Design for Social Innovation
Case Studies from Around the World

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Geographies of Power
Shana Agid, Ahmed Ansari, and Fatou Wurie, with Mariana Amatullo

At the heart of the definition of power is one's ability to influence an outcome or an action. Richard McKeon, the American 20th-century philosopher responsible for drafting the Human Rights Declaration, emphasizes the capacity that power brings in generating change, for better or for worse. Power becomes the act of "influencing the actions of others or in forestalling the effects of their actions."1 On the other hand, geography is commonly understood as the study of places and the relationships between people and their environments. Geographies also signal interrelationships across space, people, institutions, and political economies. The distinguished critic of development, Colombian-American anthropologist Arturo Escobar is a critical reference in this roundtable. Escobar's concept of the pluriverse—a world in which many worlds fit—one where the relational becomes core to the design act, provides a helpful lens vis-à-vis the provocation that frames this discussion.2

Fatou Wurie, Ahmed Ansari, and Shana Agid are colleagues working locally and globally. Each of them is deeply committed to addressing power and its embodiment and distribution across varied geographies. The reflections they offer touch upon design education, design practice, and their intersectionality with international development and community work. Their critical observations and the many entanglements they surface serve in many ways as a through-line that informs and extends the insights we glean from all 45 case studies in this publication.

Several salient take-aways emerge from the roundtable that are worth highlighting. In no particular order, ten stand out:

#1:   The "romance" of design education with neutrality and the associated myth of the designer's neutral stance
#2:   The importance of paying attention to "directional flows" of knowledge production, particularly in transnational exchanges and in community-based work
#3:   The recognition of ever-present power-laden dynamics that reveal unequal expressions of power, whether it may be based on race, age, gender, sexuality, language, class, or geography
#4:   The responsibility to name one's own privilege and acknowledge structural inequities
#5:   The limitations of well-meaning human-centered design methods
#6:   The Western, patriarchal, and Cartesian logics that often remain entrenched in design as a legacy of the discipline's emergence in the industrial era

#7:   The reckoning with the problematic legacy of the "Colonial project" and a new-found awareness about the systematic erasing of difference that logics of development and globalization perpetuate

#8:   The opportunity to widen our understanding of "what it takes to be a designer" and recognize multidisciplinarity and community expertise

#9:   The fundamental relational aspect of design and participation: it is about building relationships—and trust—with people, "making power" in solidarity

#10:   The call to imagine and reimagine a world where different worlds can exist

This is an honest, reflexive, and clear-eyed discussion. It reminds us that design mediates all of our realities and that there is ongoing hard work and humility called for when we engage in design for social innovation projects that have an aspiration for positive impact.

The discussion took place at the end of August 2020 and was edited for clarity and length

Fatou Wurie

My name is Fatou Wurie. I am from Sierra Leone, currently based in New York and on my way to relocating to UN Headquarters in Geneva. I work for UNICEF as the emergency specialist leading on digital engagement. I specialize in how to leverage the use of "the digital" and various technologies to improve our people-centered approaches to emergency responses. Outside my role at UNICEF, I consider myself first and foremost a storyteller and a social justice activist. For over a decade prior, my work has been based out of the continent of Africa, where I am from, and which has always been situated at the intersection of gender, health, and innovation—issues that continue to shape my professional interests today.

Ahmed Ansari

I am Ahmed Ansari, an industry assistant professor at the Integrated Digital Media Program at New York University in the Department of Technology, Culture and Society within the School of Engineering. My work unfolds at the intersection of design studies and history, decolonial and post-colonial theory, and the history and philosophy of technology, with an area focus on South Asia.

Shana Agid

My name is Shana Agid, I am an associate professor of Art, Media, and Communication at Parsons School of Design at The New School. My work in design focuses on a kind of use/application/research into service design and participatory design. More specifically, I look at the relationship of design to social movements, and to collaborative practices for working with community-based organizations including public schools. I think about what it means to engage in "self-determined design" as a means to consider relational practices and building practices with people.

Mariana: What does the phrase "geographies of power" prompt for each of you in the context of your practices and the focus of this book?

Fatou: These days I am participating in a variety of conversations where we are interrogating power. I am reflecting on what it all means from both a personal and professional perspective. In the context of UNICEF as a multilateral institution, there seem to be many more opportunities to have these discussions, and more vigorously than in the past. It feels quite important, because we don't necessarily always engage with notions of power, its location, and its fluidity with the heightened awareness we are showing now.

Some of the critical questions for me are about how power is interrogated, and where it is perceived and/or located in the way we design. I am interested in how power plays out in our presentation of solutions and whose voice(s) are those that emerge as most prominent in these narratives. I believe we can interpret "geographies of power" to mean more than the physical location of where power and powerful ideas reside. It is also about understanding the flow and combinations of where social innovation solutions and practices are coming from, how they are advanced, what sort of limitations and opportunities we see emerge. In sum, I look forward to interrogating how we think about power, who gets to create what for whom, and what this transnational exchange looks like.

Shana: Geographers such as Ruth Wilson Gilmore help us to interrogate the relationships between space, place, and power, and time, especially in relation to the control of people and resources. I think this has incredible resonance for design. How do we understand and read those relationships of power, how do we acknowledge and work with them, in design? This can take the shape of engaging power in relation to space or place, absolutely, and also lead us to think critically about time and temporality. We frequently lose sight in design of the fact that what the present looks like is deeply influenced by the past. Design is often oriented toward creating "a better future." Who gets to decide what is "better"? And how is that determined— through what lenses of time, place, space, etc.? This is one of the consequential questions.

We tend to privilege the idea of innovation in design as an attachment to the novel. We like to celebrate the notion of replacing things and the idea that there's always something better. Fully embracing geographies of power in design means to upset somehow the very notion that design has the capacity to create things that are better. In fact, I think it raises questions about design as inquiry. Accepting this position necessitates a willingness to be interrupted and the humility to be wrong.

There's something really compelling about the ways in which power relations are present, no matter where we are. I am reminded of this community where I have been working with the same group of people for six years—teachers and students at the Washington Heights Expeditionary Learning School (WHEELS), a regular district public school in New York City—in one neighborhood. All of our interactions and work happen within a radius of ten to 20 blocks. The ways in which these ten blocks or so represent people's movements in and around the world are deeply implicated in what people need, what we make, and in the knowledge that

people bring with them. The discipline of geography becomes a useful framing to understand the relationship of space, of borders, and of movement. Taking the time to theorize and to work from a systems perspective in a grounded manner, in this case, is very helpful.

Ahmed: My work deals with geographies in wide-ranging ways. I tend to think of power as emerging out of, and produced through, relations and by things that are done when people are in relation to each other. This includes the history of knowledge production, practices, materialization, making, and of course design. One of the threads that I pay a lot of attention to is how power unfolds through relations of colonization, through policies, and through acts of design and the designing of infrastructures such as technology in different parts of the world at various junctures of time.

I am also interested in geographies of power vis-à-vis attending to the complexity in the relationship between the local and the global. The phenomenon of globalization that we see unfolding over the last few hundred years raises particular issues today in relation to matters of difference and of knowledge production. It also leads to quite a few anxieties, especially about how knowledge discourses flow from one part of the world to another. The direction of these flows enacts, builds, and develops particular relations of power. For example, the arrival of "design thinking" in places like South Asia illustrates how design methods that were initially constructed and framed with certain Western, North American, and European knowledge models landed in this corner of the world. That does things—both locally and globally. It prefigures the way design education and design practice are set up in many parts of the world. Paying attention to how power flows in and across the global and the local opens up multiple vantage points to understand these dynamics. The courses that I teach often address these questions by inviting a reflection about how our present modern world system, by and large capitalist (but not homogeneously so), came to be.

Naturally, this kind of inquiry also entails thinking through what are the other geographies that could exist. This measure of speculation is the hope embodied in design, and why I see design as a very hopeful discipline. Design can imagine geographies of power to be otherwise. Design is a discipline that imagines future terrains, future landscapes, and future geographies. While many designers are not necessarily trained well in understanding power, they do excel at the work of imagination.

Mariana: Fatou, would you build on the notion of directional flows that create specific power relations? Have you seen these dynamics play out in your work, and, if so, how?

Fatou: What stands out for me from the humanitarian context of multilateral, national, and non-profit institutions is a default position that seems to dominate whenever we engage with the notion of power. We assume, or we are told to assume, a sense of neutrality. We are to believe that our organizational systems are based on principles of impartiality, equity, and so on. This is one of the insidious ways in which colonialism and a colonial lens are completely reproduced, actually. It is within this imaginary system of impartiality, supposedly built to benefit everyone, that these power dynamics play out. It happens in the guise of a grounded,

rational, and patriarchal logic. As a Sierra Leonean, and as a woman of color working within this system especially in the Global South, I'm being told that the principles and the values that I work with and reproduce are neutral. And, of course, this is not the case and it troubles me.

These assumptions play out, for example, in a brainstorming session about a project that aims to bridge the digital divide, and we are trying to think with the team about potential digital technologies. We're trying to bridge the digital divide, so we're able to collect their information, because we say we want to use it for change. The intention is admirable and the rhetoric of participatory methods such as co-design and human-centered design all sound great. But the fact is, when you experience this work from the location of the Global South, where many of us are being told that we are helpless and other people are here with certain expertise and tools, and resources to help us get better, the dynamic can become problematic. Instead of the true agency we aspire to, we are creating dynamics of disempowerment by design. We are basically working behind a façade because, no matter how hard we may wish to believe that we are part of a neutral system, we know it isn't true. We have to be more aware of directional flows, realizing that the global is often Western and Euro.

Mariana: The idea of widening our scope is a good segue into a key domain we must touch upon: the decolonizing design movement and the plural discourses it is inspiring. Ahmed, how do you see this body of work impacting design education? To use Shana's qualifier, are there more "nuanced" practices emerging as a result?

Ahmed: I've certainly seen a shift in the past half a decade or so. The shift entails an acknowledgment that the artifacts that designers make, and the practices and processes they engage in, are not politically and ethically neutral. It is a reckoning that I find heartening, even though challenges remain.

How we define design, historically, follows what I refer to as "logics" that often seem to go unquestioned. This stems from the fact that design is a modern discipline with a relatively young history tied to industrialization, which we can trace from its beginnings to Europe. As a result, 20th- and 21st-century design follows by and large logics connected to an Anglo-European history and genealogy. Design today is deeply tied to the kinds of modern logics that pervade and enable things like "development," "globalization," and "modernization." These logics enable and are part and parcel of the kind of world that we live in today.

Decolonial and post-colonial thought and practice in design attempts to illustrate that these logics, which emerge from colonization, do not end with the Global South becoming independent from their European colonizers—this is what we call "coloniality" today. It is important to recognize that coloniality has many different dimensions to it, including the Eurocentricity and Anglocentricity of thought that underpins how we think about gender, heteronormativity, patriarchy, the construction of race, and socioeconomic segregation. These logics, insofar as they provided ways of organizing societies, were, in many cases, quite foreign to many cultures and civilizations prior to colonization. As we know, coloniality as a

phenomenon still exists globally. It presents a big issue and there should be an imperative for designers to figure out how to deal with it in the same way as they need to address productively climate change and other large existential threats.

Doing this requires, firstly, realizing how design has been shaped into what it is today and, secondly, rethinking what design is. We need to rethink design separately from what it is today and imagine what it could be. We must foreground a different set of practices, discourses, and new approaches to design education that are not as closely tied to technology and material things. In the realm of design education, I'm arguing for a shift away from purely focusing on making artifacts towards considering what things do, and towards the larger sort of conditions under which things are created and prefigured, and within which they do their work.

Mariana: So if we consider this concept of the relational in design and the geographies of power, how might we understand how these dynamics play out in the field of design and gender? Fatou, you have been working with girls and young women in the Global South who are often at the receiving end of well-meaning designs that are aspiring to "empower" them. What are you seeing happen?

Fatou: As we said before, there is a discourse in the development and humanitarian sector that we're really trying to do good by being human-centered. The type of good that we are after claims to capture people's voices; this is the case as well in the work we do with women and girls. In fact, I reject that notion. If we were truly centering the voices of the people in our programming and humanitarian responses we would be de-colonizing our frameworks for how we design, how we adopt technologies, and how we do good. Of course, it does become critical to weave a people-centered approach and be accountable to those we are trying to impact for the better. I am just not sure we can be effective if we're not ready to decolonize. I hate the term "neocolonialism" because my perspective is that we never decolonized, to begin with. We started the process, and it was too difficult, and so we got lost. Fast-forward to the present legacies that we face today.

And so, behind the work that I do in international development, I always start by acknowledging my privilege. I may be a Black Muslim woman from Sierra Leone, but I am also the product of a certain socio-economic background and had access to a Western, liberal education in gender studies (in my case from the University of British Columbia) that makes me privileged. I also try to keep front and center the fact that I work within a heteronormative system. It can be very easy for colleagues of mine to rely on me for credibility and say, "Well, you sound a certain kind of way.

We can have a safe conversation with you, and therefore you can be the voice of the people." This is not true. I emphasize that we cannot center the voices of people in how we design programs and choose to respond if we do not decolonize the house itself from an economic, historical, and political perspective. My point is: we haven't dismantled the house. You've given us the house, you've moved the furniture around, and you've said, "Well, we've moved the

furniture around, we've allowed you to put some of your furniture in here, we've made sure that you can sit in the living room, so you should be happy." But the house is still problematic.

Another goal is to interrogate what we mean by "empowering" someone, for example "empowering women" often used to describe the verb of "doing something" for women from the Global South or black and brown communities in the "North." I hate the word "empower." To give power to someone—as though women and girls (black and brown bodies) are passive agents, without ideas, dreams, actions, movement, creation. I'm talking here about activating their agency—equity, creating pathways for their already activated selves to thrive in.

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What does that mean very, very concretely? I do think we are at a point where there are many of us preoccupied with social justice and aware that there is an urgency to push the decolonization agenda, for ourselves, for our women, and for our people.

Mariana: It is an important take-away to recognize that in co-design, power is not necessarily always diffused. Shana, can you reflect on what gives you hope from the approaches we have at our disposal for engaging with the community and learning from the community? How do you personally navigate these dynamics as a mediator and as a practitioner?

Ahmed: I'd like to build on the previous question around participation, not necessarily participatory design, but participation. I will make two points.

First of all, there's a really interesting problem when designers working with communities engage from the get-go from a position that acknowledges that historical injustices and existing systems need to be accounted for as potential sources of oppression. Starting from here entails a reflexivity, an attention to systemic injustices, and that is a good thing. However, one of the problems that working in a participatory manner raises is the issue of negotiating incommensurabilities, i.e., how do I help the community in such a way that both I and the community preserves and respects our differences? Here I'm talking about differences not as shallow but as deep, where being different entails a distinct worldview and relation to reality. In a cosmopolitan society, this can become an issue, right?

Take the example of a white Anglo-European male living next to a Muslim Pakistani immigrant in the US. You are not Muslim, nor Pakistani, nor a first-generation immigrant, and will thus experience your reality completely differently from them—how do you coexist with others radically different from you? This is but one scenario that poses a set of particular challenges to participatory design. Where and how do we preserve and respect differences? How do we do it while still enabling societies to exist as cohesive units? And how do we make sure that the

voices and the wishes of all are truly heard, and respected, and privileged, including those who are historically marginalized and disadvantaged, those whose voices have been silenced, or who have just been rendered invisible? For me, this means negotiating incommensurabilities.

"Where and how do we preserve and respect differences? How do we do it while still enabling societies to exist as cohesive units?"

Secondly, in terms of your questions of where we might find levers of change, we need to address again how we choose to imagine a global world. We cannot undo globalization. But how we imagine a world where different worlds can exist in difference is a promising direction we can move towards - this is the idea of the pluriverse, as per the Zapatistas and Arturo Escobar. I believe this particular view entails a different kind of stance and set of sensitivities where participatory designers need to only be very self-reflexive, but also foster reflexivity within the communities that they are working with, while recognizing that different communities might want very different things. At the same time we might also want some of those things to change in the service of issues we are collectively facing as societies. I would like to challenge participatory designers to think about the kinds of logics that prefigure the different wants and desires of communities. We must move towards new, more emancipatory logics, and think about materializing these logics via new socio-technical enabled conditions.

Shana: Ahmed, this brings to mind the kind of imagining and making of futures that are endemic to social movements and to the living practices of lots of people who are subject to exactly the kinds of power systems that we've been discussing together. I am thinking about folks who do work around transformative justice, for instance. This is work that does not look to re-engage the state in producing justice but seeks to produce relationships of justice and capacities for accountability outside of the state. It requires a kind of thinking about things that are both future-oriented, but also deeply observant of daily practice. So, to expand upon this particular example of transformative justice, the key question is how to create relationships that are grounded in accountability that do not involve, for instance, calling the police. People answer this question all over the world by creating common-sense capacities to solve problems, address conflict, at all kinds of scales, without following the accepted norm of calling the police (a norm, as we know, that for a lot of valid historical reasons may correlate police with unsafe-ty, not safety, etc.). And so, if we look at the work of Black, queer, and trans feminists in particular, in the United States but also internationally, or if we examine practices of sex workers, and focus on all of the systems that people build to produce other forms of safety, I think we're seeing already alternative forms of envisioning futures. And not just the envisioning of the future as an imagination, but as something that is active, and that is prototyped, to borrow the language of design.

In terms of levers for change, for me, the critical question to pose is how might designers engage with the making practices of the people with whom they are working, and recognize them not as something to be taken up and made either "better," or even amplified through the terms of/or in the terms of design. Pointing to the question of reflexivity that Ahmed brought up and your points, Mariana, I would surface the question: What does it mean for designers to

be one group of many, who do this kind of work? I think that there's a fundamental shift there that is important. And, back to Ahmed's points, let us remember that the colonial project was also a project of erasing differences. It was a systematic project that used constructions of, and imaginations of, difference, to order and produce violence.

Future-making work is about on-the-ground work in relationship with people. One of the important questions you should ask yourself as a designer is the following: are you being invited into this work? And, if so, what is the stance that you take, and what does it look like to be a participant in that work as opposed to imagining that you are coming to help people do their work?

Mariana: You're leading us to a place I was hoping we would end the discussion on—pointing us towards a direction of hope.

Fatou: In the work I do, a direction of hope is to witness that we are increasingly taking a multidisciplinary approach to understanding and communicating with affected communities, and positioning their voices and their needs at the center of our development and humanitarian system. It is certainly happening with this COVID response. But it remains a very new way for us; we have to be nuanced about the power dynamics at place and setting honest expectations. We are part of a large bureaucratic machinery and it is difficult to see change at an institutional level, yet I believe in its possibility.

My envisioning in any work I do, is one of fostering, strengthening, and snatching from the colonial project this idea of difference as threatening. We must do this in order to deepen the strengths that exist from the differences that we all bring to the table: whether it's from our disciplines, from our resources, and from the intersectionality of our identities. If we can begin to appreciate our difference, we will see the disbursement of power in places where we are creating and intervening. I would also like for us to rename and deepen some of these processes, so they're a little bit more political. In the humanitarian sector, instead of saying localization, why not call it decolonization? And why not champion calling it decolonization within a feminist framework? And then, lastly, being able to hold us accountable, and help us redefine how we measure accountability. The development sector is at a reckoning: we either adapt to the call for reformed ways of delivering aid or we will become obsolete.