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## Competitive Social Design

The social question of the next society

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Independent Think Tank for Leading Practice

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## 1 The inescapability of the “Social Other”

We have become accustomed to picking out the social as a central theme for discussion only where it visibly fails. We speak about social problems and think of poverty, disease or violent protest. We consistently locate the social at the margins of society. Social questions exist there, not here. Finding answers can be delegated to the state or civil society. We have unlearned the ability to conceptualize the social from out of the middle of society. Indeed, though we remain aware of the human being as a social being, we veer, with this thought, straight away towards population theory. We accept that humans do not live alone, but in communities. We think about communities and in our thoughts instantly jump into grand models of states and social utopias. We regularly block ourselves from seeing that the decisive area lies in-between, between the individual on one side and the state on the other side. The emerging form of the social lies in the midst of the practice of private, public and economic life, in the cooperation of the many.

Seen through the lens of cognitive theory, the social is one of the fundamental inescapabilities of being human. Besides the inescapability of the conscious self and the inescapability of living nature, the social picks the inescapability of the “social other” as a central theme. The “social other” is inescapable for the individual being. This raises questions: How do I deal with this other? How do I encounter him? How do I react to him? What do I have to fear? The inescapability of the “social other” is the source of any community or polity. Community gains a foothold on those answers and solutions that introduce security and stability in instances where the single individual seems to be left on his own to fend for himself. That is the basis of every social system. We know the joy of working with others to accomplish more work, with more joy in the work, than we could have done alone. We know the frustration of being stuck in a traffic jam with everyone else or of not being able to find a seat in

an overcrowded train. Communities give themselves rules and stabilise expectations; they reduce complexity and secure the expectations of expectations. They foster the joy in what is shared, common or communal, and they offer protection from the destruction of the many. Communities open up realms of possibility far beyond that which could be accessed by a single individual.

We like to speak of culture. We orient ourselves according to social values. We establish practices and stabilising institutions. The inescapability of the “social other” takes the face of community, society, and the state. In a process of civilisation, social systems differentiate themselves and, as one could say along the lines of Norbert Elias, realise gains of emergence and an expansion of possibilities, while at the same time, also, a reduction in complexity. This all sounds very scientific - and it is. At the core, however, the argument relates back to the idea that the social can sensibly only be thought of as an omnipresent inescapability.



## 2 Beyond the Modern Age

Viewed historically, the social question as a theme of discourse marks the transition from one form of society to the next. Thus, the social question in the 19th century marks the irreversibility of the transition from feudal, agricultural society to modern, industrial society. The social question focuses the discussion on all of the frictions and frustrations that arise from the single individual's loss of all of the certainties of the collective, before new forms of culture are combined with the new forms of production, which are able to absorb and balance the technical possibility gains and their consequences on social coexistence in adequate cultural forms. Again we stand at such a turning point in time, at a transition into a next society, which only knows of itself that it is not at the moment capable of positively defining itself.

Descriptions of postmodernism or altermodernism fall short. They remain descriptions that are still rooted deep within the modern age and which have not yet been able to free themselves from these roots. Nevertheless, we recognise possibility gains, not just of technical nature, that shake at old certainties and always lead to the popular formula according to which things are as they are, but could also be entirely otherwise.

Dirk Baecker, certainly one of the smartest minds in this period of transition, turns his considerations in succession of Niklas Luhmann, in a systems theoretical manner to the structure forms of communication – because communication is the medium through which the social is negotiated. It is the bridge between the conscious self and the “social other”. Baecker perceives in the possibilities of the computer, after the development of language, writing, and the letterpress, a technological development that revolutionises the structure forms of communication and which still needs to find its cultural form. The letterpress revolutionised communication and led to the period of social modernity. With the letterpress, alternative perspectives were multiplied in

the world. The most diverse interpretations, argumentations, and conclusions found massive distribution and found themselves thrown into a competitive coexistence of ideas and worldviews.

This was the ultimate challenge for the medieval world with its stable image of the world anchored in religion. It was a challenge that required a new form of culture, in order to cope with the possibilities of surplus and diversity of meaning to an advantage.

The modern age was born with the form of criticism. Criticism allows the coexistence of the most diverse perspectives and induces processes of negotiation that produce certainty and security. With the computer, or better yet computing – understood as electronic data processing – the structure form of communication gains a new quality. As long as the computer is used as another form of the letterpress, we remain bound to the modern age. However, in the moment in which computing allows, as with Web 2.0, a different dimension of transparency in the knowledge and will building processes as well as an expansion of participation in the subsequent negotiation processes, the culture form of the modern age reaches its limits. A new society becomes inevitable. This involves nothing less than fundamentally renegotiating the culture forms of society and even making the method of negotiation, itself, available. That initially sounds unfamiliar and frightening – and it is. For even if challenges always carry solutions within them, every transition remains risky. Not only, but also, the possibilities of the computer have given us a financial crisis with gigantic dimensions. Its makings and the challenges to manage it point to somewhere way beyond the reaches of the modern age.



### 3 Social Design

If we are now standing at such a turning point in time and we encounter the inevitability of negotiating new culture forms, then the inescapability of the “social other”, the community, society will also be negotiated anew. The social is at stake. It is about shaping, forming. Design is at stake. Design, wholly along the lines of Bruce Mau, can be understood, in a broad sense, as all that which is man-made. A design of the social, or better still social design refers to all that meets the inescapability of the other in balance, all that is anthropogenic. A design-centred thinking also reminds us that we make shaping decisions that exist as such, but could also be otherwise. If one thinks about social design, far-reaching possibilities arise, but so do responsibilities.

Social design opens realms of possibility because we gain degrees of freedom. Social design refers to responsibility because, as these degrees of freedom are realised, a decision always lies at the centre that might also be decided otherwise and, furthermore, leads to the reality that all of the consequences of these decisions can and must be tracked back to the decision, the decision makers, and the decision making process. This is valid for every area of life. It holds for politics as well as the economy. It holds for healthcare providers as well as childcare givers. It pertains to the ability to handle conflict as well as to the forms of civility.

Social design has a paradigmatic dimension in as far as it can be understood as a set of models, methods, and instruments that is formulated in response to the inescapability of the “social other”. It is here that we meet an exceptional feature of social design, distinguishing it from social engineering. Social design is conscious of the particular quality of the social. Engineering stands for, like so much in the modern age, a positivist orientation based on the true or false criteria of natural science.

However, social systems are not technical systems and do not follow the predictability of the laws of natural science. The social is particular. It is characterised by a dynamic that can best be described as a set of self-fulfilling and self-destructing prophecies. Social systems produce or destroy with regularity that which they believe to pre-suppose. McGregor's management theories X and Y give a nice example of this. Depending on which basic assumption about the character of people I base my leadership style on, whether I believe people are self-motivating, hard working, and self-responsible or unmotivated, sluggish, and irresponsible, different models, methods, and instruments are derived by top management. The tagline is that according to which image of people I base these on, the resulting social design, in this case the resulting leadership style or appropriate management system, leads to the reproduction of the basic assumption about the character of the people that was chosen as the point of departure.

If I treat a person as self-motivated and self-responsible, he will generally display this behaviour. If I treat the person, on the other hand, as unmotivated and irresponsible, I will induce exactly this behaviour from which I had actually wanted to protect my control oriented management system.



## 4 The Competition of Paradigms

The consequence of these thoughts about social design is relatively farther reaching than we suspect at the moment, for it allows for reflection on the capability of different social designs with respect to the challenge to which each social design seeks to be a solution. Let us remain for a moment in the area of leadership styles and management methods.

It becomes apparent that a diverse set of models, methods, and instruments on which the respective methodologies stand, can be differently capable or efficient. One could reflect, at this point, on something like social design impact evaluation. It would be an evaluation, which measures the impact of rule systems, basic assumptions, processes, and instruments. This would then allow the understanding of social design as a fundamentally in-development existing result of negotiation; a negotiated result that is as it is, could always be otherwise and furthermore, always endeavours to become better, more capable, more just or functional. The meaning of venturing such a thought becomes frighteningly clear if one deals with the self-perception of developed, democratic state systems, which seem to have generally lost perspective on their own development and on the continuous improvement of their capabilities as social design. We regularly pick out nation building, failing states, or failed states as central themes of discussion. We do not, however, maintain a discourse about in how far our own social system designs are to further develop the capabilities of developed democracies.

Once we have gained perspective on the capabilities of a social design, there is only a small step to take to comparing different social designs. Because of this, competitive thinking is given a wide open door to what is much more far reaching than that which we know from the modern age. It is about the most different versions and variations of co-operation and of coexistence. It is about the modes of coexistence.

The next society will be characterised by an ecology of paradigms.

Which paradigmatic sets of models, methods, and instruments, have which functional results and are, as Stafford Beer would formulate it, viable in distinction to other paradigmatic sets? It is this one question that will not permit an answer based on the foundations of a natural science theory debate. It is not a question of true or false, but deals with functional or not functional, capable or not capable. It is about viability, about practicability, about aptitude for life and survival.

In this context, ecology should mean that we will be dealing with a great deal of diverse paradigmatic alignments and a great deal of different social designs that coexist in an ecological sense, and in which the most different forms of juxtaposition and co-operation will be realised. There will be social designs that are in competition with one another. There will be social designs that alternately support each other and will enter into almost symbiotic relations. There will not be the one, true political system, but an ecological juxtaposition of different political systems, which will find their respective social designs regularly having to prove their merits – internally and externally. At this point, a new social utopia, which focuses on the viability of the social design, can be formulated. That sounds new – but we are already there.

States, like Singapore, Dubai, or even China, can be used as illustration. They place the plasticity of their own development at the centre of their attention, in a sort of pre-stage of this idea, and introduce competitiveness as a standard. That which we see today is relatively crude because these considerations are, by habit, reduced to economic competitiveness. These are, however, activities that should not be underestimated in their dynamic and that fundamentally illustrate that a first step in this direction has been made. In order to solve the social question of the next society, we will have to grow accustomed to vocabulary like democracy development, constitutional state development, and market economy development. We will experience, in this context, an emancipation of the social sciences from the criteria of the natural sciences, on which foundations it will be possible to think of and conceptualise ideas like social design or social technology leadership; for that will be the line of demarcation, along those societies, social systems, and states which negotiate capabilities for the future. The social question of the next generation is the question about the competitiveness of our social designs.

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