# Militant Design Research: A Proposal *to* Politicize Design Knowledge-making

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ABSTRACT

This work reflects on how design can engage in emancipatory processes of knowledge-making through Militant Design Research. The argument draws on the work of scholars who are engaged in counter-hegemonic design research and practice, and questions the knowledge production structures within academia. 'Militant research' is presented as a Latin American theoretical-political approach to knowledge production in social sciences, engaging processes of research, educational, and political actions, and uniting organic intellectuals, researchers, and social movements. Inspired by this perspective, principles for Militant Design Research are outlined to stimulate alliances between designers and social movements for the collective production of knowledge, to overcome situations of oppression in and out of academia.

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## Militant Design Research: A Proposal to Politicize Design Knowledge-making

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### FOR STARTERS

The Eurocentric assumptions imposed a civilizational paradigm for social organization in Latin America. Science was spread through formal and informal educational spaces to justify the domination of one social group over another. Over time, the processes of knowledge production were structured, and the Latin American intellectual work was consolidated in the privileged space of the university, being influenced, initially, by colonial perspectives and later by liberal-capitalist ideals.

Nevertheless, these processes, founded on the attempt to build a cultural, political, and social hegemony based on European and Latin American elite values, were fiercely resisted by popular movements and social struggles, which influenced another approach to Latin American critical thought inside academia. This conflict between ways of knowing and ways of living embodied in substantive differences of class, race, and gender, continuously challenges the elitist and positivist configuration of Latin American thought developed in universities.

Design was formally established in the continent's universities[1] recently, for example, in Brazil in 1964 (Leon & Montore, 2008), in Chile in 1965 (Palmarola Sagredo, 2008), and in Mexico in 1969 (Álvarez Fuentes & Comisarenco Mirkin, 2008). Most of these courses had their curricula inspired by the Ulm School of Design. This influence happened, among other reasons, because the formal design education in Latin American universities responded to a growing industrialization process, which glimpsed a horizon of progress inspired by the post-war recovery of the German industry. The Latin American industrialization process, however, was built on foreign capital investments and did not encourage local technological development, so a model of dependent industrialization was established (De Ponti & Gaudio, 2008).

Through the military coups financed by the United States that plagued the region from the 1960s until the mid-1980s, the counter-hegemonic design initiatives that relied on alliances of academia with popular forces were discontinued by the dictatorial regimes. Such was the case of the experience of Industrial Design State initiatives[2] in Salvador Allende's government in Chile, and the case of the School of Industrial Design and Craftsmanship,[3] conceived

[1] It is important to emphasize that before the 1960s there are records of design education experiences linked to the schools of Arts and Crafts or to cultural and artistic spaces, such as museums. In the same way, different initiatives of knowledge production, such as magazines and exhibitions, existed in Latin American countries before the establishment of design education in universities, and have been present since the beginning of the 20th century on the continent (De Ponti & Gaudio, 2008; Leon & Montore, 2008).

[2] The State initiative for Industrial Design in Chile has a long history, dating back to 1938. It is not within the scope of this work to resume this trajectory, but it is important to point out that from 1968 on, a group of designers led by Gui Bonsiepe articulated with the university reform movement and with state agencies to conduct research with popular movements, to reposition the Chilean industry as producer of quality consumer goods that were financially accessible and could meet the most urgent demands of the country´s vulnerable populations, plagued by economic inequality (Palmarola Sagredo, 2008). Although Gui Bonsiepe followed the Ulmiana tradition, his trajectory in Chile was able, through dialogue with local agents, to reconfigure actions to ensure the political and technical feasibility of the execution of projects allied to local needs and restrictions.

[3] The School of Industrial Design and Crafts idealized by Lina Bo Bardi never got off the paper, and there are few records about her project. Pereira and Sobral Anelli (2005) recovered its history and showed us that the School transited between the ideas of development, industrialization, and popular culture. In her proposal, Bo Bardi tried to bring the designer closer to the executor, combining students and master craftsmen for the making of artifacts. The initiative tries to blur the hierarchy between the two in order to consolidate a Brazilian design that approximates to the tradition of Northeastern craftsmanship, and has the ability to reproduce such objects in a modern industrial setting.

by Lina Bo Bardi in the Museum of Popular Art at Solar do Unhão in Brazil. Until today, design academia in Latin America struggles in navigating between inherited design tradition and the *diseños otros* (Gutiérrez Borrero, 2022) built on local prerogatives.

As a Latin American researcher in design and an activist and popular educator in the feminist movement, I have built a growing interest in the characteristics of knowledge production within spaces that have distinct practices and goals. Although new design theories indicate interesting epistemological paths (Ansari & Kiem, 2021; Escobar, 2017; Gutiérrez Borrero, 2022; Ibarra, 2020; Leitão, 2020; Mazzarotto & Serpa, 2022; Noel, 2020; T. Schultz et al., 2018; van Amstel et al., 2021), I found it difficult to transit between such environments. How was I supposed to be a designer-militant-researcher *able to commit* to radical social transformations coherently in all my working duties?

In the search for how to guide committed and emancipatory practices in scientific work and reflecting on the production of knowledge in Latin America, I came across the militant research approach, which has inspired me in the political-scientific work I developed in my doctoral research, and in other spaces between militancy and academia.

In the first section of this paper, I present some contradictions of knowledge production in academia, and pave the ground to discuss design research and practice considering these characteristics. In the second section, I present the political-theoretical approach of militant research and its origins in the Latin American social sciences. Next, I outline principles for militant design research, hoping to expand the strategies for designers' engagement with social and popular movements for the production of knowledge with a focus on the emancipation of the oppressed, which includes designers and academics. At the end of the paper, I reflect on the structural limitations for emancipatory knowledge production in general, and in design specifically, and invite all readers to join forces in facing the everlasting struggle against domination and oppression.

## FRAMING THE OPPRESSION

As workers of intellectual production, we occupy a privileged place in the articulation of knowledge and the interpretation of the world. The production of knowledge challenges us to establish a political and ethical posture that corresponds to the project of society that we want to build. On the one hand, we produce knowledge from the hierarchical logic of academia, often reproducing unequal power dynamics in our research work. On the other hand, by becoming aware of these power relations, we can make efforts to unravel such chains to make the creation of knowledge that can build new realities possible, conforming to another project of the university and society.

One of the unequal power relations concerning knowledge production was recognized as 'epistemic colonialism'. Frantz Fanon (1963) defines it as an extractive process in which the colonizers appropriated the knowledge of the colonized and, at the same time, disqualified this knowledge as irrational in the name of supposedly superior rationality. This resonates in contemporary academic processes that are heirs of its barbarity, such as epistemic extractivism (Grosfoguel, 2019; Rivera Cusicanqui, 2010), which occurs in peripheral territories when the ideas of oppressed groups are treated as raw material in a global market of commodified goods. These ideas, once extracted from peripheral experiences, are processed and refined in the large centers of intellectual production, and return to their territories of origin regurgitated as better-finished products; that is, theories and methodologies that entangle their space of origin in an idealized simulation.

In the field of social sciences, activist and theorist Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui (2010) accuses the Modernity/Coloniality Group, especially Walter Mignolo, of committing contemporaneous epistemic extractivism. By strategically retrieving contributions made by organic intellectuals[4] (Gramsci, 1991) from Latin American social movements, they would elaborate depoliticized interpretations of local reality and struggle, presenting these ideas in US universities. The 'extractivist academics' capture critical thoughts forged in the popular struggle by less internationally relevant intellectuals and personally gain financial, cultural, and symbolic capital thanks to the recognition and certification of US academic centers. As a result, after the intense international tour, the 'decolonial turn' returns to Latin America as a prescriptive and idealized explanation of reality, that does not resonate with the contradictory reality being forged at the grassroots.

In design, Alfredo Gutiérrez Borrero identifies, based on Linda Tuhiwai Smith, that

> the collective of designers, no matter how decolonial and even pluriversal they claim to be, (…) bears the mark of that education that creates native elites, instructs them in the hierarchies of colonial knowledge, invites the most talented thinkers to the most important schools or selects them for great foreign universities, and immerses them in contexts where they acquire the tastes, benefits, and privileges of living and belonging to the metropolitan culture, to develop in the academic code, learn the language of the elite, and become functional to the cultural and economic interests of the colonizing group that educated them, instead of identifying themselves with the interests of their own people. (Gutiérrez Borrero, 2022, p. 133)

Contemporary epistemic colonialism and extractivism in design are reproduced by the marginalization of existing intellectual communities. Voices roaring for alternative forms of practice are silenced as standardized methods and methodologies

**4** Rivera Cusicanqui does not use the term "organic intellectual", this is an authorial insertion to designate the work of subjects who fulfill the social function of intellectual work in the political, social, and economic interpretations that ground the organization of popular movements in the class struggle (Gramsci, 1991).

become the 'right' way to think about and do design. According to Ahmed Ansari (2019), this imposes an uncritical acceptance of design theories and tools in peripheral spaces, which invariably disseminates specific political and ideological standards all over the world. By preventing specialized knowledge from growing in the peripheries, design curbs any possibility of radical change that could accommodate new knowing-doings in the field (Ansari, 2019).

Furthermore, the concern with oppressed groups in design is often merely shown through consumer-oriented research and product development. In these cases, oppressed individuals and their reality, which involves their ways of life and interpretation of the world, are placed at the center of design processes, in a kind of 'poor-centered design' (user-centered design aimed at poor communities). This extractive process, besides dehumanizing users (Gonzatto & van Amstel, 2022), feigns interest in oppressed groups and their struggles, just to turn them into consumers of products and services developed by multinationals that often break up local businesses and create a dependent market, colonizing these subjects through the consuming structure. Regarding this dynamic, van Amstel (in press) points out that approaches such as universal design methods, humanitarian design, and design for social innovation were not able to deal with their own contradictions and ended up (re)colonizing the colonized.

Building knowledge and practice committed to the emancipation of the oppressed requires a continuous exercise of self-criticism and humility (Freire, 1968/2014). This means that we need to move away from a design that claims to be sensitive to social problems but proposes solutions that reinforce colonialist and extractivist postures. This calls us to debate the limits, formats, and roles of universities and challenges us as researchers and practitioners to reflect on the intellectual work of design and who design knowledge serves.

## MILITANT RESEARCH AS A DIALOGICAL APPROACH TO KNOWLEDGE PRODUCTION

The concept of 'militant research'[5] emerges in the path of political-historical reflection on Latin American knowledge production, and in the search for guidance on committed and emancipatory practices in scientific making within academia. This approach presents itself as a theoretical and methodological proposal of subversive practices of knowledge production, anchored in political action committed to social transformation (Bringel & Varella, 2014; Varella, 2017). There are different forms, traditions, and perspectives of militant research in Latin America. Bringel and Varella (2014) highlight some emblematic historical experiences such as, for example, the popular education in Brazil by Paulo Freire; the participatory-action research in Colombia by Orlando Fals Borda; the spaces of confluence created by Zapatismo between organic intellectuals and organized social movements, from

5    The term 'militant research' is used in 1972 in the book *Causa Popular, Ciencia Popular*, by Víctor D. Bonilla, Orlando Fals Borda, Gonzalo Castillo, and Augusto Libreros and is further developed in *Teoría e investigación militante*, by Raúl Rojas Soriano, published in 1989 (Varella, 2017). In addition to theoretical-methodological discussions, researchers from different fields around the world make use of the term to qualify their practices within social movements (Botero, 2012; Collective et al., 2012; Russell, 2015). One vigorous example is the Colectivo Situaciones (2021), from Argentina, that unites different researchers and social agents in diverse actions based on militant research.

1994 on in Mexico; the activities developed by popular, intercultural, and social movement universities, such as the Universidad Intercultural de las Nacionalidades y Pueblos Indígenas *Amawtay Wasi* (Intercultural University of Indigenous Nationalities and Peoples *Amawtay Wasi*) in Ecuador, which is managed by different indigenous social movements; and the 'systematization of experience' methodology developed in the 1990s by Oscar Jara Holliday (2006) to recover lessons learned in numerous Latin American countries.

The proposal of militant research, in the first place, is a research process marked by the recovery of popular struggles and by the theoretical reflection on the social movement or community. This critical (re)memoir is done in a deep dialogue between the 'thinking thought', which occurs in the daily and permanent actions of the movement, and the 'thought thought', already systematized by the academy and other spaces of knowledge (Collin, 1994).

This engagement triggers an educational process for all those involved, which can be more or less formal. The educational space can be formalized as a specific course with an outlined program and process, or it can have fewer rigid contours, taking place in one-time or recurring dialogue actions. Some methods of these less formal processes include, for example, the dialogic practice of systematic knowledge devolution (Fals Borda, 2012) and the collective investigation of different generating themes (Freire, 1968/2014). All this happens also, and at the same time, promoting concrete political actions in the movement's daily practice. These political actions can be organizational actions for the movement itself, or direct visible actions in society.

Thus, we can glimpse militant research as a polyvalent practice that is articulated from a tripod of (1) research, (2) education, and (3) political action, that congregates organic intellectuals, researchers, social movements, and political organizations (Figure 1). The fields of action (political, research, and educational) are at the same time intentions and results of the practices of militant research, and do not have very well-defined contours because they are fluid processes, imbricated by the need for effective participation and the commitment to social transformation shared among the engaged subjects.

**Figure 4**: Diagram of the Militant Research Tripod. Source: The author.
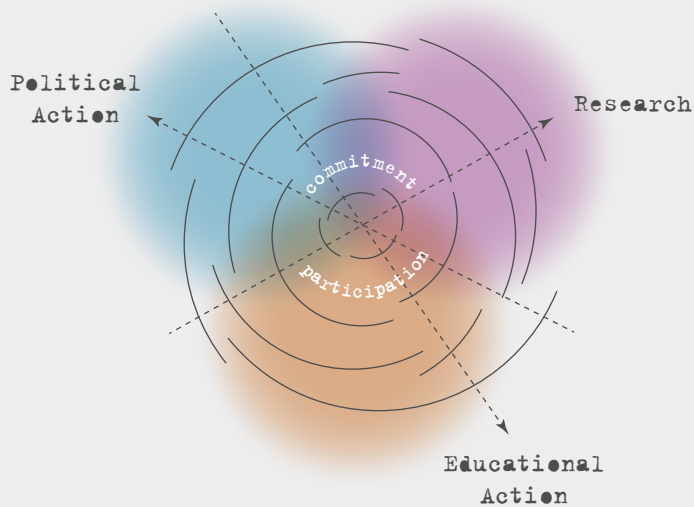


## PRINCIPLES FOR A MILITANT DESIGN RESEARCH

In recent years, some design scholars have paid attention to these perspectives in relation to the field, especially regarding participatory-action research, popular education, and the systematization of experiences (Calderon Salazar & Huybrechts, 2020; Ibarra, 2020; Mazzarotto & Serpa, 2022; E. Schultz et al., 2020; Serpa et al., 2020). While it is still necessary to reflect in detail on how these approaches play out in experiments conducted in deep cooperation between designers and social movements, these studies pave the way to explore militant research and its political force. By proposing a militant design research approach, I understand that it can bring together the perspectives presented above, holding them together and acting as their political horizon.

The premise of militant research is that through practice, everyone gains political skills and makes a collective political commitment that is shaped into a shared political identity within the social movement. This commitment is both to the cause and to the people who sustain that struggle. This does not only mean that the researcher must be or become a militant of the movement in this process, but that the very practice of militant research aims to train people politically for action within the movement. Hence, Militant Design Research is necessarily a practice of collective *conscientização* (Freire, 1979), by which everyone develops not only the ability to reflect and deeply question their own historical and social conditions, but also to build a strategy for action on that reality.

In militant research, the delineation of what is explored as an object of inquiry and the course of this process is given by the community involved in the process. The practice relies on the 'context of discovery' rather than restricting investigative action to the 'context of justification' (Choudry, 2015).

In Militant Design Research, we aim to discover issues, educate ourselves about them collectively, and feed into the movement's struggle, rather than finding evidence for theories or finding solutions to particular problems that were outlined prior to the encounter with the research field. The recognition of a situation as problematic, deserving collective attention and strategic effort, is given by the collective and not by the researcher or designer. That is, the framing of the issue to be addressed is not the responsibility of the designer, but rather a collective endeavor. Such enunciation is followed by a debate about possibilities that allow participants to generate agreements on goals, and decide between alternative actions (Versiani & Jaumont, 2016). In this way, Militant Design Research permanently acts to overcome the dichotomy of the subject and object of research, and fights 'solutionism' as a modus operandi.

The research project is led by the community or movement's own interests, and by its own tools and techniques for debate, deliberation, and action. Any social movement has its own ways of doing things, and sometimes these practices are more systematized, and they are just customary ways of dealing with situations at others. The designers involved in this process also have the possibility of presenting their tools and perspectives so that the group can work with some kind of dynamic supported by design. But it is important to recognize that collective know-how is more important and presents a wider range of practices than the design tools we usually try on design research proposals.

Historically, Latin American experiences of militant research, in terms of the use and selection of techniques and tools, bring a multiplicity of situations and applications that depend on the context of action, the collectivities, and the objectives (Varella, 2017). However, it is possible to highlight the use of techniques that stimulate the reflection and expression of all participants in the articulation of the processes of research, educational, and political action. Some examples of techniques and tools that can be used in Militant Design Research are acting (sociodrama, theater of the oppressed, etc.) to make diagnoses or reveal important problems and situations; informal individual and/or collective interviews; interventions on works promoted by movements and communities; collective analysis and debate of texts and documents; posters, collective drawings, photographs, and other means to manifest the group's creativity and provoke more reflection; playful involvement with songs, stories, poetry, and tales that reflect the situations to be faced; expository techniques in order to provide additional information sharing, etc. (Jara Holliday, 2006).

The combination between critical reflection and political practice enables different understandings of the social problems and challenges that the movement faces. These diagnoses are concerned with subjective experiences that are put in dialogue with a broader interpretation of society, strengthening

the community's understanding of their place in the world today and the place they want to occupy in the future (Jara Holliday, 2006). Design can be an ally in promoting dialogical activities that enhance the recuperation of the movement's history and strategies through these cited tools and techniques. This can be especially interesting while working with a heterogeneous group of people that differ in age, literate skills, and hierarchy roles within the movement.

Even though the learning process in design projects is one of the claims that define participatory design, researcher Betsy Di Salvo points out that often this is a one-sided process and becomes focused on what designers can learn from participants, and how this insight can inform design solutions (DiSalvo, 2016). Within a Militant Design Research perspective, the learning process emerges as a shared social production not only from observation or participation in design spaces, as is the case of participatory design and participant observation approaches, but from political action in these spaces. By political action, I mean organizing and engaging in courses, meetings, fundraisings, riots, political debates, and so on. This is why it may be necessary to go beyond participatory design techniques, as they do not necessarily connect theory to action or have a political horizon of emancipation through action.

Participation has been widely discussed in design at least since the 1970s (Ehn, 2017), but recent work calls for the design community to look at the political dimension of participation, suggesting the addition of layers of social and political reflection to discussions of democratic design (Serpa et al., 2020), focusing on personal politics and not just institutional politics (Gautam & Tatar, 2020), and to view the political nature of participation through a pluriversal lens that makes the emergence of other possible worlds feasible (Calderon Salazar & Huybrechts, 2020).

Creating conditions for participation is an ongoing challenge in spaces of social movements and militant research. Participation is not something that designers or 'responsible' people can give to another person so that they can express themselves. From the understanding that existing inequalities in society are reflected in these spaces, we have that contextual systematic oppressions should not be neglected in Militant Design Research; on the contrary, they are transversal to its activities. It is not enough to promote democratic ideals without seriously addressing the inequalities that historically affect the people who engage in them. Without properly addressing these issues, participatory processes within Militant Design Research can lead to the dehumanization of subjects (van Amstel et al., 2021), the restriction of their autonomy (Escobar, 2017), and the control of the socio-material production of their existences (Silva, 2022).

The process of Militant Design Research is always collective and involves subjects who have different positionalities and abilities. Although all

those involved are expected to actively participate in the processes of research, political action, and education, the role played by the subjects is not the same. For example, community leaders have the power of oratory, which is an incredible tool for the oral exchange of knowledge, yet they may not be so skilled at taking notes and systematizing knowledge in writing. Likewise, some militants are exceptional at political mobilization, which teaches about political processes, discipline, and the cause of the movement; however, they are not as practiced at designing pedagogical tools for educational processes. The responsibilities of each militant in the promotion of the activities that make up the tripod of Militant Design Research should be mutually agreed upon among those involved, based on the objectives defined collectively, and on each one's abilities.

The projects developed in Militant Design Research processes with social movements do not need to deal with formal design products. The process can develop any social-material instrument that the group needs to produce collectively, like an event, an instrument to control seeds production, a waterfall mapping for ecotourism services, a riot, an advocacy initiative, etc. In this way, we can rethink the practices of design in understanding them beyond the making of an artifact or the gathering of 'user' information: as relational processes that occur within the militant research tripod. Not everything serves the design research and project, but for greater purposes, which articulate the political struggle, integrate people, and may resonate and develop in unpredictable ways.

When designers engage in social movements, we engage in learning a particular repertoire of practices and framings of reality. This process of participation and commitment is, in fact, a process of self-transformation. The practices within the movement not only produce such movement, but also produce the subjects that take part in it. Social movements are not only significant sites of social and political action but also important—albeit contested and contradictory—terrains of learning and knowledge production. The needed transformation of design may come from an openness to the collective processes of discovery proposed by Militant Design Research.

May we have the courage to become all that we can be!

## THE EVERLASTING STRUGGLE

In this article, I sought to question the role of intellectual designers, especially those situated in the Global South and Latin America, in confronting how we produce knowledge and for whom. The structure of institutions and the organization of intellectual and academic work pose permanent challenges for researchers who wish to confront the traditional modes of scientific work and, above all, seek to transform social relations with their work in the production of knowledge.

The surpassing of epistemic colonialism and extractivism within our field of research and practice are permanent challenges and unfinished tasks, especially for those of us who live in countries subject to structural and historical exploitation. Therefore, the challenge for Latin American academics committed to emancipatory design research is twofold. On the one hand, it is necessary to confront the inequality posed by the international division of intellectual labor, which fetishizes our geo-political experience as the 'other' and views with suspicion the theoretical-political interpretation produced from the 'Global South'. On the other hand, we cannot succumb to poor political-intellectual mediation, which tames the radicality of grassroots movements and flattens differences and inequalities in order to make research results more presentable for traditional academia.

The solution-driven and problem-solving modus operandi of traditional design research and practice do not serve such emancipation purposes. Nevertheless, there are perspectives in design that show the political will to question the field and its paradigms (Ansari & Kiem, 2021; Escobar, 2017; Gutiérrez Borrero, 2022; Ibarra, 2020; Noel, 2020; T. Schultz et al., 2018; van Amstel et al., 2021). They are building a path of critical reflection that has been gradually growing, but there is still a lack of concrete strategies for design actions that can face their own contradictions.

I sought historical references on how privileged spaces of knowledge production dealt with these contradictions in the past and got to militant research, an approach born in Latin American practices to promote cooperation between the academy and the popular movements that ascended in the fervent 1960s. Inspired by this perspective, I outline principles for Militant Design Research to draw initial contours for a possible engagement with the oppressed. In doing so, this work recognizes social movements as political subjects that have been prefiguring, through their political and organizational practices, other ways of being and relating to the world.

The presentation of Militant Design Research as a theoretical-political proposal within the community of design researchers aims to stimulate methodological experimentation in research and practice. It will take further work to scrutinize Militant Design Research principles and to evaluate the limits and potentialities of militant research for knowledge construction in the field of design.

Ultimately, it is necessary to hold intellectuals and researchers responsible for the processes of knowledge production and for the academic mediations that we perform, so that popular struggles and their interpretation of the world are not tamed and depoliticized when these experiences are presented in research, publications, seminars, and lectures. Even with outlined strategies for horizontal dialogue, the final decisions about which phenomena and how they will be analyzed are up to us, the researchers. We are responsible for the authorship

of these works. That being said, we need to reaffirm horizontality as a quest, a permanent task of expanding the plurality of enunciation in academic narratives. The engagement of design, as a field of knowledge, with social movements, can enhance design capacity to work for emancipation and to dismantle the oppressive structures that still orient our practice in and out of academia. **D**

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