

# Social Means Do Not Justify Corruptible Ends: A Realist Perspective of Social Innovation and Design

**Abstract** This article introduces designers to the dilemma that arises when twin aspects of social innovation – social means and social ends – do not align. Some academics have noted the anti-social, anti-political, and anti-inventive effects emerging from the spread of microfinance practices. We discuss the tendency for social design and innovation literature to focus on design processes rather than outcomes, and introduce ideas from realist political theory to account for the corruptibility of social innovations. We suggest that designers can prevent the corruption of social outcomes by shifting from idealist “what if” scenarios to realist “who whom?” questions instead.

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5 Andrew Shea, *Designing for Social Change: Strategies for Community-Based Graphic Design* (Princeton: Princeton Architectural Press, 2012).

6 Anthony Dunne and Fiona Raby, *Speculative Everything: Design, Fiction, and Social Dreaming* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2013).

7 *Ibid.*, 160.

8 Compare with Cynthia E. Smith, *Design for the Other 90%* (New York: Cooper-Hewitt, National Design Museum, 2007).

"Social innovation" is a concept that transcends the boundaries of academia, business, and the public sector. Design academics and innovators have written about it. Corporate social responsibility (CSR) initiatives and new social partnerships are just two of the activities businesses undertake in its name. Within the public sector, social innovation is a buzzword in the United Kingdom, the United States, France, and Scandinavia. Most notably, though, its practice has been widely promoted by the European Union.

The European Commission defines social innovations as "social in both their ends and their means."<sup>1</sup> "Social means" implies that the innovation is a *process* of co-creation involving a set of stakeholders who work in a social or collective *manner*; "social ends" implies that such practices lead to socially beneficial *outcomes*. This article will argue that these two facets of social innovation do not necessarily align. Although there are many proponents of "social practices" or "social processes" – not least within the design profession – the deployment of such design processes do not *necessarily* produce socially beneficial outcomes. Indeed, this article endeavors to show that leveraging "the social" may well produce unforeseen negative societal outcomes, and that the rhetoric claiming that social design processes lead to socially beneficial results represents a false promise. As evident in debates between idealism and realism in political theory, well-intended and idealistic modes of conduct need not produce positive outcomes. As an illustrative example of this harsh reality, the article will discuss the case of microfinance, an oft-cited example of social innovation.

### What's in a Prefix? The Emergence and Meaning of the "Social"

The social value of participation has long been acknowledged in the field of design, and so have the conflicts and politics involved in collaborative endeavors involving users,<sup>2</sup> trade unions,<sup>3</sup> and civic stakeholders at large.<sup>4</sup> The use of the "social" prefix when describing a design process has become commonplace for actors who wish to highlight the ethical quality of their efforts. All designs can be socially oriented, and sometimes the social aspect of a design can emerge via a very specific artifact, such as a poster. For instance, design educator and writer Andrew Shea proposes the notion of "Community-Based Graphic Design" to mobilize community engagement in "real world cases" through collaboratively designing posters, websites, or murals.<sup>5</sup> At the other end of the spectrum, the term social design can apply to something as vast and open as the future. Thus, critical design proponents Anthony Dunne and Fiona Raby propose an engagement with the social in the form of speculative "social dreaming."<sup>6</sup>

Dunne and Raby, however, explicitly distance their work from social design, as it focuses too much on "fixing things."<sup>7</sup> Their straightforward rejection of social design as too focused on such fixes highlights how the "social" part of design has become an ethical statement about designing itself. The fact that an exhibition like "Design for the Other 90%" at the Cooper-Hewitt Design Museum was subsequently displayed at the UN office in New York suggests that design practices are increasingly deemed relevant to the humanitarian agenda.<sup>8</sup> Similarly, book titles such as *Design Like You Give a Damn*<sup>9</sup> and *Design Revolution: 100 Products That Empower People*<sup>10</sup> show that designing is no longer primarily concerned with producing shiny new commodities. Indeed, it seems designers are finally heeding Papanek's call for them to address the "real" world.<sup>11</sup>

Design academics' "social" turn dovetails with a similar shift in innovation research.<sup>12</sup> Over the past few years, scholars have flocked around societal innovation processes, with publishers scrambling to put out major edited volumes that promote the concept.<sup>13</sup> In many ways, the academic study of "social innovation"<sup>14</sup>

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