# On the Politics of Design Framing Practices

Design Frames, Design Politics; Social Movements, Institutional Theory; Frame Innovation; Counter-Frames; Collective Action; Materiality; Sociomateriality

## 1. Introduction

Designers have been described as "material-semiotic storytellers" whose material practices normalize past and present values into the future.[1] From this standpoint design can be understood as a set of practices and capabilities to interpret social systems and facilitate socio-material outcomes that have long-term structuring effects on society. Design is historically contingent and by virtue of its structuring, or "forming" in Clive Dilnot's words, is both sociomaterially conditioned and conditioning.[2] With this understanding, design is invariably political.

At the same time, framing has become a foundational concept in design theory and the impact and contribution of scholarly work on this topic on the design field cannot be understated. This body of work emerges from interpretivist and phenomenological epistemological positions, building on planning literature, and a key proposition is that it argues for the superior abilities of the designer and their skills to problem-solve and indeed "problem-frame."[3] At the same time, wide-ranging theories of and debates on the sociology of framing and frames originating from the anthropologist Gregory Bateson's work on framing undertaken during the 1950s, warrants greater attention within design literature.[4] Framing as understood in social movement studies, communications, and institutional and political theory provides new and different viewpoints to those currently understood in design. In this broader literature, social

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[1] Matt Ward and Alex Wilkie, "Made in Criticalland : Designing Matters of Concern," *Networks of Design: Design History Society Conference, September 2008*, 2008, 1–7.

[2] Clive Dilnot, "Design as a Socially Significant Activity," *Design Studies* 3, no. 3 (1982): 139–46.

[3] Mieke van der Bijl-Brouwer, "Problem Framing Expertise in Public and Social Innovation," *She Ji: The Journal of Design, Economics, and Innovation* 5, no. 1 (2019): 29–43, https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1016/j.sheji.2019.01.003.

[4] Gregory Bateson, *Steps Toward an Ecology of Mind: Collected Essays in Anthropology, Psychiatry, Evolution, and Epistemology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 191–97.

frames are conceptualized as sociological phenomena, meaning that frames are concepts that animate social processes. This distinction relates specifically to how frames are necessarily about taking a position ("symbolic", "material", "social"),[5] produce and reproduce ideology in context,[6] containing possibilities of dissent through or within a given frame,[7] displaying dynamic characteristics in relation to societal processes of change.

As such, following Dilnot, we approach frames as historically constituted and enacted sociomaterially outside and beyond discrete "problem frames", observable in design project contexts. On this basis, the political implied therein is about how frames condition, foreclose, direct, or open up social processes and outcomes and in doing so suppress or reveal dissensus. These principles have important implications for design processes and practices in general but specifically for more dissensual design spheres, such as critical and socially and politically engaged design. Therefore, we consider this new understanding within the specific context of social movements, collective action, and grassroots organizing, to ground our arguments and critiques.

In this conceptual paper, our intention is to revitalize the conceptualization of design framing and establish its essentially political nature. On this basis, we first present the current literature on framing and design. We then reinterpret this literature by drawing on existing scholarship on distinct yet interlinked social theories of frames: 1) agentic, subjective, or cognitive frames; 2) collective action frames; and 3) institutionalized frames. From here, we develop a specific line of enquiry through our concept of counter-framing design within the context of socially and politically engaged design practices. We elaborate on this through two illustrative examples where we articulate practices of designing as conceived through social movements theory,[8] in combination with institutional theories of framing.[9] The examples focus on collectives/activist groups within which designers play active and generative community mobilization roles. The paper demonstrates the positionality inherent within frames insofar as

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[5] Marcos Ancelovici, "Bourdieu in Movement: Toward a Field Theory of Contentious Politics," *Social Movement Studies* 20, no. 2 (2021): 155–73, https://doi.org/10.1080/14742837.2019.1637727.

[6] David Snow and Robert Benford, "Ideology in the Study of Social Movements," *Mobilization* 5, no. 2 (2000): 55–60, http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/03634529609379059.

[7] John A Noakes and H Johnston, "Frames of Protest: A Road Map to a Perspective," in *Frames of Protest: Social Movements and the Framing Perspective*, First (Oxford: Rowan and Littlefield Publishers Inc., 2005).

[8] Donatella Della Porta and Mario Diani, *Social Movements: An Introduction*, Second (Oxford, UK: Blackwell Publishing, 2014); Pamela E. Oliver and Hank Johnston, "What a Good Idea! Frames and Ideologies in Social Movement Research," *Mobilization: An International Quarterly* 5, no. 1 (2000): 37–54, https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.0703993104.

[9] Neil Fligstein and Doug McAdam, "Toward a General Theory of Strategic Action Fields," *Sociological Theory* 29, no. 1 (2011): 1–26.

frames articulate subordinated or dominant status, or express normative understandings until challenged. In doing so, we build a conceptualization of the political foundations of design framing practices and their implications for those contexts within which design operates. Consequently, we argue for dissensual counter-framing design practices that unsettle institutionalized norms and ideologies played out within frames, and through which a form of political agency is sociomaterially enacted.

## 2. On Framing Theory in Design

The literature on design framing builds on the works of key scholars,[10] which taken together establishes the designer's framing activity as a "deliberate strategy"[11] involving an approach to meaning and sense-making intended to make complex social situations understandable[12] and from which to develop actions. According to Kees Dorst, framing is "the creation of a (novel) standpoint from which a problematic situation can be tackled."[13] This work is developed from positions of symbolic interactionism[14] and phenomenology/hermeneutics[15] "that positions intersubjective meaning-making front and center, resting on the interactive processes entailed in working out definitions-of-situations."[16] As such, entering, engaging with, and framing a context or "situation" is the process by which meaning is constructed.

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[10] Donald Schön, *The Reflective Practitioner: How Professionals Think in Action* (London: Temple Smith, 1983). Donald Schön and Martin Rein, *Frame Reflection: Towards the Resolution of Intractable Policy Problems* (New York: Basic Books, Inc., 1995). Nigel Cross, "Creativity in the Design Process: Co-Evolution of Problem Solution," *Design Studies* 22, no. 5 (2001): 425–37, https://doi.org/10.1016/S0142-694X(01)00009-6; Nigel Cross, *Designerly Ways of Knowing* (Springer).

[11] Kees Dorst, "The Core of 'Design Thinking' and Its Application," *Design Studies* 32 (2011): 521–32, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.destud.2011.07.006.

[12] Schön and Rein, *Frame Reflection: Towards the Resolution of Intractable Policy Problems*.

[13] Dorst, "The Core of 'Design Thinking' and Its Application."

[14] Nigel Cross, "Designerly Ways of Knowing : Design Discipline versus Design Science," *Design Issues* 17, no. 3 (2001): 49–55, http://www.jstor.org/stable/1511801; Schön, *The Reflective Practitioner: How Professionals Think in Action*.

[15] Kees Dorst, *Frame Innovation: Create New Thinking By Designing*, ed. Ken Friedman and Erik Stolterman (Cambridge Massachusetts, London England: MIT Press, 2015), 77.

[16] Merlijn Van Hulst and Dvora Yanow, "From Policy 'Frames' to 'Framing': Theorizing a More Dynamic , Political Approach," 2016, https://doi.org/10.1177/0275074014533142.

These strands of work contribute to an extensive area of research in design – ranging from studies on the processes and relations of framing and complexity,[17] as practices that redefine the "solution space"[18] to create a narrative for engaging with the project,[19] or to construct cognitive interfaces.[20] Recent work on framing as practice emphasizes its role in design policy. Mieke van der Bijl-Brouwer focuses on public and social innovation organizations through systemic design in the context of complex policy-making processes.[21] Similarly, Jung-Joo Lee's study on "frame failures," which draws on the work of Peter Vermaas, Dorst and Clementine Thurgood,[22] develops knowledge on situations where a frame cannot achieve an intended project goal and/or outcome, the process of presenting "new frames" to clients and how designers might better sensitize clients in this process.[23] Similarly, Francesco Zurlo and Cabirio Cautela use the concept of "narrative frames" as a time device to articulate designers' engagement in a process.[24] In these studies, "framing and reframing" happens in situ, in dialogue with relevant actors, and occurs within the timebound constraints of a given project, where clients may "agree on a new frame."[25]

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[17] Mieke van der Bijl-Brouwer, "Problem Framing Expertise in Public and Social Innovation," *She Ji* 5, no. 1 (2019): 29–43, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.sheji.2019.01.003.

[18] Dorst, *Frame Innovation*, 59.

[19] Zurlo and Cautela, "Design Strategies in Different Narrative Frames," *Design Issues* 30, no. 1 (2014): 19–35, https://doi.org/10.1162/DESI_a_00246.

[20] Elzbieta T. Kazmierczak, "Design as Meaning Making: From Making Things to the Design of Thinking," *Design Issues* 19, no. 2 (April 2003): 45–59, https://doi.org/10.1162/074793603765201406.

[21] Van der Bijl-Brouwer, "Problem Framing Expertise in Public and Social Innovation."

[22] Peter Vermaas, Kees Dorst, Clementine Thurgood, "Framing in Design: A Formal Analysis and Failure Modes," *Proceedings of the International Conference on Engineering Design, ICED* 3, no. DS 80-03 (2015): 133–42.

[23] Jung-Joo Lee, "Frame Failures and Reframing Dialogues in the Public Sector Design Projects" 14, no. 1 (2020): 81–94.

[24] Zurlo and Cautela, "Design Strategies in Different Narrative Frames.

[25] Lee, "Frame Failures and Reframing Dialogues in the Public Sector Design Projects."

Furthermore, framing as a practice is understood as highly dependent on design skill,[26] where framing and reframing leads to a transformative insight,[27] with many examples of studies of framing processes within organizational project contexts.[28] As Dorst writes, "[F]rame creation is a design-based practice… developed from the working methods of expert designers."[29] Similarly, design framing practices are understood as discrete activities, exemplified in activities such as thematic analysis and frame creation workshops,[30] where the "designer's view of the design problem" constructs the frame through cycles of learning to redefine the "solution space."[31] A design frame is a constructed problem *statement* that is about both "a new way of looking" and "acting within" the problem situation, during the timeline of a project to realize a solution.[32] As such, framing is a purposeful activity, an approach and element of practice for innovative outcomes.

Recently, in an evolution on Dorst's work, Louise Møller Haase and Linda Nhu Laursen distinguish two conceptualizations of design frames. Alongside Dorst's "problem frame" reasoning process, they identify the "meaning frame," which is the process by which designers create "shared understandings… of relevant issues, important values and goals in the project, and criteria for evaluation" – the meaning frame is "the entirety of knowledge and belief structures associated with the design."[33] Their study foregrounds how designers create desirability, identity, and legitimacy by embedding narratives associated to certain values,

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[26] Van der Bijl-Brouwer, "Problem Framing Expertise in Public and Social Innovation"; Dorst and Cross, "Creativity in the Design Procecss: Co-Evolution of Problem Solution."

[27] Darren Umney and Peter Lloyd, "Designing Frames: The Use of Precedents in Parliamentary Debate," *Design Studies* 54 (2018): 201–18, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.destud.2017.10.008.

[28] Louise Møller Haase and Linda Nhu Laursen, "Meaning Frames: The Structure of Problem Frames and Solution Frames," *Design Issues* 35, no. 3 (2019), https://doi.org/10.2307/2067804; Lee, "Frame Failures and Reframing Dialogues in the Public Sector Design Projects"; van der Bijl-Brouwer, "Problem Framing Expertise in Public and Social Innovation."

[29] Dorst, *Frame Innovation*, 161.

[30] Jos P Van Leeuwen et al., "Thematic Research in the Frame Creation Process," in *Proceedings of ServDes 2016* (Linköping University Electronic Press: Linköping, 2016), 352–64; Bijl-Brouwer, "Problem Framing Expertise in Public and Social Innovation."

[31] Dorst, *Frame Innovation,* 183–85.

[32] Dorst, *Frame Innovation,* 53.

[33] Møller Haase and Nhu Laursen, "Meaning Frames: The Structure of Problem Frames and Solution Frames."

ideologies and worldviews.[34] Furthermore, Dorst's most recent text on "frame innovation" elaborates on his "frame creation" concepts and methods through his extensive practitioner experience of working on frame creation processes. In this work, Cameron Tonkinwise finds that Dorst is implicitly political, addressing the hard problems of society by questioning the "roles, norms, and values" within a given social order.[35] Be this as it may, questions remain in how design frames correlate with sociological phenomena in context, such as how frames play out processes of subjectivization, i.e., whereby people become subjected to certain modes of self-expression and identity portrayal in particular situations or institutional environments.[36] Thus, new questions arise that are relevant for design research and practice. In recent work, Dorst nods to this necessity, touching upon Bourdieu's field theory.[37]

In summary, design framing is understood as a meaning and sensemaking practice directed to build consensus between project beneficiaries on a given issue or "seemingly intractable" problem,[38] through purposefully constructed problem frames or meaning frames that predominantly occur within discrete timebound processes of innovation. Framing is understood as intrinsic to and inseparable from the design activity and is, thus far, focused on the individual subject and rooted in the humanistic capacities of the expert designer deployed to situations to interpret the "socio-emotional aspects of life."[39] This points to how the philosophies of knowledge underpinning framing theories are consequential to how frames manifest in design theory and practice: framing as understood in policy is predicated on individuals engaging with situated problems, and is unconcerned with frames as organizing collective opposition to challenge power relations or to unsettle normative understandings of issues, as in social movement studies.[40]

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[34] Guy Julier, *The Culture of Design*, 3rd ed. (London: SAGE Publications Ltd, 2014), 4–5.

[35] Cameron Tonkinwise, "Committing to the Political Values of Post-Thing-Centered Designing (Teaching Designers How to Design How to Live Collaboratively)," *Design and Culture* 8, no. 1 (2016): 139–54, https://doi.org/10.1080/17547075.2016.1142355.

[36] Edward Finegan, "Subjectivity and Subjectivisation: An Introduction," in *Subjectivity and Subjectivisation: Linguistic Perspectives*, ed. Dieter Stein and Susan Wright (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 1–15, https://doi.org/DOI: 10.1017/CBO9780511554469.001.

[37] Dorst, *Frame Innovation*, 76–77.

[38] Dorst, "The Core of 'Design Thinking' and Its Application."

[39] Van Leeuwen et al., "Thematic Research in the Frame Creation Process."

[40] Hulst and Yanow, "From Policy ' Frames ' to ' Framing ': Theorizing a More Dynamic , Political Approach."

## 3. Frame Theory – Agentic, Collective Action, and Institutionally Embedded

In this section, we turn to disciplines of media and communication studies, social movement studies, psychology, philosophy, and political and institutional theory to sketch out foundational framing concepts and key scholars and theories of frames and framing from outside of design theory. The origins of framing theory can be traced to Bateson's work on meta-communication and later work by sociologist Erving Goffman[41], which together led to the uptake of the theory in different ways in these fields.[42] Several extensive reviews on frame theory demonstrate its widespread use across the social sciences and articulate distinct positions within what is a broad conceptual approach.[43]

Our overall intention is to establish that design framing practices are in their essence political, and to achieve this we draw selectively on this literature on frame theory to develop our arguments. Following Merlijn van Hulst and Dvora Yanow and Barbara Gray and colleagues,[44] we structure our arguments on frame theory according to agentic, subjective, or cognitive frames; strategic and collective action frames; and institutional frames and evolve this analytical scheme in correspondence with design theory (Table 1).

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[41] Gregory Bateson, *Steps to an Ecology of Mind: Collected Essays in Anthropology, Psychiatry, Evolution, and Epistemology*, Second (Chicago and London: Chandler Publications, 1972). Erving Goffman, *Frame Analysis: An Essay on the Organization of Experience*, Northeaste (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1986). First published in 1972, this work along with that of Goffman (1986) are internalised within the design literature by those design theorists who originated work on design frames.;

[42] Hulst and Yanow, "From Policy ' Frames ' to ' Framing ': Theorizing a More Dynamic , Political Approach."

[43] Hulst and Yanow; Joep P. Cornelissen and Mirjam D. Werner, "Putting Framing in Perspective: A Review of Framing and Frame Analysis across the Management and Organizational Literature," *Academy of Management Annals* 8, no. 1 (2014): 181–235, https://doi.org/10.1080/19416520.2014.875669; Barbara Gray, Jill M Purdy, and Shahzad Ansari, "From Interactions to Institutions: Microprocesses of Framing and Mechanisms for the Structuring of Institutional Fields," *Academy of Management Review* 40, no. 1 (2015): 115–43, https://doi.org/10.5465/amr.2013.0299. Oliver and Johnston, "What a Good Idea! Frames and Ideologies in Social Movement Research"; Snow and Benford, "Ideology in the Study of Social Movements."

[44] Hulst and Yanow, "From Policy 'Frames' to 'Framing': Theorizing a More Dynamic, Political Approach"; Gray, Purdy, and Ansari, "From Interactions to Institutions: Microprocesses of Framing and Mechanisms for the Structuring of Institutional Fields."

The work of social movement scholars David Benford and Robert Snow[45] and Pamela Oliver and Hank Johnston[46] on collective action frames is particularly relevant for our conceptualization of counter-framing design.[47] While useful to organize our arguments and explicate our analysis, these are artificially constructed frameworks that "bypass the reality of social relations," which rather are intersecting, dialogic and play out in the everyday.[48]

2.1 Cognitive, Agentic, Subjective Frames (Micro)

This understanding of frames is derived from cognition theory, psychology, linguistics, and communications. Management scholars Joep Cornelissen and Mirjam Werner define micro-frames as "knowledge structure[s] that direct and guide information processing."[49] These are cognitive processes where "humans live by inference."[50] Here frames are individuals' "frames of reference"; these create "cognitive biases" understood to relate to larger discursive forces and knowledge systems in society (i.e., institutional frames). Within the "framing effect" people assess situations through a process of internal comparison to a legitimate point of reference or baseline. This directly relates to automatic cognition processes and affect how people react to an issue, for example depending on how it is presented and perceived either as a loss or a gain.[51] Cornelissen and Werner in their review highlight that better

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[45] Robert D. Benford and David A. Snow, "Framing Processes and Social Movements: An Overview and Assessment," *Annual Review of Sociology* 26, no. 1 (2000): 611–39, https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.soc.26.1.611; Robert D Benford, "Ideology, Frame Resonance, and Participant," *Mobilization: An International Journal*, 1988; Snow and Benford, "Ideology in the Study of Social Movements."

[46] Oliver and Johnston, "What a Good Idea! Frames and Ideologies in Social Movement Research."

[47] Snow and Benford, "Ideology in the Study of Social Movements."

[48] Klaus Eder, "Social Movements in Social Theory," in *The Oxford Handbook of Social Movements*, 1st ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 41.

[49] Cornelissen and Werner, "Putting Framing in Perspective: A Review of Framing and Frame Analysis across the Management and Organizational Literature."

[50]Cornelissen and Werner.

[51] Dennis Chong and James N. Druckman, "Framing Theory," *Annual Review of Political Science* 10, no. 1 (June 2007): 103–26, https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.polisci.10.072805.103054.

understanding is warranted of these ”agentic”[52] – meaning the degree to which these frames engender action – and subjective micro-frames, and their “attendant biases.”[53]

Cognitive biases such as the “framing effect” are central to understanding the link between perception, moral values, and actions. For example, a study conducted on liberal and conservative Americans attitudes towards climate change revealed that while liberals’ attitudes did not generally differ across conditions, conservative Americans shifted substantially towards the pro-environmental direction when the issue was presented within their binding moral frame, i.e. when framed as a matter of obeying authority, defending nature’s purity, and demonstrating patriotism to the United States.[54] The attitude shift towards a positive view related directly to the fact that the appeal was perceived as congruent with their cognitive frame and conservative ideology. This understanding of the agentic as constitutive of cause and effect has led to design theory objectifying frames as stable points of view[55] that are consequently neutralized of more foundational forms of agency (such as affect, or by soliciting action and thought that is critical of dominant positions).[56] Consequently, effectively framing an issue so that it is perceived as sufficiently problematic by a particular group is a form of “information politics” that has the capacity to stir social action.[57]

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[52] Rhys H. Williams, “The Cultural Contexts of Collective Action: Constraints, Opportunities, and the Symbolic Life of Social Movements,” *The Blackwell Companion to Social Movements*, Wiley Online Books, January 1, 2004, https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1002/9780470999103.ch5.

[53] Cornelissen and Werner, “Putting Framing in Perspective: A Review of Framing and Frame Analysis across the Management and Organizational Literature.”

[54] Christopher Wolsko, Hector Ariceaga, and Jesse Seiden, “Red, White, and Blue Enough to Be Green: Effects of Moral Framing on Climate Change Attitudes and Conservation Behaviors,” *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology* 65 (2016): 7–19, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jesp.2016.02.005.

[55]Christopher Le Dantec, *Designing Publics* (Cambridge Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2016), 23.

[56] Williams, “The Cultural Contexts of Collective Action: Constraints, Opportunities, and the Symbolic Life of Social Movements.”

[57] Raffaele Marchetti, “The Conditions for Civil Society Participation in International Decision-Making,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Social Movements*, 1st ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 757.

2.2. Strategic and Collective Action Frames (Meso)

In social movement studies, collective action frames or strategic frames are meso-level group framing practices,[58] where frames as "schemata of interpretation" emphasize elements of an (unfolding) issue to determine how that issue is perceived and understood.[59] Frames manifest by assigning meaning to issues through generative and active exchange processes between actors.[60] They are not individual but established through a "productive" process that mobilize actors within a movement.[61] As frames are established through processes of frame alignment or frame expansion, collective action framing involves a process of "dynamic" exchange between actors, where framing is linked to the culture of a given context and its institutions.[62] John H. Noakes and Hank Johnston argue that both "political structure can shape movement framing" and at the same time "movement framing can cause openings or closing in political opportunities," pointing to how frames are conditioned by wider social contexts as well as conditioning within those contexts.[63] As different social groups strive for legitimacy claims by "un-institutionalized actors," new forms of "political agency" are enacted that, at the very least, make possible the process of deconstructing institutionalized "norms" within the global polity.[64] Social movement studies also provide the (disputed) concept of "master frames": these are enduring collective action frames that re-emerge in different forms through cycles of action; e.g. the justice master frame has pertained to environmental, climate, or social justice, or the "rights" master frame has variously pertained to civil, women's, or gay rights.[65] Raffaele Marchetti refers to these as readings across a "world polity," or "cosmopolitanism,

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[58] Cornelissen and Werner, "Putting Framing in Perspective."

[59] Goffman, *Frame Analysis: An Essay on the Organization of Experience*.

[60] Della Porta and Diani, *Social Movements: An Introduction*.

[61] Robert Benford and David Snow, "Framing Processes and Social Movements: An Overview and Assessment," no. August (2000), https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.soc.26.1.611.

[62] Della Porta and Diani, *Social Movements: An Introduction*.

[63] John H. Noakes and Hank Johnston, "Frames of Protest: A Road Map to a Perspective," 21.

[64] Marchetti, "The Conditions for Civil Society Participation in International Decision-Making."

[65] Oliver and Johnston pan the static abstraction of the master frame, on the basis that it loses the interactive and processual nature of the frames conceptualization. This is posited within a more substantive critique on the tendency towards conflation of frames with ideology, the latter of which is constitutive of "political and organisational factors." Oliver and Johnston, "What a Good Idea! Frames and Ideologies in Social Movement Research." – I wonder if this second point needs more elaboration or should be removed…

localism, neoliberalism, civilisationism," within which different ideologies, political arrangements, power, and agency are at work. [66]

Collective action frames involve social group formation around counter-frame positions constructed to gain power to influence socio-political processes (public debate, protest, policy analysis) – that is, collective action frames challenge institutionalized frames. Counter-frames are "frames that oppose earlier effective frames"[67] and arise competitively between opponents involved in political debates – examples can be seen in studies of energy policy among others.[68] Furthermore, this literature establishes the relationship between frames and other political theories and concepts, by setting out how frames can both originate from and effect ideologies.[69] Elsewhere, we develop the concept of counter-framing design in tandem with ideology, discourse, and epistemology, and consequently its usefulness for design for social movements.[70]

### 2.3 Institutional / Field Frames (Macro)

Emerging from institutional theory, institutional frames are those "taken for granted realities" that "structure expectations and script behaviours," and which form "enduring meaning structures" as the basis for social and economic change within an institution.[71] As the cognitive linguist and philosopher

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[66] Marchetti, "The Conditions for Civil Society Participation in International Decision-Making."

[67] Dennis Chong and James N Druckman, "Strategies of Counter-Framing*," *Available at SSRN 1912083.*, 2011.

[68] Michaël Aklin and Johannes Urpelainen, "Debating Clean Energy: Frames, Counter Frames, and Audiences," *Global Environmental Change* 23, no. 5 (2013): 1225–32, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.gloenvcha.2013.03.007.

[69] Della Porta and Diani, *Social Movements: An Introduction*, 79.

[70] S. Prendeville and P. Syperek., "Counter-Framing Design: Politics of the New Normal," in *Nordes: Matters of Scale, Proceedings of the 9th Nordic Design Research Conference*, ed. E.; Brandt et al. (15th-18th Aug, Kolding, Denmark: NORDES, 2021), https://conference2021nordes.org/.

[71] Cornelissen and Werner, "Putting Framing in Perspective: A Review of Framing and Frame Analysis across the Management and Organizational Literature."

George Lakoff states, "institutionalised frames" manifest through the cultural practices and discourses of a given social context and its institutions.[72] Such frames "lay claim to reality" in a given social order.[73]

Institutionalization leads to legitimization of previously illegitimate norms, values, and practices,[74] through "ongoing processes" of contention between social movements and political authorities and through which the foundational institutions of society are formed. Institutional frames necessitate approaches that are both "symbolic and material" to allow for understanding how such frames are produced and reproduced, and subsequent theorization on the development and modes of organizing new institutions, practices, norms, and knowledge systems. [75] Lakoff points to "environmental inaction" linked to the perceived "natural and moral" liberal frame of a "let-the-market-decide" ideology,[76] which translates to failed (design) efforts at resource-efficiency and "zero-waste circularity."[77] To this end, institutional frames allow for observing hegemonic social orders as well as potential sites of contestation. In design theory, Liesbeth Huybrechts and colleagues elaborate the concept of "institutioning," through which they seek to loosen the strictures of embedded institutionalized frames.[78]

## **4.** The Political Foundations of Design Framing Practices

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[72]George Lakoff, "Why It Matters How We Frame the Environment," *Environmental Communication* 4, no. 1 (2010): 70–81, https://doi.org/10.1080/17524030903529749.

[73] Mikko Laamanen and Per Skålén, "Collective–Conflictual Value Co-Creation: A Strategic Action Field Approach," *Marketing Theory* 15, no. 3 (2015): 381–400, https://doi.org/10.1177/1470593114564905.

[74] Michael Lounsbury, "Institutional Variation in the Evolution of Social Movements: Competing Logics and the Spread of Recycling Advocacy Groups," *Social Movements and Organization Theory*, no. January 2005 (2005): 73–95, https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511791000.006.

[75]Stephen Wulff, Mary Bernstein, and Verta Taylor, "Collective Identity, Multi-Institutional Politics and Emotions," in *The Oxford Handbook of Social Movements* (Oxford University Press, 2017), 114.

[76] Lakoff, "Why It Matters How We Frame the Environment."

[77] Francisco Valenzuela and Steffen Böhm, "Against Wasted Politics: A Critique of the Circular Economy," *Ephemera: Theory & Politics in Organization* 17, no. 1 (2017): 23–60, http://ephemerajournal.org/sites/default/files/pdfs/contribution/17-1valenzuelabohm.pdf.

[78] Liesbeth Huybrechts, Henric Benesch, and Jon Geib, "Institutioning: Participatory Design, Co-Design and the Public Realm," *CoDesign* 13, no. 3 (2017): 148–59, https://doi.org/10.1080/15710882.2017.1355006.

Elzbieta Kazmierczak argues that, historically, designers have not had adequate tools to bridge the gap between meaning construction and design decisions at the level of design framing.[79] In sociology, frame theory has also been critiqued as a surface concept that is reducible to a linguistic form of "politics as marketing," which muddies the clarity with which other concepts, such as ideology, may bring when it is used interchangeably or in place of such terms.[80] The renowned Marxist philosopher Fredric Jameson pans Goffman's schematic conceptualization of frames as self-contradictory in its articulation of the relationship between individual and collective, and "only apparently about social life" insofar as it is willfully absent of "content", namely issues of power and history, which amounts to frames constituting a "historical residuality" that is "an after image of the real."[81] This points to the breadth of interpretations, critiques, and elaborations yet to be unpacked in design theory.

Correspondingly, the nature of what informs Dorst's "problem frame" or Møller Haase and Nhu Laursen's "meaning frame" remains to be understood. Following Marchetti and Oliver and Johnston, we might ask: which values, practices and norms are espoused and promoted within a given meaning frame?[82] What ideologies are being asserted by design and how, within a given polity? How are values, practices and norms de-/re-institutionalized by design? These are some of the critical questions that sociologists and critical theorists address through frame deconstruction and analysis to uncover normalized power relationships within institutionalized frames and associated ideologies.

Shana Agid and Mahmoud Keshavarz and Ramia Mazé question the absence of the social and the political in design's historical and predominant conceptualization of framing practices.[83] Agid mounts a critique of subjective frames: returning to Donald Schön's work on reflective practices, and questions the "prescriptive frames… [and] constrictions of the worldviews of the designers themselves," which are the determining factors on what is "reflected back."[84] As Umney and colleagues state, frames "carry the values of the frame's creator or borrow values from a normative narrative to which the designer may subscribe or

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[79] Elzbieta Kazmierczak, "Design as Meaning Making: From Making Things to the Design of Thinking."

[80] Oliver and Johnston, "What a Good Idea! Frames and Ideologies in Social Movement Research."

[81] Frederick Jameson, "On Goffman's Frame Analysis," *Theory and Society* 3, no. 1 (1976): 119–33.

[82] Marchetti, "The Conditions for Civil Society Participation in International Decision-Making."

Oliver and Johnston, "What a Good Idea! Frames and Ideologies in Social Movement Research."

[83] Shana Agid, "World Making: Working through Theory/Practice in Design," *Design and Culture* 4, no. 1 (2012): 27–54, https://doi.org/10.2752/175470812X13176523285110. Mahmoud Keshavarez and Ramia Mazé, "Design and Dissensus: Framing and Staging Participation in Design Research," *Design Philosophy Papers* 11, no. 1 (2013): 7–29, https://doi.org/10.2752/089279313X13968799815994.

[84] Agid, "World Making: Working through Theory/Practice in Design."

aspire."[85] Similarly, Lauren Williams identifies ill-defined "frames," claiming that "relying on empathy as the point of departure effectively privatizes its frame of reference, rendering the problems of [for example] systemic racism… as one to be solved by 'walking a mile in a person's shoes.'"[86] Implicit within this critique, is an argument against the uncritical subjectivist approaches that currently underpin design frame theory, whereby frames reproduce biases of identities, gender, race, citizenship, and beliefs. Rather, articulating frames as bound up in wider social phenomena allows for acknowledging the systemic nature of social injustices, or drawing on critical theories of frames points to fundamental deficiencies in the essence of the concept, thus far absent in design framing theory.

If Agid's view is a micropolitical critique, Huybrechts and colleagues' "institutioning" is a macropolitical one, articulating the reciprocal processes between institutions that have stakes in participatory design work and the institutions themselves.[87] Institutions are historically enacted social orders that condition the possibilities of design – possibilities that are "radically limited" through the material infrastructures and norms which they legitimize.[88] Relatedly, Umney and Peter Lloyd's textual analysis of a political debate on a major UK infrastructure project notes that project "precedents," have implications for the ways in which design reframing occurs in practice. [89] Similarly, views from practice lament the tokenistic nature of participation in contentious contexts. This tokenism is established under the auspices of participation whereby the coercive role of design plays out a "dishonest frame" through apparatuses (visualizations, maps, design workshops) that solicit public consent for and legitimacy of certain infrastructures, but under false pretenses that obfuscate controversial aspects of the project.[90]

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[85] Darren Umney, Peter Lloyd, Stephen Potter, "Political Debate as Design Process : A Frame Analysis," 2007, 771–81.

[86] Lauren Williams, "The Co-Constitutive Nature of Neoliberalism, Design, and Racism," *Design and Culture* 11, no. 3 (2019): 301–21, https://doi.org/10.1080/17547075.2019.1656901.

[87] Liesbeth Huybrechts, Henric Benesch, Jon Geib, "Institutioning: Participatory Design, Co-Design and the Public Realm."

[88] Clive Dilnot, "The Matter of Design," *Design Philosophy Papers* 13, no. 2 (2015): 115–23, https://doi.org/10.1080/14487136.2015.1133137.

[89] Umney and Lloyd, "Designing Frames: The Use of Precedents in Parliamentary Debate." Umney's study uses a naturally occurring dataset in the form of a transcription of a parliamentary debate, and as such, corresponds to institutionalised frames in this study. The authors delimit this study from an analysis of the whole process of the infrastructure development.

[90] Shannon Mattern, "Post-It Note City," Places Journal, 2020. https://placesjournal.org/article/post-it-note-city/ (Accessed 12th May 2020).

In summary, critically re-interpretating design framing offers insights into its relationship to bias, legitimization, values, positionality, ideology. Table 1 summarizes the implications of this analysis for understanding the political foundations of design framing.

| Frame Theory | Implications for the Politics of Design Framing |
|---|---|
| Agentic, Subjective, Cognitive Frames | - Reproduce cognitive biases and prejudices, and social/symbolic positions<br>- Legitimize / de-legitimize different people, cultures, race, gender<br>- Promote individual worldviews / hegemonic epistemologies<br>- Engender agency (stronger/weaker, individual/collective) |
| Strategic and Collective Action Frames | - Ideological premises of rationale for frames and associated strategies and actions<br>- De-institutionalize institutionalized norms, values, practices<br>- Legitimize social groups outside norm-making institutions and re-articulate positions |
| Institutional Frames | - Produce world polities, and their associated agency, power, political principles, and ideologies<br>- Semiotic front disavows coercive (material) realities<br>- Material conditions as historical phenomena |

Table 1 Social Theories of Frames and their Implications for the Politics of Design Framing

## 5. Towards Counter-framing Design

In this section we elaborate on and synthesize the politics of design framing in practice, and the relevance for design of social theories introduced in section three. Our conceptualization of "counter-framing design" argues for the complex, conflictual and processual nature of frames and counter-frames and their importance for understanding design in general as a sociopolitical practice.[91] Here we present two illustrative examples, which through the construction of counter-frames of collective action to contest institutionalized frames, foreground counter-framing design as political dissent.

In this article, design is understood as a set of capabilities that relate social systems to socio-material outcomes that have long-term structuring effects on society. Within this process, practices of design framing lead to the generation of "design concepts" that constitute cultural and material

[91] Prendeville and Syperek., "Counter-Framing Design: Politics of the New Normal."

infrastructures, and their related "purposes, relationships, identities, politics."[92] In his work, Adam Drazin cites an example of mobility infrastructure as a cause of rural inequality and isolation. This problem frame relates the historical absence and presence of material infrastructure to how the problem is latterly understood, which in turn leads to the creation of design concepts, new interfaces and technologies that integrate the social and material.[93]

Centering the materiality of design frames as Drazin does, helps to challenge conceptions of human-centered individual agency within frames,[94] and excessively discursive forms of social analysis that result in "an allergy to 'the real,'" [95] in favor of more relational understandings of embodied and collective agentic capacities. Similarly, in her work Noortje Marres contests the sub-politics interpretation of material participation as "below" discourse and metaphor, rather emphasizing the empirical bent of material politics as distinct from more "idea-centered or discursive understandings."[96] In tandem with Jameson and Oliver and Johnston, Marres's observation restates this surface effect of frames when they are understood as ephemeral statements, beyond which deeper and more consequential questions are found. This critical stance is productive for overcoming the linguistic conception of framing as sloganeering, in both its practice and its criticism, revealing the important role design can play vis-à-vis the socio-material aspects of frames.

Illustratively, Drazin's example requires acknowledgement of the historically constituted nature of the socio-material object through which frames are enacted, thereby demonstrating the substance of frames over and above linguistic interpretations of problems.[97] Equally, the construction of an "erroneous frame" in the context of a UK shooting incident is illuminating – the location of the incident, the material objects such as surveillance cameras photographs, as well as physical movements observed act as "material cues,"

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[92] Adam Drazin, "The Social Life of Concepts in Design Anthropology," in *Design Anthropology: Theory and Practice*, vol. 23, 2016, 1–11, https://doi.org/10.1111/gena.12013.

[93] Drazin.

[94] Diana Coole and Samantha Frost, *Introducing the New Materialisms*, *New Materialisms*, 2013, https://doi.org/10.1215/9780822392996-001.

[95] Coole and Frost.

[96] Noortje Marres, *Material Participation: Technology, the Environment and Everyday Publics* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2015).

[97] Adam Drazin, "The Social Life of Concepts in Design Anthropology," in *Design : Theory and Practice*, 1st ed. (Bloomsbury Academic, 2013), 33–50.

which "correspond" between linguistic cues in frame formation.[98] This further underscores the possibilities to revise our understandings of design framing – because frames in design are understood as intimately related to linguistics and metaphor.[99]

Our conceptualization of counter-framing design is rooted in the understanding that counter-frames contest problematic institutionalized frames through sociopolitical processes of change. Hegemonic perspectives and values embodied in institutionalized frames are continuously contested by emergent counter-publics and counter-institutional actors forming around counter-frame positions that embody and organize alternatives.[100] Returning to Marchetti, we can consider means for the legitimacy claims by "un-institutionalised actors" to foster new forms of "political agency." [101] Counter-frames engender oppositional forces to upend institutional norms and organize counter-publics, through political relevance and affectedness.

We establish that socio-materially generative design practices involve both the production and re-production of frames and counter-frames in these activist contexts. Frames are concordant with values and positions stemming variously from education, beliefs, and access to resources, which may be continuously contested and reformed by dissenting groups. Furthermore, by the very fact that counter-frames may be designed to contest institutionalized frames observed in contexts of mainstream design, we posit that our re-articulation of design framing is also relevant for those same mainstream design contexts.

5.1 Illustration A: "Open Source Circular Economy" (OSCE) Collective

The Open Source Circular Economy (OSCE) collective was founded on a mission to develop *"open source practices to create, socialise, and distribute solutions globally to build local circular economies."*[102] It was set up in 2014 by a coalition of activists from (eco-, social-) design, art, open source

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[98] Joep P. Cornelissen, Saku Mantere, and Eero Vaara, "The Contraction of Meaning: The Combined Effect of Communication, Emotions, and Materiality on Sensemaking in the Stockwell Shooting," *Journal of Management Studies* 51, no. 5 (2014): 699–736, https://doi.org/10.1111/joms.12073.

[99] Klaus. Krippendorff, *The Semantic Turn: A New Foundation for Design* (CRC/Taylor & Francis, 2006).

[100] Michael Warner, *Publics and Counter-Publics*, 4th Edition (Cambridge Massachusetts: Zone Books, 2014).

[101] Marchetti, "The Conditions for Civil Society Participation in International Decision-Making."

[102] "OSCEdays Framework Development, OSCEdays, Last modified February 2018, https://community.oscedays.org/t/oscedays-framework-development-2017/5702/28

hardware, policy and business backgrounds, with the prefix "open source" denoting its mobilizing counter-frame and oppositional position. This was a direct response to the institutionalized sustainability frame based on eco-modernist discourse, which was understood by the collective to perpetuate the positions of privileged corporate actors and market-based solutions predicated on *technical fix frames* of *resource efficiency* – manifesting in reductive approaches to the material practices of ecodesign and sustainable design. To this end, the collective's practices were conceived through the design of a counter-frame position to "reactivate politics…to tailor new and distinct counter-frames on waste and sustainability for subjects to identify with" against the institutionalized "dominant wasteful growth frame."[103] Its oppositional stance was fostered on values and practices of commons and social justice, through open source, peer-to-peer and participatory design methods (e.g. participatory budgeting, open hardware) that materially manifested "the potential for people to participate in a new economic frame." to construct positions and spaces for action outside of the prevailing discourse on circular economy.[104]

5.2 Illustration B: Transition Network (TN)

The Transition Network (TN) defines itself as "a movement of communities coming together to reimagine and rebuild our world," to enable low-carbon lifestyles by building resilient and self-sufficient communities beyond a fossil fuel-dependent economy.[105] TN was founded in 2005, in response to an institutionalized frame of "green consumerism" and environmentalist discourse that emerged with the mainstreaming of sustainability after The Stern Review, when government, corporations, and the media popularized superficial, individualistic, and elite practices of sustainability.[106] This constituted a process of co-opting "eco-conscious" consumers into status quo systems of consumption, where both producers and consumer positions benefit from *scapegoatism* via commodification.[107] Framing and reframing as currently understood within design fosters this form of

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[103] Valenzuela and Böhm, "Against Wasted Politics: A Critique of the Circular Economy."

[104] "Project New Diagram for Open Source Circular Economy, OSCEdays, Last modified February 2018, https://community.oscedays.org/t/project-new-diagram-for-open-source-circular-economy/6267/7

[105] Rob Hopkins, *The Transition Handbook: From Oil Dependency to Local Resilience* (Green Books, 2008).

[106] The Stern Review was a milestone study undertaken in 2006, which was instrumental in public perceptions of inaction on the climate crisis. https://www.lse.ac.uk/granthaminstitute/publication/the-economics-of-climate-change-the-stern-review/ (Accessed 20th July 2020).

[107] Akenji.

blinkered, counterproductive, and ultimately damaging response to ecological crisis, in its emphasis on individual actors and projects and consensual processes.

Counter to this individualistic frame, TN promotes resilience, interdependence and self-sufficiency positions through new economic models that "transform their local economies, … to establish and maintain livelihoods and enterprise that enhance wellbeing and respects environmental limits."[108] Its "REconomy" mindset stands for a redefinition of worth and degrowth which translates into sparking entrepreneurship, re-skilling, growing food, generating energy, rethinking transport, alternative currencies, shared ownership of land and working spaces, development of platforms that enable self-organization and sharing and distribution of resources within the locality, within which designers are involved in practice.[109]

## **6.** Conditioning the Possibilities for Political Agency

In this conceptual paper our overall intention has been to critique the widely accepted theory on design frames, where the ideological and positional dimensions are overlooked. We propose a revitalized view of design frame theory through social theories of framing, to reveal the political dimensions of design framing practices, as these cannot be disentangled from processes of subjectivization and involve assuming social positions (of power, status, material standing) in a covert and an implicit, rather than an open and intentional manner. We make the case that subjective and institutional frames reproduce and materialize certain ideologies and worldviews and how this is in dialogue with conceptions and practices of design. Further, we elaborate how *counter*-framing from a socio-material lens is an effective strategy for designers to organize dissensus, exemplifying this in relation to how activists and social movements overthrow such frames.

We elucidate this new understanding of frames by conceptualizing several practices of "counter-framing design," highlighting the role of material culture in collective action and the ways in which design is implicated in formations of agency within social movements and their respective counter-frames. Material objects inculcate activists into and through a given collective frame to instate a social order against institutionalized socio-material conditions, through representation and mobilization. As Gavin Grindon says, "disobedient objects… appropriate their context or situations… unlocking them to reframe a

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[108] Rob Hopkins, *The Transition Companion: Making Your Community More Resilient in Uncertain Times EBook: Hopkins, Robert: Amazon.Co.Uk: Kindle Store* (Green Books, 2011).

[109] TN has also inspired new disciplinary directions, such as Transition Design https://design.cmu.edu/content/design%E2%80%99s-terry-irwin-developing-transition-design-institute, which apply a deep understanding of the interconnectedness of social, economic, and natural systems and begin to integrate political aspects into design theory. (Accessed 10th July 2020)

situation or produce new relationships."[110] The historically contingent and conditioning sociomaterial practices of design relate to, enact, produce, and reproduce frame constructions, positions that themselves co-evolve over time through a "web of agency."[111]

Taken together, this allows us to demonstrate the nature of politics in motion within a given design frame, that is, how counter-frames are made and remade within processes that adopt, produce, reproduce or challenge social positions. Design practices of framing are the source and site of relational exchange between political agency and social structures that foster collective action. By foregrounding materiality within our re-conception of frames we simultaneously re-center the content of frames on the basis of material practices, context, and cultures and consequently the historical and social nature therein.

With this understanding, we wish to indicate the possibilities in which design can rearticulate and critique its conceptualization of frames. Further work is warranted on the politics of epistemology underpinning frame theory, in relation to its genesis in white male Western scholarship, especially as to when frames obfuscate other ways of theorizing the politics of design where alternative concepts may be more meaningful. How the widespread use of frame theory in design might be leveraged to instill critical practices within the discipline, by opening a pathway between practice and concepts of master-frames or ideology, may be generative when such knowledge[112] That certain frames are continuously (re-)institutionalized demands analysis, and how such frames can be countered in practice. Equally, the substantive critiques of framing theory outside of design pertain to deficiencies in how social theorists determine the correspondence between linguistic frames and material contexts and cultures, as well as how the apparent formalism of frames is in tension with praxis, areas within which design as a materially generative practice has the potential to respond.

Acknowledgements

This research is funded by the UK Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) grant number AH/T002875/1.

[110] Gavin Grindon, "Disobedient Objects," in *Design & Activism*, 1st ed. (Mimesis International, 2019), 69–85.

[111] Coole and Frost, *Introducing the New Materialisms*.

[112] Anne-marie Willis, "Design, Change and Politics," *Design Philosophy Papers* 11882, no. 3 (2012): 12–13; Agid, "World Making: Working through Theory/Practice in Design."