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SYSTEMIC OPPRESSION IN SERVICE DESIGN

Frederick M. C. van Amstel, Bibiana O. Serpa and Fernando Secomandi

1 Introduction

According to the Encyclopedia of the UN Sustainable Development Goals (Liedauer, 2021), systemic oppression refers to the subordination, humiliation, and domination of certain social groups, maintaining their political, social, and economic disadvantage relative to more privileged groups. By systemic, this definition underlines the systems that jointly shape human activity, irrespective of personal or individual choices.

Exceptional stories of magnanimous individuals who decided not to oppress others or equally exceptional stories of individuals who overcame their oppressed condition do not fundamentally alter the systems that divide those individuals. Similarly, stories of ousted rulers, replaced managers, and imprisoned convicted offenders do not end systemic oppression. Historical evidence suggests that significant changes in oppressive systems—improved labor rights or anti-discrimination laws—have primarily resulted from coordinated collective forces, i.e., social movements (Martin, 2020).

Social movements are becoming influential in service design in recent years. For example, Akama, Light, and Agid (2023, p. 10) recognize that "histories of social movements evidence what we might call service designs 'by other names'" (following Gutiérrez Borrero, 2015, 2021). By that, they mean people that do not call themselves service designers yet carry remarkable similarities (and differences) in how they design services. For example, while studying the Brazilian Digital Culture Movement, Siqueira and Van Amstel (2023) found that collaborative cultural producers do *service design as a practice of freedom* instead of a practice of oppression. They design their services collaboratively instead of relying on internal or external designers who can potentially oppress them.

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Social movements typically approach oppression as a systemic contradiction that must be addressed on several fronts, which is why they organize as a movement that spreads through many institutions as well as deinstitutionalized spaces. In a similar way, systemic service design addresses the contradiction of oppression in multiple organizations (e.g. Hay et al., 2024); however, the topic still needs to be fully covered. To further this work and enable systemic service design to meaningfully engage with social movements, we propose here to examine its oppressive potential. In our view, the field needs to scrutinize its *practice of oppression* before moving to the *practice of freedom* identified by Siqueira and Van Amstel (2023). Distinguishing between the two practices may prevent service designs that oppress while trying to liberate disenfranchised people.

This chapter offers the first step in that direction. We begin by developing a more specific definition of systemic oppression than the one mentioned above. We position this definition as part of a dialectical-existential cybernetic theory of oppression that can account for its systemic aspect. This theory is constructed from the combined works of several authors who engaged with social movements in their scholarship, including Álvaro Vieira Pinto, Paulo Freire, Augusto Boal, Combahee River Collective, Kimberlé Crenshaw, and Patricia Hill Collins. Once outlined, we apply this theory to the analysis of contemporary digital labor platforms, a.k.a. crowdsourced services, and reveal the systemic oppression that interlocks designers and users, but also *metadesigners* and *infrausers*, in service cocreation. This chapter does not aim at devising methods or approaches to combat systemic oppression in this or other cases. Rather, it seeks to foster critical consciousness among service designers and researchers, encouraging them to revise their theories and models and better align them to the liberatory practices of contemporary social movements.

2 Collective embodiment in systemic service design

Oppression is rarely addressed in service design. The few works that deal with it conflate oppression with power, i.e., a relationship between individuals in an organization (Hay et al., 2024), not a relationship between social groups in a society. According to mainstream literature, service designers are typically regarded as individual agents guided by apolitical professional values and practices (Fayard et al., 2017), not as societal members who are subjected or who subject others to oppression based on class, race, gender, and other factors (Goodwill et al., 2021). In their education, service designers learn how to approach others through social groups using methods like personas (O'Keeffe et al., 2022), yet this classification often lacks the critical self-reflection that can help them find their place within larger systems of oppression (a rare exception can be found in Prakash, 2022).

Systemic service design may contribute to filling this gap. Among the several theories that underscore this emerging approach (Darzentas and Darzentas 2014), second-order cybernetics offers a good prospect for dealing with this issue. In this

branch of cybernetics, the minimal unit of analysis is a nested cybernetic feedback loop between an observed system and an observer system (Dubberly and Pangaro, 2007). Every time one system changes, both change by their connection. Applied to service design, this concept reveals the mutual shaping of services (an observed system) and designers (an observer system): in their inner processes, designers reflect on their designs as much as designs reflect on their designers (Borgefalk, 2021).

As insightful as this may be for critical self-reflection, this application of second-order cybernetics does not account for the influence of social groups in such interactions, not to mention oppression. Dubberly and Pangaro (2007, p.1314) recognize that "an approach to design that considers second-order cybernetics must root design firmly in politics" or rhetorical argumentation. That is not enough to grasp oppression. The embodied, dialectical, and existential aspects of cybernetic politics cannot be reduced to rhetoric, even if that is an important aspect of it.

To address this gap in systemic service design, we will revisit some ideas about collective embodiment in services developed by the first and third authors elsewhere (Van Amstel and Secomandi, upcoming). That work is premised on the understanding that human bodies in service are not treated, manipulated, and designed as singular individuals but as particular individuals of determinate social groups. Moreover, human bodies are not just passively observed (and designed) objects; they are also self-determining subjects who design themselves as much as design other subjects, including their observers (Secomandi and Van Amstel, 2023). As such, human bodies are experienced in service as things that mediate the constitution of Self and Other—a dialectical interface of a corporeal sort.

From this bodily understanding of service interfaces, systems of oppression can be realized. Historically, services have always tapped into human bodies' physical and emotional labor, from ancient slavery to modern waged employment (Kim, 2018). By inscribing bodies at the service interface with socioeconomic, racial, and gender markers, humans have been differentiated between those who should *serve* and those who are supposed to *be served* in each system. Oppression here is a historical negative differentiation between collective bodies that can be used to justify regimes of servitude (Van Amstel & Secomandi, upcoming). Yet, oppressed bodies may affirm their positive body difference and find other ways of being in service without servitude.

Second-order cybernetics, when applied to service interfaces, must account for the contradictions that arise from their collective embodiment. Human bodies often play ambivalent roles, sometimes as oppressors (observers) and other times as oppressed (observed). To address this complexity, we will build upon a philosophy of technology that offers a dialectical and existential treatment of oppression. Later, we will extend this theory with insights from Theatre of the Oppressed and Black intersectional feminism to account for body ambivalence. This theoretical articulation will assist in incorporating the contradiction of oppression as a concrete formalism in systemic service design.

3 A dialectical-existential cybernetic theory of oppression

In philosophical terms, the concept of oppression can be traced back to Georg W. F. Hegel (2018) and his widely discussed master-slave dialectics. In Hegel's dialectics, the masters dominate the slaves to fulfill their desires and become independent from working directly on nature. However, by doing so, the masters gradually become dependent on the slaves, and this does not satisfy their strive for freedom. Conversely, the slaves, who are at first dependent on the master's command, fulfilling desires that are not theirs by accepting the subservient position and obeying the masters, eventually gain greater independence from the natural desires that plagued the masters. Even so, none of them achieve absolute freedom in this coercive relationship.

Hegel (2018) did not characterize such relative freedom as an "oppression"—a term he reserved for abstract collectivity imposed over concrete individuality. Still, many authors elaborated upon the above dialectic to better understand oppression between social groups, including imperialism, classism, racism, homophobia, and sexism. Paulo Freire, Augusto Boal, and Álvaro Vieira Pinto are some of the prominent authors who built on it. Of the three, Vieira Pinto is lesser known because some of his work was suppressed by the Brazilian military dictatorship. In particular, the work from which we mainly draw remained unknown for several decades and was published posthumously (Vieira Pinto, 2005a, 2005b). Nonetheless, Vieira Pinto is often credited with deeply influencing Paulo Freire's widely regarded academic contributions to oppression studies.

Vieira Pinto established an original connection between Hegel's master-slave dialectics and cybernetics. Other authors have also seen Hegel as a precursor of cybernetic theory due to his approach to thinking through dialectical cycles (e.g. Sommer, 2017). Yet none went as far as to develop an entire philosophy of technology based on Hegel's dialectic as Vieira Pinto did. Finished in 1973, his two-volume work *O Conceito de Tecnologia [The Concept of Technology]* (Vieira Pinto, 2005a, 2005b), still unavailable in other languages beyond Portuguese, brings together not only Hegel's dialectics but also Marx's historicism, Jaspers' existentialism, systems thinking, and other philosophical traditions. The master-slave dialectics is just a piece of this treatise, and we rely here only on the parts needed to analyze systemic oppression as a cybernetic phenomenon.

To combat oppression, Vieira Pinto (2005b) had to revise the basic tenets of cybernetics, as they were rather ambiguous about this topic. Instead of seeing it as a science of human/animal control and communication (Wiener, 1948), he saw it as a science of self-reflection. According to him, cybernetics study how humans and other living beings (not just animals) reflect on being in the world while acting in the world: "nature gives each living species ways of structuring matter that make it receptive to certain kinds of influxes from the outside universe" (Vieira Pinto, 2005b, p. 268).

Like all living beings, humans are cybernetic *by nature,* as they can regulate their behavior based on an internal model of the world. Unlike other living

beings, humans are not born with an operative internal model. Rather, they must undergo a long interaction process with other humans to develop their internal models. Moreover, humans have a unique capacity to externalize their models and share them with others, be that through language or things. Such creations, the so-called cybernetic beings *by construction*, are not meant to adapt to but to change the world.

Let's consider a simple example. Every clock, as a cybernetic being by construction, contains an internal model of the world meant to change the human experience of time. This model is *designed* and not *up to par* with the humans' internal model of experiencing time, as the latter constantly actualizes by redesigning itself—a remarkable characteristic of cybernetic beings by nature. Nevertheless, the clock, as an external thing, still carries information that can trigger internal model redesigns. When the information provided by clocks is judged insufficient for the *world-to-be-made*, humans redesign their internal models of experiencing time and externalize them in new clocks. This process of self-actualization, mediated by cybernetic beings by construction, enables what Vieira Pinto (2005a) calls cultural evolution, which contrasts with the biological evolution of other living beings, tied as they are to (epi)genetically transmitted models of the world.

As can be seen, cybernetic beings by construction play a fundamental role in defining the cultural standards for distinctly human ways of interacting with the world. To put it bluntly, humans *become human* by designing and redesigning cybernetic beings by construction in their worlds. In this positive feedback loop, humans and their worlds become ever more human.

In certain historical circumstances, however, a group of humans may attempt to design and redesign other humans as cybernetic beings by construction, ignoring their self-designing nature. Like in the master-slave dialectics and second-order cybernetics, one system observes and controls another system by design. The enslaved people's feedback loop for interacting with the world folds into the masters', henceforth subordinated to the internal model of the world designed by the masters. Nevertheless, since the masters no longer interact *directly* with the world but only do so *indirectly* through the slaves, the model soon becomes outdated. Even so, the masters prevent, deny, or ignore the slaves' model redesigns for the sake of preserving domination. As a result, masters and slaves both lose touch with their worlds. Thus, conceived in cybernetic terms, systemic oppression hampers the loop of humanizing, causing cultural evolution to slow down or stall.

Luckily, this existential condition is temporary. In earlier work, Vieira Pinto (1960a) characterizes the apex of oppression as a *limit-situation*, a situation wherein the oppressed are up to do something extraordinary: "limit-situation is not the boundary between 'being' and 'nothingness,' but the boundary between 'be' and 'be more' [...] It is not the abode of despair, but of hope" (Vieira Pinto, 1960a, p. 349). Vieira Pinto firmly believed that the slaves could revolt against their masters and repurpose their technology (primarily a body trained to perform as a thing) to rehumanize themselves and their masters (Vieira Pinto, 2005a). Like other

hopeful Latin Americans (Nieto Larrain, 2022), he believed that cybernetics could support a new kind of revolution in his nation.

Paulo Freire (1970) further expanded Vieira Pinto's earlier understanding of oppression, redefining it as a constant force of *being less* directed towards the oppressed.[1] This force generates the historical negative body differentiation mentioned in the last section. Instead of *being more* by stealing the humanity of the oppressed, the oppressor ends up *having more* things in their world and yet *being less*. "No one can be authentically human while he prevents others from being so. Attempting to *be more* human, individualistically, leads to *having more*, egotistically, a form of dehumanization" (Freire, 1970, p. 85, our emphasis). The oppressor *has*, thus, many *more* things in their world than the oppressed. In Vieira Pinto's philosophy (1960b), such a wider reachable world is known as a high degree of handiness. The world of the oppressor, thus, establishes a standard for being human that can never be attained by the oppressed due to the negative feedback loop established between them. The oppressor will always have more than the oppressed within this loop.

Figure 6.1 shows a cybernetic formalism articulating Vieira Pinto and Freire's take on oppression. On the left side is the oppressor, the human who states, "I am the human." On the right side, the oppressed, who hears what the oppressor, says: "You are not human, or at least you lack some humanity." The *being more* of the oppressed is transformed into the *having more* of the oppressor, and it doesn't return to the oppressed. Instead, what the oppressed receive back is *being less*, i.e., being treated as less than human by the oppressors' failed attempt to *become* more. Like in the master-slave dialectics, the oppressor is *having more* (things) but *becoming less* (human), whereas the oppressed is *having less* (things) and also

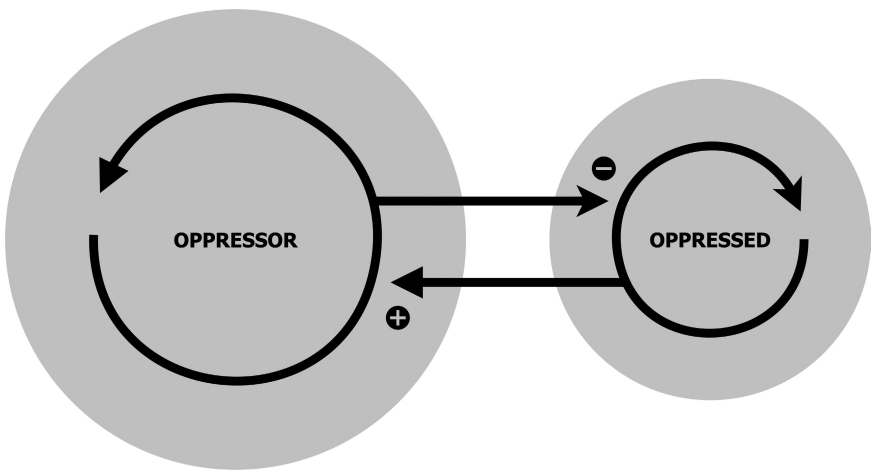

FIGURE 6.1 The cybernetic nested loop of systemic oppression. The oppressor depends on the oppressed to interact with the world.

becoming less (human). In cybernetic terms, this is a runaway or self-destroying negative feedback loop that ends up depleting the humanity of both oppressor and oppressed. This is why systemic oppression leads to super-exploitation, violence, war, and even genocide.

However, even if the oppressed *have less*, they always *have something* to react to their oppression. The oppressed can counter the oppressor by rejecting the dehumanizing standard set by the oppressor and rehumanizing themselves in a different way, i.e., by *having their own things* (Van Amstel, 2023). Freire (1970, p. 86) does not endorse the politics of austerity of *having less* for *being more*: "Not that it is not fundamental to have to be human. Precisely because it is necessary, some men's having must not be allowed to constitute an obstacle to others' having." The oppressed, thus, should have enough to be more.

Exchanges of being are not interrupted, though, as the oppressed still carry the historical task of liberating the oppressor from the dehumanizing loop of oppression (Freire, 1970). The oppressed feel compelled to convince or force the oppressor to *be more, have enough* and interact directly with the world too. Self-criticism on this *reaction* is fundamental not to miss the long-term goal of *being more* with the oppressor, therefore re-establishing the cultural evolution process hampered by systemic oppression. Liberation equalizes worlds to the point they are partially shared (Figure 6.2). Speaking of nations as worlds in themselves, Vieira Pinto believed that cybernetic beings by construction, constructed by peripheral nations for their political ends, could help them develop differently than developed nations.

Freire (1970) and later Boal (1979) expanded Vieira Pinto's concept of oppression towards banking education, *latifundium*, racism, sexism, and other systems of oppression. Inspired by this expansion, design researchers built on Freire's and

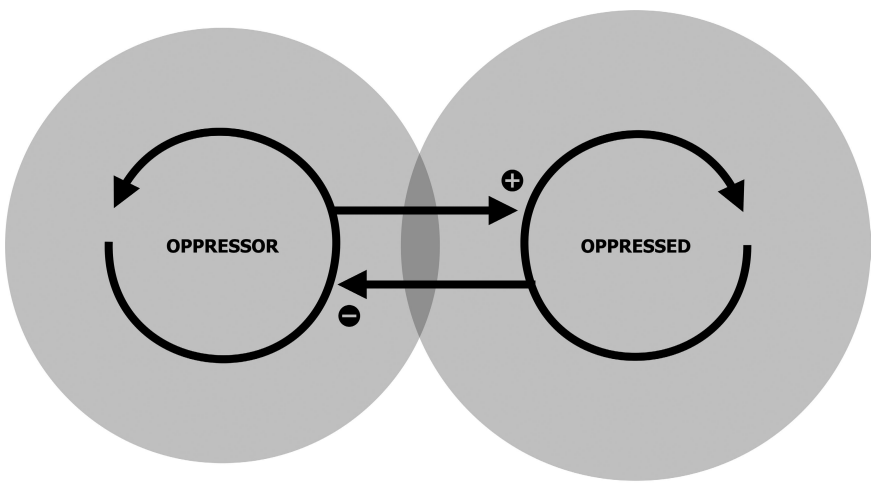

FIGURE 6.2 The cybernetic Speaking of liberation. Both oppressor and oppressed interact with the world.

Boal's to devise participatory design approaches (Ehn, 1988; Penin & Tonkinwise, 2009). Following this trend, we can generalize that, in systemic service design, the oppressed are Indigenous, Black, women, LGBTQIAPN+, immigrants, disabled, and user bodies from the Global South. On the other side are the oppressing bodies: men, cisgenders, heterosexuals, settlers, Whites, citizens, able, designers, and from the Global North.

They can and should work together to overcome systemic oppression, but significant challenges are involved. Recognizing who is who is hard because the same person can be on both sides of these classification systems depending on the *limit-situation* at hand. In order to take this complexity into account, we must further extend the double cybernetic loop of oppression with thoughts coming from Augusto Boal's work and Black intersectional feminism.

4 Twistted loops of oppression

In his Theatre of the Oppressed, Augusto Boal (1979) dealt with many kinds of oppression, from sexism to ableism. He was adamant that the fight against oppression must always be against all forms of oppression (Boal, 2005). Otherwise, one form of oppression might replace another in a twisted relationship. For example, a unionized man may, after a long day of fighting capitalists at work, return home and beat his wife, a woman. If this man does not become conscious of the oppression he is reproducing at home—sexism—chances are that his fight at work will not put anything much better in place of classism. This ambivalent collective embodiment can be visualized as a twisted loop (Figure 6.3). The same body, oppressed in one relation, is also oppressor in another.

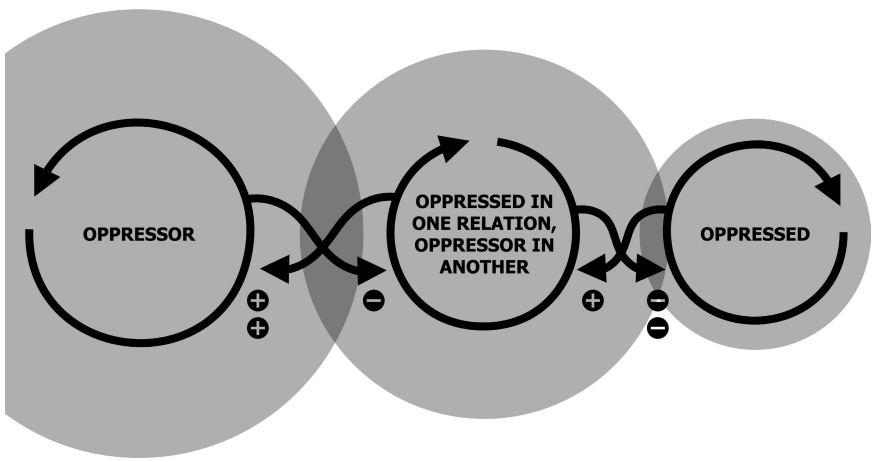

FIGURE 6.3 Interlocked cybernetic loops of oppression. The central loop is twisted.

Incapable of understanding the systemic consequences of reproducing oppression, the oppressed can adopt the same strategies and technologies of their oppressor against their kind or towards another social group just to *have more* than what they already have (Freire, 1970). In these cases, the oppressed move to the oppressors' side and oppress their closest others to compensate for *being less* in relation to their distant oppressors. However, doing so does not rehumanize them or help them become more, as the action is insufficient, if not contrary, to dismantle any of the existing relations. Oppressor's and oppressed's worlds remain intact. This twisted exchange of being can go on and on through several social groups, in what we are calling a *cascading* effect of systemic oppression.

Notwithstanding, in this effect, some bodies accumulate *being less* in several relationships. This is one of the main findings of Black feminists in the 1970s, who, through their scholarship and activism, found their worlds severely reduced by interlocking systems of oppression like class, race, gender, and sexuality (Combahee River Collective, 1979). Later on, these findings have been generalized in legal studies through the concept of *intersectionality* (Crenshaw, 1989). According to its underlying metaphor, the oppressed are standing at a crossroads, having their humanity undermined from various sides. Each side is a different oppression relation. For example, a lesbian Black unemployed trans woman user is more likely to lose their potential of *being more* when getting through an AI-assisted job application than a straight White employed cis man designer. Besides adding nuance to understanding systemic oppression, intersectional Black feminism enabled the simultaneous coordination of actions against oppression in several systems, and it is a recurrent resource for social movements (Collins, 2019).

Returning to cybernetics, although the oppressed may be eventually put into the role of cybernetic beings by construction in an intersectional *limit-situation*, i.e., reduced from a self-designing human to an other-serving thing, they are not condemned to stay in that existential situation forever. They can always develop the potential of their natural design capabilities and redesign the purposes of their cybernetic beings by construction, even if that would generate conflicts with the oppressor. As cybernetic beings by nature, humans always have a choice either to maintain the cascading effect of systemic oppression or to contain it, even if not treated by society as fully human. The cascading effect is thus not a natural given, but it evolves historically according to specific cultural circumstances and could be redesigned otherwise. In the next section, we elaborate on how this cascading effect manifests itself in the design of services and, in the last section, how it is possible to contain it.

5 Cascading oppression in service design

The *theater model* is one of the most prevalent internal models of the world in the design of services and the most effective disguise for the cascading effect of systemic oppression in this field. Devised in the early service marketing literature

as a conceptual model to prioritize customer satisfaction in service development (Grove & Fisk, 1983), this model formalizes a particular perspective on the social division of labor that, in our view, is oppressive.

A vital aspect of the theater model is approaching service providers as "actors" performing services before an "audience" of customers or end-users. Like in traditional theater settings, their performance depends not only on actions at the *frontstage* interacting with users but also on supporting activities performed by themselves and other workers at the *backstage*. The stage curtain that demarcates these two regions—preventing the audience from seeing the hidden work of service providers—is the equivalent of the *line of visibility* of Shostack's (1982) service blueprint method.

Influenced by industrial operations management (e.g., Chase & Hayes 1991), the theater model prescribes that service providers' actions should remain as much as possible invisible, restricted to the backstage, and decoupled from immediate interaction with users. However, when the higher economic value from improved customer satisfaction offsets the lower operational efficiency owing to humans' variable performances, the provider is warranted to step out of invisibility and cocreate "memorable experiences" with users, who should still be the main protagonists of the story being staged (Pine & Gilmore, 2011).

Over the years, service design developed several tools and methods that encourage the cocreation of experiences in alignment with the theater mode. Some methods, like customer journey mapping and service blueprinting, strongly support the labor division described above. Others, such as figurine playing and bodystorming, encourage looking at the back-to-frontstage transitions. In either of them, human bodies are treated as a design "material" (Secomandi and Van Amstel, 2023), or as we call them here, cybernetic beings by construction.

The invisible social structures manipulated by service designers (Vink & Koskela-Huotari, 2021; Penin, 2018), we hold, can turn out pernicious for some social groups, even when they incorporate such positive values as holism, empathy, and cocreation (Fayard et al., 2017). Service designers sometimes explicitly oppose automation at the frontstage, highlighting the added value of having skilled clerks at the service interface to provide custom offers and humanize service delivery (Teboul, 1988). They also advocate abolishing clear divisions between providers and users (Yu & Sangiorgi, 2018). Yet, in a capitalist service market, more often than not, the satisfaction enjoyed by a few oppressors comes at the expense of exploiting the work of many oppressed hidden behind a carefully crafted service interface.

Service design performs for the experience economy (Pine & Gilmore, 2011), by and large, a similar function classical theater had: to justify the *status quo*. According to Boal (1979), ancient Greece was a society marked by a stark social division between citizens with democratic rights and non-citizens and slaves without rights. In that historical context, theater was the "theater of the oppressor" because it made the audience believe that any societal injustice would be fixed by

a divine force in the future, not by human forces in the present. In line with our dialectical-existential cybernetic theory of oppression, it is as if this type of theater designed an internal model of the world (an ideology) for both oppressed and oppressors, which consolidated their unequal condition as a fate, not as a design.

Inspired by Boal, we will scrutinize service design's "theater of the oppressor" to elucidate how systemic oppression may manifest in this field. For that, we will refer to the specific case of digital labor platforms that increasingly permeate contemporary life (Van Doorn, 2017). These platforms rely on the digital mediation of human work to attain a growing variety of service outcomes, including home delivery of food, transportation by cars, and training of algorithms, among many others. These services display a highly structured and mostly fixed body hierarchy, hence our choice to focus on them here. Our aim is not to produce a thorough criticism of this particular kind of service design but to unveil the cascading cybernetic loops that may appear in this and potentially other service systems.

First, we propose characterizing customers and providers of digital labor platforms as distinct types of users: there are the ordinary *users* (i.e., customers or end-beneficiaries of service production) and there are the *infrausers*, who work under temporary contracts as outsourced workforce, as third-party providers, or as workers who don't see themselves and are not seen by others as workers. Second, we propose differentiating designers between ordinary *designers*, who give form to the service interface between users and infrausers, whether it is digital or corporeal, and *metadesigners*, who influence or guide the work of designers, users, and infrausers at the service interface indirectly, by making decisions about the workplace, the design process, the business strategies, etc. This extraordinary type of designer includes financial investors, business owners, directors, vice presidents, politicians, government administrators, and other people who have the power to set the conditions in which ordinary designers operate.

Metadesigners, designers, users, and infrausers are the current existential positions we identify in this particular service design situation. In line with the labor division underpinning the theater model expounded before, their performance can be allocated to different regions of the service system, as illustrated in Figure 6.4. Users belong to the frontstage, and infrausers, to the backstage. Beyond this classical distinction of service research, we identify two further regions that expand on the theater model: the *belowstage*, to which designers belong, and the *abovestage*, reserved for the metadesigners. Although novel within service design research, this distinction alludes to the class/racial division between the "factory floor" and the "upper office."

Instead of overcoming industrial capitalism's prototypical division of labor, the experience economy and digital labor platforms may have only made it less visible: "At every level in any company, workers need to understand that in the Experience Economy every business is a stage, and therefore work is theatre" (Pine and Gilmore, 2011, p. xxv). Instead of implementing anti-specialization routines and rotational roles like self-management does (Gonzatto et al., 2021), the experience

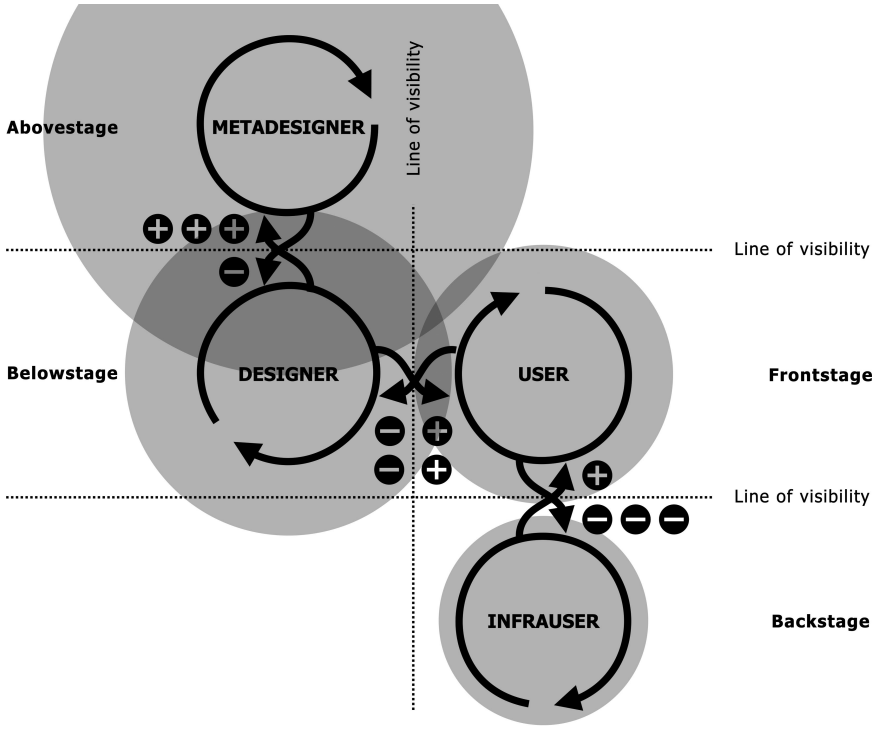

FIGURE 6.4 Cascading cybernetic loops of oppression in service design.

economy turns the division of labor into a spectacular internal model of the world: "Let us be very clear: we do not mean to present work as theatre. It is not a metaphor but a model" (Pine and Gilmore, 2011, p.157).

The line of visibility has a specific meaning in our critical cybernetic model, which is different from its regular use by professional service designers to help orchestrate this spectacle of "playful labor." The line represents the socially produced boundaries between human bodies in an oppressive service system. Even if visible gatherings of different groups may occur, that does not mean displacing the invisible thresholds. For example, when precarious workers remotely operating from the Global South are tasked to contribute to computer design by quietly correcting and updating the internal models of these machines (Ekbia and Nardi, 2017), that does not turn infrausers into designers. Nor does the CEO of a digital labor platform company migrate to the designers' stage when going out of their way to publicly suggest how the user interface should be made more aesthetically pleasing and friendly for (infra)users. Likewise, a platform-based food deliverer does not ascend from the backstage to the protagonist position of the beneficiary of value cocreation when interacting with users at their front doors. Lastly, designers do not acquire any real power to shape the organization's vision and strategy

by *having* a seat at the table with the metadesigners. To do that, they need to *be* metadesigners, by significantly owning and controlling the means of design and production.

The theater model presupposes that metadesigners *have* the highest degree of handiness over the design world, i.e., a socially produced design space they can explore and dwell in Van Amstel et al., (2016). In contrast, infrausers *have* very limited design possibilities around them; they are not supposed to design anything, just use what others have already designed and used. They are "humans in the loop" who fulfill a legal responsibility, a required human moderation action, or a task that hasn't been fully automated yet. Designers and users are in the middle of this hierarchy, eventually performing the role of design tools or designed things.

This cascading model of oppression in service design allows for further analyses, which we can only begin to elucidate here. Metadesigners design the service backstage by means of designers and users. Even if designers are not fully aware of the oppressive system they are part of, they keep giving form to interfaces that prioritize user satisfaction rates, putting extra pressure on backstage automation. Designers rarely have a say on backstage automation, not to mention a remote backstage that the company is trying to hide from the public. Designers cannot do otherwise because they implement customer-centric strategies and labor structures devised by metadesigners. By their token, users take advantage of infrausers because they don't see the gigs and micro-tasks they order as a work (or ethical) relationship with another human. Infrausers, in turn, often accept this unfairness as an unquestionable feature of these platforms (Fieseler et al., 2019), accumulating several ways of *being less* in an experience-economy service system.

In these systems, users can typically demand from and rate infrausers as if they were cybernetic beings by construction—not by nature. For example, in 2023, a White woman user attacked a Black man courier infrauser in Rio de Janeiro because he delivered her food too late, at least from her perspective. Empowered by the courier rating system that makes no regard for working conditions, she considered reenacting the despicable racist ritual of weeping the Black man with her belt. A public attorney prosecuted her, yet the company did nothing to prevent this racialized interaction from occurring again besides excluding her from the platform (Portes and Nascimento, 2023). The company and its designers could have done much more to mend the precarious working conditions of their infrausers, clearly intersectionally racialized and exploited. Their omission could be explained by the fact that the metadesigners behind the labor platform did not foresee a sufficient impact on profits. Given that senior designers working for such service systems are more likely to reproduce the capitalist discourse of the platform metadesigners (Costa, 2023), nothing different could have been expected.

This experience economy theater model, with its hidden labor and highlighted protagonists, is not merely a choice but a design based on entrenched societal hierarchies. Human bodies oppress and are oppressed in these positions largely because of the social groups they are socialized in or identified with. Historically privileged

groups tend to take on the roles of metadesigners and designers, whereas groups facing intersectional oppression fulfill the roles of users and infrausers. Design workers are not oppressed by metadesigners just because they are designers, but because they are workers in an exploitative relationship under capitalism. Metadesigners, in contrast, are still designers, but they are oppressors because they are (or work closely with) the capitalists who exploit other designers, users, and infrausers.

Following the cascade of oppression, designers oppress users, not just because users are mostly women, Black, or disabled bodies but also because they are precisely that: users. Women, Black, Indigenous, immigrants, LGBTQIAPN+, and other historically oppressed groups, despite differences, more often stay within the bounds of what users are supposed to do; otherwise, "they might break or disrupt the system." While designing "idiot-proof" service interfaces, designers deny the oppressed to become co-designers of their service interfaces.

This existential situation is the service design equivalent of what Gonzatto and Van Amstel (2022) called userism: the historical and structural reduction of the oppressed to the condition of being a user (and only a user) of computers. In the case of labor platforms, userism is realized through service interfaces that make (infra) users feel like just users, not as workers or potential (meta)designers. Looking more broadly, userism is the oppression that structures the experience economy's theater model and enables the cascading effect described above. Other service systems that follow this same model will likely display similar systemic oppression.

Newer forms of service design focused on value cocreation may be more effective in preventing userism (Yu & Sangiorgi, 2018). Nevertheless, they cannot prevent metadesigners from oppressing designers. Metadesign theory in service design suggests that users can temporarily join metadesigners (Menichinelli, 2018), yet this same theory in other fields raises concerns about the authoritarian potential of privileged designers designing the means of production for underprivileged designers (Vassão, 2008). Even if the boundaries between metadesigners, designers, users, and infrausers are blurred temporarily, their collective body inequality remains. For example, recent research has shown that marginalized users have more difficulty cocreating self-services than privileged ones (Darmody & Zwick, 2024). As Freire (1970) and Boal (1979) found out from fighting several kinds of oppression, there is not much one can do against oppression on the oppressor side. Siding with (infra)users—i.e., *designing as an oppressed*—seems to be the only way toward liberation in systemic service design.

6 Prospecting liberation in service design

Designing as an oppressed requires, first and foremost, excluding oppressors' biases in systemic service design. The case of collaborative cultural producers in Brazil is illuminating here (Siqueira & Van Amstel, 2023; Gonzatto et al., 2021). Originally, users of a free and open collaborative design platform, these cultural producers participated in the platform's open metadesign project and became more than just

users. They cocreated a new social currency feature to move beyond the traditional volunteer structure in their community service operation. Based on open-source software, this feature was rolled out to other platform users, who became designers of their own Local Exchange Trade System (LETS). In these systems, infrausers typically take responsibility for a community task and are rewarded by the beneficiaries of those tasks, the main service users. Infrausers may or may not be part of the community to use their credit and order the community services they helped to coproduce. The cascading effect of systemic oppression is temporarily reverted, but the roles are sustained, and oppression can return at any moment.

Crafting solidarity bonds across different oppressed bodies seems to be the way to prevent the return of the cascading effects of systemic oppression. Insurgent design coalitions woven around matters of care can sustain such liberating relationships (Van Amstel et al., 2021; Eleutério and Van Amstel, 2020). The history of social movements is full of these "service design by other names," as Akama and colleagues (2023) have pointed out. We would like to highlight the Black Panther Party for Self-Defense, a multi-structured service program that enabled their intersectional anti-racist and anti-sexist organizing activities (Pope & Flanigan, 2013, p. 457). Collaborative services included breakfast programs for school children and food aid for families; schools, adult education, and childcare; medical care and ambulance services; and cooperative housing, among others. In this way, they avoided defaulting to capitalist and gendered services that would undermine their fight (Hilliard, 2008).

These are just initial prospects of liberating systemic service design from systemic oppression. Future research must continue exploring alternatives to the oppressive theater model. The main contribution of the present research lies in outlining a dialectical-existential cybernetic theory of oppression that can take hold of complex service systems such as labor platforms. As part of larger capitalist, patriarchal, and colonialist systems, platformized service systems seem to be condescending. However, social movements are experimenting with delivering solidarity services through similar platform structures, the so-called platform cooperatives. For that, they need a new internal model of the world.

Theatre of the Oppressed (Boal, 1979), a recurrent *praxis* adopted by social movements in local initiatives, was key in criticizing the theater model in service design, but in past works, we have also demonstrated how it can be used to develop alternative models. For instance, converted into an embodied design practice, Theatre of the Oppressed can support conscious bodies in designing interfaces that challenge oppression (Gonzatto and Van Amstel, 2017). The joker system at its core, with its emphasis on task rotation, participation, public debate, and solidarity, could well inspire a new theater model for service systems.

Previous research in interaction design has found out that changing systems without changing the human bodies that constitute them is not enough because the system itself is never the oppressor—even if it is oppressive (Gonzatto & Van Amstel, 2017). Similarly, systemic service design can contribute to changing collective bodies, but this entails prospecting new ways of being of service to

society. Service designers are not doomed to work only for capitalist companies and institutions devoid of anti-oppressive policies. They can work for progressive companies that serve progressive users (a rare case at this historical moment, we must admit) or for governments, non-profits, international agencies, trade unions, and institutionalized social movements that do have profit as their ultimate goal. Designing *for* the oppressed, as if service designers could liberate users from their condition, does not take full advantage of this existential situation. Instead, this situation calls for a design akin to the Pedagogy of the Oppressed: "a pedagogy which must be forged *with*, not *for*, the oppressed (whether individuals or peoples) in the incessant struggle to regain their humanity" (Freire, 1970, p. 48). Hopefully, this collective endeavor would render service (meta)designers free from systemic oppression together with service (infra)users.

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Note

1 These terms are often translated inconsistently. In Pedagogy of the Oppressed (1970), Myra Bergman Ramos translates *ser-menos* as "being less" and *ser-mais* as "to be more fully human". We prefer here to use *being more* and *being less* to emphasize their opposite directions in the process of humanizing.

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