Social Engineering
Can Society Be Engineered in the Twenty-First Century?

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This *Open* reflects on old and new forms of social engineering in relation to the urban and social space as well as to (communal) life within it. Is social engineering now a hollow ideal, or does it offer new, urgent perspectives?

Social engineering, in an objective sense, only refers to an analysis of the possibilities of constructing something. In relation to, for instance, sociopolitical reality, a strong faith in social engineering was an element of the utopias and idealized societies of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In the course of the last century, however, social engineering also became a more specific, almost self-sufficient concept. As part of the modernist concept and as an expression of an optimistic faith in progress, there emerged, particularly in the Netherlands, an explicit discourse of social engineering [1] dealing with societal models to be realized (the welfare state) or forms of citizenship to be stimulated (the emancipated citizen), which were also mirrored by large-scale physical social engineering projects. As part of the modernist projects in the domain of urban design (the Bijlmermeer) and spatial planning (the impoldering of the Zuiderzee, the Delta Plan), social engineering also became a more specific, almost self-sufficient concept. Social engineering became associated with a social-democratically oriented faith in government intervention and with a belief in a nature that could be controlled by man.

Over the last several decades, there as been an apparent abandonment of social engineering and its ideals. Cultural critics such as John Gray attacked the general faith in social engineering and progress as a disastrous regression to the utopias of the Enlightenment, degenerating into a destruction of culture and nature and providing fodder for totalitarian thinking. At the same time, affluent Western countries experienced the bankruptcy of the welfare state, and developments such as privatization, globalization, migration, international terrorism and climate change generated steadily increasing scepticism about the social engineering of the world. In neo-capitalist postmodernity, or as culture philosopher René Boomkens called it, 'the new disorder', social engineering seemed a phantasm.

The question is, however, whether the philosophy of social engineering had really disappeared or whether it is being used by neoliberal philosophy, using the procedures and instruments of the market and corporate management and targeting the individual. The model of the 'creative city', in which creativity and entrepreneurship are implanted in the urban fabric, seems a quintessential product of this 'neo-social engineering'. Other 'neo'-social engineering models might be the network society, the information society, the knowledge society, and of course the security state. Neo-social engineering, after all, seems to tap the logic of the police and the secret services as well: the security state is emerging as the most current and complex societal ideal of the moment, dystopian and disturbing as it may be considered from the standpoint of the old philosophy of social engineering, yet at the same time based on the utopian desire that liberty and security

might be compatible – a desire that is also part of the neoconservative ideology of the Americans, which illustrates, as John Gray emphasized, the current right-wing philosophy of social engineering.

And then there is that other current obsession in which a belief in social engineering plays a role, namely 'the citizen': according to the Dutch 'Assimilation Delta Plan', a demonstration of contemporary biopower, legal newcomers from outside the European Union are transformed into national citizens, while the European Commission programme 'Citizens for Europe' wants to turn national citizens into European citizens. And all these citizens have to be 'active' citizens – illegals and refugees excepted.

Philosopher Lieven De Cauter, in his book *The Capsular Civilization*, emphasizes the impossibility of a non-social engineered society: 'It is not because total social engineering is dangerous that society should not be engineered, albeit relatively engineered. If society were not engineerable, it would be a natural process, or an accidental coincidence, or destiny. No politics can be conducted on this basis, and there is not a single historian who cannot demonstrate that society is engineered, not created, and moreover by a complex process of decisions.' De Cauter indicates that he believes in the countering force of a relative social engineering, thereby touching on current discussions about urban politics and social systems, in which theorists and designers are again asking whether social engineering is not a requirement of the human longing for organizational forms and intervention that vouchsafe a pleasant communal life. In its contribution, BAVO rightly asks to what extent relative social engineering can lead to an actual repoliticization and not remain mired in an ethical appeal without consequence. Are there new, emancipatory forms of a philosophy of social engineering, in which agency is pre-eminent, that might provide a tactical, political or activist response to dominant neoliberal and neoconservative tendencies?

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Footnotes

1. In Dutch-speaking countries the term 'maakbaarheid' is used, which literally means 'makeability'.

Tags

Architecture, Control, Design, Public Space, Urban Space

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