Parallel Reality

A Conversation with Michiel Dehaene, Lieven De Cauter and Rudi Laermans

Pascal Gielen

Interview – January 1, 2008

This past summer, three Belgian intellectuals held a conversation for *Open* about the renewed attention being paid to the 'makeability' of city and society. Moderated by sociologist Pascal Gielen, philosopher Lieven De Cauter, urban designer Michiel Dehaene and sociologist Rudi Laermans discuss such topics as the limits of the socially engineered society and the role of creativity and science in this.

PASCAL GIELEN Since the advent of postmodernism, the idea of 'makeability' has become discredited, in architecture as well as in philosophy and sociology. Faith in a socially engineered society, after all, is deemed to lead to inhuman, totalitarian regimes, whether they be fascist, Nazi or communist in nature. Postmodernism, however, seems to be quietly fading into the background. We are living in a ' post-post-era'. In this era, it seems not only relativism but also political indifference are being exchanged for a quiet new hope. Small, admittedly modest utopians are being aired again, and with them a longing for an ' alternatively engineered' world. Engagement is once more experiencing a boom in architecture and art, for example. In political philosophy, the narrative of Antonio Negri and Michael Hardt has captured worldwide attention. This has also brought renewed attention to the Italian Autonomia movement. This suggests that social engineering can once again be discussed as an idea. The taboo on longing for it, at least, seems to have been lifted. How do you explain this new hope for a socially engineered society?

RUDI LAERMANS The ideal of social engineering was only jettisoned at the level of society, and at the same time it was re-articulated. It has shifted from the level of society to the level of organizations and the sectors in which they operate. In the process, the discourse of social engineering has been transmuted into that of management and control. This new, postmodern if you will, social engineering discourse was assimilated in a very short time within large transnational enterprises. From these private organizations it then trickled down into the government sphere. Today, education and health care, and therefore hospitals and schools, are ' managed'. The emphasis is placed on flexibility and project-based focus. This is the basic hallmark of postmodern management, which also places the individual at centre stage, and therefore, for instance, the performance of an individual doctor or teacher. The individual is assigned all responsibility and his or her performance is reviewed at least once a year – but within a business usually a lot more frequently. Social engineering is therefore being shifted to a large extent to the individual. The individual has to constantly remake or reinvent himself or herself according to new objectives or projects. I think this diagnosis should be made before we start talking about the social engineering of society again.

MICHIEL DEHAENE Management is social engineering without a social engineering idea.

Never before has there been so much control capacity; never before has so much effort been expended to make things. Yet there is no pilot aboard. The credit crisis in the USA is a good example of this: there is a lot of management behind that, but they were on a collision course. Today, faith in social engineering has turned into disaster management.

LIEVEN DE CAUTER The word *maakbaarheid* ('makeability', or social engineering) does not exist outside Dutch-speaking countries. So right off we have a conceptual problem. What is social engineering? Total social engineering is indeed a totalitarian political course, namely the creation of both the society *and* the human being. I think there is a consensus that this can only lead to perverse systems. But you also have what I call 'relative social engineering'. We are indeed engaged in a collision course today. This is not social engineering, however, but total un-social engineering. It is the invisible hand of rogue capitalism that is steering us towards the abyss. Social engineering, on the other hand, is associated with a sovereign. It entails a democratic decision that says, 'we will do this, and we will not do that. This is how we will organize society. ' This is how the welfare state was created. That is just about the best thing that humanity has produced in all its history.

RL I think that social engineering, on a political level, has primarily become a question of occasionally significant but sectorally limited interventions, and therefore has indeed left the societal level. Look at European education policy and the Bologna Accord, for instance. Tens of thousands of people were involved in that, to say nothing of the numbers of students. In a matter of a few years, all of higher education was reformed. This demonstrates that things are relatively socially engineerable.

MD Yet we no longer know which political course to choose, and we are faced with problems to which we don't even fathom the beginnings of a solution. We are all, for example, convinced that the problem of global warming exists. But opinions on possible solutions are highly divergent. I'm thinking of the concrete example of the blunder of biofuels. What seemed to be a technological solution now seems to have catastrophic consequences for food prices.

RL At the same time, there is no longer a consensus among the elite about the general food and the basic problems of this world. The USA and China, for example, do not consider the climate issue a priority, in contrast to the European Union.

PG *Back to my initial question: where does today's receptivity to social engineering come from?*

MD When you look at urban development and at traffic, you see that it's all jammed. If you stick with the same mobility management in operation today, eventually everything will grind to a halt. All the margins have been taken up, and we can still produce some custom-made urban design, but at some point this margin too will be gone. So the demand for energetic interventions and social engineering crops up again. But even if you were convinced that you had reached a point at which a new path should be slashed through the city, as it were, there' s a kind of 'path dependency' in operation today, you have to deal with all kinds of historical contingencies and with all the rubbish from the past that seems to preclude such radical interventions a priori. People are absolutely not ready for this.

PG *It is therefore because of the spectacle of the ecological catastrophe as a product of a limitless economy that the demand for social engineering is becoming legitimate again.*

LDC To keep it in concrete terms: the car is a good example. In this area, there is hyperproduction and hyperconsumerism. Only 2 per cent of Chinese people own a car so far. You shudder to think what will happen when they all want one. We are stuck in a growth logic that will destroy us. The limit of social engineering is the economy that is without limits.

RL On the ecological level, you should have the equivalent of the moral minimum of human rights. There is after all a relative consensus about the fact that a permanent violation of human rights is unacceptable. There must be a similar minimum for ecological rights.

PG Allow me to pose an academic question. What is the difference between attitudes towards social engineering in the 1920s, the 1960s and today?

LDC You can go back even further. Things have always been socially engineered, in the nineteenth century for instance: the hard infrastructure of the nation-state. There was an enormous positivist and technocratic faith in progress and social engineering. This is part of hard modernism across the board, on the political as well as the economic side.

RL The idea that society is not created by God but by man is the proverbial essence of the French Revolution. This became the model for the modern politics of social engineering.

LDC But the 1920s were indeed the age of revolution, both communist and fascist. Labour was its focus. In communism, the worker was elevated to the dictatorship of the proletariat. In the case of fascism, you had a petit-bourgeoisie filled with resentment about the lost war and the economic crisis that experiences a resurgence as a people and a race. What matters is that a philosophy of planning comes to the fore. The 1960s, on the other hand, were reformist and concentrated on free time. With the emphasis on freedom and free time, the economy realized that it was no longer driven by a production capitalism, but by a consumer capitalism. Today everything revolves around communication and information capitalism. You can no longer call this reformist. The most accurate label would be ' post-historic'. Europe is in the post-history of the welfare state. This does not mean that the welfare state no longer exists. Europe has managed to preserve the welfare state, at least continental Europe. Dubai, for example, is truly post-historic. How should we classify it? As theocratic capitalism? In China, on the other hand, you can speak of a postcommunist capitalism, and in America of a rabidly neoliberal capitalism. What matters is that people now realize that consumer capitalism has limits. In the 1960s the new lifestyle encouraged everyone to buy a car, and this is now turning into a nightmare. That too is a post-historic experience. We are experiencing limits, including those of democracy. How should we deal with this? How can we institute the mechanisms of new politics that rearticulate democracy? To me, these are the basic questions when you are discussing social engineering today.

PG And what are the answers?

LDC Back to the nation-state! A dam has to be built against privatization. The state has been robbed on a massive scale: public transport, telephony, etcetera – in short it sold off all the infrastructures paid for by the taxpayer for a pittance. Nationalization is not a strategy for universal salvation, but at least it is a dam against this.

PG When you say ' nationalize everything', you are effectively saying 're-politicize everything' too.

LDC: Of course.

RL In relation to that, let me note that economics are always political economics as well. The European telephony market, for example, is socially engineered. It is actually an illustration of neoliberal *and* transnational social engineering. On the other hand we also

see an influential social engineering ideal in the domain of life as such. I'm thinking of life extension or the battle against the aging body. Biology, certainly genetic technology, still adopts a classic social engineering position, linking progress optimism to technological determinism. Now that is biopolitics!

MD Yes, but then you're talking about the sense of social engineering. Because it too has no pilot. People have absolutely no idea what they're doing. They're just messing about and waiting to see what happens.

PG The Frankenstein syndrome . ..

But let me pose a somewhat different question. Up to now we've been talking about social engineering as a historical category or a fact of history. But what is it that makes a philosophy of social engineering possible; what is it based on? If I look towards Jacques Rancière and Hannah Arendt, I see art as a base category. Politics is, for instance, the design of a society. That also means you have to be able to design things in your head; you have to dare to fantasize. But even science needs fiction, which is expressed, among other things, in the hypothesis. In that, after all, many possible outcomes are conceived, or to put it a better way, 'imagined' and designed. Isn't fiction necessary to conceive possible realities?

And, if my thesis is correct, are we not today witnessing an expulsion of fiction from the political sphere and from science? Politics today, after all, has turned into policy, or ideological politics into management, but even in science hypothetical thinking is being consumed by blind faith in and an obsession for methodology. Because thinking about possibilities is being circumscribed, thinking about social engineering is also limited within the boundaries of calculability and feasibility.

LDC: One answer to your first question is in fact also an answer to the question ' what is man? ' Man is *ein nicht festgestelltes Tier*, according to philosopher and sociologist Arnold Gehlen, an instinct-forsaken animal. He is a creature of culture. Everything that makes us human is taught to us. If children do not learn to walk, they cannot walk. If they do not learn to speak, they cannot speak. Man is a creature of culture, and culture, from the Latin *colere,* literally means to work, to till. To cultivate is to make.

MD Yes, but how open is man anymore? To me, the total flexibilization of labour, going as far as the expropriation of speech, is the end of this openness, of the human project and of the 'make-able' human being. Because everything is economized, a margin that a system needs to evolve is disappearing. As a scientist you have to continually create this margin in order to think creatively. Today you have to constantly protect yourself, otherwise you get swallowed up in the third money flow. You see this in the creative industry as well. It does not create creativity; on the contrary, it swallows it. Creativity is being fettered, pushed into a standardized format. True creativity does not come out the proverbial 'centres of excellence' ; it lies in the periphery.

RL Your question is interesting, but it is two-fold. On the one hand, politics is indeed design, which is an aesthetic category. I call this the pole of the *Bildung*, with as its extreme variant – to paraphrase Boris Groys – the *Gesamtkunstwerk* of the Stalinist state. The opposite pole is politics in relation with aesthetics as a sense of possibility, as the conception of alternatives. Every idea of social engineering presupposes an outside, a fictional space, a parallel reality. We actually know two forms of this. Both religion and art are 'the world in the world', the postulation of another horizon of possibility within the existing one. And perhaps the scientific experiment is the same thing.

LDC Plato's *Republic* outlines a similar parallel reality. This is imagining by creating a concept, a utopia. It can be read as a totalitarian blueprint, but perhaps also as an outline

of possibilities, a fiction. Man is no IS creature, but a creature of possibility. Political imagination seems to be swallowed up in the hyperactivity of information technology and the hypnosis of the display screens. There seems to be no margin for critical distance, for subversion, for imagining other forms of life and society.

RL In very concrete terms, I have always, for example, defended a baseline standpoint when it comes to policy. Reserve 10 per cent of policy for experimental policy. In universities, for instance, try to do something other than uncovering yet another empirical truth. It might lead to nothing, but you might also end up thinking, ten years down the line, 'the model we once tried, which didn't work in this or that condition, now makes sense'.

PG Today we are seeing a rather paradoxical development in connection with creativity. On the one hand you see that – as I just indicated – creativity is being banished from politics and science. On the other hand you see that industry is embracing creativity. Is industry so much smarter?

MD I am not all that surprised that creativity is something you can market. But I am pessimistic about the capacity of the economy to effectively produce creativity. It remains primarily a captation.

RL That is also Antonio Negri's analysis. You can be creative with others, but all creativity is immediately privatized, including in a legal sense. Creativity, including collective creation, immediately becomes property – that's the logic.

PG All three of you are academics. To what extent has academic research supported, legitimized today's politics-without-politics?

MD I am ambivalent about this. The new management regime, as Rudi Laermans calls it, is indeed highly project-centred. From an urbanism point of view I have always been a proponent of this project-based approach. Directive urbanism or 'planism', in which you think in terms of 30 years, are a thing of the past. But the big problem is that project-based urbanism today is in the hands of the project developer. As a result you end up in a logic of perfunctory action. The project manager just has to make sure the project happens. The question of which projects a city needs and why, however, is very seldom posed anymore. What interests me is how a city arrives at particular projects. What are the projects that you cannot leave up to the market and in which public investment is desirable and necessary? In Flanders, for instance, there is discussion about public-private social housing. This is rather absurd, since social housing in Flanders is aimed at that portion of housing for which there is no market. This means that you can only interest market players in this segment if you guarantee their profits with subsidies. This is only one example of the uncritical use of public resources within a blind faith in project-driven financing. In a more general sense, urbanism, because of its insistence on working project by project, risks being reduced to a lubricant for commercial urban development. I think we are ready for a countermovement.

RL Something similar is happening in the social sciences. There is a highly technocratic orientation, whereby data collection amounts to supplying policy-making authorities, in the broad sense, with information about a national population or specific groups. If one is already working on something socially relevant, one usually keeps to the problem definitions of the political establishment. The whole research industry into immigrant populations is a good example of this. No other category in society is so thoroughly researched these days, although 'surveiled' would be a better word. What bothers me is the attitude of 'as a scientist I'm trying to change the world too'. When in reality the goal is simply to obtain research grants and have research results converted into academic publications. Party politics today works mainly with moral statements: something is bad, or something should be considered bad. The vast majority of sociological research rides

along in that narrative. As a result what might also be researched, what might be conceived differently, is curbed.

LDC The task of the intellectual lies in registering resistance. Resistance against privatization, for example the privatization of the university, against management thinking at the university, resistance against the erosion of civil rights and of individual freedom, freedom of opinion, resistance against the dualization of the world and the militarization associated with it, resistance against the ecological destruction of the planet . .. That is the task of an intellectual, and a good academic is an intellectual. But critical academic reflection has always been limited. It can only exist if it is nurtured by a broader resistance movement.

PG But my question was intended more broadly. Institutions like universities, but public broadcasters as well, always used to leave a free, open space that you could occupy. The big institutions, after all, were the ones that scarcely asked questions about what some individuals or small entities do within the institution. It was precisely in these undefined places that creativity and alternative social engineering were often nurtured and other ways of thinking were developed.

LDC These have indeed been 'managed away' today. Everything has been rationalized, so that room for imagination is shrinking. Although I should add some nuance to that: Bologna has also, at least in the art academies, generated a new dynamic.

MD There was indeed what the Belgian sociologist Jean Ré my calls a *seconde réalité* . Within organizational systems, another organization was created simultaneously, and for a number of people who worked within that system, another reality as well. The reality of an academic post today, however, is 'we're on holiday, now we can do some writing'. We can finally do what we essentially consider to be our actual work. But this situation eats up all sorts of other things through which you function, your home life for instance.

RL But critical thinking has also emigrated. Whereas in the 1960s and 1970s critical social theory was mainly influential within the social sciences, for some time now its main habitat has been cultural studies. Moreover, a remarkable number of art academies accommodate (or used to accommodate) alternative thinkers, such as Peter Sloterdijk and Boris Groys.

PG So there are still spaces where one can think about society in a critical way. But how does this relate to actual practice? Does this theorizing actually lead to an alternatively socially engineered society? Take Negri and Hardt's or Virno's concept of the 'multitude'. How do such theoretical, almost virtual concepts relate to reality?

LDC Concepts can feed politics. You have to furnish that imaginary with a critical operationability. But let's be honest: the anti-globalization movement did not need the concept of the multitude' to resist the G8. When theory becomes a sort of poetics in which the distinction between theory and practice vanishes, a certain performativity does develop in both thought and action. In inventing a new discourse, a new reality is also created. Ultimately, however, I expect concrete changes in this area only if citizens, activists and organizations such as NGOs and trade unions, and ultimately political parties as well, join forces. Thinking about politics has to flow through to the political forum.

PG Let me round things off with a somewhat different question. The social engineering of both man and society was very powerfully expressed by Michel Foucault through the architectural principle of the panopticon. It was the core architecture of the apparatus of discipline from the eighteenth century onward, and therefore the instrument of social engineering as well. What architectural principle would you put forward as the centre of the current management regime?

LDC The panopticon is fairly unique. It is a philosophical machine to which I can think of no equivalent. What's more, it's actually been built. I would spontaneously answer that the atrium model is at the centre of management. Davos is more or less such a place: a congress centre cum hotel with separate rooms and nouvelle cuisine on the terrace. This is the new locus of power. It is no coincidence that Davos is a spa.

RL The panopticon as a machine is a powerful metaphor because it touches on both the subject and society. Today, however, I would not think of architecture, but of networks. With an example that is an extension of the panopticon: the closed-circuit video that guarantees security and control. And more general circuits of communication, video conferences and Skype. In this way you can extrapolate to the network approach of neurology. Today, after all, we are witnessing a neuropolitics as well.

LDC We are not really going to figure it out. After all, the metaphor of the panopticon was only put forward in the wake of historical facts – when the paradigm became clear, in other words. At the moment we are in the middle of this paradigm. It is therefore difficult for us to classify our situation, let alone sum it up in one metaphorical machine.

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Tags

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