# The New Myth of Relative Social Engineering

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**In the struggle against the global world order, Lieven De Cauter calls for a rehabilitation of social engineering and the realization that political choices do matter [1] And rightly so. The triumphal march of the global world order – at least at an ideological level – is being made possible by an apolitical view of society.**

We see it as an 'occurrence', a spontaneous play of conflicting forces that constantly short-circuit one another and seek out synergies. The role of politics has been reduced to merely 'policing' the orderly course of this play of forces, without the ambition to want to guide it, as was the case during the heyday of the socially engineered society. [2] Nonetheless 'social engineering' still treads the societal stage. Monitoring, after all, also concerns the safeguarding of the essential conditions for the societal occurrence, such as parliamentary democracy, press freedom and the free circulation of goods and capital, conditions that the 'police troops' of the global world order defend with force if necessary.

Remarkably, however, De Cauter also immediately puts the brakes on his call for a 'repoliticization' by immediately speaking about a 'relative' social engineering. At first glance this defensive approach is understandable. To again advocate total social engineering would not only be unacceptable, but above all not credible, given the current consensus on the causal link between social engineering and totalitarianism. The social engineering of society has become an anathema over which hangs a corny paternalist haze. De Cauter's emphasis on the relative, however, is more than merely strategic. With it he expresses the more general conceptual movement to make thinking and acting in terms of a utopia – the framework within which attempts at social engineering were invariably undertaken – acceptable once more by no longer viewing it as a 'guiding-image', but as a 'counter-image'. The term utopia no longer refers to the representation of an alternative model of society as the guiding thread for a political project. On the contrary, it is understood in terms of an 'unceasing indictment' against the inequities intrinsic to the existing world order. [3]

De Cauter himself seems not to believe in the possibility of repoliticizing the global world order. Within his train of thought, critical counterforces can at most make an ethical appeal to the global order to better control its excesses – what on closer examination is also the bas ic position of the 'global governance' movement. [4] This assumes that the global world order is not infallible, but is capable of regulating its own shortcomings, without external political interference. The assumption is that globalization, in its current, neoliberal form, is an inevitable, quasi-natural process, which at most requires the stipulation of certain ethical (behavioural) codes. A defining feature of these ethical codes is that they are drawn up by the parties involved themselves. Think of the Dutch publicly traded corporations that recently formalized their own behaviour with the famous Tabaksblat Code. Alternative globalization ethicists, like De Cauter, can at most exert pressure to accelerate this natural process of self-regulation.

It is precisely this ultimate naturalization of the global order that needs to be combated. A merely ethical counterposition is not sufficient for this purpose.[5] What is needed is a political critique of the global world order: the global world order must be stripped of any pretence of naturalness by critically reconstructing its 'socially engineered' character, as well as exposing the last fragments of utopian thinking that lend this order its coherence.[6]

### The Perverse Core of Relative Social Engineering

In this we come up against the paradox of the relative social engineering of Dutch society. On the one hand, there is consensus on the fact that social engineering leads to an asphyxiation of the most essential qualities of societal actors: their creativity, entrepreneurship and potential for self-regulation. At the same time, there is agreement that these qualities should be stimulated. This creates the hilarious spectacle of a government that claims to be recusing itself and leaving the societal initiative to bottom-up developments, only to frenetically guide these processes along proper channels and, if they are absent, to generate them. In this the government is fulfilling the same role as the presenter of the popular television programme *Dragons' Den*, in which creative individuals (the pitchers) try to arouse the interest of venture capitalists (the dragons) in order to develop their inventions. The role of the presenter is limited to introducing the pitchers and to laughing or crying along with the pitchers when they discover the market value of their creative proposals. While the initiative to appear before the dragons indubitably lies with the creative individuals, the presenter, who always stays in the background, represents the vanishing mediator of this ostensibly spontaneous occasion.

Relative social engineering acquires a perverse quality in that societal actors may have more room to give free rein to their creativity, but under the strict condition that they not only be creative, but exploit their creativity in the correct, enterprising way. If they fail to do this, disciplinary sanctions follow. In the process the Dutch government, in the area of cultural policy, is increasingly taking on the guise of the *Dragons' Den* venture capitalists: the financial resources of 'uncreative' breeding grounds are implacably slashed or even cut off entirely, with the resulting available budgets being reinvested in so-called 'points of excellence'. These are top cultural institutions from which a high 'return value' is expected in the area of international allure, economic suitability or societal benefit. This modus operandi represents, within culture policy, the variant of the previously mentioned National Spatial Framework.

This far-reaching government interference in the field of culture in the Netherlands is anything but an isolated case. On the contrary, it is the local version of the philosophy of relative social engineering that prevails on a global scale today. Think, for example, of the way Western powers, in countries like Afghanistan, Iraq or Palestine, are actively creating the right conditions for the facilitation of the innate thirst for democracy of the local populations. When the population misuses its democratic rights and chooses undesirable parties to defend its interests, such as Hamas in Palestine, extreme sanctions follow and the paternalism of the heyday of the socially engineered society makes a grand comeback.

### The Social Engineering of Spontaneous Initiatives

A good start for such a project is to expose the superficial character of the 'demonization of social engineering' in today's society. For all that it is taboo these days to speak in terms of social engineering, the philosophy of social engineering is nonetheless being applied on a massive scale. Geographer Erik Swyngedouw rightly points out that, despite what official ideology would suggest, neoliberalism maintains an intimate relationship with state intervention.[7] Not coincidentally, he made this observation in connection with the development of the Zuidas in Amsterdam, a large office, residential and leisure complex currently being built in the south of the city. At an official level, the Zuidas is represented as

the spontaneous outcome of societal processes: the demand for more office space, trendy residential accommodation and cultural infrastructure, as well as the need for reliable access. The reality, however, is that the Zuidas is part of what the Dutch Ministry of Housing, Spatial Planning and the Environment (VROM) calls the 'National Spatial Framework' of the Netherlands: the collection of all the spatial assets that are crucial to the international competitive position of the Netherlands – and which are therefore meticulously managed at the highest planning level: the state.[8] Here we uncover the core of the 'relative social engineering' intrinsic to present-day society in the Netherlands. Dutch society is being socially engineered even today – the Zuidas leaves no doubt as to this fact. It is simply no longer totally socially engineered. Instead, the government intervenes only in places that are of strategic importance to particular objectives. It initiates projects for which it delegates both the implementation and the direction, but intervenes in the process at well-considered, strategic moments. It also repeatedly responds to the particular needs and desires of specific target groups and facilitates these as much as possible. This hyperactive role in the National Spatial Framework is compensated by outsourcing the remaining portion of societal organization as much as possible to lower levels of administration (provinces and municipalities) and to the self-regulating capacities of the social field of forces (market partners, societal parties and/or enterprising individuals). A second characteristic of relative social engineering is the dissimulation of state intervention by involving every conceivable stakeholder in the development – economic, societal and cultural players – so that even the Zuidas takes on a quasi-spontaneous character.

At lower levels of scale we run into the same politics of relative social engineering. Every self-respecting city in the Netherlands is now hard at work on generating a creative quantum leap. Municipal authorities are frenetically mapping out creative hotspots, redeveloping sites for creative 'breeding places', designing policy focusing on creative developments, launching promotion campaigns, mobilizing investments in creative sectors, and so on. Here too, in other words, in spite of all the rhetoric to the contrary, we are clearly dealing with social engineering based on a more or less clearly formulated ideal vision. Only this is done in a smarter, 'relative' way. Instead of subjecting deprived neighbourhoods to a total makeover, the Dutch government is performing extremely localized precision operations into the social and physical fabric of the city. These interventions are nevertheless linked to grand utopian expectations. Not coincidentally, the parties involved speak of 'gentripuncture' in these cases. In a problem area, like Rotterdam's Spangen district, creative groups are 'injected' in the expectation that their entrepreneurial zeal will restore the countenance of this working-class area to its former glory and spur its residents into action.[9] Just as at the Zuidas, here too we are dealing with a consciously created ambiguity about the true engine of the process of societal change. Even though the so-called gentripunctural interventions would be unthinkable without the massive financial and organizational efforts of the government and even though they are part of well-defined policy programmes based on scientific reports, the operation is nevertheless attributed to the spontaneous entrepreneurial actions of creative actors.

### A Different View of the Global World Order Is Possible

The politicization of the global world order, therefore, lies not in an 'ethical critique', but in rendering visible its 'relatively socially engineered' character and hidden paternalism. A unique political moment can consist of the public acknowledgement of this suppressed and obscene truth as well as its integration in its official, post-political self-representation. The challenge is therefore to resist the temptation to immediate postulate an 'alternative globalization'. In the first instance, the global world order demands an alternative historiography – new historiographic myths and monuments – that does justice to the denied socially engineered character of its spontaneous guise.

In concrete terms, we propose the following. In another context Lieven De Cauter, protesting the harsh immigration policy of the European Union, proposed nominating the wall around Ceuta – along with all detention centres for illegal immigrants on the European mainland – as the culture monument of 1998 (in the context of the Jan Hagel Prize) with as a tag line: 'Observers predict that it will someday become a tourist attraction.' [10] Building on this, we propose nominating the light coercion with which creatives are being sent into 'the dragon's den' in search of microcredits – made necessary by the closure of uncreative 'breeding places' and the concentration of culture budgets in elite creative institutions – as the 'culture moment of 2008'. Without De Cauter's ethical cynicism, however. We are deadly serious. Today the actions of the government within the creative sector might appear as cruel yet necessary. The future will undoubtedly tell whether this disciplinary state intervention will have contributed in an unprecedented way to the making of a new generation of self-sufficient and decisive creative entrepreneurs, who cheerfully let their creativity be tapped for the dream we all share: a strong international competitive position for the Netherlands within the global world order.

**BAVO** is an independent research firm focusing on the political dimension of art, architecture and planning. BAVO is a partnership between Gideon Boie and Matthias Pauwels; both studied architecture and philosophy. Recent publications include *Cultural Activism Today: The Art of Over-Identification* (2007) and *Urban Politics Now: Re-Imagining Democracy in the Neoliberal City* (2007). See www.bavo.biz.

## Footnotes

1. See 'Utopia and Globalization' in: Lieven De Cauter, *The Capsular Society*, Reflect #3 (Rotterdam: NAi Publishers, 2004), 184-191.
2. We use 'policing' as the translation of the concept of 'la police' that Jacques Rancière defined in detail as a depoliticized form of conducting politics. See Jacques Rancière, *La mésentente* (Paris: Ed. Galilée, 1995).
3. Lieven De Cauter also situates the practice of relative social engineering as resistance in light of the formulation of an 'absolute demand for justice'.
4. This solution to the excesses of globalization in terms of 'better management' is advocated by such figures as Joseph Stiglitz, one of the most famous critics of neoliberal globalization. See Joseph Stiglitz, *Globalisation and its Discontents* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co, 2003).
5. Because of the ethical slant of De Cauter's position, he can easily be forced into the position of the hysteric or whistleblower who continually challenges the global world order to respond to one failing or another – war yesterday, global warming today, something else tomorrow – without proposing an alternative himself. Even his call to politicize the global world order by creating alternative worlds in its margins is significantly undermined by the way in which De Cauter interprets this resistance (among other things, with general terms such as alternative globalism, the anti-war movement and environmental activism) as well as the idealistic selection of the margin as a field of action.
6. This premise is based on Slavoj Žižek, who argues that a critique lies, first and foremost, in the study of the reproduction of the existing order. See the introduction to *The Indivisible Remainder (*London/New York: Verso Books, 1996).
7. Erik Swyngedouw, 'A New Urbanity? The Ambiguous Politics of Large-Scale Urban Development Projects in European Cities', in: *Willem Salet (ed.), Amsterdam Zuidas. European Space* (Rotterdam: 010 Publishers, 2005).
8. See *Nota Ruimte. Ruimte voor ontwikkeling* ('National Spatial Strategy: Room for Development'), finalized by the Dutch cabinet on 23 April 2004. This illusion is being maintained in the face of all sorts of grave signs to the contrary, such as a major lack of occupancy in the Amsterdam office market, declining interest on the part of market parties, and so on.
9. In this we are alluding to, for instance, 'De dichterlijke vrijheid' (poetic licence) – as far as we know one of the first projects to explicitly use the term gentripuncture. This was a project centred on the Wallisblok in Spangen, set up by the Rotterdam Development Corporation in close cooperation with Steunpunt Wonen and Hulshof Architecten. Due to its success, this spontaneous initiative became best practice within the 'Hot Spot Policy' of the Dutch Ministry of Housing, Spatial Planning and the Environment (VROM). In Rotterdam, the project was further developed and refined in the project '169 Klushuizen' (169 houses to fix up).
10. See footnote 17 to the essay 'The Capsular Civilization' in: *De Cauter, The Capsular Civilization*, op. cit. (note 1), 51-54.

## Tags

Biopolitics, Control, Democracy, Urban Space

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