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# Social Engineering 1899-1999: An Odyssey through *The New York Times*

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“Social engineer” and “social engineering” are terms which have been current in the discourse of the industrialized world for more than a hundred years. These are, however, concepts which are difficult to capture and define without ambiguity. In this article I shall examine the occurrences of the two terms in an American context during the twentieth century.<sup>1</sup>

It would seem that William Tolman, the American advocate of social “betterment” in industry, coined the terms social engineer and social engineering with instrumental intent at the turn of the nineteenth century. The social engineer was to make workers efficient in approximately the same way as the technical engineer made machines efficient.<sup>2</sup> It did not take long for the terms to be carried over from industry into the realm of politics. The social engineer came to be associated with experts of reformist ambitions or with social reformers of utopian visions.<sup>3</sup>

1. This article forms part of a project on “American Welfare Capitalism and Social Engineering” financed by the Jan Wallander and Tom Hedelius Foundation. I was able to carry out the search of *The New York Times* Full Text database (ProQuest Historical Newspapers *The New York Times*) during a sojourn as Fulbright scholar at the City University of New York during the summer of 2003. I am grateful for help received from reference librarian Scott Johnston at CUNY. Geoffrey French helped me “get the English right.”

2. William H. Tolman, *Social Engineering: A Record of Things Done by American Industrialists Employing Upwards of One and One-half Million of People* (New York: McGraw Publishing Company, 1909).

3. Karl R. Popper, *The Open Society and Its Enemies*, Vol. 1 (London: 1945).

The aim of this article is to investigate in what contexts and with what meanings the terms “social engineer” and “social engineering” have figured during the twentieth century. To this end I have searched for these two terms in *The New York Times* (NYT) article database for the years 1857-1999. The aim was to use this widely respected newspaper as a lens through which we can observe when, where, and how the terms came into use. Certainly, a journal article like the present one can at best hope to provide but a historical overview, as any thorough scrutiny needs to cover a shorter time span in many more pages. There are in fact already a few books dealing with social engineering in the early twentieth century: John F. McClymer’s *War and Welfare: Social Engineering in America, 1890-1925* (1980), Guy Alchon’s *The Invisible Hand of Planning: Capitalism, Social Science and the State in the 1920s* (1985), and John M. Jordan’s *Machine-Age Ideology: Social Engineering and American Liberalism, 1911-1939* (1994).<sup>4</sup> However, as far as I know, less is written about the decades after the 1930s and about “the long run,” which forms the main scope of my investigation.

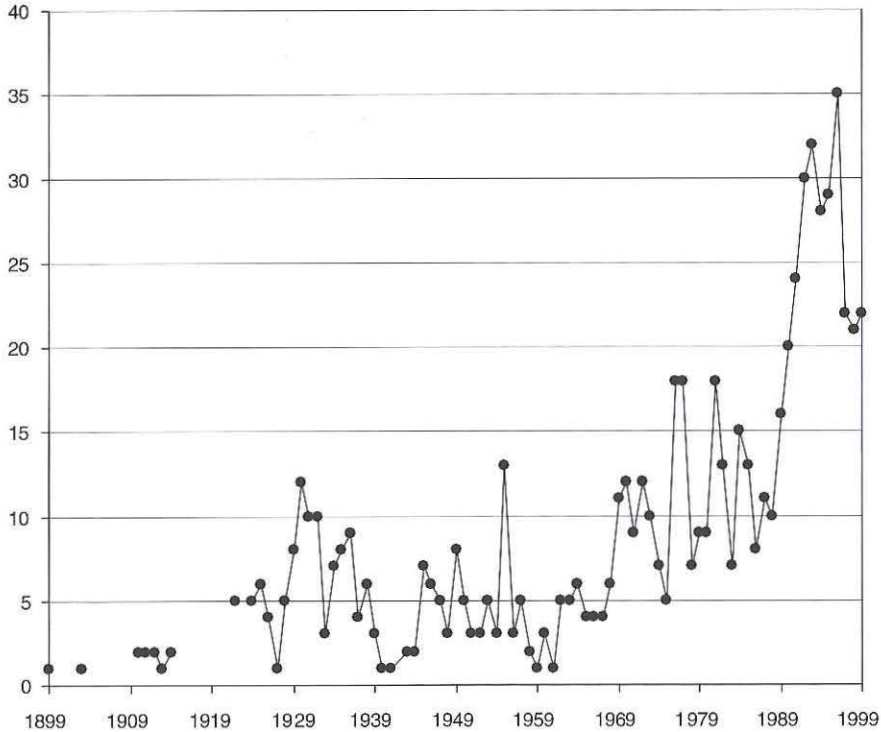
### The Quantitative Picture

The term “social engineer” occurs in the NYT for the first time in 1887 and “social engineering” for the first time in 1899. Thereafter the two words occur in occasional articles prior to World War I. They figure rather more frequently in the early 1920s and more frequently still in the early and mid-1930s. After that they appear rather sparsely up to the period following World War II. The use of the terms increases from around 1970 onwards, especially during the 1990s when they come into regular use with the number of “hits” peaking in 35 articles in 1996. (See figure 1.)

During the years 1899-1999, one or both of the terms figure in 736

4. Guy Alchon, *The Invisible Hand of Planning: Capitalism, Social Science and the State in the 1920s* (Princeton, N. J.: Princeton University Press, 1985); John M. Jordan, *Machine-Age Ideology: Social Engineering and American Liberalism, 1911-1939* (Chapel Hill & London: University of North Carolina Press, 1994); John F. McClymer, *War and Welfare: Social Engineering in America, 1890-1925* (Westport, Connecticut & London: Greenwood Press 1980).

Figure 1: Number of *New York Times* articles containing mentions of “social engineer” or “social engineering” 1899-1999.



Source: ProQuest Historical Newspapers *The New York Times*.

articles.<sup>5</sup> “Social engineering” occurs in more articles (527) than “social engineer” (229), and both terms occur in one and the same article a few (20) times. An amusing episode in the search for the social engineer may merit a mention. The use of the term saw a sudden, and therefore mysterious, rise in the early 1960s. The culprit turned out to be a horse by the name of “Social Engineer,” which figured in the result lists of seventy-

5. In addition the terms occur in a number of advertisements which I have not taken into account. In the 1980s and early 1990s “social engineering” began to be used in a new sense having to do with hackers who exploit human weaknesses to attack computers; I have excluded the few articles dealing with this phenomenon.

odd horse races. Naturally I had to exclude these “hits” from our quantitative picture.

At this point let us begin our scrutiny of the keywords. I have not examined all of the 700-plus articles in which the words occur but have attempted to select those of more comprehensive content where the words do not occur merely *en passant*. My chronological odyssey is organized into ten-year intervals, spanning about 120 articles.

### **Around the Turn of the Century: A New Profession**

The first “hit” for the term “social engineer” occurs as early as 1887 and refers, unexpectedly, to an arranger of society events in one of New York’s suburbs.<sup>6</sup> “Social engineering” appears for the first time 1899 in a less unexpected context. It was launched as “the latest of the professions” by William Tolman, secretary of the League of Social Service, which had been founded the year before. Tolman told of a department store in Boston which was looking for someone to handle the needs of its employees and denominated the task as being “really, that of a social engineer.”<sup>7</sup>

“Social engineer” occurs in the columns several times during 1911-1912. The context varies: the need to compile statistics on public health; an article voicing criticism of social engineers by the president of US Steel for demanding better working hours in the steel industry; the use of pauper children as weapons in the great textile workers’ strike in Lawrence, Massachusetts: “The marvels of human betterment have not been worked by eight-hour men, or by social engineers, or by trade unions, or by philanthropists. It is the work of capital ...”<sup>8</sup>

Summary: Not unexpectedly, the period preceding World War I was when William Tolman introduced the new profession of social engineer. Thereafter the word occurs from time to time in the context of articles on social and industrial issues.

6. “Society Topics of the Week,” 2 Jan. 1887, 3.

7. “New Profession Appears. Promoters of ‘Social Engineering’ Find a Fruitful Field,” 15 Oct. 1899, 8.

8. “Needs of Statistics to Save Human Life,” 15 Aug. 1911, 8; “Steel Trust’s Head is for Supervision,” 23 Jan. 1912, 12; “Children and Society,” 20 Feb. 1912, 10.

### The 1920s: Colorful Profiles

Henry E. Jackson, renowned as a social engineer, figures in several articles during the early 1920s. In his book *Robinson Crusoe, Social Engineer* he proposed that social problems should be solved not by the exertions of experts or the state but by ordinary people organized in "community engineering boards," an idea rejected in the *NYT* as reactionary, utopian, and absurd.<sup>9</sup> Jackson did not let himself be deterred by this but called for the "community councils" which had been formed in New York during World War I to be used in order to reawaken traditional American small-town democracy.<sup>10</sup>

Professor Arland D. Weeks argued in his book *The Control of the Social Mind* that "social engineering might assure a diffusion of prosperity never known before." The social engineers in this case were psychologists who could lead men's thinking into altruistic paths.<sup>11</sup> The jurist and Supreme Court Justice Louis D. Brandeis and the philosopher and educationist John Dewey were spoken of as social engineers on the occasion of their seventieth birthdays.<sup>12</sup> However, the greatest social engineer of the time was of course Herbert Hoover. In the presidential election campaign of 1928 Henry Ford exclaimed: "The President's job has become that of a social engineer. Hoover fills the rôle."<sup>13</sup> Democrats agreed that the country needed an engineer as President and pointed to Alfred E. Smith, "the most sensationally successful social engineer of our day."<sup>14</sup> Later on, when Hoover tried to stabilize the economy, Edwin F. Gay of Harvard called him "a great social engineer."<sup>15</sup>

Summary: Writings on social engineering in the 1920s are dominated by Henry Jackson, self-styled social engineer. Other Americans catego-

9. Louise Townsend Nicholl, "The Pacific Ocean's Own Block Party," 31 July 1921, 40; John Corbin, "Labor, Capital and Crusoe," 17 Dec. 1922, 52.

10. "Hopes to Make Us a City of 'Villages'," 17 Feb. 1924, E7; "Thinks New Yorkers Need Town Meetings," 24 Feb. 1924, X11; "Plans to Split City into Many Towns," 14 Feb. 1924, 29; Henry E. Jackson, "Town Meeting Idea for Modern New York," 29 June 1924, XX10.

11. Van Buren Thorne, "Civilization Once More at Stake. Social Betterment Through the Medium of Social Engineering," 24 Feb. 1924, BR13.

12. Carson C. Hathaway, "Justice Brandeis Reaches 70 Years," 7 Nov. 1926, SM8; Irwin Edman, "Our Foremost Philosopher at Seventy," 13 Oct. 1929, SM2.

13. "Ford Hails Hoover as Leader of Age," 8 Sept. 1928, 2.

14. "Cox Calls Smith 'Human Engineer'," 5 Nov. 1928, 9.

15. "New England Backs the Hoover Program," 22 Nov. 1929, 3.

rized as social engineers are Louis Brandeis, John Dewey, and “the great social engineer” Herbert Hoover.

### **The 1930s: Planning and Joint Action**

Young militants of the socialist party in the early 1930s were advocating “a feat of social engineering” and a five-year plan after the Soviet model.<sup>16</sup> Dr Harry W. Laidler of the League for Industrial Democracy visited the Soviet Union and described its five-year plan as “the outstanding piece of social engineering in the world today.”<sup>17</sup> A ten-year plan was demanded in a letter from the National Civic Federation, the welfare-capitalist central organization, to 600 American business and trade union leaders. The plan which Matthew Woll, its initiator, had in mind was of a different kind from the Soviet version: “We need, for example, to meet the cold-blooded Communist five-year plan with a warm-blooded ten-year plan of democratic idealism woven into the very pattern of our national fabric.” Woll went on:

The idea of systematic coordination and scientific planning in industry and economic life has long been urged upon modern industrial nations by constructive thinkers and far-seeing social engineers. The Bolsheviks discovered nothing new when they evolved their so-called five-year plan. As with many other good ideas which they took over from others and appropriated as their own, they have vitiated and perverted the idea of economic planning, subjected it to their own political purposes, and turned it into despotic planlessness.<sup>18</sup>

William J. Cooper, U.S. Commissioner of Education, hoped for a “leisure class” of teachers prepared to “serve as social engineers in solving the problems of democracy.”<sup>19</sup> Andrew C. McLaughlin, Dean of the Department of History at the University of Chicago, had similar ideas regarding higher education: “We must develop in the colleges social engineers, men and women capable of taking up social problems scientifically and ana-

16. “Militants’ Urge Plan on Young Socialists,” 8 Sept. 1930, 11.

17. “Urges 5-Year Plan for Liberals Here,” 26 April 1931, N20.

18. “10-year Plan Urged to Offset Red Drive by Stabilizing Trade,” 15 June 1931, 1.

19. “Foresees Teachers in ‘Leisure Class,’” 13 April 1930, 19.

lyzing them as engineers do.”<sup>20</sup> Harry M. Shulman, research director of the New York State Crime Commission, considered that the rehabilitation of young criminals was an area suitable for social engineering.<sup>21</sup> *The American Adventure*, a study by the German professor of economics M. J. Bonn, was described as an attempt to “discover and define the chief forces responsible for the spirit of enterprise and experiment, the passion for ‘social engineering’, which, he insists, ‘has always animated the people of the United States.’”<sup>22</sup>

After the threat of a strike in the automobile industry had been averted through an agreement on collective bargaining in the spring of 1934, President Roosevelt made a declaration:

I would like you to know that in the settlement just reached in the automobile industry, we have charted a new course in social engineering in the United States. It is my hope that out of this will come a new realization of the opportunities of capital and labor not only to compose their differences at the conference table and to recognize their respective rights and responsibilities, but also to establish a foundation on which they can cooperate in bettering the human relationships involved in any large industrial enterprise.<sup>23</sup>

Roswell C. McCrea, Dean of the Columbia University School of Business, declared that the industrial society could not survive under *laissez-faire* and that “all the knowledge, wisdom, courage, honesty and imagination we can command must be marshaled on a united front to assist in social engineering.”<sup>24</sup> *Basic Economics* by James Gilbert Evans, a professor of economics, was said to constitute a theoretical foundation for “disinterested, professional social engineering.” One of Evan’s messages was that the state must play a leading role in the economy and that “the assistance of the economist, the social engineer, rather than the politician will be necessary.”<sup>25</sup> Henry A. Wallace, Secretary of Agriculture, considered social engineering necessary to raise the poorer sector of the popula-

20. “Asks Public Purpose in Aim of Colleges,” 9 April 1932, 32.

21. “Assails Severity in Reform Schools,” 20 Oct. 1931, 26.

22. Florence Finch Kelly, “A German’s Lucid Commentary on American Life,” 4 March 1934, BR2.

23. “White House Statement,” 26 March 1934, 1. Roosevelt’s words were echoed in the news columns on a number of occasions the following year: “Labor Board Aide for Wagner Plan,” 29 April 1934, 24; “Collective Bargaining,” 16 Feb. 1935, 12.

24. “Columbia Dean Asks Wider Trade Study,” 9 Sept. 1934, N3.

25. Louis Rich, “Economic Principles,” 3 Feb. 1935, BR21.



tion and create increased economic security so as to rescue the capitalist system.<sup>26</sup>

According to the reviewer of *Law and the Lawyers* by Edward S. Robinson, the author wanted to “have lawyers become ‘social engineers’ with a ‘social philosophy,’ and to that end urges them to be ‘scientific’ after the fashion of the natural scientists, and that they be more concerned with the ‘facts’ of a situation than with the ‘logical’ application of principles.”<sup>27</sup> At a seminar at Harvard anthropologist Bronislaw Malinowski called attention to the need to create a balance between the might of the natural sciences and the self-inflicted backwardness of the social sciences, “and [to] the consequent impotence of social engineering.”<sup>28</sup> When the American Association of Social Workers held its congress, Wayne McMillen of the University of Chicago proclaimed that social workers wanted to have a piece of the action: “The guiding of social change, social planning, or social engineering, as the function is variously called, is merely social reform in a new dress.”<sup>29</sup>

Summary: The term social engineering comes into use during the 1930s in articles on the need to increase economic and social security. President Roosevelt uses the term when expressing hopes of cooperation between labor and capital. Socialists want to see five-year plans of the Soviet type and representatives of welfare capitalism want to see plans that will sweep away the seedbeds of socialism. Various scholars argue that teachers, jurists, or economists must shoulder responsibility as social engineers and work in accordance with models designed by scientists.

### **The 1940s: International Views**

World War II meant that discussion of social engineering was drowned out by the alarms and vicissitudes of war. However, the concept did not disappear completely from the pages of the newspaper. One reviewer

26. “General Welfare Urged by Wallace,” 8 Dec. 1935, N12.

27. Chester & Edith Rohrlach, “Modern Psychology and the Lawyers,” 13 Oct. 1935, BR11.

28. James MacDonald, “Holds Modern Man Victim of Machine,” 8 Sept. 1936, 15.

29. “Favors Guidance on Social Changes,” 21 Feb. 1937, 18.

summarized a message taken from James Burnham's *The Machiavelians*, arguing that when the political optimist and perfectionist comes to power he discovers that the state's subjects do not want to be objects of social engineering. He believes that a mere one or two reactionaries are hindering him, tries to brush them aside with a little terror and ends up drowning the nation in blood.<sup>30</sup> Caroline Haslett, a female engineer and adviser on "womanpower" to the British government, singled out the Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA) as "the greatest piece of social engineering in the world," a type of experiment with enormous potential in Europe and China.<sup>31</sup>

In early 1945 Raymond B. Fosdick, president of the Rockefeller Foundation, recalled that it was 25 years since the founding of the League of Nations: "It was a stupendous piece of social engineering conceived in planetary terms." In face of the task of designing a new world organization he warned against letting the perfectionists make the decisions.<sup>32</sup> Another postwar problem would be the administration of Germany, "especially since both the United States and Great Britain are likely to remain averse to the 'social engineering' that is becoming a familiar pattern in Eastern Europe."<sup>33</sup> One Labor Member of Parliament in Britain, R. H. S. Crossman, looked to America for an idea for the postwar world, and once again the spotlight fell on the TVA: "When we think of the American way of life, we think of the skyscraper and of the TVA. They symbolize for us American engineering – colossal, but without the blind ruthlessness of Russian communism."<sup>34</sup>

Towards the end of the 1940s an article by the economist Adolf A. Berle Jr. was commented on in which it was said that American liberals had come to look at economic and social problems not as doctrinaires but as pragmatic social engineers. The reasons were said to be the productive capacity of the private American economy during the war, the weaknesses inherent in European socialism, and the ugly example of Soviet communism.<sup>35</sup> The centennial year of the Communist Manifesto was

30. John Chamberlain, "Books of the Times," 29 April 1943, 19.

31. "Miss Haslett Hails TVA As Peace Tool," 26 July 1944, 12.

32. Raymond B. Fosdick, "The Hour Is Late – We Must Not Fail," 11 Feb. 1945, SM3.

33. "Ruling Germany," 8 Aug. 1945, 22.

34. R. H. S. Crossman, "TVA's for World Peace," 24 Aug. 1947, SM12.

35. Russell Porter, "Facts Show Common Basis For Liberals, Conservatives," 28 Sept. 1947, F1.

marked in an article drawing attention to the resemblances between communism and Nazism – “essentially twin products of the same ponderous German mind in search of the absolute” – which both “submerged the individual into the mass, which, in turn, became merely the raw material for the ‘social engineering’ of self-appointed ‘Fuehrers.’”<sup>36</sup> An English historian, J. J. Saunders, was noticed for his gloomy analysis of the rise and fall of liberalism in *The Age of Revolution*. Saunders took the view that Leninism and Hitlerism meant that “liberalism was slain by the democratic masses which it had itself set in motion,” and that “the worship of technology and of social engineering put new weapons in the hands of the state.”<sup>37</sup>

The “new anthropology” claimed to be able to reduce tensions all over the world. “Gone is the day when anthropologists traveled to distant places, chopped through malarial jungle and dodged poisoned arrows to study cat’s cradles among the dreaded Boola-Boolas,” declared Bernard Mishkin’s review of Clyde Kluckhohn’s *Mirror for Man*, which “hails the new anthropology as a branch of social engineering.”<sup>38</sup> William F. Ogburn – known for his theory of “cultural lag” – hoped that the social sciences would create more scope in social engineering for personal and family problems.<sup>39</sup>

Summary: Social engineering is a term seldom used in the early 1940s. When it does occur it reflects experiences of the 1930s and the war, along with fears and hopes for the future. The efforts made to build a new international order after World War II set their impress on the use of the term.

### **The 1950s: Conformism and Segregation**

That the term social engineer had not lost its original meaning at mid-century can be deduced from an announcement that the author Stuart Chase was to deliver a lecture on “The Social Responsibility of Manage-

36. “A Grim Centennial,” 24 Jan. 1948, 14.

37. Hans Kohn, “Status of Liberalism,” 3 July 1949, BR4.

38. Bernard Mishkin, “Science on the March,” 30 Jan. 1949, BR15.

39. William F. Ogburn, “Can Science Bring Us Happiness,” 4 Dec. 1949, SM14.

ment” and would present “the view of the social engineer.”<sup>40</sup> The American edition of Karl Popper’s *The Open Society and Its Enemies* was reviewed in the summer of 1951. The reviewer argued that certain social problems were so momentous that their solution called for a coherent large-scale plan, not merely “piecemeal social engineering.”<sup>41</sup> William H. Whyte Jr., editor of *Fortune*, brought out his book *Is Anybody Listening?* delivering harsh verdicts on large American corporations. Whyte associated himself with both George Orwell’s *1984* and Aldous Huxley’s *Brave New World*, and the reviewer wrote: “What is alarming is the abject surrender of many corporations to the so-called ‘social engineers,’ who preach the importance of group values, which means conformity (social, moral and intellectual), which in turn means the flock psychology of sheep.”<sup>42</sup> Adolf Berle entered the debate once more, arguing that social engineering could counteract communism in Latin America.<sup>43</sup> When the Vietminh took over the government of North Vietnam the question arose whether and when a more drastic phase of social engineering was to be expected.<sup>44</sup>

During the second half of the 1950s, prompted by the Supreme Court’s ruling of 1954 declaring racially segregated schools to be unconstitutional, the process from segregation to integration in the American South was proclaimed to be social engineering. John P. Roche, political scientist, and Milton M. Gordon, sociologist, taking as starting point the Supreme Court’s ruling – which set in motion “a monumental project in the field of social engineering” – discussed whether changes in public morality could come from the bottom upwards, from the grass roots, or from the top downwards, from legislation and court rulings.<sup>45</sup> The manner in which the Supreme Court ruling was implemented in the states affected was followed up in articles by the *NYT*’s correspondent John Popham, who made frequent use of the term: “The job ahead is a great task of social engineering,” he wrote in an article on “The Southern

40. “Stuart Chase Speaks Tonight,” 25 April 1950, 21.

41. Sidney Hook, “From Plato to Hegel to Marx,” 22 July 1951, 149.

42. Orville Prescott, “Books of the Times,” 7 April 1952, 23.

43. Adolf A. Berle Jr., “Communist Thunder to the South,” 4 July 1954, SM8.

44. Tillman Durdin, “Communists Grip Indochina With Velvet Glove,” 24 Oct. 1954, E3.

45. John P. Roche & Milton M. Gordon, “Can Morality Be Legislated?,” 22 May 1955, 229

Negro": "All the modern skills of the historians, the sociologists, the political scientists, the educationists, must be brought to bear."<sup>46</sup>

Carroll Reece, Republican chairman of a House of Representatives committee investigating tax-exempt foundations, declared that an "intellectual cartel" of sociologists had imported Fabian socialism into the United States. "Social engineers" were attempting to undermine America's "unique system of enterprise of free management and free labor."<sup>47</sup> Gertrude Samuels, a *NYT* correspondent reporting on a project for vitalizing the local community of Morningside Heights in New York, argued that what was needed were "trained leaders to be the 'social engineers' to bring about the cooperation of private and public agencies that can revitalize a community."<sup>48</sup> William Whyte reverted in *The Organization Man* to the theme of how "politically neutral 'experts in human relations'" were seeking to create a conformist human type in business corporations. The reviewer, sociologist C. Wright Mills, known for his ideas on the ruling class, concurred: "In fact, the moral problem of social control in America today is less the explicit domination of men than their manipulation into self-coordinated and altogether cheerful subordinates."<sup>49</sup>

Summary: Karl Popper's distinction between utopian and piecemeal social engineering is introduced during the decade of the 1950s. The great American corporations are accused of cultivating conformism. Social engineering is held up as both a cure for and a threat from communism. Hopes are pinned on social engineering as a method of solving problems of race segregation in the American South and urban renewal in the inner cities of the North.

46. John N. Popham, "Integration Progress Is Made at Local Level," 21 Nov. 1954, E10; "Outlook for Desegregation: Report from the South," 5 June 1955, E9; "The Roots Are Deep," 20 Nov. 1955, BR10; "Desegregation: Two Years After the Ruling," 13 May 1956, 178; "Civil Rights Issue: A Desegregation Report," 12 Aug 1956, 153; "Integration: Action by States," 8 Sept. 1957, E5; "Parley Will Test Moderate View," 30 Sept. 1957, 24; "The Southern Negro: Change and Paradox," 1 Dec. 1957, 270.

47. "Reece, in Reply to Dr. Hutchins, Says Foundations Aid Socialism," 24 Feb. 1955, 12.

48. Gertrude Samuels, "Rebirth of a Community," 25 Sept. 1955, SM26.

49. C. Wright Mills, "Crawling to the Top," 9 Dec. 1956, 295.

### The 1960s: Death, Resurrection, Revolt

An article on “the disenchanting intellectuals of the West” cited *The End of Ideology* by the sociologist Daniel Bell: “Few serious minds believe any longer that one can set down ‘blue-prints’ and through ‘social engineering’ bring about a new utopia of social harmony.”<sup>50</sup> A citation from *The Democratic Prospect* by Charles Frankel, a professor of philosophy, reveals the hopes and fears of the era:

We hold an image of technological society as the affluent society, giving the great mass of its members a share in the goods in life. We also hold an image of technological society as an air-conditioned nightmare, as a society of men tied down and denatured by a system – by time-tables, assembly lines, bureaucratic rules, and the incessant demands of machines.<sup>51</sup>

In 1962 President John F. Kennedy and Attorney General Robert Kennedy launched a 12 million dollar “joint program of social engineering” to combat juvenile delinquency by using the Lower East Side of New York as “a giant laboratory.”<sup>52</sup> When Gunnar Myrdal appeared at the UN World Food Congress in Washington along with the Kennedy administration’s Secretary of Agriculture, Orville L. Freeman, the latter did the talking: “We seek today in the United States to apply the highest level of social engineering that we can muster to meet the challenge of human relations, as well as the challenge of material well-being.”<sup>53</sup> Thomas S. Szasz, professor of psychiatry, declared in *Law, Liberty and Psychiatry* that institutional psychiatry was a new form of social engineering which was mortally dangerous when combined with compulsion.<sup>54</sup> In the words of reviewer John Keats, Paul Goodman’s book, *Compulsory Mis-Education*, argued that the school system was equally dangerous. It produced manipulated conformists and led “straight to 1984.”<sup>55</sup> As regards the anthology *What Is Conservatism?* the reviewer J. M. Lalley wrote of the conservatives’ fears of a collectivism which would lead to “the reduction of society to an undifferentiated mass and the extinction of personal lib-

50. James Reston, “The Disenchanted Intellectuals in the West,” 29 May 1960, E6.

51. Brand Blanshard, “What Counts Is to Be Heard in Waukegan,” 14 Oct. 1962, 297.

52. Marjorie Hunter, “U.S. and City Open 12,6-Million War on Delinquency, 1 June 1962, 1.

53. William M. Blair, “U. S. Pledges Speed in Rights Battle,” 8 June 1963, 11.

54. Edward de Grazia, “Punishing Treatment,” 26 Jan. 1964, BR6.

55. John Keats, “Road to 1984?,” 27 Sept. 1964, BR18.

erty and even personality itself under a despotism of bureaucratic experts and social engineers."<sup>56</sup> In the primary election campaign of 1964, state governor George Wallace of Alabama launched an attack on "the social engineers in Washington," especially opposing their having any right to compel anyone to bus their children to a more distant school in order to create racial balance in the classroom.<sup>57</sup>

Christopher Lasch's *The New Radicalism in America, 1889-1963*, parades an array of intellectuals, from Jane Addams and Lincoln Steffens to Norman Mailer, who in the words of the reviewer, Daniel Aaron, "provided a rationale for a kind of coercive social engineering."<sup>58</sup> In *The Industrial Society* Raymond Aron, a French sociologist, championed a variant of the death of ideologies. "To him, the pragmatic social engineer, skilled at the maintenance and improvement of what now exists, is preferable to the now obsolescent and irrelevant ideologue."<sup>59</sup>

Then came 1968, and the ideologies threw off their funeral pall. Paul Goodman contended that the student protesters represented anarchy: "It is a cry for a say in the decisions that shape our lives, as against top-down direction, social engineering, corporate and political centralization, absentee owners, brainwashing by mass media."<sup>60</sup> Left-wing intellectuals from all over the world met at Princeton University at the end of 1968. Angry representatives of students, blacks, and the new Left mingled with representatives of the liberal establishment. The only thing uniting them was indignation over Daniel Bell's pragmatic engineering: "For an hour, the old liberals and young militants made common cause against the notion (a caricature of Bell's position) that human beings should have their needs and their solutions worked out for them by some machine or other in the control of soulless experts."<sup>61</sup>

"The plight of the poor" came under the spotlight at about the same time as "the war on poverty" was petering out. Michael Harrington, author of *The Other America* (1962) and chairman of the American

56. J. M. Lalley, "A Question Not of What to Conserve, But of What to Recover," 29 March 1964.

57. Austin C. Wehrwein, "Big Wallace Vote Likely in Indiana," 5 May 1964, 35; Ben A. Franklin, "Wallace Keying Maryland Campaign to Prayer and Anecdotes," 11 May 1964, 23.

58. Daniel Aaron, "Parallel Lines Met in the New Frontier," 13 June 1965, BR6.

59. Paul Seabury, "A Dignified Commitment to the Left," 17 Sept. 1967, BR29.

60. Paul Goodman, "The Black Flag of Anarchism," 14 July 1968, SM10.

61. Henry Raymond, "Sociologist Sees Intellect 'Peril'," 15 Dec. 1968, 11; Walter Goodman, "The Liberal Establishment Faces The Blacks, The Young, The New Left," 29 Dec. 1968, SM8.

socialist party, put some books on social policy under scrutiny and mentioned approvingly S. M. Miller's and Frank Riessman's refusal to regard the American lower class as "the lifeless pawns of social engineers."<sup>62</sup> Justice Skelley Wright thought that the American inner cities had changed from melting-pots to powder-kegs and that the courts had failed the poor as consumers, tenants, and welfare claimants. The law was social engineering which must be judged by its results, and the results were depressing.<sup>63</sup> In *Three-Fifths of a Man* Floyd McKissick, a former prosecuting attorney and leader of the Congress of Racial Equality, argued that "a new type of lawyer is necessary – a social engineer, an agent of progress."<sup>64</sup>

Summary: The death of ideologies is proclaimed during the 1960s. For some this means the death of utopian social engineering, for others the resurrection of pragmatic engineering. The events of 1968 show, however, that ideologies were anything but dead. Students lash out against all authorities, also in the shape of social engineers. One of the few things that seems to unite radicals young and old is the rejection of Daniel Bell's theses of the death of ideologies and the problem-solving capabilities of pragmatic social engineering.

### The 1970s: Disillusionment and Confusion of Terminology

President Richard Nixon was no lover of social engineering. "The Grand Design has been abandoned and the Great Society, or what there was of it, is simply frozen."<sup>65</sup> The conservative political theorist Kevin P. Phillips declared that the workers had moved to the right because of "unhappiness with permissiveness and erosion of traditional values, opposition to the principle of Federal welfareism and social engineering."<sup>66</sup> In Daniel Bell's view the world had become unrecognizable. Changes in

62. Michael Harrington, "What's to Be Done for the Other America – Three Plans for the Nixon Years and After," 5 Jan. 1969, BR1. Miller & Riessman's book is called *Social Class and Social Policy*.

63. J. Skelley Wright, "The Courts Have Failed the Poor," 9 March 1969, SM26.

64. Howard Moore Jr., "Three-Fifths of a Man," 15 June 1969, BR7.

65. Max Frankel, "Is 'Benign Neglect' The Real Nixon Approach?," 8 March 1970, E1.

66. Leonard S. Silk, "Labor and the Economy," 2 Sept. 1970, 49.



morality and culture did not chime with social engineering and political control.<sup>67</sup> At a meeting of the American Historical Association, professor of history Oscar Handlin, renowned for *The Uprooted* (1951), accused his colleagues of having fallen into the hands of “propagandists, politicians, dramatists, novelists, journalists and social engineers.” This provoked a counter-attack by Christopher Lasch and David H. Fischer – the latter of whom characterized Handlin in terms typical of the era as “not merely conservative but reactionary.”<sup>68</sup>

Social engineering as a concept seemed now to lose many of its earlier connotations and started to crop up in new and different contexts. Articles begun to appear signaling the emerging post-modernist (?) spirit of the age. In a piece from October 1972, Peter Jenkins, Washington correspondent of *The Guardian*, addressed what he perceived as the conceptual disintegration of a whole range of socio-political terms:

American politics this year have got everybody guessing. Even the famous columnists are stumped. Political discussion is beginning to run around in circles because the mystery can't be solved with any of the old conceptual kits; even the vocabulary is being undermined as such shorthand words as 'radical', 'liberal', 'WASP' and even 'Democrat' cease to have precise meaning.<sup>69</sup>

Jenkins sees disintegration of national goals and organization of groups – ethnic, environmental, feminist groups. In Washington there is a need for new techniques of social control to protect the environment and promote racial harmony, but at the grass roots the perspective looks different: “escape from bureaucracy, and a respite from social engineering, notably in racial integration which has made people feel like black and white guinea pigs in a laboratory experiment.”

The Democratic governor of California, Edmund G. Brown, struck a chord with all who disliked “the cadres of bureaucrats, professors and social engineers who design the state and Federal programs that influence much of American life” when he declared that the program against poverty was “the last refuge of scoundrels.”<sup>70</sup> The evacuation of Phnom

67. Daniel Bell, “The Cultural Contradiction,” 27 Oct. 1970, 45.

68. Robert Reinhold, “Handlin Warns Scholars of ‘Decay’ in Profession,” 30 Dec. 1970, 8. See also Oscar Handlin, “Knocking the Living ‘H’ Out of History,” 8 Aug. 1979, A23.

69. Peter Jenkins, “American Politics: ‘I Am a Grass Root’,” 23 Oct. 1972, 31.

70. Jon Nordheimer, “New California Governor Stuns the Liberals, Too,” 13 April 1975, 57.

Penh elicited the following comment from William Safire: "This is social engineering on a scale that would make a Stalin blush ..."<sup>71</sup> The busing of school children was (one again) regarded as social engineering.<sup>72</sup> President Gerald Ford was criticized for being out of step with an increasingly conservative electorate on issues such as busing and social engineering.<sup>73</sup> Barry Goldwater on the other hand argued that Ford was a bulwark against social engineering. A vote for Jimmy Carter, said Goldwater, would mean the US would follow in the footsteps of Great Britain, with nationalized industries, social engineering, and a ruined economy.<sup>74</sup>

The light and shade of the Great Society hung over the late 1970s. Some were defending Lyndon Johnson's social programs: "They were not failures; they were only beginnings."<sup>75</sup> Some of the scarred warriors of the war against poverty concluded that the problems of poverty are not so easily grappled with. "The country," said Gerson Green, a veteran from the Office of Economic Opportunity, "has taught the social engineers a lesson."<sup>76</sup> Carter was, according to the *NYT*, groping backwards to "the innocent idealism of the early 20th-century progressives rather than to the social engineering of more modern Presidents."<sup>77</sup> Nevertheless he was soon dubbed a social engineer in the *NYT*'s columns.<sup>78</sup>

A new ideological current, a neo-conservative one, was making its presence felt and was represented by such names as Daniel Patrick Moynihan, Henry Jackson, Ben J. Wattenberg, Daniel Bell, Nathan Glazer, Seymour Martin Lipset, Irving Kristol, Norman Podhoretz, James Q. Wilson. "Many of these men worked in Government and became skeptical about the efficacy of large-scale social programs as a result of first-hand experience." Wattenberg felt that social engineering was now "a bad word."<sup>79</sup> Nevertheless, certain pre-school programs from

71. William Safire, "Get Out of Town," 12 May 1975, 25.

72. Michael Novak, "Liberal Resistance to Busing," 16 Oct. 1975, 39; Michael Novak, "Black and White in Catholic Eyes," 16 Nov. 1975, 9; Louise Day Hicks, "Marching," 3 May 1976, 31.

73. James C. Roberts, "Out, Out," 4 April 1976, E15.

74. Barry Goldwater, "The Future With Ford," 1 Nov. 1976, 39.

75. Roger Wilkins, "Dreams and Nightmares," 29 July 1975, 24.

76. Joseph Lelyveld, "Johnson Antipoverty Aides Look to Possible Roles Under Carter," 27 Nov. 1976, 10.

77. Hedrick Smith, "Carter to Date: A Moderate, Centrist, Active Idealist," 24 April 1977, E1.

78. "Future Planner or Present President?," 1 May 1977, E16.

79. Terence Smith, "Opinion in U. S. Swinging to Right, Pollsters and Politicians Believe," 4 Dec. 1977, 1.

the Great Society had shown themselves over the long term to be "A Triumph of Social Engineering."<sup>80</sup>

Summary: After the war on poverty and ideological outbursts of the 1960s come the 1970s, bringing disillusionment and conceptual confusion. The debate over the Great Society continues, and the new President, Jimmy Carter, is spoken of at times as a social engineer, though not of the modern vintage. The battle-scarred veterans of the war on poverty are less assured in their faith than before. Some have even become neo-conservatives and skeptical towards large-scale social programs.

### **The 1980s: A Retrospective Look at the 1960s**

When Ronald Reagan was preparing for his entry into the White House in the fall of 1980, reports were circulating that conservative pressure groups were endeavoring to persuade the President to cut back on the federal program financing legal aid to the poor. A report from the Heritage Foundation, for example, advised the new administration to restrict the "social engineering" being practiced by lawyers financed by legal aid.<sup>81</sup> In one submission the claims that legal aid was financing social engineering were rejected on the grounds of the types of case concerned: divorce, rent disputes, custody disputes.<sup>82</sup> When the new administration cut down on appropriations for the social and behavioral sciences, this triggered bitter protests on the part of those affected. "They charge they are being made the special political targets of a conservative and anti-intellectual political ideology that equates sociology and economics with social-spending programs and sees most social scientists as liberals, leftists and 'social engineers'."<sup>83</sup> Reagan's reduction of income taxes was justified on the grounds that Americans would work harder if they could keep a larger proportion of what they earned. This was met with the comment that they might work less if they could maintain the same income

80. "A Triumph of Social Engineering," 3 Nov. 1979, 20.

81. Stuart Taylor Jr., "Federal Program of Legal Aid for Poor Faces Challenge by Conservatives," 25 Nov. 1980, B13.

82. Tom Wicker, "Priority or Penalty?" 21 April 1981, A19.

83. Robert Reinhold, "U. S. Starts to Withdraw Support for Social Research," 21 April 1981, C1.

for less effort. Not without an element of *Schadenfreude* this argument was rounded off with the remark that one can never tell what the effects of social engineering are going to be.<sup>84</sup>

E. S. Savas, Assistant Secretary of the Department of Housing and Urban Development, argued that a better educated and more critical public did not equate state intervention with the general interest. It expected "unintended, adverse, consequences of attempts at social engineering."<sup>85</sup> An EU proposal concerning employees of multinational corporations triggered a comment on "The First Law of Social Engineering: the loftier and the more universally desirable the objectives of proposed legislation, the poorer will be its draftmanship, the more cumbersome its implementation, and the more depressing its results."<sup>86</sup> One who had not lost his faith was Kenneth B. Clark, a New York professor of psychology: "I am convinced that social engineering is no more difficult than space engineering."<sup>87</sup>

In *A Time of Passion*, a book about America between 1960 and 1980, Charles R. Morris, a lawyer and businessman, described Kennedy's men as pragmatic social engineers, heirs of William James and John Dewey.<sup>88</sup> A book about America's future, *Making the Future Work* by John Diebold, emphasized the state's incompetence as a social engineer. The reviewer protested, citing the TVA and SSA while also arguing that the Great Society programs had reduced the proportion of Americans below the poverty line.<sup>89</sup>

Twenty years after the launching of the Great Society it was time for a reunion of old comrades. They argued that people had not reacted so much against the social programs as such as against the exaggerated promises which were made.<sup>90</sup> Robert Lacey's book on *Ford* attracted attention, and inspired the reviewer to express the opinion that Henry Ford "invented" the idea that society can be improved if it is managed

84. Steven R. Weisman, "Intentionally or Not, Tax Policy Is a Social Policy," 2 Aug. 1981, E1.

85. E. S. Savas, "Limits to Government," 10 July 1982, 23.

86. Steven M. Schneebaum, "How Much More?," 3 Oct. 1982, F2.

87. Walter Goodman, "Dr. Kenneth B. Clark: Bewilderment Replaces 'Wishful Thinking' on Race," 27 Dec. 1984, A14.

88. Michael Kinsley, "Moralism, Pragmatism and Irrationality," 25 March 1984, BR12.

89. Robert Lekachman, "O Brave New Information Age," 21 Oct. 1984, BR39.

90. David E. Rosenbaum, "20 Years Later, the Great Society Flourishes," 17 April 1985, A1.

like a factory. "In his soul he wasn't a businessman but a social engineer."<sup>91</sup> Another twentieth anniversary dawned. European academics from the barricades of May 1968 assembled at Harvard to reflect upon the vision and the reality. "The kneejerk Marxism has gone now," said the report of the meeting, "given final rites by the implications of glasnost and perestroika for the archaic visions of 19th-century social engineering."<sup>92</sup>

Summary: When the Reagan administration cut back on certain items of expenditure it was, paradoxically, accused of aiming at social engineering. Reagan's critics pointed out that tax reductions also acted as instruments of social engineering, even though the intended effect may have been claimed to be the opposite. The launching of the Great Society in 1965 and the student riots of 1968 formed the object of retrospective examination and assessment of what these events signified in terms of faith in social engineering.

### **The 1990s: "Who Are the Social Engineers, Really?"**

The 1990s witnessed some interesting conceptual twists and turns with regard to the use of the term "social engineering." The rhetorical positions appeared to remain the same as earlier during the presidential election campaign of 1992. For instance, social engineering became for George Bush, the incumbent, a stick with which to beat his challenger Bill Clinton:

Look at the differences. My opponent and his advisers propose something quite different. Their writings refer to European models and industrial policy. And that's an academic term for letting the government pick economic winners and losers. Their idea is not the entrepreneur but the government planner, the lawyer or the policy professor who flatters himself that he understands the American economy better than the workers and the entrepreneurs who have their sleeves up and really make it work. And my opponent and his advisers can trace their intellectual roots to the social engineering ideas popular at the turn of the century.<sup>93</sup>

91. Ted Morgan, "Intrigue and Tyranny in Motor City," 13 July 1986, BR1.

92. Flora Lewis: "The Word Wore Out," 19 Oct. 1988, A27.

93. "In Their Own Words," 18 Sept. 1992, A21.

“Bush Paints Clinton as ‘Social Engineer,’” said the *NYT* headline the next day.<sup>94</sup> After Clinton’s assumption of power former President Reagan spoke out in similar terms:

In his campaign, candidate Clinton described himself as a “new Democrat”, implying that there would be no more tax-and-spend dogma, no social engineering, no class warfare pitting one group against another. This week, however, he has begun to sound like an ‘old Democrat.’ That’s the kind who does not understand one simple fact: the problem is not that the people are taxed too little, the problem is that the Government spends too much.<sup>95</sup>

Clinton’s health care reform was described in the *NYT* as “the most ambitious attempt at social engineering since the New Deal.”<sup>96</sup>

Furthermore, representatives of groups that in the past would have been presumed to be supporting the notion of social engineering began to speak up against the idea. In a *NYT* article from May 1990, affirmative action was analyzed by the black professor of English, Shelby Steele, who argued that the civil rights legislation of 1964 was intended to deal with equal rights, not racial preferences. “But,” he continued, “in the late 60’s and early 70’s, affirmative action underwent a remarkable escalation of its mission from simple anti-discrimination enforcement to social engineering by means of quotas, goals, timetables, set-asides and other forms of preferential treatment.”<sup>97</sup> It became known that Charles Murray was working on a book on intelligence and race (*The Bell Curve*). Murray described his years in the Peace Corps during the 1960s as the beginning of a lengthy education in the subject of “the hubris of social engineering.”<sup>98</sup>

However, as ideological war over health care reform flared up, sociology professor Paul Starr argued that the roles of left and right had been reversed. Ever since the French Revolution, conservatives had warned against utopianism and social engineering, while the Left had pursued visions of a new and untried society. In Starr’s view, the Right was now

94. Michael Wines, “Bush Paints Clinton as ‘Social Engineer,’” 18 Sept. 1992, A21.

95. Ronald Reagan, “There They Go Again,” 18 Feb. 1993, A23.

96. “Clapping for Health Reform,” 24 Sept. 1993, A32.

97. Shelby Steele, “A Negative Vote on Affirmative Action,” 13 May 1990, SM46.

98. Jason DeParle, “An Architect of the Reagan Vision Plunges Into Inquiry on Race and I.Q.,” 30 Nov. 1990, A22.

launching an unproven theory that sickness insurance could be managed through the mechanisms of the free market.<sup>99</sup> Similarly, when the Congress assembled, dominated by Newt Gingrich, it was the men of the Right who were characterized as “a new band of hard-talking office-holders and social engineers.”<sup>100</sup> After Clinton’s defeat in “the great health care war” Joseph A. Califano, Secretary of Health, Education and Welfare in the Carter administration, argued that the problem was not social engineers with hubris but failure to reform.<sup>101</sup> Even the Republicans on Capitol Hill did acknowledge that the health care system was in crisis and must be reformed. The criticism they had aimed at Clinton rebounded on themselves. “Republicans hate these comparisons, particularly the suggestion that they are about to embark on a huge exercise in social engineering ...”<sup>102</sup>

An article by Janny Scott in 1995 summarized the situation with reference to the use of social engineering as an argument in the dispute between the Left and the Right. The phrase “social engineering” had long been used to suggest government manipulation run amok:

Conservatives have invoked the phrase to attack liberal policies ranging from busing to affirmative action, from health care reform to lifting the military’s ban on gay soldiers. Mostly, the charge has been lobbed from right to left. But when the Christian Coalition recently unveiled its platform for shoring up the family and re-tethering America to certain moral moorings, some conservatives seemed to be committing the very sin of which they had accused the left.<sup>103</sup>

Newt Gingrich warned against believing that “the social engineering of the right will be more clever than the social engineering of the left.” However, the Christian Coalition considered itself to have taken up the cudgels only after a series of government interventions in moral and social questions which ought to lie outside the purview of the state. An agenda had now been launched for encouraging marriage and discouraging abortion. Ira Glasser of the American Civil Liberties Union called this “the most pervasive program of government intrusion into personal freedom.” “Whatever they call it,” Janny Scott concluded, “most conser-

99. Paul Starr, “The Ideological War over Health Care,” 4 Feb. 1992, A21.

100. “The Quality of Mercy in 1995,” 1 Jan. 1995, E8.

101. Robin Toner, “It’s Not Enough to Mend the Ill and Injured,” 15 Jan. 1995, BR14.

102. Robin Toner, “Now It’s Republicans Who See a Health Care Crisis Looming,” 23 April 1995, 1.

103. Janny Scott, “Now, Social Engineers Design at Right Angles,” 4 June 1995, E3.

vatives and liberals alike don't mind social engineering when it is a means to their ends."

On the whole, however, traditional ideological poles appeared to remain stable. Andrew Sullivan, editor of *The New Republic*, said that affirmative action as an ideology was beginning to resemble Soviet communism. "Outside the sheltered elites, the majority of people loathe it," he argued, and gave Clinton some damning praise remarking that the President "is sincere in his defense of racial social engineering."<sup>104</sup> Paul Berman wrote *à propos* Terry Eastland's *Ending Affirmative Action* that "the diversity argument transforms affirmative action from a bit of remedial social engineering into a permanent system for dividing up the American spoils along ethnic and sexual lines."<sup>105</sup>

When Vice-President Al Gore clashed with the Republican vice-presidential candidate Jack Kemp during the presidential campaign of 1996, social engineering became a tax issue. Gore spoke of tax deductions for college education fees. Kemp spoke of tax cuts all round, saying of his opponents that "they'll give us a tax cut, but only if we do exactly what they want us to do. That isn't America. That's social engineering."<sup>106</sup> Democrats and Republicans alike made promises to various groups of electors and endeavored to influence their actions by means of tax deductions. Iris J. Lav, assistant head of the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, regarded the tax system as "a very poor place to do social engineering."<sup>107</sup> Former Vice-President Dan Quayle criticized tax deductions for children as "social engineering at its worst."<sup>108</sup>

Collective agriculture in the Soviet Union, compulsory village settlement in Ethiopia and Tanzania, China's "Great Leap," Pol Pot's self-sufficiency – these were some grandiose attempts to improve people's lot which ended in fiasco. These experiments, said James C. Scott in *Seeing Like a State*, were associated with a conceptual system which can be called "high modernism." Scott's book was praised by the reviewer, the historian of ideas John Gray of the London School of Economics. Scott associated high modernists with the conviction that society must be re-

104. Andrew Sullivan, "Let Affirmative Action Die," 23 July 1995, E15.

105. Paul Berman, "Redefining Fairness," 14 April 1996, BR16.

106. "Excerpts From Debate Between Vice President Gore and Jack Kemp," 10 Oct. 1996, B14.

107. Richard W. Stevenson, "The Secret Language of Social Engineering," 6 July 1997, E1.

108. Richard L. Berke, "Gingrich Promises to Fight Clinton on Welfare Law," 23 Aug. 1997, 1.



created in accordance with rational schemes and scientific laws. In his view, they use state power in order to shape society like a business corporation whose aim is to maximize production, but the result is poverty and “disasters of social engineering.” Gray argued that this “lunacy” was not over just because economic planning had been discredited. “The contemporary cult of the free market is just as radical an exercise in social engineering as many experiments in economic planning tried in this century.”<sup>109</sup>

Summary: In the debate over health care reform the *conservatives* are accused of wanting to practice social engineering. On the other hand, George Bush accuses his challenger, Bill Clinton, of being a social engineer in the old European style. The second half of the 1990s represents a culmination of the use of the term social engineering, which comes into use in connection with the great controversial issues of the day: affirmative action, health care reform, welfare reform, tax reform.

### Summary and Conclusion

When the word “social engineer” occurred in the *New York Times* for the first time in 1887 it was used to denote a “party fixer.” The term “social engineering” was launched for use in industry by William Tolman in 1899 and adopted by social reformers during the progressive era. By the 1920s the term had come to be associated with “big names” such as Brandeis, Dewey and Hoover. By the 1930s the concept of social engineering was applied actively in domestic policy as a part of the New Deal, and various occupational groups lent their active support to policies covered by the term, hoping to benefit from social engineering programs. However, by the 1940s the term started to be associated with expressions of fears and hopes inspired by totalitarian experiments and postwar visions. In the 1950s the idea of social engineering was associated with conformism, collectivism, and communism but was also embraced as a weapon against racial segregation. In the 1960s social engineering was declared dead (in its utopian variant) and resurrected (in its pragmatic

109. John Gray, “The Best-Laid Plans,” 19 April 1998, BR36.

variant), and towards the end of the decade it was repudiated (in its pragmatic variant) by rebellious students. In the 1970s disillusionment set in concerning the prospects for social engineering, coinciding with a process in which ideological terminology at large went into a state of conceptual disintegration. During the Reagan administrations commentators reactivated the concept along traditional connotational lines when examining the political trends of the 1980s in light of attitudes towards social engineering accompanying the reforms and revolts of the 1960s. Finally, during the 1990s the term provided an important ideological focal point in the debate over a series of controversial issues: affirmative action, health care, welfare, and tax reforms.

At the end of this century-long odyssey through the *New York Times* I conclude that my examination of the uses of the term "social engineering" in the pages of the newspaper has produced a historical account that by no means feels unfamiliar. The use of the term reflects the great events of the era and is charged with the fears and hopes that characterize each period. The terms "social engineer" and "social engineering" came into use fairly rapidly in a much broader context than that intended by Tolman. At the same time the original (industrial) and the mutated (sociopolitical) meanings of the terms went on coexisting side by side until sometime in the 1950s at least.

In the conservative camp, social engineering was anathema for most of the twentieth century. In this camp Herbert Hoover was the last "great" social engineer. The radical camp was divided: on the one hand there was hope that social engineering would solve social problems, on the other there was fear of the top-down control and conformist effects. The most interesting development of recent years has been that the Left has begun to charge the Right with social engineering ambitions. One reason for this may be the fact that the Right, through its rhetoric, or the Left, by its actions, have in different ways succeeded in discrediting the term to a point where the Left abandoned it in the hope that it would return like a boomerang to strike those who threw it. It may also result from the Right having changed direction and become more interested in using the state for its own purposes. This changed approach may in turn be a consequence of the Right having retreated so far that it feels compelled to fight on its opponents' terms. Another, and perhaps more likely, explanation may be that the Right now has advanced to a point where it believes itself

to have a degree of control over the state which makes conservative (i.e. beneficent) social engineering possible, and even necessary, as a way of correcting what it sees as the negative effects of leftist social programming during the better part of the twentieth century.