

Some Observations on the Good and Bad Chances of Feasible Social Engineering

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ABSTRACT

We attempt to discuss anew the idea of engaging in total social transformation without regard to huge human cost. We argue that “social engineering” entails much more risk than useful achievement, for our destructive capabilities exceed our creativity potential. To support the argument we draw some parallels between key social and political phenomena with aesthetic, communicative, or legal ones. Especially dangerous seems to be a partial appropriation of time, space and history, or a full disregard of them in efforts to change society. In the end we come to the conclusion that, while social manufacturing is feasible, at least to a certain extent, the end result of the process is quite often no better than the previous state of affairs. Therefore, the question of human capacity to effect social transformation should be accompanied by the question “with which specific result”.

Keywords: social manufacturing, social engineering, social results, creative capabilities, destructive capabilities, history, aesthetics, law, communication.

“Where the Idea remains abstract, having not in itself the specific and suiting inly it way of expression” (G.W.F. Hegel)

INTRODUCTION

God made man and woman, Rose Vadim made Brigitte Bardot a woman (Bardot Wikipedia), geneticists can produce new animals and some avant garde intellectuals aspire to manufacture entire societies. As a matter of fact, technological progress in the more material world traditionally inspired analogous experiments in the social realm. Thus, for example, Modernity has often been identified with progress in the natural sciences (Hall & Gieben 2003: ch. 1). It was then supposed that a brand new society was born based on reason and science. Also, more recently due to the intellectual current called “postmodernism” (e.g. Lash & Friedman 1996: 3) tradition based institutions appeared strongly delegitimized with some people coming to the conclusion that everything in society can be remade and appear new. In this sense a “migadic” society is perfectly feasible, as social archetypes and roles may be socially modified. What is more, so the story goes, what can be manufactured must acquire the status of an unbeatable socio-political ideal, a kind of golden lamb to be adored by the populace. For it is characteristic of some kind of revolutionaries that they cannot tolerate the past, save for cases they can reinterpret it, i.e. remake it.

The issue has been handled by various historical figures on particular occasions which appeared as landmarks in the history of knowledge. Take, for instance, the quarrel between ancient Greek rationalists and some sophists (Kioukias 2018), or the critique exercised over revolutionary regimes, either the French Revolution, or the Russian one. Such prominent historical and political thinkers as E. Burke, Alexis de Tocqueville, C. Popper, to mention but a few, strongly doubted the idea of an artificial social blueprint (Burke in Ball & Dagger 1991: 135 ff.), de Tocqueville 1991, Popper 1980). Their “opponents”, notably the Enlightenment thinkers, believed in social progress, but accepted the notion of universal human roles (Hall & Gieben 2003: 57). The Greek classics (Kioukias 2018) were also predisposed towards social institutions which stood the test of endurance over time, in spite of the fact that they themselves were quite innovating, not to mention they probably introduced a first kind of Enlightenment. As a matter of fact, they largely focused on the individual and reason (Sinclair 1951:19, Kioukias 2018:14).

A key characteristic of the discussion is the perception of law from each point of view. While to classical writers law seems to be a product of maturity coupled by reason, to “modernists” law is yet another instrument, ready to use to effect social change. This means that in the former case law is not entirely separated from habit, while in the latter this is of no concern: You can legislate just what you like. Law that is, is like a magical thing capable of transforming this into that. Law is chemistry! Thus, for example, if for centuries minor violations of law, or morality, were punished mildly, today this must be of no concern. For, we tend to believe in immense punishments and, more generally, smart “multipliers” (as in economy, private law, etc.). It is as if we try to replace human time by a universal one.

To what extent such claims may be realistic is a key question in this paper, examined, of course, in broad lines-in principle. Examining to this end a number of social relationships can hopefully bring fresh light into the discussion and thereby a number of political decisions which acquire the status of law and regulate modern life. Before we enter into concrete social relationships, we intend to discuss the matter in somehow more abstract terms, providing examples of feasible and unfeasible transformations.

CAN I CHANGE IT?

Which materials can be changed and how is a question notably answered by natural science. We cannot, of course, enter into this vast area, but at least we understand that a stone cannot generate a new stone. We must admit that there are things which remain still. Thus stones we see today are the same as seen thousand years ago. Without a moving force there cannot be any change in the material world. Or, if you like it in Latin, “*ex nihilo nihil fit*” (Markantonatos 2019), i.e. from nothing comes nothing. In a materialist philosophy we may consider the same. If intellectual loopholes may be invented to refute this argument, the example of the stone is quite strong. If now thousands of years are needed to change a stone, in social life this is not an acceptable time measure.

As a matter of fact, we cannot as yet abundantly change the course of time. We may, of course, speed it up, through our machines of transportation and observation, but not to such extent as to achieve immortality-this requires no time limits. We cannot visit the past either; we still need to rely on historians and our natural mental tools. We can only use statistics to pretend we are able to control time. We also try methods of *ex ante* forecasting and planning as well as prefabricated coincidences, sometimes successfully, sometimes not so much so, if we judge from the poor results. Thus, in a

number of catastrophes we note that the results are worse than some decays ago, probably because the “multiplier” (the less predictable variance) has been raised considerably.

Humans, on the other hand, have managed to effect such changes as ages could not. Yet, however magnificent technology we may have, the basic shape of the earth remains unaltered. For instance, mountains remain mountains and oceans have been altered only slightly, after thousands of years-it is only due to past imperfect maps that we could “enjoy” greater alterations. While mass destruction capabilities have been greatly developed, artificial “sculpture” has not developed evenly. Therefore, it may be the case that human capacity of changing things has been tremendously increased, but not so much in the sense of manufacturing as in the sense of destroying. Of course, it would be foolish to disregard manufacturing abilities, best portrayed in the urban landscape. However, their power can hardly be compared to the destruction power. We can much faster get rid of Maracana stadium than build a new one.

You may argue that the new one may be much more comfortable. What will be missing though is a less material ingredient, probably related to its history. For, indeed “time is a keen sculptor of humans” (Elytis 1979). From this point of view, destruction exceeds creation and therefore bad results appear to be more powerful than good ones. Although this is a hard to prove claim, in terms of time destruction is definitely far faster than creation: The old stadium falls down in a few minutes, the new one takes decades to establish itself as a legend, for some battles of historic magnitude must be conducted inside it. Yet, a historic magnitude is made not every day. This is probably why a daily creation which ends up in ruins only to start all over again next day, as shown in the myth of Sisyphus, has been regarded as a human tragedy; real creation is synonymous to continuity. Ill and fragile efforts are somewhat destructive, even when they appear in high technology. Then “our efforts are like those of the Trojans” (Seferis 1981).

In a quite technological world such intangible factors as history may make little sense. On the other hand, we witness a new revival of history in international relations, or even in such public functions as law giving (case of past scandals). Perhaps the advent of internet resulted in increasing the historical factor through technically possible curiosity satisfaction. If we are made to believe that search in the internet is omnipotent, history research is also made plausible.

Speaking of such change of aspect, we may reach another conclusion, namely that indeed change of viewpoint is much easier than real changes in the urban landscape. In this conjuncture we may remember such terms as mass propaganda, or ideology. To change one’s mind then might be considered more possible than other changes. Thus, it looks easier to change our view about a particular history than change its remains/archaeology. Having agreed on that though, we understand we are entering the realms of ideas, theory, science, philosophy.

I shall now provide another example, borrowed from aesthetics. A useful question in this respect is: Is it possible to make past artistic works whatever we wish for? In a social climate freed from aesthetic concerns it would be perfectly possible. As was put some time ago, we can easily build a new Parthenon. By the same token we can use classical operas at will. First of all, nobody is going to claim a copyright. Great composers are absent, while contemporaries have cultivated a spirit of modification. They avail the right to technically transform past artistic works, even without caring about official titles. Othello can change a costume and a setting without the slightest hint in the title

of the modified work. Aristotle had put it this way: Some (bad) artists try to rely much more on visual effects than a good script, while he urged that “characters should comply with reality” (Aristotle 2008: 144-45, 151) (It is often assumed that such rules reveal a classicism; consequently, modern art is not obliged to abide by such outmoded rules. However, a paramount rule here is the rule of genuine creation which includes both script and scenic means. The selective separation of the two suggests an experimental art and as such a trial. As in adolescence, a wish for experimentation is mixed with appropriation though. Unfortunately, the same practice in letters often amounts to plagiarism-another manifestation of man’s destructive capability.). Having said that, one comes with the conclusion that there are really aesthetic rules; there is no such thing as anomie in arts and letters and by extension in other forms of creation.

Such rules do not easily change, if, for example, we recall the basic geometrical rules of mechanical engineering and architecture. As a matter of fact, they have remained the same for ages! This is may be why contemporaries who wish to innovate try to change the mood and not the structure, as the latter seems unalterable. Of course, some structural rules may indeed be alterable, as, for instance, in visual arts, where we manage to approach the frontiers of human eccentricity. Still, basic human figures are necessarily present. It is quite difficult to get rid of anthropomorphism.

Let us, however, expand a little more, entering the world of communication. An obvious reason for such a customization as mentioned above is the “purpose”: Small alterations can convey a message we have in mind, most probably different from what the original work aimed at. It is as if we thought the means one uses in a work play a minor part in it. We may use the same practice in other social realms too. For example, we may notice that political purposes are much more important than their means. Of course, if this becomes eligible, we must regret it, for few are ready to accept such modifications in real life. As the rule of proportionality is the common measure of social things, no one would accept grotesque laws, because of extravagant means.

A legal regulation would fall into such a category, if it, for instance, provided for unsafe procedure, jumping into severe penalties. If a proper law is such as to use moderate means, before it accomplishes its purpose, i.e. rehabilitating injustice made to both the victim and the public, an aesthetic rule of general validity is applied here. After all, what is an aesthetic rule at the end of the day? Is it not a manifestation of the general geometric rule which is based on right proportions?

It is true that some arts rely more on non-proportionality than the other way around. Comedy is an obvious such case (Karzis 2005). Its rationale must have been approaching real life which is not always governed by reason, i.e. right measure. However, even here we are in need of a common story to provide a good background. Comic gags, i.e. exaggerations, will be inserted into the plain story to make for a good comedy. Bad comedies, on the contrary, are marked by a plenitude of means (gags) without a purpose (we note here that a purpose, however good it may have been planned, may be lost because of abuse of means).

CONCLUSION

Though the capacity for social engineering has been undoubtedly been increased, matching technological similar capacities, it has been argued that there are limits to it which cannot be ignored. It has hopefully been shown through various examples that mass destruction capabilities appear more “successful” than reliable social engineering. By changing the means, the environment

and some details that is of various social representations, including actual social relationships, we can hardly succeed to truly renew and legitimize them. Speaking of legitimacy, this appears as an important factor in any such endeavor. The measure of it is likely to be related to the need to associate some innovations with strong enforcement measures. In contrast workable innovations are usually marked by a sense of proportionality and, hence, acceptance. To put it in other words, like in art it does not suffice to manufacture something; it has to be likeable too!

In the legal-political realm, if reforms are to be useful, they have to pass such tests. For, very unequal results, waste of resources as well as “ugly” results betray a wrong calculation of cost and benefits. Thus, a new relationship in which “victims” equal “winners” must be regarded as a failed social modification.

If totally unaltered social relationships are often undesirable, for economic, political, or other reasons, social engineering often signifies a violent modification with considerable side effects. Thus, to radically change the urban setting is such a case. We appear we value the ends much more than the means. Unfortunately, History has been marked by a few such radical decisions which ended up in a bloodshed. It seems that certain “aesthetic rules” as part of universal rules (e.g. principle of proportionality) may apply here too. At the end of the day we must feel obliged to abide by the principle of balancing the possible principles surrounding an issue and finally either choose the best, or abstain from action. For, when in doubt, inaction is also a choice, just like it happens in some cases brought to courts; “In dubio pro reo.”. A final verdict is not always desirable.

To try to reverse the order of things, or the common symmetry is certainly a manufacturing process, but with often bad results. I think this is especially true when we adore the ends at the expense of the legitimate procedure. It is as if we decided to put the blame on someone who is criticizing social things in private, praising at the same time the one who spies on him/her. Yet, such preventive justice approaches the notion of “preventive democracy” which in turn has arguably been connected to tyranny (Triantafyllopoulos in Kioukias 2019).

At the end of the day everything stable and recognizable and whatever appeases us is a (certain) place. Everything that constantly changes is a non place, bordering the infinite which to the classical Greeks meant the abyss. In political terms this is called utopianism. Extensive social engineering then can be only feasible, if one decides to destroy common meanings such as the state, the nation, or borders. For, just like rules and games, borders signify a particular meaning, i.e. something conceivable and familiar, something which starts and ends somewhere. A borderless entity is an infinite and normless game with no predictable play, as it happens when we insert into it a great volume of undefined space. It seems then advisable to cease equating social progress with careless social engineering, at least before we have carefully tested some social experiments. Unfortunately, in social science and politics we can only rely on the traditional research methods, i.e. logical argumentation, precedent, classification, quantification, graphical representation, to mention the most common ones. We have fallen short of further innovating this human landscape; our bibliography still uses these tools.

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