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Bridging Politics and Science

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Dissertation Summary

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Abstract
This dissertation aims to problematize the historical concept of “social engineering.” In historiography, social engineering is usually understood as the application of scientific theory to political and social practice. As such, it is thought to have characterized much of early 20th century expansion of public interest and state responsibility into previously non-politicized areas of private life, especially when this expansion has been deceptive and/or technological in nature. It has also been seen as an expression of mechanistic “modernity” and “technocracy.” Through a comparative histoire croisée of the concept of social engineering this dissertation studies how social engineering was “spoken” in Sweden and the USA circa 1890-1950. The comparison shows that social engineering rhetoric emphasized the role of human agency and voluntarism in social change, rather than social laws or mechanistic determinism. As such, it highlighted the “constructed” character of the social and opened up the reach of the political. While it did indeed make a formal separation between science and politics (in the interest of the “efficiency” and “objectivity” of science) it also sought to bridge this very gap functionally (in the interest of the “justice” and “representativity” of politics). Rather than a technocratic attempt at moving against, above, or beyond politics social engineering rhetoric sought an intermediary role between science and politics as a kind of “intrapolitics.” Instead of promising a Utopian end to all conflict, the social engineering vision held out the hope for a modern code of conduct, a “social diplomacy” of sorts, in order to bring otherwise opposed social interests into controlled intercommunication with one and another. Thus, social engineering ran against both the laissez-faire liberal ideal of a harmonious balance between various interests (as the result of competition) as well as the socio-biological and historical materialist doctrines of an apocalyptic conflict between classes and/or races. Indeed, when these ideologies lost much of their appeal after the end of World War II and the beginning of the Cold War, social engineering rhetoric lost much of its raison d’être and faded away from public discourse, at the same time as social science became firmly established as a necessary component of post-war politics, in social democratic Sweden as well as in liberal capitalist USA.

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The 20th century has witnessed many attempts to use science and technology in order to change and to control human behaviour: Ranging from the totalitarian experiments of interwar Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union, via the modernization plans of various developing countries during the Cold War, to the authoritarian capitalism of present day People’s Republic of China and Singapore—not to mention the Brussels “technocracy” of the European Union—many forms of “modern” governance have indeed been taken as examples of “social engineering” (Johnson 1983; Podgorecki 1996).

This dissertation seeks to map how this concept—social engineering—has been used from its inception in the early 1890s to the beginning of its decline in the late 1940s in two democratic countries: Sweden and the USA. Especially, it discusses the rhetorical role of this concept during the economically tumultuous 1920s and the politically dramatic 1930s, asking who used this concept, with what meaning, in what contexts, for which purposes, and—importantly—against which adversaries.

Both Sweden and the USA have often taken as examples of “successful” modernization (Arvidsson 2001). Largely due to this perceived success, they have also been seen as representing two divergent “models” of how to respond to the challenges of “modernity.” Sometimes phrased in terms of the “American Dream” and the “Swedish Model,” respectively, both of these models present alternatives as to how to combine democracy with efficiency and to reconcile otherwise opposite economical and social ends.

This “success” of Sweden and the USA in organizing modernity may of course be questioned on a number of accounts. However, judging by the standards of the past century, the mere absence of revolution and civil war would indeed suffice to warrant this epithet.

As this placid success took place is spite of deep cultural, economical, political, and social divides, the rather unique experiences of Sweden and the USA have also been
translated into “benchmarks” for comparison as well as economical, political, and social “models” for export, not the least between each other (Stråth 1997; Rosenberg 1982; Alm 2003). Indeed, the history of social science in both countries indeed give ample evidence of transfer and exchange of ideas and people between the two (Rodgers 1997; Eyerman & Jamison 1985).

To the extent that this placid success has been the result of purposive action and active deliberation, this dissertation aspires to shed some light on the general puzzle of how this successful modernization could be brought about in such a comparatively peaceful manner in these two cases, despite political tensions, social divisions, and widespread disbelief in democracy as well as politics more generally. Which ideas and metaphors were used in creating the necessary conditions for such a peaceful course of events?

This question is important as many of the challenges of modernity which once confronted the social engineers of the early 20th century have by no means dissolved under present conditions of globalization and post-modernity. Rather, they have gained an even more complex and critical edge under pressing economical crisis, impending ecological collapse, and unabated social change. Traditional forms of governance still grapple with the problem of how to confidently provide guidance for social change—as well as control of human behaviour—in desired directions, yet remaining democratic and level-headed. Thus, it would seem prudent to carefully study the experiences of peaceful social change of the past.

There is of course a vast literature on the many relevant material, ideational, institutional, and international conditions and relations which may explain at least some of this pacificity in both American and Swedish processes of modernization. Especially this is so concerning the different political coalitions and power resources available in each case.

However, few studies have addressed directly the rhetorical landscape in which this pacificity was construed and where this success was eventually secured (Weir & Skocpol 1985; Åsard & Bennett 1997; Blyth 2003; Berman 2006). This dissertation is thus tasked
with asking to what extent did this success depend upon the “bridging” of critical divides? How was the winning formula for the creation of “consensus” arrived at? To what degree did specific rhetoric—e.g., social engineering—play a role in this bridging and search for consensus?

The present problematization is thus based upon the assumption that social change does not take place through unmediated social action, but in and through language. In other words, language is no innocent in the process of political and social change. It may be used more or less successfully as a discursive instrument for various rhetorical purposes. However, the structure of previous usages and the failure or success of these both constrain and enable what can be said and done at a given moment. Indeed, the eventual success or failure of these linguistic operations can tell us a lot about the mental universe of the past. Especially, the role of language is central when taking an interest in consciously guided or political social change (Laclau & Mouffe 1985).

In other words, the concepts, languages, and vocabularies by which social meaning is constructed and changed play an important role in the process of social change, both as “factors” in their own right as well as “indicators” of other factors. The study of concepts is thus a critical task if we wish to explain and understand processes of historical change, and even more so if we wish to map the alternatives, conjunctures, and contingencies of these processes (Koselleck 2002).

Arguably, certain concepts, languages, and vocabularies have been more convincing than others. Naturally, some have thus come to influence and shape these time periods more than their competing alternatives. During modernity, for example, concepts and phrasings either derived directly from or more loosely associated with “expertise” and “scientific” knowledge have supplied important arguments, metaphors, and rationalizations for the formulation, development, and assessment of competing visions of the promise and peril of modern “society,” of humans living together.
However, due to the high level of complexity of modern society, it has been essential to transport concepts from more concrete and thus more easily understood spheres of meaning to make sense of the vast number intricacies resulting from the experience of humans living together. Society has been understood with the help of various “root metaphors,” such as society as a kind of war, as a theatre, as a body, as a jungle, and as a machine (Lakoff & Johnson 1980).

Social engineering is indeed often seen as an attempt at exactly transporting meaning from the realm of the predictable rules of mechanical cause and effect, creating a social idiom for making society, too, more predictable, rational, and regulated. Most previous studies of the practice and rhetoric of social engineering have taken this rhetorical function of this metaphorical transport as a given. The standard accounts of social engineering outline a powerful alliance between progressive political interests, organized professional interests, and a more general pragmatic interest in formulas of social knowledge which “work.” This alliance, it is suggested relied upon the powerful image of society as a gigantic machine, which could, if only properly understood and arranged, be made to operate just as regularly and efficiently as any clockwork (Johnson 1983; Jordan 1996; Wang 2002).

There is much merit to these accounts of social engineering. Not only has the rhetoric of “science” but also the practice of science has contributed most significantly to the shaping of modern experience. Certainly, the image of society as a machine as well as the power of example by the massive engineering feats of the 19th century inspired 20th century administrators, businessmen, and politicians to undertake long awaited and much needed social reforms, but also emboldened them to the extent they did not balk at making terrible mistakes.

However, these accounts do tend to downplay or even ignore the opposition against which the historical rhetoric and social metaphor of social engineering was originally formed. It also tends to ignore the fact that the most disastrous attempts at social engineering more often relied upon explicit radical ideologies (e.g., colonialism,
communism, fascism, nazism, and racism) rather than the logic of rationality and social engineering alone.

This dissertation thus seeks to further historicize the history of this vocabulary, a historicization which reveals, it is argued, a closer affinity between the rhetoric of social engineering on the one hand, and various attempts at providing platforms for peaceful expansion of the political mandate on the other, an affinity which also extends to contemporary languages of social knowledge current today, which is replete with seemingly progressive notions such as “civil society,” “human capital,” and “social investment.”

As to structure, the dissertation is divided into five parts. Part I provides an introduction to the problematization and the heuristic framework of the dissertation. Part II sketches the background of the problem by revisiting the historiography of social engineering and analyzing its relationship to the germane, yet distinct, concept of technocracy. Part III contains three chapters on the development of social engineering rhetoric in the USA, while Part IV analyzes the Swedish ditto in two chapters. Part V, finally, summarizes the main findings and points to some differences and similarities between the social engineering rhetoric of the past and contemporary languages of social knowledge in the search for consensus and for the bridging of opposites.

More specifically, Chapter One deals with benefits and drawbacks of the conceptual history approach to the study of social engineering vocabulary. Since the dissertation seeks to determine how social engineering was used in political and scientific contests about the social, the chapter also explains the choice of material, and the primary focus upon American and Swedish material, mostly within academic and political discourses.

This choice of method and material has lead to a concentration upon the practices and theories which were once called social engineering, rather than those practices and theories which may now be considered to have been social engineering. However, the value of the former is wholly dependent upon what it can contribute to our understanding
the latter. Therefore, Chapter Two is devoted to a quite detailed study of contemporary understandings of social engineering—including its historiography. Primarily, the chapter discusses Karl Popper’s well-known distinction between “Utopian” and “piecemeal” social engineering and the notion that this distinction may be more of a difference in degree than in kind (Hirdman 1989).

In this historiography, the concept of social engineering is often seen as synonymous with “technocracy.” Chapter Three therefore provides an analysis which shows that technocracy—quite literally, the “rule” of technicians—must not be confused with social engineering, which in its historical usage always referred to the “advice” of engineers.

After these three chapters having provided a solid background and made some conceptual distinctions, Chapter Four proceeds to show how the concept of social engineering was used by American economist Thorstein Veblen in 1891, apparently one of the earliest usages of the concept. Veblen used it to describe a possible, yet imaginary “middle way” between cooperation and competition in modern industrialism against the laissez-faire liberal and Social Darwinist notion of an absolute opposition between the two, as held by Herbert Spencer. The chapter describes how the concept was later picked up within American scientific management and social settlement movement in the late 1890s. It also shows how the concept would gain popularity within philosophical pragmatism, legal realism, and interactionist sociology in the USA during the 1910s and 1920s. Especially Social Gospelers—Christian sociologists who feared that “community” had been lost in modern American society and that religion had become weakened as a consequence—suggested that clergy had to become “social engineers” to lead their flocks through the turmoil of modern society. Legal realists agreed, but saw lawyers instead of priests as the new social engineers. Like Veblen before them, both Social Gospelers and legal realists used the concept of social engineering to criticize laissez-faire liberalism and Social Darwinism which had dominated American public discourse up to the 1920s. Both argued against the defaitism of these dogmas that social problems had human causes and must be solved actively by human means. Social problems could not be left to be balanced out through “the law of the jungle” or evenly adjusted by “the invisible
hand” as held by Social Darwinists and laissez-faire liberals. Rather, society was better seen as a “construction” built over generations which must be actively maintained by morals and knowledge. Hence, social engineers were required, whether they be lawyers, priests or social scientists.

Chapter Five shows how these longstanding debates from the Progressive Era gained a new and more critical edge during the economic crisis of the 1930s. The Great Depression made “planning” a perceived necessity in economic and social thought. As democracy seemed incapable of handling crisis—which was metaphorically understood in terms of “war”—social planning was launched as a kind of “security policy.” Just as security policy is motivated by the exceptional risk posed by conflict, social planning was motivated by the perception that the crisis posed an existential threat to democracy. However, while planning already belonged to the conceptual toolbox of totalitarianism—of communism, fascism, and Nazism in Europe, social engineering could be conceptually linked to traditional American values such as business, innovation, and thrift, and yet motivate an emphasis upon cooperation rather than competition.

While the issue of how to regulate the day to day operation of the economy rose to prominence, American public intellectuals perceived that their nation stood before a choice between “drift” and “mastery” in the words of Walter Lippman (1914). Chapter Six therefore deals with the way in which American social scientists in the 1930s responded to this critical choice and what role they foresaw for social science in solving the dilemma: Should social science actively “engage” in making science applicable to politics in the interest of democracy? Or should it rather be “detached” in the interest of objectivity? A close reading of the way this issue was debated during the mid-1930s reveals that two very different answers arose: The younger objectivists thought that social science should copy natural science. Therefore, social engineers would be needed as intermediaries between “dirty” politics and “pure” science. In contrast, the older and more moralist tradition—connected with the legal realism and the Social Gospel of the Progressive Era—regarded social science itself as socially embedded and as such more or less political anyway. Instead of making a false pretense to absolute objectivity, social
science should aim to support social engineering from the beginning. Just as the technical
engineer worked in the interest of profit, the social engineer would work in the interest of
the public.

Even though social engineering became a common concept in America during the 1930s,
it would be two Swedish social scientists and politicians, namely Alva Myrdal and
Gunnar Myrdal, to first attempt to formulate a concrete theory of social engineering.
Chapter Seven therefore goes on to outline how the Myrdalian version of social
engineering was presented as a third alternative to objectivism and moralism in social
science. Obviously, in his advocacy for a more activist or even “political” social science,
Gunnar Myrdal to longstanding American debates. He wanted to disassociate his version
of social engineering from American activist social science, turning against what he
called the “do-nothing”-attitude of the American objectivists as well as the “sentimental”
attitude of the American moralists. He argued that social science would neither be able to
provide a “social ethics” as held by the moralists, nor would it ever be objective enough
to satisfy the degree of objectivism asked for by the objectivists. Instead, social science
should analyze the values which were actually held in society and use these values as
premises for the study of social problems. These values could then serve as the basis for
social engineering. In fact, prominent social reformer Alva Myrdal argued, such a
“constructive social engineering” had been put into practice in one small European
country, namely Sweden.

This statement of course baffled even the most enthusiastic American supporters of social
engineering, who believed that social engineering—even in the best case scenario—
would be a thing of the distant future, once social science had become more advanced.
Furthermore, how would one chose which social values should be made the basis of
social engineering, if several different values existed among the population at the same
time? Of course, the Myrdals were both aware that Sweden was much more
homogeneous country than the USA would ever be, despite strong tendencies towards
“Americanization.” Also, the average American was much more religious than the
average Swede, and this put limits on what kind of social reforms could be undertaken in
the USA. But it did also provide the platform upon which an American social engineering would have to be built—what Gunnar Myrdal called “the American Creed.”

In Sweden, in contrast, cultural homogeneity, secular modernity, and social democracy provided the basis for social engineering. Chapter Eight therefore turns to the way in which Sweden was presented as a “social laboratory” from the 1920s and onwards. This chapter details how Swedish social reform was made to represent a kind of “pragmatic Utopia” in American New Deal debate. The Swedish “middle way” was thought of as uniting capitalism and democracy. The Swedish experience showed, as President Franklin D. Roosevelt was fond of pointing out, how opposites could be united and how tradition could be aligned with modernity.

While the Second World War and dubious Swedish neutrality challenged this preference for Sweden among American radicals, the debate on “post-war reconstruction” reactivated the interest in planning again. By now, however, the concept of social engineering did not play such a central role as it had done in the 1930s. First, the war had provided many employment opportunities for social scientists. The notion of an intermediary social engineer to run in between politics and science had become largely redundant as science and politics were already in close cooperation, especially through the military-industrial and security complex. Second, the main adversaries of social engineering—laissez-faire liberalism and Social Darwinism—had both lost much of their popular support after having been historically disproven by the Great Depression and the Second World War, respectively. As these doctrines faded away from public respectability, social engineering lost its adversaries and subsequently lost much of the rhetorical punch it once had commanded. The enemies of rhetorical social engineering were either gone or marginalized, while practical social engineering quite paradoxically enjoyed widespread popularity on both sides of the Iron Curtain dividing the world at the beginning of the Cold War.

The concluding Chapter Nine outlines the main findings of the dissertation: Even though the concept of social engineering has been used in very many different and sometimes
contradictory ways there are in particular four points which question the established historiography of social engineering.

First, judging from the present study of social engineering rhetoric, it seems as if social engineering was closer to moralism than to objectivism. It referred primarily to an early kind of “proto-constructivism” and a conviction that society is created socially and upheld through common human action. This constructivism came attached with a moral imperative to act in order to improve society. As such, the social engineering metaphor is better understood as a functional analogy—outlining what something does—rather than a formal analogy—which explains what something is. The social engineer should work as an engineer in constructing social institutions, rather than manipulating human beings as if they were machines.

Second, the comparison between Swedish and American forms of social engineering rhetoric shows that this rhetoric emphasized the role of voluntarism for social change, rather than any mechanistic determinism. By highlighting not only the constructed but also the intentional and purposive character of the social, social engineering also opened up the potential reach of the political. While social engineering indeed did make an analytical separation between science and politics—in the interest of “efficiency” and “responsibility” of science—it also sought to bridge this very gap functionally—in the interest of the “democracy” and “representativity” of politics, or to combine “input-oriented legitimization” with “output-oriented legitimization” to use a figure coined by Fritz Scharpf (1999).

Third, unlike both laissez-faire liberalism, Social Darwinism, and Marxism, which placed their bets with either some kind of balance between social interests or with some kind of apocalyptic conflict between them, supporters of social engineering accepted the eternal imbalance between competing, yet interdependent social interests. Rather than a “technocratic” attempt at moving against, above, or beyond politics, social engineering rhetoric sought an intermediary role between science and politics. As such, it was proposed as a kind of “intra-politics,” which would not only build upon the “lowest
common denominators” of a given society, but also help to construct the necessary codes of conduct for channeling potentially disastrous conflict into productive communication and exchange of ideas. As a kind of “social diplomacy” social engineering rhetoric sought ways to negotiate and manage these tensions, rather than promising a Utopian end to all conflict.

Fourth and finally, culture and politics, and not so much mechanicism and science, seems to have been much more central to proponents of social engineering than is often imagined. While “Utopian social engineers” of totalitarianism found support in their respective totalitarian Utopias, “piecemeal social engineers” seem to have relied upon “the Utopia of democracy”—that formal democracy can represent the public opinion, that it can allow for protest, and that it can promote open communication between the minority and the majority. The notion that one had to actively work to make “formal” democracy “realize” this Utopian dimension seems to have been much more important to social engineering rhetoric than any mechanistic understanding of society by itself.

With regard to the many (dis)similarities between the language and rhetoric of social engineering in Sweden and the USA which have emerged as a result of this comparison, it is clear that the concept of social engineering was explicitly introduced much later in the Swedish debate, only in the 1940s. There is also a vast imbalance between the common utilization of this concept in the American debate if compared with the Swedish debate: Not only did the USA support a much bigger market for ideas and subsequently saw a much greater number of relevant works being produced over a longer time. Also, Swedish reforming elites did not seem to have perceived a similar need to protect science from politics and politics from science in the same way as American social reformers did. In Sweden, science was already enjoyed strong linked to politics, long before the social democratic brokered class compromise of the 1930s, firmly entrenched in the bureaucratic traditions of the 19th century state. The attempt to expand the ambition of politics did not necessarily need to take the bypass via science. Instead, Swedish social reformers could draw rather directly upon notions of social cohesion and national integration, through concepts such as the folkhem, “the People’s Home,” and the related
fears of national disslution, decline, and marginalisation, such as the \textit{befolkningsfrågan}, “the Population Crisis.” As a result, the explicit concept of social engineering was primarily used by Swedish social reformers when speaking to international audiences. Indeed, Swedish social reformers much more often spoke of their proposals in terms of “radical social policy,” plain and simple, without either attempting to deny or to hide the primacy of politics over science in guiding social change.

In conclusion, the dissertation argues that the concept of social engineering is one of the most visible representations of a particular early 20\textsuperscript{th} century attempt to rhetorically bypass critical divides in two rapidly modernizing societies, avoiding either totalitarian control or liberal chaos and yet retaining democracy.

As such, the rhetoric of social engineering finds its functional equivalents in a number of social metaphors current in contemporary political debate—both in Sweden and the USA as well as internationally—such as for example “civil society,” “human capital,” and “social investment,” but also “identity politics” more generally. While these vocabularies do depend upon the legitimacy of social science, they also seek to create a language of social knowledge which can bypass critical divides in contemporary society, for example between the (neo)liberal emphasis upon competition and the social democratic one upon cooperation.

Similarly, and just as social engineering of the past did, these concepts underline the need for both political action and scientific advice in solving the dilemmas of post-modernity: Where the social engineering of the past once represented an intrusion of “the public” into that which had previously been considered largely “the private,” the contemporary discourses on human capital and social investment as well as identity politics reflect an expansion of the private into the public.

However, while the greatest challenge of the social engineering rhetoric of the past concerned the bridging of the gaps between well-entrenched social interests and creating consensus about the public interest of society, its present equivalents are tasked with the
even much more daunting and possibly Utopian goal of creating a vision of a common “us” capable of organizing collective action in line with common goals under conditions of post-modernity (Kettunen 2008).

Which metaphors will be employed to bring across this vision of a coherent yet competitive, performative yet pluralist post-modern society is too soon to tell. But it seems that where once political “construction” and collective “cooperation” stood out as the most important functions of the rhetoric of social engineering, its contemporary equivalents will focus upon the role of civic “communication” and individual “capacity” in future society. In sum, the languages of the present and the image of a “network society” may be less removed from the intentions of the languages of the past and the image of a “machine society” than previously thought.