



Department of History and Civilization

**Bridging Politics and Science: The Concept  
of Social Engineering in Sweden and the  
USA, *Circa* 1890-1950**

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Thesis submitted for assessment with a view to obtaining the degree of  
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**Abstract - Contents - Prologue**

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Department of History and Civilization

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BRIDGING POLITICS AND SCIENCE:  
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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 20<sup>th</sup> century expansion of public interest and state responsibility into previously non-politicized areas of private life, especially when deceptive and/or technological in nature. It has also been seen as an expression of mechanistic “modernity” and “technocracy.” Through a comparative and conceptual *histoire croisée* of social engineering this dissertation studies how this concept 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 an analytical separation between science and politics (in the interest of “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.” Such a modern code of conduct, a “social diplomacy” of sorts, strove to bring opposed social interests into controlled intercommunication with one and another instead of promising a Utopian end to all conflict. Thus, social engineering ran against both the *laissez-faire* liberal ideal of a harmonious balance between various interests as well as the socio-biological and historical materialist doctrines of an apocalyptic conflict between classes and/or races. When these ideologies were cornered as a result of World War II and the Cold War, social engineering rhetoric also lost much of its *raison d’être* and faded away from public discourse.

*Key Words:* conceptual history • intrapolitics • metapolitics • New Deal • People’s Home • politicization • rationalization • scientification • security • social engineering • social metaphors • technocracy



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While I have certainly felt challenged by the richness and complexity of the problem I have chosen to tackle in this text, I have also come to enjoy the voyage it has allowed me to undertake. I have come to see the Ph. D. more as a vessel to be sailed than as a series of problems to be overcome. After all, it has quite literally allowed me to go places, to meet people, and to learn of ideas I would never have encountered otherwise. I will not be able to fully convey my gratitude to the many people who have been my critics, my guides, and my fellow travellers on this journey. I am greatly indebted to my supervisor Bo Stråth for his confidence and support throughout this expedition. Thank you Bo! I would also wish to thank Yvonne Hirdman for her openness and encouragement in the earliest stages of this research, before the boat had even put to sea, so to speak. Victoria de Grazia, Fredrik W. Thue, and David Östlund gave positive support at critical moments along the way. Volker Berghahn, Alan Brinkley, Ira Katznelson, Esther Katz, and Paul Mattingly all extended generous advice during formative exchange visits to Columbia University and New York University, which were made possible by generous grants from the American-Scandinavian Foundation and the Marcus and Amalia Wallenberg Fund. My warm thanks to Adam Schwartz and Rebecca Haverstick, whose friendship and warmth made the stay at 137 Saint Marks Avenue, Brooklyn, a once in a lifetime experience, as well as to all friends in Firenze, above all the Palazzo and the Giacomini crowd, to “the Old Guard” in Stockholm, especially Olle Söderström, Johan Koskinen, and Anders Ljung, and in Kraków to Jasiu, Andzia, Małgosia, and Andrzej for having put up with me while I was an “inner exile,” and to my dear parents, Ingrid and Björn. *Dziękuję! Tack!* Finally, my deepest gratitude goes out to my beloved Żurek.



## *Prologue: The Crystal Palace*

This project began with an interest in the many possible answers which may be given to that most “modern” of questions, namely “what is to be done?”<sup>1</sup> The conviction that things need not always be the way they seem is part and parcel of the modern imagination of the human condition. Things change. We change things. Even in order to avoid changing things, we have to change things. And then things change anyway, and we change along with them. This question is somewhat different from the seemingly more perennial wonder about “how is it done?”<sup>2</sup> These two queries may capture the tension between what is considered practically possible at a certain time, or what is sometimes also called “know how,” and what may be thought of as theoretically desirable in a specific context, also known as “know what.”

Under the umbrella of “modernity,” both collective and individual human behavior have been thought of as being subjected to constant and irreversible change, just as nature and environment has been, for better and for worse.<sup>3</sup> During the late 18<sup>th</sup> and for much of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, this observable change and this very dynamic—not only as demonstrated in the history of civilizations, but also as witnessed in the discovery of evolution in the history of nature—seemed to open up the present to a previously undisclosed future. This future has often appeared as frightening and perilous, but also as potentially progressive and promising. Indeed, the way in which the future has become part of the present has become characteristic of the modern experience, and especially of modern politics, according to German historian

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<sup>1</sup> Swedish historian Yvonne Hirdman has described this query as “the great, Utopian question: what can one do?” in her pioneering study of Swedish social engineering, when she wonders “how it can be that one ‘knows’ how it should be. From where comes the notions of happiness, of how life should be lived, how one should love? I have always seen these dominating images of ‘how it should be’ as the strongest hindrances of my own inner freedom, since they have become the merciless measure according to which my life has been assessed.” See Yvonne Hirdman, *Att lägga livet till rätta—studier i svensk folkhemspolitik* (Stockholm, 1989), pp. 7, 105.

<sup>2</sup> These questions can hardly be posed in a coherent way without activating that overriding concern which Immanuel Kant formulated in his *Critique of Pure Reason* (Houndmills, 2003 [1781/1787]): “What can we know?”

<sup>3</sup> The concept of “modernity” is very general, and the literature practically impossible to survey completely, as it is a highly contested concept, too. There is the modernity *versus* modernization debate, there is the modernity *versus* post-modernity debate, and there is the teleology *versus* contingency debate. I will tentatively use the related concepts of modernity, modernization, and modernism in accordance with Zygmunt Bauman’s formulation as the historical process in the Western world which was expressed in Enlightenment, industrialization, scientific and technological progress, and the effects resulting from this, as well as historicity and agency in very much in the sense developed by Peter Wagner and Björn Wittrock, as well as reflexivity as understood by Ulrich Beck, Anthony Giddens, and Scott Lash, see for example discussion in Zygmunt Bauman, *Modernity and Ambivalence* (Ithaca, NY, 1991); Peter Wagner, “Modernity: History of the Concept,” in Neil J. Smelser & Paul B. Bates (eds.), *International Encyclopedia of the Social and Behavioral Sciences* (Oxford & New York, 2001), pp. 9949-9954; Peter Wagner, *Theorizing Modernity: Inescapability and Attainability in Social Theory* (London, Thousand Oaks & New Delhi, 2001); Peter Wagner, *Modernity as Experience and Interpretation: A New Sociology of Modernity* (Cambridge & Malden, MA, 2008); Björn Wittrock, “Modernity: One, None or Many? European Origins and Modernity as a Global Condition,” in *Daedalus* (Winter 2000), pp. 31-59; and Ulrich Beck, Anthony Giddens & Scott Lash, *Reflexive Modernization* (Cambridge, 1994).

Reinhart Koselleck. Under modernity, the future has not only pushed the horizon of expectation further than before, it has also opened up the present for ambitious collective action with the future in mind, not the least so in various attempts at making the world a better place.

Admittedly, though, much of ancient mythology was also concerned with conscious attempts to not only control natural environment but also to remake the ways in which humans live together, i.e. “society.”<sup>4</sup> However, these ancient myths also point out the limits of what humanity can undertake successfully, usually by way of referring to the prerogatives of Divinity.<sup>5</sup> Perhaps the myth of the Tower of Babylon best expresses the balance between the intra-human prerogative to fulfill our *telos*, “*τελος*,” our “purpose” or “aim,” on the one hand, and the extra-human obligation to our gods to refrain from *hubris*, “*ὕβρις*.” Translated into modern conditions a similar tension may be found in the way intra-human “ideas” can enter into conflict with extra-human “facts.” It may from that perspective matter little if a particular fact is considered God-given or whether it is scientifically determined.

However, a key difference between earlier attempts at the massive, intentional remaking of human conditions, and between those that took place during modernity, is that the latter have only seldom been forced to defend themselves from accusations of *hubris*. It has not only often afforded the imagination and determination necessary for reconstructing social life, but it has also sometimes possessed the instruments and resources to actually implement and put into practice schemes of “social control,” some of which may have been unimaginable, if not impossible, before.<sup>6</sup> This increase in human agency allowed *mythos*, “*μῦθος*”—“story” or “legend”—to be turned into *logos*, “*λόγος*”—reason—and *vice versa*, whereby the difference between what was considered authentic and “given” and what was artificial and “made” would become more and more blurred, and therefore also of greater and greater importance. Ritual was supplanted with rationality. Interestingly, at the high tide of naturalism, this burgeoning insight began to undermine the notion that social knowledge was—or at least could and should be—like natural science: neutral, objective, and above all

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<sup>4</sup> The experiences of Prometheus, who stole the secret of fire from the Olympian gods, of Icarus and Daedalus, who flew too close to the sun with wings they had made themselves, or of Faust, who made a pact with the Devil in order to attain perfect knowledge, illustrate how humans and their attempts to improve their lot have failed on account of their artificial character, for being out of step with the way things seem to be and very possibly the way things also should be. See for example Marshall Berman, *All That is Solid Melts Into Air: The Experience of Modernity* (New York, 1982).

<sup>5</sup> If there are no gods to keep us in check, the ancient myths seem to tell us, we can be sure our calculations will backfire, no matter how noble our aims or how rational our planning may be.

<sup>6</sup> The concept of “social control” was probably coined by American sociologist Edward A. Ross.

culturally and socially universal.<sup>7</sup> These developments would have paramount importance for the concept of “ideology” which juxtaposed situational and contingent knowledge—values, ideas, and ends—with situational and non-contingent knowledge pertaining to givens like facts and means.

The question of “what is to be done” had probably echoed long before Nikolai Chernyshevsky’s novel of that title was published in 1863.<sup>8</sup> One year after this book was published, another Russian author, Fyodor Dostoyevsky, took the opportunity to mock the belief in progress and human agency that his compatriot had expressed. In his *Notes from the Underground* (1864), Dostoyevsky would succinctly outline most—if not all—of the counterarguments against scientifically guided social change that have been voiced heretofore.<sup>9</sup> Therefore, it deserves to be quoted at length:

Have you noticed that it is the most civilised gentlemen who have been the subtlest slaughterers, to whom the Attilas and Stenka Razins could not hold a candle, and if they are not so conspicuous as the Attilas and Stenka Razins it is simply because they are so often met with, are so ordinary and have become so familiar to us. In any case civilisation has made mankind if not more bloodthirsty, at least more vilely, more loathsomely bloodthirsty. In old days he saw justice in bloodshed and with his conscience at peace exterminated those he thought proper. Now we do think bloodshed abominable and yet we engage in this abomination, and with more energy than ever. Which is worse? Decide that for yourselves. They say that Cleopatra (excuse an instance from Roman history) was fond of sticking gold pins into her slave-girls’ breasts and derived gratification from their screams and writhings. You will say that that was in the comparatively barbarous times; that these are barbarous times too, because also, comparatively speaking, pins are stuck in even now; that though man has now learned to see more clearly than in barbarous ages, he is still far from having learnt to act as reason and science would dictate. But yet you are fully convinced that he will be sure to learn when he gets rid of certain old bad habits, and when common sense and

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<sup>7</sup> This startling and subversive claim, first substantiated by Karl Mannheim in 1929, that “knowledge” had a sociology—that it is socially located and therefore socially embedded and ideologically contingent—had a profound effect upon debates which previously had moved little since the initial linkage between the human sciences and the natural sciences as proposed by such diverse figures as Francis Bacon, Marquis de Condorcet, and, most notably, Auguste Comte. Mannheim was, however, and as we will see, not the only one to actively undermine the notion that knowledge could be like natural science was supposed to be: neutral, objective, above the contending forces in society and culture and yet propagate vigorously for a *Sozialtechnologie*, “social technology” or in social engineering. In the end, Mannheim believed that the sociologist of knowledge could find an interest-free vantage point. He adopted a position of “relationalism” which eschewed the toughest epistemological questions. See Karl Mannheim, *Ideology and Utopia: An Introduction to the Sociology of Knowledge* (London, 1954 [1929-1931]); Robert M. Young, “Science, Ideology and Donna Haraway,” in *Science as Culture*, No. 15, Vol. 3 (1992), pp. 165-207.

<sup>8</sup> Nikolai Chernyshevsky, *What Is to Be Done?* (1973 [1863]), the title of which may be alternatively translated as the imperative “What Shall We Do?” [“*Что делать?*”], just like Yvonne Hirdman’s “great Utopian question” uses the conditional “what can we do.” See Yvonne Hirdman, *Att lägga livet till rätta—studier i svensk folkhemspolitik* (Stockholm, 1989), p. 105.

<sup>9</sup> Including Zygmunt Bauman’s and Theodor W. Adorno’s critical analysis of Auschwitz as the pinnacle of—rather than the aberration of—modern rationality as well as Michel Foucault’s thesis on the internalization of control and terror.

science have completely re-educated human nature and turned it in a normal direction. You are confident that then man will cease from INTENTIONAL error and will, so to say, be compelled not to want to set his will against his normal interests. That is not all; then, you say, science itself will teach man (though to my mind it's a superfluous luxury) that he never has really had any caprice or will of his own, and that he himself is something of the nature of a piano-key or the stop of an organ, and that there are, besides, things called the laws of nature; so that everything he does is not done by his willing it, but is done of itself, by the laws of nature. Consequently we have only to discover these laws of nature, and man will no longer have to answer for his actions and life will become exceedingly easy for him. All human actions will then, of course, be tabulated according to these laws, mathematically, like tables of logarithms up to 108,000, and entered in an index; or, better still, there would be published certain edifying works of the nature of encyclopedic lexicons, in which everything will be so clearly calculated and explained that there will be no more incidents or adventures in the world. Then—this is all what you say—new economic relations will be established, all ready-made and worked out with mathematical exactitude, so that every possible question will vanish in the twinkling of an eye, simply because every possible answer to it will be provided. Then the “Palace of Crystal” will be built. Then...In fact, those will be halcyon days. Of course there is no guaranteeing (this is my comment) that it will not be, for instance, frightfully dull then (for what will one have to do when everything will be calculated and tabulated), but on the other hand everything will be extraordinarily rational. Of course boredom may lead you to anything. It is boredom [which] sets one sticking golden pins into people, but all that would not matter. What is bad (this is my comment again) is that I dare say people will be thankful for the gold pins then. [*capitals original*].<sup>10</sup>

“[E]very possible question will vanish in the twinkling of an eye, simply because every possible answer to it will be provided,” the Underground Man writes. The answer to Chernyshevsky’s question would cancel itself out if it was ever fulfilled, as well as every other question for that matter. It would ring out as hollow and produce an echo at most, as it would be obvious, evident, and beyond any reasonable doubt what ought to be done in the “Palace of Crystal.”<sup>11</sup> In there, everything would be as translucent as the glass walls of the Palace itself. However, Dostoyevsky’s imagery also seems to suggest that human imagination

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<sup>10</sup> In Dostoyevsky’s account, it is notable that the “Underground Man” considers it fully possible that science will indeed be able to transform the human condition to such an extent as to reduce freedom of choice and thus individual responsibility to a minimum, not the least through the introduction of psychological considerations in legal reasoning, such as the inculpability of the individual acting under so-called “affect” (as argued by the lawyers inspired by French physiologist Claude Bernard in Dostoyevsky’s *Brothers Karamazov*), allowing humans to liberate themselves from the human condition to the extent that they turn animal and thus represent a danger not only to themselves, but to other people and society at large as well. However, this seems mostly to serve the purpose of strengthening the irony of his conclusions. Fyodor Dostoyevsky, *Notes from the Underground* (2000 [1864]).

<sup>11</sup> Undoubtedly, Chernyshevsky molded his “Palace of Crystal” in the cast of the Crystal Palace which had been built for the 1851 Great Exhibition in London and whose iron and glass structure virtually embodied the promise and peril of the Industrial Age (see Epilogue).

will become stifled in a frail and refined environment.<sup>12</sup> Furthermore, the kind of “social engineering” which would be required for the building of such a perfect edifice would run the risk of erecting an “Iron Cage” in its stead, a prison where human development would come to a halt. Generally speaking however halcyon days have been few and far between, although at times they have seemed close enough: Francis Fukuyama’s 1989 article and his 1992 book being the most noted contributions to this genre recently.<sup>13</sup> Instead, questions continue to be raised, not the least since the answers to previous questions persist in generating new conflicts, tensions, and dilemmas.<sup>14</sup>

As this dissertation has unfolded, the focus has come to center upon why “what is to be done?”-questions are raised in the first place. More specifically, I have come to focus upon the way in which such questions are framed in modern politics, rather than the specific character of the answers eventually given to any particular such query. This is not to say that answers and questions can be neatly separated. Rather, they remain closely connected, since the phrasing of questions is so often shaped by the manner in which possible answers are imagined beforehand. These answers might in their turn be shaped by answers once given in response to previous and sometimes rather different problems. Indeed, a lot of human thought appears to be tied together in a dialectic which R. G. Collingwood (1939) understood as a complex of questions and answers, and these complexes may not always be very easily disentangled.<sup>15</sup> There is a peculiar kind of reflexivity in how “society” has been constructed as both a subject of knowledge somehow capable of asking itself questions and as an object of power and a target of various solutions. This reflexive relationship between society as an object and society as a subject reflects a more profound tension between what is considered spontaneous, natural, and authentic in social life on the one hand, and what is planned,

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<sup>12</sup> In the fictitious work of Emmanuel Goldstein, author of *The Theory and Practice of Oligarchal Collectivism*, it is argued that “[t]he world of today [i.e., that of George Orwell’s *Nineteen Eighty-Four*] is a bare, hungry, dilapidated place compared with the world that existed before 1914, and still more so if compared with the imaginary future to which the people of that period looked forward. In the early twentieth century, the vision of a future society unbelievably rich, leisured, orderly and efficient—a glittering antiseptic world of glass and steel and snow-white concrete—was part of the consciousness of nearly every literate person. Science and technology were developing at a prodigious speed, and it seemed natural to assume that they would go on developing. This failed to happen, partly because of the impoverishment caused by a long series of wars and revolutions, partly because scientific and technical progress depended on the empirical habit of thought, which could not survive in a strictly regimented society.” See George Orwell, *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (London, 1949 [1990]), pp. 196-197.

<sup>13</sup> See Francis Fukuyama, “The End of History?” in *The National Interest* (Summer, 1989); and Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (Glencoe, 1992).

<sup>14</sup> These thoughts lean heavily upon Ulrich Beck, *Risk Society: Towards a New Modernity* (London, 1992); Ulrich Beck, Anthony Giddens & Scott Lash, *Reflexive Modernization: Politics, Tradition and Aesthetics in the Modern Social Order* (Cambridge, 1994); and Ulrich Beck, *Democracy without Enemies* (Cambridge, 1998).

<sup>15</sup> R. G. Collingwood, *The Idea of History* (Oxford, 1994 [1936]); R. G. Collingwood, *An Autobiography* (Oxford, 1978 [1939]).

contrived, and artificial on the other, a tension which has been seen as characteristic of modernity.

Modernity, then, is said to be ambiguous. “Post-modernity” is even more so.<sup>16</sup> While modernity is considered to have been largely concerned with controlling these ambiguities, post-modernity is said to celebrate them (Bauman 1991). One of the main ambiguities of both of these “modernities” can be found in the relationship between two of the most important forms of “world-making” practices human history has witnessed, namely “science” on the one hand (the ascendancy of which has affected both modernity and post-modernity to such a great extent) and “politics” on the other (the revolutionary openness of which has sometimes been seen as a defining characteristic of political modernity and the growing irrelevance of which has been taken to signal the advent of post-modernity). The tensions, reflections, and bifurcations between these two mutually constitutive modes of knowledge production continue to shape society today, not the least through the perception of increasingly politicized science, and, conversely, politics made “scientific.”

Yet, as this voltage is so much part and parcel of our “room temperature reality,” i.e., something many consider not only normal but also natural, it is perhaps best seen through the perspective of the past. Through the past one may more clearly observe how things which appear as if they could not be otherwise could have been different. Especially the tension between science and politics promise to reflect other fields of suspension; strains which did not only shape how the political or the “public” and the non-political or the “private” were imagined during modernity, but also how these imaginations continue to influence social theorizing under post-modernity; tensions, such as the ones between liberty and discipline, between individuality and community, cooperation and competition, and between nature and nurture. These tensions did not only provide impetus for the building the Crystal Palace, they also reverberate in the rhetorical language within which such crystal visions of the future were voiced. In the following, I will try to show how these ambiguities

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<sup>16</sup> The literature on post-modernity is vast. Here I have relied upon some standard works mainly from the 1990s with the exception of Lyotard’s seminal work, e.g., Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (Manchester, 1984 [1979]); Perry Anderson, *The Origins of Postmodernity* (London, 1998); Anthony Giddens, *The Consequences of Modernity* (Cambridge, 1990); Anthony Giddens, *Modernity and Self Identity* (Cambridge, 1991); Zygmunt Bauman, *Liquid Modernity* (Cambridge, 2000); Ulrich Beck, *Risk Society: Towards a New Modernity* (London, 1992); Seyla Benhabib, “Feminism and Postmodernism,” in *Feminism Contentions: A Philosophical Exchange* (New York, 1995); Judith Butler, “Contingent Foundations,” in *Feminist Contentions: A Philosophical Exchange* (New York, 1995); Manuel Castells, *The Rise of the Network Society, The Information Age: Economy, Society and Culture*, Vol. 1 (Cambridge, MA, Oxford, 1996); and David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity. An Enquiry Into the Origins of Cultural Change* (Oxford, 1990).

played out in the complex rhetoric of “social engineering” during the first half of the 20<sup>st</sup> century.