Social Engineering in China

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Abstract

Social engineering may sound as a new “science” for understanding the social patterns and behavior of the people as members of the state, but its roots can be found way in the past. Political philosophers from Confucius onward offered their understanding, analyses and prescription for sustaining social order. During the long and colorful history of China the notion of society and its development and relations has changed, but in some strange way kept its basic values, founded since ancient times. Even now, when China is the second world economy, the government initiates a program for control and social engineering over its subjects, that is nothing else but a reform observing the old Confucius idea for maintaining the social order using education and ethical conduct.

Keywords: social engineering, Confucius, Chinese society, education, social credit, women status.

1. Introduction

Social engineering can be understood in many different ways and the reason for this is because it is intertwined with many aspects of human social activity like social change, decision-making, planning of development, etc. Sir Karl Popper is perhaps most often mentioned as a theorist of social engineering. In both his books, *The Poverty of Historicism* and *The Open Society and Its Enemies*, he left us a classical description of social engineering. Popper’s view of the two kinds of social engineering (*large scale* and *piecemeal*) are analyzed in detail in the Bulgarian philosophical literature by K. Lozev (Lozev, 2000, ch. 2) but for the purposes of this paper I shall use a more general conception of social engineering.

In general terms “social engineering” means the use of centralized planning in an attempt to manage social change and regulate the future development and behavior of a society. Social engineering is a discipline in social science that refers to efforts to influence particular attitudes and social behaviors on a large scale, whether by governments, media or private groups in order to produce desired characteristics in a target population. Social engineering can also be understood philosophically as a deterministic phenomenon where the intentions and goals of the architects of the new social construct are realized.

Although the science is relatively new the problems it takes for consideration are not. As long as there is a notion of society there are different ways, rules or principles that help establishing and engineering the social order. Even in the myths for creation of the world and men

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could be found the basic principles of social engineering in order to create harmony between the members of the society.

2. From myths to reality

One of those myths is the myth for NuWa who created the men. From the many shades of yellow earth, NuWa made tall dolls and short dolls. She made thin dolls and fat dolls. She made curly-haired dolls and straight-haired dolls. She made dolls with eyes as round and large as cherries, some with eyes as long and narrow as a mosquito’s wing. She made some with eyes so dark they looked like the midnight sky, others so light they looked like liquid honey. Each creature was different, so the goddess could recognize her creations. Then she breathed in every doll and they sprang to life, giggling and hopping about. (Collier, 2001: 26) Performing this act the goddess not just creates the living men, but establishes the social difference and order as well. Compare this myth with the biblical one in the Book of Genesis: it could be concluded that Chinese thought is at some scale more advanced. Unlike the story of creating Adam from clay and after that Eve from Adam’s rib, here one could find the creation of the whole society, of mankind.

The Biblical story, although fascinating, lacks the explanation the bigger picture – the whole society and the difference between its members, social class order and so on. The only thing closer to social engineering in the Biblical myth is the establishment of male supremacy over women, because Eve is created from Adam’s rig, therefore female is a subject to the male since she was created as a part of his body. However, there are many questions that remain with no answer, or the explanations are confusing. For example, where is the notion of society in the Biblical myth and how the whole mankind, male and female are created or even procreated? The story in the Bible tells how Adam and Eve are punished by God to leave the Eden garden; after that they have two children who are supposed to have created humanity. The tricky part is that their children are both boys and after the act of the first murder there was only one male left, so how was the whole humanity created, when there is only one human species and it is male? Cliffhangers like that could be found all over the Holly book. Of course the stories inside are to be understood as an allegories, but still the questions remain. Unlike the Bible’s stories Chinese thought is more practical and even in its mythology one is able to find understanding for social relations and order.

The evolution of society changes the understanding of social order and its engineering, but all has begun in the ancient times, where the basis of understanding the community has been established. At the time of the Zhou dynasty, along with the noble class and the common people, a new class of shuffles has emerged. Although they are of noble origin, they have a surname and have the privilege of entering battle, they serve the feudal lords as officers in the army or as civilian mercenaries, advisers, scribes. The increase in demand for educated people, this class focuses on learning. It is from this class that most of the famous Chinese politicians and philosophers came from (Van Gulik, 2003: 69). They can be seen as a prototype of the scientists who play a huge role in the administration of China even today. One of those famous philosophers is Confucius.

Confucius was, above all, a teacher, and all his thought was embedded in his teachings. At the beginning, learning took the central place as respond to his conviction that human nature is perfectly susceptible to perfection. Every person is defined as a being, fit to improve, and perfect to infinity. For the first time in an aristocratic culture, highly structured in castes and clans, the human being was perceived in its entirety (Chen, 2011: 59). According to Confucius, upbringing cannot be purely literary. Indeed, his teaching assigns a broad place to the study of old texts, but the main lesson is not a theoretical knowledge, which is important in itself, as much as its specific and practical purpose. That is why it is important to “know how” rather than “know that”, since knowledge is primarily intended to be a fitness rather than to acquire the intellectual content.
The practical purpose of education is to form a capable person, politically – to serve the community and, at the same time, morally – to become a worthy person. These two levels merge into one, because serving your lord is tantamount to serving your father. Confucius established a moral, political-ethical code that effect all areas of life and order in the state. He compares the state with the family, so the relations in the family are the same as the relations in the state, but on bigger scale. At the center of his teaching is the image of the noble man, who has to maintain Ren – thus manifested in predominantly rationalist virtues, as they are based on reciprocity and solidarity whose significance can be measured in the hierarchical and binding ties that characterize Chinese society. Confucius is interested in the ritual, and it keeps his attention, is not the purely religious aspect of the one with a sacrifice to the deity, but the ritual behavior of the one who participates in it. The concept of Li is the image of the idea that is usually created for ritualism as a simple label, as a protocol, in a word, as a collection of conventional, purely external behaviors (Chen, 2011: 70).

Learning, sense of humanity and ritual spirit are like a tripod on which Confucian pledge is based. The personification of that trinity is the worthy man, not only in personal ethics, but above all in the ruler’s political practice. When the family is perceived as a continuation of the individual, and the state – as a continuation of the family; when the ruler is for his subjects what is the father for his sons, there won’t be violation of the relationship between ethics and political theory. In that way Confucius transforms the ruler’s authority into the superiority of the exemplary person, not only because the ruler cultivates the principles of ren, xia, li, but because he has the mandate of Heaven and as the emperor receives the Heaven`s blessing so to become father of all the nation.

After the first reunification of China during the Qin Dynasty, the new Emperor carried out radical political and economic reforms, replaced the feudal hierarchy with state bureaucracy, redistributed the land among the peasants, and divided the empire into administrative districts. Han Dynasty emperors patronize Confucian doctrine not only because it provides an ideological foundation for the empire, but also because the disintegration of the feudal system coupled with unprecedented territorial expansion, creates a huge need for administrative officials. From that point on, scholarly officials play an important role in civilian and military services in China (Van Gulik, 2003: 71). The Confucian exam still plays very important role in present day China. On the other hand, the courtesan’s institution based on social factors has flourished over the centuries and played a significant role in uprising of women social status. At that time and even afterwards the women were banded from education. They were in submissive place rather than men. That notion for women started to change because of the courtesans, who were the first to gain some education or training. They arose during the Zhou period, when the rulers maintain trained women for entertainment. Changing the economic climate through Han and Qin restricts the support of private groups to ruling families.

The economy and influence of the Tang dynasty have reached a period of great prosperity, which has led to significant developments in the social superiority of men, yet during the Tang era the tolerance towards women was unprecedented. As a worthy example of that is Empress Wu Tian. Such a rise in respect for women can be explained by several factors. On the one hand, the power and flourishing of China have attracted the attention of many countries that have sent their representatives, showing a tendency for openness and tolerance, albeit suppressed, to the world. An empire like China at the time implies the existence of many nationalities within the state (many minorities), which further enriches the cultural and moral character of the country, the penetration of Western models and culture through trade relations adding some new insights into traditional Chinese culture (Yi, 2015: 318). On the other hand, the founders of the Tang dynasty were not pure Han people, which to some extent contradicted the dominant Confucian traditions that had the basis of family and family values that were not entirely inherent to Tang.
At the time of the Tang, courtesans have a recognized place in society, their profession was considered to be perfectly legitimate. Unlike low-profile prostitutes, they do not experience social disadvantage. Each city boasts its courtesans and they play an important role in all public affairs. (Van Gulik, 2003: 188). With the establishment of New China, the majority of women were released from the age of inequality during the feudal system. The social status of women underwent a qualitative rebound. Different basic women’s rights are recognized and shaped by law.

3. Dawn of new China

At the beginning of the 20th century there were deep problems in Chinese society, first of all in the ports of the cities that have been handed over to the Western countries according to the treaties. The traditional elite, the nobility, can no longer rely on the examination system to justify its position. The wealthy noble families moved to live in the cities and hired representatives of the inferior aristocratic class as governors of their rural possessions. Although nobility has been trained for centuries to despise trade, many members of that class ultimately devote themselves to commercial activity, sometimes associating with merchants (Roberts, 2009: 267). After 1945 Guomindang makes a series of mistakes that ultimately destroy the support of the population that every government needs. But Guomindang’s mistakes represent no more than half the explanation for the shift of political balance. The other half is provided by the CCP’s success in winning the battle for hearts and minds, especially in the villages.

The CCP embodies the new centralization of power. Recently united national unity has been reduced to the close leadership of the CCP in all national spheres. The fluctuations in the sudden acceleration of the transformations in the country are determined directly by the internal dynamics of the party, especially its leading cadres. The CCP is in no hurry to build a legal system that introduce a predictable state structure that defines the relationship between power and the population. The power of the party precedes any other jurisdiction that allows senior leaders in the hierarchy to change course. Mao is accustomed to such a kind of behavior. The CCP, which has two decades of military practice behind it is highly hierarchical. It is carried out from the top to the base, with the obligation of the lower levels to fulfill the instructions of the above and to ensure their fulfillment by those who in their turn are subordinate to them: this is the “democratic centralism” inherited directly by the Soviet Marxism-Leninism (Liu Rolan, 2000: 25). Another immediate step increasing the educational level of the masses. Those whose schooling has been interrupted due to the war can enroll in accelerated training courses, and millions of adults start attending winter training courses and schools (Roberts, 2009: 331).

The rhythm of Chinese life after the creation of the PRC, as well as the life in other countries of real socialism, is determined by the great campaigns of the regime to meet the set goals that keep the population constantly under pressure. They contribute in this way to the legitimacy of the new regime, to justify its claims to be of a different type from what the country has ever known (Lui, 2000: 30). The Chinese Cultural Revolution (1966-1976) has long been characterized as a period of “gender erasure”. Indeed, many researchers have argued that gender and sexuality were essentially disavowed within Chinese society during the revolution in the name of equality between the sexes and the proletarianization of the majority Mao’s slogan “the times have changed, men and women are the same” was propagated as a powerful message to millions of Chinese women, in particular, that men and women were equal. Furthermore, women’s public roles as proletarian fighters and revolutionaries were glorified. For example, the image of Iron Girls – strong, robust, muscular women who boldly performed physically demanding jobs traditionally done by men, such as repairing high-voltage electric wires – was widely promoted as a symbol of the Maoist slogan: “Whatever men comrades can accomplish, women comrades can too”. Traditionally “feminine” imagery was essentially banished from public discourse to such an
extent that discussions of sexuality became almost ascetic during the Cultural Revolution. Women were publicly reconfigured and reimagined as “gender-neutral persons” (Fei, 2017: 64).

This policy, apparently endorsed by Mao, determines the orientation of the government, the recovery of economic growth, planning and planning organizations, the growth of foreign trade and the improvement of relations with the West. The goal also implies the effective implementation of a decisive birth-restraint policy after the demographic question left Mao indifferent, sensitive to the benefits of the unit rather than to the burden it represents (Liu, 2000: 61).

The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) adopted a combination of institutional and cultural approaches to promote the Maoist rhetoric of gender equality. First, institutionally speaking, the party-state built a tightly controlled political hierarchy. In order to establish its power CCP initiates a program for re-education of the people, especially those of intellectual background. The proclamation of proletarian values as an ideal of the state, which is not uncommon as a resource for establishment and guarantee communist ideology, gave the government so needed excuse to put down its critics and political enemies. The program for re-education relocated the members of the unsuitable with the new power classes, send them into countryside where they can be though the importance of the new way by labor. Young girls and boys were sent-down form urban to rural areas in order to boost the agricultural development.

Patterns of class labeling were a decisive factor in determining whether someone was attacked and re-educated or not. People associated with “good class” could easily obtain political credentials and empower their political identity. Moreover, a good class background was also an important criterion for favorable job allocation, promotions, wages, housing, migration to cities, and social services. The most pronounced inequalities, therefore, were defined not by gender but by political criteria that ranked individuals by class background and level of workplace activism. In order to cultivate loyal revolutionary subjects and indoctrinate people with the proper revolutionary attitude toward socialist construction, state media glorified women’s public roles as proletarian fighters and socialist constructors via images such as the Iron Girls (Fei, 2017: 66).

Fertility rates for the early twentieth century have been estimated at five to six births per woman. Missionaries decried female infanticide, but disagreed as to its prevalence. The Republican penal code and other government regulations outlawed infanticide, but rural fieldwork reports from the 1930s often found lopsided sex ratios that pointed to preferential treatment of sons, if not direct infanticide of girls (Hershatter, 2007: 26). From the mid-1950s, party-state planners mentioned population as an important area of policy-making, with an emphasis on health and welfare. By the middle of the decade, the top party leadership, worried about rapid population growth, endorsed birth control, but this approach was soon transformed into a doctrine of state-controlled birth planning.

The Chinese government introduced the one-child policy in the late 1970’s to slow China’s population growth. The policy is far from uniformly enforced. In the largest cities very few people are permitted to have a second child, but parents in rural areas and members of ethnic minorities can apply for permission to have a second child and sometimes even a third. Particularly if both parents are only children or if the first child is a girl. The one-child policy draws criticism from almost every imaginable angle. It is often applied coercively, and tales of forced abortions grab headlines outside China.

The success of this policy in the cities has been attributed to several factors. The state could provide effective incentives and penalties in the urban Environment. Urban families live in crowded housing conditions, rely on pensions in addition to children for old-age support, and have devised mobility strategies relying on education and work connections rather than on extended family ties. Urban women who work in family businesses and women more generally who find the
rising costs and effort of raising children quite demanding have been quite explicit about their desire to limit childbearing (Hershatter, 2007: 27). In the countryside, by contrast, the one-child policy collided with the re-emergence of the household as a fundamental unit of production; the dismantling of rudimentary collective welfare guarantees; the emergence of peasant households wealthy enough to pay hefty fines for excess births; and a general weakening of state control over peasant mobility, income, activities, and its own local branches.

But its many unintended consequences have also turned it into history’s largest ever exercise in top-down social engineering. Young adults who were raised as only children because of China’s one-child policy were less inclined to trust others, less trustworthy, more risk-averse, less competitive, more pessimistic and less conscientious. Perhaps the most perverse unintended consequence of the one-child policy concerns its effect on sex ratios and creating the “missing girls” problem and increasing homosexuality. Although the one-child policy is no more the effect from it still present.

Nowadays the Chinese government initiates an idea for total control over the nation. In this world, anything from defaulting on a loan to criticizing the ruling party, from running a red light to failing to care for your parents properly, could cause you to lose points. And in this world, your score becomes the ultimate truth of who you are — determining whether you can borrow money, get your children into the best schools or travel abroad; whether you get a room in a fancy hotel, a seat in a top restaurant — or even just get a date. It may sound like a science fiction, but it could be totally possible to happen in China by 2020. It is the scenario contained in China’s ambitious plans to develop a far-reaching social credit system, a plan that the Communist Party hopes will build a culture of “sincerity” and a “harmonious socialist society” where “keeping trust is glorious.”

The ambition is to collect every scrap of information available online about China’s companies and citizens in a single place — and then assign each of them a score based on their political, commercial, social and legal “credit.” At the heart of the social credit system is an attempt to control China’s vast, anarchic and poorly regulated market economy, to punish companies selling poisoned food or phony medicine, to expose doctors taking bribes and uncover con men preying on the vulnerable.

The idea may sound revolutionary, but actually it is just a developing of the Confucius idea for reward and punishment. An idea that effect the Chinese society for centuries. Some of the penalties showed the party’s desire to regulate its citizens’ private lives — participating in anything deemed to be a cult or failing to care for elderly relatives incurred a 50-point penalty. Other penalties reflected the party’s obsession with maintaining public order and crushing any challenge to its authority — causing a “disturbance” that blocks party or government offices meant 50 points off; using the internet to falsely accuse others resulted in a 100-point deduction. Winning a “national honor” — such as being classified as a model citizen or worker — added 100 points to someone’s score (Simon, n.d).

On that basis, citizens were classified into four levels: those given an “A” grade qualified for government support when starting a business and preferential treatment when applying to join the party, government or army; or applying for a promotion. People with “D” grades were excluded from official support or employment. Unlike the Confucius idea for severe punishment, in the social credit plan the punishments are less severe — prohibitions on riding in “soft sleeper” class on trains or going first class in planes, for example, or on staying at the finer hotels, travelling abroad, or sending children to the best schools — but nonetheless far-reaching.

Under government-approved pilot projects, eight private companies have set up credit databases that compile a wide range of online, financial and legal information. One of the most popular is Sesame Credit, part of the giant Alibaba ecommerce company that runs the world’s largest online shopping platform. Tens of millions of users with high scores have been able to rent
cars and bicycles without leaving deposits, company officials say, and can avoid long lines at hospitals by paying fees after leaving with a few taps on a smart phone. The Baihe online dating site encourages users to display their Sesame Credit scores to attract potential partners; 15 per cent of its users do so (Simon, n.d.). This scoring system that China government is creating is a form of social engineering because the system can tell you that if you’re good enough and proven to be good enough. This kind of *being good enough* divides people into grades which is a form of obedience training for the state. Under this system there is no privacy: everything you do will be monitored. The system could be seen as another utopian idea for creating a perfect society, but it is more probable to become anti-utopia like Orwell’s *Big brother*.

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