Social engineering commonly refers to large-scale efforts to reshape social structures (Fein 2001). It is “the planned and directed process of social change undertaken by the agency of government...to influence [public] behavior to alter [either] the consumption of public goods or individual relations to society” (McMahon 2001, p.77). Social engineering takes both a deontological and a teleological perspective; the assumption that certain moral rights must be honored regardless of consequences (e.g., slavery is wrong) is clearly the former, and the interest in shaping the long-term future by working toward a set of predefined social goals is clearly the latter (Duff 2005).

The broad goals of social engineering include addressing historical social inequities, redistributing wealth, inducing economic development, encouraging sustainable consumption, encouraging healthier lifestyles, improving workplaces, enhancing national viability, and fostering a more enlightened populace. Although such goals appear de rigueur for advanced societies, their achievement is often stymied by the devil in the details. For example, delaying morbidity from disease would seem to improve society irrefutably. Yet, the net economic and social value of smoking cessation campaigns is unclear; they may improve longevity and quality of life for some people at the expense of higher insurance premiums and health-care-related taxes for other people. Inducing economic development is uncontroversial until the wrong industries, technologies, or companies are supported.

Perhaps social engineering, if not implemented by democratic states, would then “be implemented willy-nilly by private corporations exploiting the normlessness of the info sphere” (Duff 2005, p.70). Although social welfare and environmental marketing may reflect this perspective to some extent, social engineering is a far more unpopular notion for at least three reasons: (1) scary
history, (2) often-unmet assumptions, and (3) paternalistic/anti-libertarian tendencies.

First, social engineering has been linked to coercive methods and grandiose but flawed schemes, such as eugenics and communism. “Social engineering concepts have served some of the most dangerous, destructive, and ideological regimes in the history of the world (Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union under Stalin)” (Tabori 2001, p.144). People are understandably skeptical about any approach with so checkered a past.

Second, social engineers make three important, but often unmet, assumptions: they understand the problem, they can develop an appropriate solution, and they can implement that solution. As affirmative action schemes and the long-running war in Afghanistan illustrate for many people, “each of these surmises contains pitfalls that can make the cure worse than the disease” (Fein 2001, p.123).

Third, social engineering smacks of paternalism and condescension. The sociopolitical events of the last century have led many people to doubt the state and/or recognized authorities know what is best (Rothschild 1999). People prefer to decide their own future because they want to feel in control of their destiny and believe they are the best source for any decision about themselves. Other reasons for rejecting paternalism, which entails interfering with people’s choices on the grounds that it is for their own good:

- include claims that the interference they permit (a) would deprive people of the opportunity to make choices with significant instrumental value, (b) would interfere with choices that have important representative value for people as ways of shaping their lives and expressing their values, or (c) would stigmatize those who are interfered with by labeling them as immature or incompetent (Scanlon 2000, p.254).

Depriving people of choices that provide them value and stigmatizing people for their supposedly bad choices is contrary to the basic tenets of free societies. Free markets and a free people’s collective wisdom in ultimately pursuing the right goals are likely to produce a far better future than the utopian future promised by social engineering.

People may be poor predictors of their future and future happiness. Despite their beliefs to the contrary, people quickly return to their baseline level of happiness after an unexpected positive or negative event. The typical response of other people under similar circum-
stances is far more predictive of a person’s future belief or behavior than any person-specific model (Gilbert 2006). Nonetheless, to maximize society’s total happiness, the popular consensus—reality television notwithstanding—should generally outperform the decisions of even the brightest government bureaucrats. As William F. Buckley famously stated, “I would rather be governed by the first 2000 names in the Boston phone book than by the 2000 members of the faculty of Harvard University.”

References


About the Author

Dr. Michael R. Hyman is Distinguished Achievement Professor and Ph.D. Coordinator of Marketing at NMSU. He is Executive Editor of NMSU Business Outlook and Marketing Ethics Section Editor for Journal of Business Ethics. Attesting to his writing compulsion are 80 academic journal articles, 45 conference papers (10 which won a ‘best paper’ award), four co-authored/co-edited books, 25 other academic contributions, and 30 non-academic works. He is known for his collection of Looney Tunes shirts, inability to chip a golf ball correctly, encyclopedic knowledge of classic Hollywood movies, overly neat office, and loyalty to the New York Yankees.