Book Reviews

Social Engineering in Singapore: Educational Policies and Social Change, 1819 – 1972, by H.E. Wilson. Singapore: Singapore University Press, 1978 (under the auspices of the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies). Pp. xvi, 300. Introduction, Appendices, Bibliography, Index. Hardcover S$30, Paperback S$20.

Social Engineering in Singapore, sub-titled *Educational Policies and Social Change, 1819 – 1972*, is sure to attract attention among not only educationists but also social scientists who are interested in the problems of change. This interest is likely to be enhanced by the fact that Singapore is noted for its planning activities and the success that resulted from such planning. However, critics are by no means unknown, and one of the oft-heard criticisms is that Singaporeans, in the field of education in particular, have been subjected to far too much "social engineering" within a highly centralized system of education. To educationists brought up in more liberal traditions, "social engineering" are pretty strong words to use to describe what is commonly understood to have been a formative (and creative) educational process. Have Singaporeans been indeed thus "engineered" for the last century and a half, as the sub-title of the book seems to indicate?

The answer to this question is, by the author's own admission (p. 75), quite surprisingly, "no" – at least for the 120-year period between 1819 and the outbreak of the Pacific War. To quote:

> The foregoing consideration of some of the salient features of the system of education as it evolved in Singapore will have demonstrated the inappropriate-ness of referring to an "educational policy". Rather than a single plan, educa-tion in the Island can be better characterized as a series of programmes, one for each ethno-linguistic group, another for the English-medium schools, and yet others for private schools and higher education. It is tempting to identify these separate programmes as part of an overall policy of "divide and rule"; yet to do so would be to credit colonial officials with greater guile, or perhaps duplicity, than they appear to have had.

Indeed, the author goes on to stress that "at no point was such a policy enunciated" and that even the so-called plans "seem to have evolved in response to a series of challenges and to reflect the interests and prejudices of senior members of the Malayan Civil Service, as well as their perceptions of the needs of the different communities".

Moving on to the period of the Japanese occupation (1942 – 45), while the author quite rightly points out that "education was recognized by the Japanese as a most powerful instrument to be used to achieve the major objective of 'incorporating the Southern Region into the domain of Imperial Japan' ", it must be emphasized that wartime conditions and

military preoccupations did not permit the conquerors to pay more than lip-service to their aspirations. Moreover, the occupation period was short, and conditions deteriorated very rapidly. Particularly in Singapore, anti-Japanese sentiments were so strong that no conceivable amount of "social engineering", short of coercion, would have worked even if the Japanese had attempted to do so. The author also seems to credit the Japanese with more than what they had done when he suggests that "the proliferation of junior technical schools and trade schools produced the nucleus of a skilled labour force that was to play an important role in the metamorphosis of post-war Singapore" (p. 104).

The author is on surer ground as he goes on to consider the post-war problems of education, particularly those after the mid-fifties. Indeed, a semblance of "educational policy" as it is now understood did not become evident till after the re-occupation, when political realities forced the administrators to think in terms of "fostering and extending the capacity for self-government and the ideal of civic loyalty and responsibility", of providing "equal educational opportunity", and somewhat later, of grappling with the thorny problems of medium or media of instruction. (Manpower considerations came in even much later.) Here the author appears to be knowledgeable and perceptive, and quite capable of handling the available published data both competently and confidently. However, some of the comments made may need to be further verified, one way or the other, in the light of future historical research, such as for example: despite the oft-repeated aim of developing a united, multi-racial society in which all four languages should enjoy equality of status, the use of English is encouraged; Chinese education is allowed to atrophy through lack of support; a Singaporean identity, which is English-speaking for the most part, is promoted (pp. 236 – 37); and many others of a similar nature which are scattered throughout the book. "Social engineering" is here in abundance.

One last comment: there appears to be more discussion of "political change" than "social change" in the book.

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