

# PERSPECTIVES ON THE CONCEPT OF SOCIAL CONTROL

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## INTRODUCTION

Even a cursory examination of the concept of social control will confront an apparently insurmountable problem: No definition of the term is agreed upon by sociologists. This is puzzling not only because social control is one of the most widely used terms in the sociological lexicon, but also because there is evidence of a revival of interest in the topic (e.g. Janowitz 1978; Zald 1978; Roucek 1978; Goode 1978). The term social control is found in three contexts in the sociological literature: (a) as a description of a basic social process or *condition*; (b) as a *mechanism* to insure compliance with norms; and (c) as a *method* by which to study (or to interpret data about) social order. The first conception, associated closely with classical sociological theory, served as the dominant perspective during the first part of this century. The second has its roots in classical theory but is a more modern innovation, coming to fruition in the 1950s. The third is temporally the most recent but represents in many ways a return to earlier views. None of these perspectives has been the object of rigorous conceptual or theoretical development (cf. Gibbs 1981). As a result, social control is a sensitizing concept that "gives the user a general sense of reference and guidance in approaching empirical instances," rather than a definitive concept that "refers precisely to what is common to a class of objects by aid of a clear definition. . ." (Blumer 1969: 147-48).

This lack of agreement on a definition is related ultimately to the absence of an adequate theory of social control—i.e. a theory of the origin and maintenance of norms, and the relationship between norms and sanctions.

## SOCIAL CONTROL AND THE THEORETICAL PROBLEM OF SOCIAL ORDER

Most published definitions of social control are so broad that virtually anything might be included. Consider Hollingshead's (1941: 220) definition: "Social control inheres in the more or less common obligatory usages and values which define the relations of one person to another, to things, to ideas, to groups, to classes, and to the society in general." Now, omit the words "social control" and ask a sociologist what is being referred to. Social-psychological definitions have usually been no more precise. According to Mead (1925: 275), "social control depends. . . upon the degree to which individuals in society are able to assume the attitudes of others who are involved with them in common endeavor." But putting one's self in the place of another might just as well characterize social organization; furthermore, the process of generalizing one's self might as easily be the result of social control as social control itself. More contemporary definitions are no less troublesome; by narrowing the scope of the term, modern definitions—particularly those that link social control with reactions to deviance—have defined social control by means of other, equally dilogical concepts (e.g. norm, deviance, law).

Writings through about World War II tended to equate social control with the maintenance of social order through the continuation of effective social organization. These writings were by American sociologists, since social control is predominantly an American idea. (However, it has conceptual counterparts elsewhere, such as Durkheim's notion of collective conscience; see Pitts 1968.) European writers were quietly and indirectly influential in the initial formulation of the concept.

Social control became a major American sociological concept for at least two reasons. First, writers in the United States linked it with one of the foremost problems in sociology: explaining continued social organization in highly differentiated, complex social groups. Such theorists as Tonnies (*gemeinschaft* and *gesellschaft*), Maine (status and contract), Weber (traditional and rational or bureaucratic), Durkheim (mechanical and organic), Marx (capitalism and socialism), Cooley (primary and secondary), Linton (ascription and achievement), Redfield (folk and urban), and Becker (sacred and secular) were concerned with the manner in which the form of social organization could change without adversely affecting social order. This was perceived to be a problem of social control.

Second, the United States was ideally suited "as the laboratory for the study of transitional society in the framework of a rapidly changing social structure" (Odum 1951: 56) for the firsthand study of social control because the term implied potential—if not actual—social problems. Near the end of the 19th century, when sociology was being established as an independent discipline,

the United States could be viewed as a microcosm of social change and disorder.<sup>1</sup>

In the United States, Edward A. Ross first popularized the concept of social control in a series of articles that appeared in the *American Journal of Sociology* between March, 1896 and May, 1898. These papers comprised the substance of his later well-known book, *Social Control*, published in 1901. In his "Americanization" of the problem of social control, Ross framed the concept in social-psychological terms. For Ross, as for the European thinkers he drew upon, the essential problem was to explain social order which he sought to do through 23 mechanisms by which groups influence individuals. However, Ross did not emphasize the conditions of social organization per se (as did writers who joined the community-society debate) but instead viewed individuals as objects of society's domination. Society created its own order by channeling the behavior of its members into orderly relations. Ross's conception of social control is a reaction against the economics he was trained in, which viewed human conduct as essentially self-serving. Ross thus wondered under what conditions self-interests intersected collective interests, and what collectivities could do to maximize this intersection. Ross's answer—subsumed under "social control"—rejects much in the economic approach he dutifully learned from Richard Ely (with classmate John Commons) at Johns Hopkins.

Ross and W. I. Thomas (whose work formed the foundation of the later development of the concept) believed that individuals required regulation once they had escaped the uterine-like influence of the primary groups that had characterized a simpler, more satisfying social organization. Early sociologists were concerned that urbanization—and the more sociologically insidious "urbanism"—were threatening traditional social values and behavior patterns. Workers were leaving small midwestern and southern towns and gravitating to the larger northern cities where opportunities were greater; women, the stalwarts of the nuclear family (long perceived by sociologists to be the central socializing institution) were freeing themselves from traditional roles and agitating for equal participation in political and occupational arenas; and American shores were attracting many immigrants.

But, it was not simply physical and social mobility that concerned these early sociologists; rather, it was the social problems they were thought to breed. At the turn of the century muckrakers cried "foul" over the behavior of robber barons and political bosses, social workers attempted to combat

<sup>1</sup>Historian Robert Wiebe's (1967) sensitive account of this period in America recounts the specifics of this theme. A similar point has been made by a sociologist who claims that "sociology needed moralists to get started" (Dibble 1975: 153), implying that the discipline of sociology no less than the concept of social control required troubled times for its origins.

poverty in urban areas, and “child savers” snatched juveniles from the throes of a misspent adolescence. The city represented an odd mixture of golden opportunity and social salvation amid depressing surroundings and among persons with little hope. Rather than providing a utopia for its newer residents, the city spawned vice, corruption, and despair. The city may have been “where the action was,” but much of that action was either illegal or considered socially debilitating.

This irony of urban life did not escape the notice of early sociologists. These scholars had similar backgrounds and approaches to sociology. Their common background (the early sociologists were recruited mainly from small towns, were educated in the midwest, derived from religious families, and demonstrated a similar distrust of—although they themselves were lured to—the city) and perhaps their similar class interests (Schwendinger & Schwendinger 1974) seemed to produce a like view of the task of sociology. That task was essentially to ameliorate the social problems of the new industrial, urbanized society. Their alarm over the growing problems of city life produced an interest in mechanisms that could assume the nurturing influence of the primary group, which was seen as the ultimate source of socialization and order. This theme is evident in Cooley’s (1909) work on social organization, a book similar in many ways to Ross’s (1901).

The central sociological problem was not to account for the lure of the city—that, after all, was self-evident: promises of economic well-being, a place where the future was earned and not inherited, and the excitement and diversity of city life were sufficient for this purpose. Instead, the problem was to explain how humans could act cooperatively and civilly once released from the gently restraining bonds of the primary group. This was the American formulation of the problem of social control.

The problem was stated elegantly by Cooley (1909: 351) in the form of a parable (and from this it surely acquired the moral truth it was meant to convey):

A well-ordered community is like a ship in which each officer and seaman has confidence in his fellows and in the captain, and is well accustomed to do his duty with no more than ordinary grumbling. All hangs together and is subject to reason in the form of long-trying rules of navigation and discipline. Virtue is a system and men do heroic acts as part of the day’s work and without self-consciousness. But suppose that the ship goes to pieces—let us say upon an iceberg—then the orderly whole is broken up and officers, seamen, and passengers find themselves struggling miscellaneously in the water. Rational control and the virtue that is habit being gone, each one is thrown back upon his undisciplined impulses. Survival depends not upon wisdom or goodness—as it largely does in a social system—but upon ruthless force, and the best may probably perish.

The well-ordered community, the one bound together with primary ties, common purpose, and altruism, thus becomes disorganized when those bonds

are weakened or broken. The task of social control, to continue Cooley's parable, is to replace those old bonds or to create new ones once people find themselves "in the water."

For both Ross and Cooley, the solution was to be found in the structure of social relationships, rather than in the "undisciplined impulses" of humans. In fact, Ross (1901: 5) labeled as delusional the idea that "order is to be explained by the person's inherited equipment for good conduct, rather than by control that society exercises over him." Since disorder was a social problem, it required a social explanation and social solution.

W. I. Thomas's concept of "social disorganization" foretold subsequent conceptual problems. Social disorganization was defined as an absence of social control, and then social control was defined as an absence of social disorganization. Circular 'explanations' resulted. For example, the social disorganization of certain city areas was 'explained' by an absence of social control; but since social control had become synonymous with social order, this amounted to nothing more than explaining that disorder resulted from the absence of order.

In the view of these early sociologists, if the primary group performed the essential function of social control, then its antithesis, the secondary group, served to disrupt, disorganize, and produce deviance. If the secondary group did not produce these ills directly, it at least did little to prevent them. The importance of primary groups was vivid for Clifford Shaw. On numerous speaking engagements, Shaw would recount his own childhood experience with both delinquency and social control in the small town of Luray, Indiana, his birthplace. Shaw was once caught stealing bolts from the local blacksmith to repair his toy wagon. The blacksmith apprehended him, shook him by the heels until the bolts dropped to the ground, and then helped him fix the wagon, thus epitomizing the small-town response to delinquency (Snodgrass 1976: 3).<sup>2</sup>

This model of delinquency prevention—and the well-learned lessons of the importance of primary relations and a sense of community—informed Shaw's efforts to combat delinquency. The Chicago Area Projects can be interpreted as being organized around the theme (though not the explicit objective) of transforming neighborhoods into pseudo-primary groups. Using indigenous community leaders as project personnel, the Area Projects attempted to stim-

<sup>2</sup>Confidence in the effectiveness of "natural" social control was not unique to Shaw; indeed, it pervades the writings of most early sociologists. "The social problem is fundamentally a city problem," proclaimed Robert Park (1952: 74). "It is the problem of achieving in the freedom of the city a social order and social control equivalent to that which grew up naturally in the family, the clan, and the tribe." Of course, no one knew how this could take place since what grew up "naturally" in the city was often something other than "social order and social control." See also Frazier & Gaziano 1979.

ulate a greater sense of belonging among delinquent youth and their parents (Finestone 1976). Unfortunately, the primary groups that intrigued sociologists initially and upon which such efforts were based could not be easily replicated; primary groups in small communities were based either on kinship, common cultural backgrounds, or shared intimacies (Erikson 1976), while the (secondary) groups observed in urban areas represented little more than the effects of physical proximity, with no closer immediate bonds between group members than the use of common transport, post offices, and groceries.

The sociological problem thus became one of replacing primary groups in social settings that were neither dominated by nor conducive to kinship-based relations. Ethnic ties that united many urban residents were not sufficient for this purpose, although they were by no means meaningless in the creation of urban communities. The question was: How could the function of the primary group be reproduced by social mechanisms in the city? How could social order be guaranteed without a more primitive, but more effective, type of social organization? In response to questions such as these, Park & Burgess (1924: 785) lamented that "all social problems turn out finally to be problems of social control." Once humans had taken to the city, once the process of urbanism had taken place, social control involved the replacement of primary group ties with a set of forces that would serve as surrogates.<sup>3</sup>

It seemed sensible that any form of social control substituted for the primary group would have to possess the characteristics and operate in the manner of the primary group. For this reason, social control and coercive control were seen as antithetical; social control was thought to consist of a set of legitimate moral principles that rendered coercive control unnecessary. As such, social control did not force compliance, but used persuasion by remnants of the primary group in the city (Cooley 1909). Other sociologists in this tradition equated social control with the effective linkages among social groups, from primary groups to complex bureaucratic structures (Thomas & Znaniecki 1927).

Early writers became so enamored of the concept of social control and were so disturbed by the threat to social order they were witnessing that the notion of social control eventually appeared to be a synonym for sociology itself. The study of society was the study of social control (Gurvitch 1945). As a result,

<sup>3</sup>The city has long been criticized, but the nature of the criticism has often been misunderstood. Many intellectuals criticized the city, not because they romanticized the primary group and found the city too civilized but because the city seemed to them not civilized enough—it seemed too uncontrolled, too gaudy, too chaotic for scientifically oriented minds who sought, or hoped for, a more planned social order (see White & White 1962: 227). Even E. A. Ross, his biographer tells us, "with all his nostalgia for the past. . . found the urban world an exciting and inviting place, and he fully enjoyed the impersonality and material rewards mass society offered, without any deep regrets over the loss of his primary group" (Weinberg 1972: fn. 50, 98–99).

all manner of social mechanisms and conditions were discussed as mechanisms of social control. The table of contents of books on social control read like a litany of topics in sociology—institutions, education, law, family, religion, authority, public opinion, mass communications, stratification, and propaganda, to mention only a few (cf. Lumley 1925; Dowd 1936; Roucek 1947).

This, of course, was precisely the problem with the concept: It was not only difficult to define, but it also produced confusion about whether it was a process or the desired consequence of a process. Sociologists early recognized the definitional problem. Park & Burgess (1924: 785) pointed out in proper elegiacal tone that “social control has been studied, but in the wide extension that sociology has given the term, it has not been defined.” In large part because of ambiguous definitions (see Hollingshead 1941), social control was usually inferred from evaluations of social states. That is, social control was assumed to exist in social settings characterized as “organized,” and assumed to be absent in settings said to be “disorganized.” The degree of social control was reflected in the degree of social organization or disorganization. As such, social control was more than that which led to social organization (Janowitz 1975); social control *was* social organization. Under those circumstances, social control could never become a definitive concept; it could only sensitize sociologists to some “desired” form of organization.

## A PERIOD OF TRANSITION

The decline of the view equating social control with effective social organization was gradual and incomplete. Some current writers (discussed below) still employ such a concept. Nevertheless, it became apparent in the 1930s and 1940s that this perspective was no longer tenable for the broad range of problems it addressed. First, developments in criminological theory pointed to a role of the primary group quite different from that envisaged by earlier sociologists. In his theory of differential association, Sutherland (1947) conceived the primary group as a source of both social order and social disorder; as if to emphasize the point, Sutherland indicated that criminal norms are learned only within primary groups and not at all in secondary groups. But even Sutherland was reluctant to abandon altogether the notion that the primary group was an effective socializer of conventional norms. In this regard, he rejected the idea that such areas as cities were “disorganized,” referring to them instead in less evaluative terms as “differentially socially organized” or in “culture conflict.”

Second, evidence began to mount that urban areas, even those said to be disorganized, were far from devoid of social control (Whyte 1943a,b). Such evidence seemed to indicate that inner city areas contained essentially the

same social dynamics as pastoral areas. The main difference was in the consequences of control efforts. Social control in slums appeared to be organized around norms different from those of rural communities, but the processes of mutual influence, accommodation, and legitimation were the same.

Partly in response to the increasingly empirical nature of sociology (Oberschall 1972), writers following World War II began to view social control not as a condition but as a collection of variables—as units of influence, each exercising independent effects upon human conduct. Forerunners of this tradition existed prior to 1950 (e.g. Lemert 1942), but these earlier statements were more closely associated with industry, labor relations (“worker control”), public administration, and law than with sociology (Massie 1965).

Pound’s (1942) attempt—largely unsuccessful (see Geis 1964)—to wed sociological with jurisprudential analyses of social order provided a transition from the study of small-scale problems of worker productivity and employee relations to the investigation of broader issues. Pound argued that social control was exerted as “the pressure upon each man brought to bear by his fellow men in order to constrain him from antisocial conduct, that is, conduct at variance with the postulates of the social order” (Pound 1942: 18). Traditionally, such pressure resulted from the enforcement of custom by the family and religion. But the weakening influence of these institutions left only that of law; thus social control was “primarily the function of the state. . . exercised through law” (p. 25).

Pound’s argument echoed those of sociologists before him. The themes of the declining significance of institutional authority, the lessening importance of traditional ideas of morality, and the newfound freedom of persons in the anonymous environment of the city had also characterized the work of Ross, Cooley, Thomas, and Wirth. But for Pound social control was no longer a subtle, persuasive nudging toward social good, it was the exercise of power. Social control was a tool for social engineering. In the phrase “social control” Pound emphasized “control.” The significance of social control was not to be found in its social roots (e.g. society’s influence over individuals, as Ross conceived it), but in its ability to restrain and regulate actively and aggressively. Social control, for Pound, did not attempt to influence people’s opinions or evaluations of conduct, hoping that they would then behave in an orderly fashion; it attempted to channel people into orderly behavior regardless of what they thought or felt.

Pound was not sociologically naive. He recognized that law alone does not control society. Morals, religion, and education likewise exert control to varying degrees at different times and places (1942: 18ff, 22ff, 26ff, 32ff). Social control is not, therefore, an invariant process of interpersonal influence, but a changing process that relies on wider social events for its meaning at any

particular time. Moreover, control efforts are directed toward particular persons: those who were likely, through circumstance or inclination, to stray from the orderly path. For Pound, this meant (among others) criminals. For Hughes (1946), on the other hand, social control was role-specific. It was directed toward those in given roles (e.g. persons in the professions) to insure adequate role performance. Thus it was not "society's" norms that oriented social-control efforts, but occupational and institutional norms.

## SOCIAL CONTROL AND CONFORMITY

Sociological work after about 1950 was sensitive to the variability Pound discussed. Previously, sociologists had perceived variability in social control to mean simply a reduction in the influence of social institutions and an increase in the use of legal means. This, in fact, was exactly the problem as some earlier sociologists formulated it: the decline in *crescive* controls (i.e. those arising "naturally") with a concomitant increase in *telic* controls (Sumner 1906). After 1950, however, sociologists generally viewed social control as a collection of mechanisms to induce compliance to norms. Social control and social order were still linked, but now by the behavior that elicited the social control: deviance. Generally, deviance was thought to be destructive of social order (hence the need for social control; see Cohen 1966). But, aside from certain functionalists (who themselves often thought deviance was in some sense "functional" for social organization), most sociological writing was characterized by *insouciance*; to most sociologists it seemed unlikely that deviance would ever really erode social order. In the 1950s the problem of order that Hobbes had agonized over was assumed to be solved.

Sociologists in the 1950s could afford to adopt a more narrow view of social control. They had witnessed what earlier sociologists had not: that crises in society did not totally dissolve community, but only changed it.<sup>4</sup> What sociologists differed on was whether this change was for the better, and, if so, how. Subsequent conceptions of social control stem from the slightly schizophrenic positions produced on this issue. There were essentially two camps:<sup>5</sup>

<sup>4</sup>Thus Shils (1975: xxi) scolds mass society theorists by pointing to the heightened social vitality of the United States: "I could see, in the United States in the 1930s, despite the demoralizing influence of the Depression, great numbers of persons remaining attached to their society." Shils goes on to say that "The consensual element in American society was very far from extinction." Other observers stated that society had actually been strengthened by the process of economic and social upheaval in the 1930s. America had faced a stern test and passed.

<sup>5</sup>Two orientations tended to garner the most attention. The terms "functionalist" and "conflict theorist" only roughly label the participants in these debates, and sometimes the terms obscure differences rather than clarify intellectual positions. The terms are convenient. However, Merton's formulation of *anomie* is hardly functionalist, and we are indebted to Robin Williams (Parsons's student) for a sophisticated "conflict" analysis.

(a) Functionalists viewed the change as beneficial and progressive, and conceived social control as a set of independent variables, as mechanisms that reduce social strains and help maintain system stability. (b) Those inclined toward a conflict perspective viewed the change with alarm, noted increased alienation and political repression, and conceived social control as a set of dependent variables. If the question for the functionalists was "How influential is X in reducing deviance?" the question for conflict theorists was "Given that X is influential in changing conduct, how can we insure it will not be used for the benefit of the few against the many?" Both groups, however, agreed on one point: Social control had something to do with the actions of some (elites, the state, or some other controllers) directed toward others (non-elites, criminals, or deviants).

The functionalist position was founded on a faith both in social progress and in groups that would mediate between individuals and social structure. The United States, after all, had survived well two world wars, a devastating economic depression, the (more or less; see Glazer & Moynihan 1970) integration of immigrants, and the growth and proliferation of large urban and suburban areas, all of which generated a momentum against *Gemeinschaft*. People had learned to live in the modern industrial society, and had done so to their benefit.<sup>6</sup> The potential dangers of "mass society" had been largely quelled. For one thing, it appeared that earlier writers had romanticized *Gemeinschaft* (Bramson 1961; Shils 1972), thereby impeding social progress as represented by increased leisure, affluence, and especially materialism (three conditions that were interpreted frequently to mean increased freedom). Moreover, mass society's most dangerous feature—the alienation of individuals from society that makes them susceptible to antidemocratic political ideologies—was blunted through pluralism, particularly through voluntary associations that would link individuals with their society (Kornhauser 1959). The major issues thus concerned the perpetuation of the "good life," and social control would aid that process. "The most salient feature about modern life," proclaimed Daniel Bell (1962: 30), "is the ideological commitment to change. And by change is meant the striving for material, economic betterment, greater opportunity for individuals to exercise their talents, and an appreciation of culture by wider masses of people. Can any society deny these aspirations?"

Conflict theorists thought so. The disquieting analysis by Riesman et al (1950) portrayed individuals with plenty of leisure and material wealth (the

<sup>6</sup>Shils (1975: 11–12) again: "[I]n the modern societies of the West, the central value system has gone much more deeply into the heart of their members than it has ever succeeded in doing in any earlier society. The 'masses' have responded to their contact with a striking measure of acceptance." Rather than repelling citizens, mass society, according to Shils, incorporated them to a greater extent than any *Gemeinschaft* could.

“good life”) but lost in lonely crowds trying desperately to have fun. Mills (1951, 1956) noted more pointedly the despair of the conflict response. For Mills, the masses were unhappy with their lot in life; they seemed caricatures of Merton’s ritualist, going through the social motions without meaningful occupations or relationships. Most persons did indeed have more leisure and material goods; but, like Riesman’s other-directed men, they lacked a full integration into the culture that provided those benefits. The elites, on the other hand, possessed not only material goods and leisure, but also one of the key ingredients of a happy human existence: the freedom to choose goals and life-styles. Power was true freedom. Growing political factionalism and personal alienation promised for the masses only a future without freedom. Mills projected “a society of powerful elites and impotent masses, separated by innocuous middle layers” (Cleclak 1974: 40). In such a view, social control could insure the “good life” only to those with power. Social control was not a benevolent force that helped explain system stability, but was something whose source and consequences required explanation; it was the dependent variable of the conflict theorist’s research.

### *The Functionalist Response: Social Control as Independent Variables*

Functionalist sociologists attempted to make society as intuitively interpretable as possible. Parsons (1951) explained modern industrial societies, with all their complexities, in one volume, stressing the interrelatedness of parts in a unified whole. According to Parsons, the “whole” worked pretty well. Residual problems remained, but these were minor and small-scale. Such problems were attributed to “deviance.” Deviance caused a tension in an otherwise stable system, and social control would return the system to equilibrium.

Parsons (and LaPiere 1954) associated the concept of social control explicitly and strongly with deviance. Parsons found the essential meaning of social control in its ability to react against deviance, those imperfections or strains in stable social systems. These reactions, called sanctions [following Radcliffe-Brown (1933) and other anthropologists who defined social control in similar terms], are of two kinds: (a) broad structural influences, or expressions of official group sentiment (formal sanctions); and (b) interpersonal influences, or evaluations of conduct (norms) related to group membership (informal sanctions).

For Parsons social control and deviance represented opposing processes: “The theory of social control is the obverse of the theory of the genesis of deviant behavior tendencies. It is the analysis of those processes in the social system which tend to counteract the deviant tendencies, and of the conditions

under which such pressures will operate" (Parsons 1951: 297). Parsons thus duly considered alternative sources of social control (formal and informal, positive and negative, internal and external) and the conditions under which each of these operates to counteract deviance. Parsons suggested that internalization (the desired outcome of the socialization process) prevents most deviance while sanctions are invoked against the rest. This theme had predominated in the work of the Chicago theorists several decades earlier. Later writers in this tradition (e.g. Williams 1960; Toby 1964; Homans 1974) adopted Parsons's concept of social control.

In an early example of research in this tradition Reiss (1951: 196) defined deviance as the "behavior consequent to the failure of personal and social controls to produce behavior in conformity with the norms of the social system." Therefore, "social control may be defined as the ability of social groups or institutions to make norms or rules effective." Such concepts of social control as a set of mechanisms to produce normative compliance invariably evoke criticism for assuming normative consensus. But in a pluralistic society one seldom finds consensus about norms (Lemert 1964). Moreover, norms are often difficult to identify prior to their violation (Kitsuse 1972). Normative identification is thus a post hoc exercise requiring little sociological expertise: One simply observes the application of sanctions and *infers* the existence of a norm. Further definitional problems make the relationship among norms, deviance, and social control extremely troublesome (Gibbs 1981). Nevertheless, in spite of these objections, any concept of social control that omits normative considerations would seem suspect, since the very word "control" implies the manipulation of conduct toward a desired end (as defined by at least one person).

While not a direct descendent of Parsons, modern "control" theory employs a normative conception of deviance and social control. Following Durkheim and Reiss (1951), some theorists have suggested that both deviance and conformity are outcomes of socialization; when socialization works well, persons are drawn into closer contact with conventional society (Hirschi 1969). "Crime is automatically explained by explaining the behavior of the law-abiding" (Hirschi & Rudisill 1976: 21). While control theorists differ about the forms of control that explain law-abiding conduct (cf Nye 1958; Reckless 1973), they share a concern with the process of social control (typically phrased in terms of *crescive* factors, such as socialization) and the effects of socializing institutions (e.g. the family). Deviance results from the failure of social control. Here, control theorists—like the social disorganization theorists before them—run the risk of "explaining" something (deviance) by mere definition (the absence of social control).

Furthermore, linking the concepts of social control and deviance fails to specify the cause of any normative compliance achieved without sanctions.

Consider, for example, compliance said to be achieved by internalization of norms (see Scott 1971). It is inadequate to attribute to internalization all conformity that cannot be accounted for by sanctions, as LaPiere (1954) does. Many mechanisms may result in normative compliance; some are intended to do so, some not. In fact, if the sole criterion is normative compliance, "it is difficult to think of any phenomena that would not qualify as social control in one context or another, e.g., the custom of wearing wedding rings may be conducive to marital fidelity" (Gibbs & Erickson 1975: 34). Thus, even when viewed as a collection of independent variables, social control is too broad a concept to be useful in empirical research. However, no conception of social control can seem to omit normative considerations altogether.

### *Conflict Responses: Social Controls as Dependent Variables*

Viewing social control as something that itself requires study and explanation is a view not confined to "radical" theorists (cf Nisbet 1975), but has found more vocal expression in liberal thinking. Conflict theorists have called for the study of power (particularly coercive control)—its location (Domhoff 1967) and the processes by which it is exercised. These writers are concerned about the concentration of power in mass societies—i.e. the ability of certain sectors to control others—and the fact that this concentration disrupts traditional community and displaces traditional authority. Nisbet (1953) recommends a political order that decentralizes power for this reason; Marxists, who share the concern over the locus of power, are not swayed by a faith in pluralism. If social control is motivated for functionalists by collective (or system) interests, it is motivated for conflict theorists by self-interest, particularly elite self-interest. As a result, conflict theorists have generally been more concerned with formal means of control, since formal control reflects the concentration of power and may be more coercive.

**LABELING THEORY** Within the study of deviance, the "labeling" perspective first popularized the investigation of the repressive nature of social control, viewing it as a dependent variable. Sociologists using this approach limited their study largely to the actions of formal agents of social control, especially in institutional settings (e.g. the police, courts, prisons, mental hospitals, suicide prevention clinics, outpatient psychiatric clinics, and alcoholism referral agencies). They emphasized the process by which rules are created that in turn provide the necessary, but not the sufficient, conditions for rule-breaking, and the process by which an individual "becomes" deviant in interaction with control agents.

Ideas on the process of secondary deviance [closely associated with, but not identical to labeling theory's definition of deviance; see Short & Meier (1981)] were founded on a reversal of the traditional perspective concerning the

relationship between deviance and social control: "This study is a large turn away from older sociology that tended to rest heavily upon the idea that deviance leads to social control. I have come to believe that the reverse idea (i.e. social control leads to deviance) is equally tenable and the potentially richer premise for studying deviance in modern society" (Lemert 1972: ix). Social control was no longer a deviance-preventive but a potential deviance-producer. At best, social control was a *contretemps*; often, it made matters worse. Secondary-deviance theorists were committed to the selective study of social control: They were more interested in its "failures" than its "successes" (as Parsons would have defined them).

For Parsons, a theory of social control is the obverse of a theory of deviance. For theorists of secondary deviance on the other hand, social control and deviance are part of the same package; social control and deviance cannot be distinguished either conceptually or empirically. For this reason, debates on social control in recent decades have centered not on the means but on the consequences of social control. Neither secondary-deviance nor functionalist theorists dispute the notion that society exerts control over individuals through sanctions. The empirical question of the *consequences* of those sanctions is at issue.

The violations of rules provokes sanctions. Thus the rule-making process is crucial. Becker (1973) labeled as "moral entrepreneurs" the particularly zealous rule-makers who imposed their rules on others; research on the origins of specific rules discovered who these entrepreneurs were (e.g. Gusfield 1963; Platt 1969; Roby 1969).

**MARXIST THEORY** If social control is an object of suspicion for interactionist theorists such as Howard Becker, it is downright blameworthy for Marxists such as Richard Quinney. Becker's moral entrepreneurs may actually believe the rules they impose upon others are morally correct and may in fact be motivated by altruism (Turk 1972). Quinney's (1980) elites (capitalists), on the other hand, stripped of the veneer of righteousness, are little more than self-interested power-seekers intent upon protecting their social and political advantage (Krisberg 1975). For Marxists, social control is a normatively based social fact, but the norms to which control efforts are oriented in capitalist states are elite or state norms, not the norms of the larger community and certainly not the norms of the working class. Thus for Marxists social control is linked not with social order, but with capitalist state order; social control is state control.

That control activities by elites are effective is not questioned in the Marxist view. State control is self-evidently effective in its brutality. The state manipulates the consciousnesses of workers through the mass media (in order to create the image of a benign state, for example, it defines lower-class but not elite conduct as criminal). The state also employs physical force to repress

opposition.<sup>7</sup> Some writers have suggested that the state uses the welfare system to placate (control), temporarily at least, the surplus population essential for capitalist expansion and development (Piven & Cloward 1971). For functionalists, social control results in better system stability and eventual reduction of social alienation. It performs the opposite function for Marxists: It creates, maintains, and intensifies social divisions within the population, protecting elite interests and advantages (Poulantzas 1973). "True human nature is impossible under the conditions of capitalism, and true humanity can be achieved only in a protest against this estrangement" (Quinney 1980: 4).

The functionalist, interactionist, and Marxist conceptions of social control as collections of variables (or units of influence) are all normative—i.e. the objective of social control in each perspective is normative compliance. To mention one exemplar of each view, for Parsons the objective is compliance with institutional or structural norms; for Becker, it is compliance with the norms of moral entrepreneurs; for Quinney, it is compliance with state or elite norms. The statements of other Marxist scholars (Greenberg 1981) and of critical theorists (Connerton 1976) reflect a similar interest in norms, or the ends and objectives of social control.

Investigation of how the activities of social control agents "create" deviance has concentrated on (a) the generation of secondary deviant careers (e.g. Scheff 1966); (b) the definition of conduct as deviant or criminal, which in turn generates social-control efforts (e.g. Chambliss 1974); and (c) the generation of actual rule-breaking by authorities (e.g. Marx 1981). In each instance, the benign interpretation of the functionalists is questioned.

## SOCIAL CONTROL AND THE METHODOLOGICAL PROBLEM OF SOCIAL ORDER

While writers in the "classical" tradition viewed social control as synonymous with social order, a number of contemporary theorists view social control as a concept around which to organize the study of social order. They use the concept as a means to interpret data that bear on the classic problem of how social order is possible in diverse, pluralistic groups. While the general sociological answer is "social control," as it was for Ross and Cooley, modern theorists have viewed social control as a process that links individuals with one another (ethnomethodology) and with larger structures (social exchange theory).

<sup>7</sup>This distinction is close to that made by Wright (1978: 248) between hegemony and domination. Hegemony refers to "the capacity to define ideologically what kinds of social alternatives are possible at a given moment," while domination "refers to the capacity to enforce a certain range of social alternatives regardless of whether people believe other alternatives are possible or not."

## *Ethnomethodology*

Ethnomethodology is the study of social orders. It is concerned with how humans use reason—through conversational accounts of experience—to order and otherwise make sense of their daily lives (Garfinkel 1967). Since “the world is essentially without meaning” (Lyman & Scott 1970: 1), disputes over the nature and interpretation of seemingly objective events are a predominant feature of social life. Ethnomethodologists attempt to examine the alternative interpretations of individuals, usually through analyses of the language people use to describe their social worlds. The ways people interpret their experiences and emotions provide clues to the kind of social world they live in (Cicourel 1974).

Social life is a continual exercise in constructing and negotiating social order, a term that denotes shared meanings that lead to the coordination of activities among group members (Douglas 1971: 3). Social order is not of major concern in *Gemeinschaft* groups, whose members share interpretations of morality and everyday experience. But pluralistic societies (*Gesellschaften*), because they contain a multiplicity of interpretations—some shared, some not—are “problematic” (the ethnomethodologist’s synonym for lacking primary group ties). When social meanings are problematic, “one man’s social order is another man’s social disorder” (Douglas 1971: 311).

Among ethnomethodologists, the term social control denotes the development of shared meanings. Social order may be little more than what we think it is, but social life is meaningful to the extent that others share our conceptions of reality. Thus social control is the process of “the creation of meaning and the sharing of this meaning among [group] members” (Mitchell 1978: 148), the individual construction of meaning and the persuasion of others to that meaning. When Garfinkel (1967: 45, 69) asks students to violate taken-for-granted meanings in households and exchange relationships based on “one-price rules,” he is asking them to create social disorder and then find a new order, one motivated by the anxiety produced in upsetting the older, given order, and one that results from each individual’s persuading others to share his or her conception of what is taking place. Social psychologists interested in interpersonal influence and sociologists concerned with socialization processes will not be surprised by Garfinkel’s findings, which are consistent with those of a tradition of inquiry rooted deeply in sociology. The process by which individuals come to persuade others of their version of social reality is the creation of social order; this process can be termed social control. Since the process is ongoing, social life can be seen as little more than a continual exercise in social control.

## *Social Exchange Theory*

Janowitz (1978: 57) argues that what made the sociological approach to behavior unique was “the central idea held by sociology’s founders. . .that

any frame of reference—be it economic or psychological—which stressed individualistic self-interest would not supply an adequate basis for analyzing the social order and processes of social control.” Sociology rejected economics as an explanation of all social behavior, a rejection formulated initially (and imprecisely) by Ross, Cooley, and Thomas, and emphasized in its place the importance of group structure and the integration of individuals into groups.

The social exchange perspective represents in many ways a return to explanations based on the classical economic primacy of self-interest. Here, not only power elites but all persons “tend to act so as to maximize reward and minimize cost over time or in the long run” (Emerson 1976: 341). There are important differences between classical economics, or decision theory, and social exchange theory: Economics presumes a perfect market environment and a depersonalized “other” (termed market), and concentrates on one medium of exchange (money), while sociology employs this method of analysis in imperfect social systems and in the context of an interactive exchange between interdependent actors with multiple media of exchange (see Emerson 1976: 351). The similarities between the two theories appear more striking than these differences; however, the differences are crucial as they pertain to social control.

Exchange theory explores power, particularly the effects of an agent’s power on others. This perspective applies not only to dyads, but also to social institutions (Blau 1964) and to social structure itself (Cook & Emerson 1978). Yet as Tallman & Ihinger-Tallman (1979: 217) report, “Those who question the utility of the exchange perspective often point to its failure to deal effectively with issues of social order and social control.”<sup>8</sup>

The focus of exchange theory is not precisely on social control, but on the processes of mutual influence that lead to continued behavior of a given type in a particular environment. While such influence on behavior appears consistent with several broad concepts of social control, exchange theorists have avoided the term. Essential to exchange theory is the assertion that only mutually satisfying exchanges will be maintained; in situations of imbalanced satisfactions, a strain will develop that will lead to the reestablishment of balanced rewards and costs (Emerson 1972). If this assertion is correct, then self-interest may be an important factor in the process of social control. Exchange theorists would thus have us reinterpret the discipline of sociology in terms that were rejected when sociology was founded. They also suggest that the uniqueness of the sociological approach—the approach that was based largely on the concept of social control—is questionable.

<sup>8</sup>Tallman & Ihinger-Tallman (1979) respond to this objection by concentrating on the problem of conflict between individual benefit and collective good. Such an approach concerns social control since central to this conflict is the question of how norms and values develop that channel individual decision-making along lines that benefit collectivities.

## CONCLUSIONS

Sociology distinguished itself from economics and philosophy by attempting to explain the nature of social order and the relation of that order to social change—e.g. shifts from community to society (cf Eisenstadt 1977). “One of the classic puzzles—perhaps *the* classic puzzle—of social theory is how society induces us to behave in ways that serve not our own interest, but the common interest of society” (Jencks 1979: 63). Ross would have recognized this as the formulation of a problem that social control could answer; but he could not have anticipated the eventual difficulty this formulation would produce: If this is the question that only sociology—eschewing the economist’s response of rational self-interest—can answer, how can the study of social control be differentiated from the entire discipline of sociology? Is not the sociologist studying social organization (and social interaction, and processes of interpersonal influence) studying social control?

Because they lack a satisfactory answer to this question, sociologists now disagree on (a) what a theory of social control should attempt to explain and (b) how social control can best be defined to further the development and empirical assessment of such theories. Some believe that theories of social control should specify the conditions under which various control mechanisms are used [e.g. mechanisms are chosen because they are thought to be “effective” (Gibbs 1981)] and when such mechanisms attain predetermined goals [e.g. deterrence; see Tittle (1980)]. Others note that most existing theories of punishment (which are limited theories of social control) concern either variations in punishment or the reasons persons punish (Sutherland & Cressey 1978: 347–358). Moreover, what “new” theory of social control may be developing disregards the prediction of effectiveness, even though it takes explicit notice of the normative quality of social control (Black 1976). Thus some scholars seek theories about the consequences of social control, while others wish to predict variations in control mechanisms themselves; different conceptualizations of social control may be necessary for each task.

The social control of Sutherland and Whyte—neither of whom assumed normative consensus—was not the social control of Ross, Cooley, or Thomas—who did; the aggressive, power-tainted social control of Pound was not the persuasive social control of Shaw; Parsons’s narrowed conception of social controls as sanctions directed against deviance differed from the more pervasive, ubiquitous social control of most earlier writers; the self-interested, ignominious social control of conflict theorists differs from the benign, stability-inducing social control of functionalists; the order-seeking social control of the ethnomethodologists, which makes the entire sociological enterprise synonymous with social control, differs from social control informed by a conflict perspective and recalls the way the term was used near the turn of the century; and the social control of the social exchange theorists suggests that a distinctly sociological approach to social order might better be abandoned in

favor of something approaching an economic orientation, the criticism of which, ironically, prompted Ross's original conception.

We have expected too much of the concept of social control; we have made it so elastic that it fits almost every meaning. Even the more recent ethnomethodological and social exchange literatures do not employ the term, though each of these perspectives is the study of social control (i.e. the terms ethnomethodology, social exchange, and social control are almost synonymous). Social control can never become a definitive concept unless its meaning is narrowed and agreed upon.

Achieving consensus will be no easy task, and there is no guarantee that the effort will be worthwhile. But if we desire a definitive concept, at least two matters require attention. First, social control has been used to mean both "group influence upon individuals" and "influence of individuals upon one another." These two meanings must be censured as unmanageably broad. Second, distinctions are absolutely crucial between social control and related concepts such as power and authority. Gibbs (1981: 53–58) has suggested as a first step that the term social control should be reserved for intentional behavior. Such a proposal confronts a bias in sociology against conceiving human conduct as purposeful and rational. Economics has no difficulty with such a conception of behavior; indeed, much economics is the study of precisely such conduct.<sup>9</sup> Our inability to create a definitive concept of social control may cause us either to abandon the concept or to conceive it as something intentional. Our inability to link social control firmly with social order (itself an ambiguous concept) may bring us to conceive social control in nearly economic terms—terms from a vocabulary that sociologists rejected almost a century ago in creating their distinctive response to the question "How is social order possible?"

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<sup>9</sup>From the time of Adam Smith, of course, economists have devoted attention to the unanticipated consequences of purposeful human action. Yet, the image of economic actors is clear: rational humans assessing costs and benefits. It is an image like the exchange theorists' human, who after making rational choices is still left at the mercy of an imperfect, irrational market, with less than perfect knowledge regarding possible outcomes of action.

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