Social Control and History: An Introduction

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What is social control? If anything, it is a classic concept, which many scholars use as a matter of course. Few, however, care about providing an explicit statement of what they understand it to be. This classic notion is subjected to close scrutiny in the present collection. It examines formal and informal types of control over the last two centuries of European history, thus providing an integral perspective on the efforts at control by various agencies and the responses to them. Yet, each contributor deals with more than just institutions or impersonal mechanisms. The authors focus on real people, some more powerful, some less, in Europe’s past and present.

Although, over the last few decades, much work has been done on a variety of separate institutions that sought to change or influence people’s behavior, these institutions have never been examined in their totality. For example, the history of crime and justice and that of religious teaching have coexisted as largely unconnected subdisciplines. We know much about the state machinery of control (courts, police, prisons), but less about its relationship to popular sanctions and attitudes. Separate studies exist of such subjects as charity, labor, and communal life, but there is no overall analysis of how these settings operated as informal structures of control, through uplifting the habits of the poor, for example, or through patronizing the workforce. Finally, the literature on twentieth-century dictatorial regimes is immense, but little has been published yet on ordinary law enforcement under these regimes. This collection brings these various elements together in a comparative manner.

Social Control: The Concept’s Origins

Although a classic concept, none of the classical European sociologists included social control in their scholarly vocabulary. It is absent from the work of
Durkheim and Weber. The concept’s origins are unequivocally American; it appears to have become popular in Europe only after the Second World War. Popularity was instant in the United States from May 1901 when a thirty-four-year-old professor named Ross first introduced the idea in a book. The date of its appearance makes social control a decidedly twentieth-century notion, which needs fresh scrutiny at the start of the twenty-first century. Such an exercise could begin with the person of its intellectual father. Although historians—but less so sociologists—routinely cite Ross as the author who introduced the idea of social control, very rarely do they take account of the intellectual and political context in which he did so.

Edward Alsworth Ross (1866–1951) was a farmer’s son from Virden, Illinois.1 An orphan at age nine, he was raised in the home of a local justice of the peace. His foster parents cared enough for him to send him to college in Iowa. As a graduate student, Ross spent two years in Germany, studying philosophy in Berlin, but there is no record of his meeting any of that country’s young generation of social scientists. Back in America he turned to economics, which he taught at several universities and from the mid-1890s at Stanford. There, he gradually redirected his attention to sociology. The switch of disciplines was one reason for a conflict with the university’s cofounder and governor, Jane Stanford, widow of Leland Stanford, who finally fired him in 1900. Ross developed the concept of social control more or less simultaneously with becoming a sociologist. From 1896 onward he published a series of articles as a preview (so the idea actually dates from just before the twentieth century). By the time he collected the articles in a book, the concept of social control had already gained notoriety. Ross applied for a chair at the University of Wisconsin, which at the time housed the largest sociology department in the Unites States, but the state legislature withdrew the post’s funding. He finally became a professor at Wisconsin in 1906.

Social Control reads as an erudite essay on human society, with an emphasis on the problem of social order. The book discusses a wide range of societies, from ancient Greece and various non-Western nations to the United States in the author’s own days. The bibliography includes such classic figures as Herbert Spencer, Émile Durkheim, and Ferdinand Tönnies. Intriguingly, Ross concludes that social control will be all the more necessary as we move from “community” to “society,” adding in a footnote that he developed this thought before becoming acquainted with Tönnies’ book but that the ideas are similar.2 Essentially, however, Ross is concerned with classifying and labeling institutions and practices, much like Max Weber a few years after him. The crucial passage, summarizing the overall thesis, is tucked away in a discussion two-thirds of the way through the text. Ross first admits that society is a kind of fiction: There is nothing to it but people affecting one another in various ways. “The thesis of this book is that from the interactions of individuals and generations there emerges a kind of collective mind
evincing itself in living ideals, conventions, dogmas, institutions, and religious sentiments which are more or less happily adapted to the task of safeguarding the collective welfare from the ravages of egoism.” This is a remarkably modern statement, to the extent that it acknowledges that society is an abstract, not an actor who can “do” things and that processes of change are blind, not set in motion consciously by powerful individuals or groups. It is also an outdated statement, to the extent that it minimizes the role of conflict in social relations and unabashedly expresses personal contentment.

Order, then, is equated with peaceful social relations and a degree of collective harmony. It is the opposite of an aggressive assertion of self-interest. It is equally the opposite of a ruling class’s exploitation of subordinate groups, which Ross calls class control, not social control. Ross admits that order has not always prevailed historically, but he seems to consider episodes of disorder as the exceptions. The book’s first page addresses the problem of order with a metaphor: The flow of traffic at a crowded city junction is orderly when persons and vehicles move in different directions but do not collide with each other. Similarly, all members of society have different interests, but they share conventions for avoiding collisions most of the time. Why is this so since, after all, it would be more logical to assume a state of disorder? Surely, people are not born with a set of commandments etched upon their souls or with inherited cooperative instincts. At that point, social control enters the picture. Ross first identifies its sociopsychological foundations, each operating in different situations: sympathy, sociability, sense of justice, and resentment (which another person may show if we injure him). The means of social control are rather variegated, the primary ones being public opinion and the law, in that order. In other words, people act more or less peacefully because they value others’ judgments and because the state coerces them toward it. Although the latter comes second, Ross nevertheless concludes that the law “however minor its part at a given moment in the actual coercion of citizens, is still the cornerstone of the edifice of order.” The entire selection of the various means of social control is unsystematic; it further includes religious beliefs and sanctions (among which are notions of brotherhood), education, custom, and a host of minor sources, one of which is a sense of honor. Throughout the book, finally, Ross mixes analysis with considerations of policy and recipes for ameliorating institutions. When discussing criminal justice, for example, he advocates a “scientific penology” that graduates punishments according to both the harmfulness of the offense to society and its attractiveness to the criminal.

Although Social Control must be judged first of all on its own merits, any evaluation of the book should take the author’s later work and his political beliefs into account. Ross’s personal ideology was far from consistent over time. During the 1890s he advocated “state socialism” and supported Populist causes. After 1900 he turned to a more moderate advocacy of federal intervention and
mediation in labor conflicts. At the same time, he called for restrictions on immigration, particularly of Asians. Despite this, he traveled to China for six months in 1910, to acquaint himself with Chinese culture. When the First World War broke out, he championed international arbitration by disinterested third parties as a solution, but when Wilson called for war in April 1917, Ross and other intellectuals with pacifist leanings rallied behind their president. Ross visited Russia in the crucial years 1917–1918, but in the 1920s he became a great admirer of Taylor and Ford. His Russian contacts were good enough to persuade the Soviets to release his fellow sociologist Pitirim Sorokin, whom he got a job in the United States. During the depression Ross again advocated federal intervention, supporting the “other” Roosevelt’s New Deal. As late as 1935, a committee investigating communism on campuses summoned Ross to its meeting. Generally, then, he appears as a man of contrasts. He supported women’s rights, but he was convinced of the racial superiority of Anglo-Saxons. He advocated a strong government, but he cosponsored a speech on the Madison campus by the anarchist Emma Goldman, which almost got him fired again.

A bullet fired at his predecessor made Theodore Roosevelt president in the same year that Social Control appeared. He became Ross’s most influential political friend. They shared the conviction that large corporations, the latter-day “sinners,” should be kept in check for the public benefit. Roosevelt initiated antitrust measures, and his “square deal policy” sought compromises between employers and workers without favoring either party. Advocating government as compromise, Ross considered the square deal a form of social control forced upon workers and employers. His Sin and Society (1907), a mixture of sociological observations and political statements, diagnosed a basic condition of the world he lived in: The interdependence that characterized modern society meant that all members of the social body were at each other’s mercy to a greater extent than ever before. This situation created the opportunity for new forms of wrongdoing, the quintessential sinners being the large corporations. Unlike traditional small businessmen, the managers of corporations had no moral scruples and hardly felt restrained by public sentiment. So they had to be kept in check by state intervention, seen as a form of beneficial social control. The president called Social Control an impressive work, adding he had read everything published by Ross since.

The presidential attack on corporate capitalism was short-lived. William Howard Taft, Roosevelt’s successor, wooed the business community by instituting a committee on monopolies that proclaimed the inevitability of corporations in 1912. Ross expressed his intense disappointment with this “dirty deal.” The outcome was predetermined, he noted, since there were no social scientists on the committee. Táft had ignored “scholars and social workers who have given twenty years or more of their lives to the disinterested and impartial study of the prob-
lem of industrial peace.” This statement provides the final key to Ross’s scholarly and political concerns. No doubt, he had wished to be on that committee himself. He viewed the sociological mission as providing practical insights into social problems and giving policy makers expert advice. A major goal was to promote the majority’s welfare and security without endangering social tranquility. In this project, social control was a crucial factor, but note that it included state control.

Ross’s Legacy

It would take a lifetime to work through the vast number of books and articles on social control published in the twentieth century, and especially after the Second World War, when sociology had become a well-established discipline. This section, then, is certainly not a discussion of social control theory or of the way the concept has been handled within various schools of social science. It merely samples a few collective volumes, sociological and historical, in order to show the wide range of applications to which the concept has been put. This is evident from even a cursory look. Take one of the earliest textbooks on the subject by Roucek and “associates,” first published in 1947. Meant as reading for introductory courses in sociology and social psychology, it takes a broad view of agencies of social control. The book opens with the principal “institutions” involved (state, law, and government; religion; marriage, home, and family; education) and continues with elements of social control in areas such as the economy, art, literature, and the mass media. The preface to the second edition of 1956 proudly announces a new chapter on television, “this ever-more-important means of public communication and control.” Had it been the 1990s, the new chapter, no doubt, would have dealt with the Internet. The introduction defines social control as “those processes, planned or unplanned, by which individuals are taught, persuaded, or compelled to conform to the usages and life-values of groups.” Essentially, it comes down to “attempts to influence others,” or everything that is not self-control. Thus, despite the broad view taken, the insight that the formation of self-control also is a social process is lacking.

A volume entitled Social Control and Social Change exemplifies the move away from a static perspective in the social sciences, which became manifest by the late 1960s. Sociologists, social psychologists, and even biologists contributed to this collection. A chapter on the biological basis of social behavior, for example, offers sections on “the physiological and genetic bases of social control.” In the chapter on changing concepts of masculinity and femininity, the emphasis is on culture rather than biology. Its central concept is the sex role, as one type of “social role,” which men and women acquire through learning. The word “gender” was
not yet fashionable! Chapters on play and games (involving “ludic controls”),
the American radical Right, and the growth of populations indicate that, for this
team of authors, social control is virtually everything. The concept gets no for-
mal definition, but chapter 1 delineates the field on the basis of a few practical
problems: “that of producing constructive social change without the use of destruc-
tive methods, . . . that of inducing individuals to take up desirable kinds of social
behavior within the framework of what is presumably a well-organized society,
. . . that of the undesirable effects of social control” (in particular its “misuse”
for exploiting others or enforcing rules that run counter to human biology).12
In line with the broad approach, the preface states “many people understand con-
trol to mean only restriction of action rather than the positive interstimulation
that is the chief subject of this book.”13

Historians turned to social control a little later. In Social Control in
Nineteenth-Century Britain (1977), A. P. Donajgrodzki, the editor, claims that
this is “the first collection of historical essays making use of the concept.”14 To
date, it is probably the best-known historical work with social control in its title.
In this collection, the emphasis clearly lies on nonstate control. The contribu-
tions deal with, among other things, charity organizations, educational policy,
metropolitan fairs, and the Salvation Army. To justify this emphasis, the editor
cites a passage from Ross’s work, without paying any further attention to it. According
to Donajgrodzki, his contributors share the belief “that social order is maintained
not only, or even mainly, by legal systems, police forces and prisons, but is expressed
through a wide range of social institutions, from religion to family life, and includ-
ing, for example, leisure and recreation, education, charity and philanthropy, social
work and poor relief.”15 In this case, too, we miss a formal definition;
Donajgrodzki is content with the observation that the institutions his book deals
with “contributed to social order.”16

We find the emphasis exactly reversed in the collection Social Control and the
State (1983), edited by Stanley Cohen and Andrew Scull. Although not appar-
ently from its title, this volume contains historical perspectives, some of them
going back to the eighteenth century. They focus on either crime and prisons or
insanity and its treatment, the latter equally with reference to the state and the
social order. The introduction, entitled “social control in history and sociology,”
firmly links our concept with state agencies (the very first words are “the inter-
relationships between the modern state and its apparatus of social control”). Another
revealing sentence accuses authors who use the word “reform” of cherishing a
naive, value-laden view of a continuous movement “from barbarism to enlight-
enment, from ignorance to expertly guided intervention.”17 For Cohen and Scull,
it seems, social control is mainly a negative category, which refers to checking
deviant people and labeling deviance; it is the opposite of “benevolent intentions.”
This perspective necessarily leads to a disproportionate emphasis on control from above. In contrast to Donajgrodzki, Cohen and Scull, even though they appear to dislike it, do believe that social order is maintained primarily by legal systems, police forces, asylums, and prisons.

In a study published two years later, Stanley Cohen put his emphasis on the control of crime and delinquency, in particular the interventionist strategies of state-sponsored professionals. He comments on (then) recent developments in a cynical tone. The cynicism extends to the notion of social control itself, which he calls a Mickey Mouse concept, but not after he has provided us with a formal definition, again in the very first sentence. Social control refers to “the organized ways in which society responds to behaviour and people it regards as deviant, problematic, worrying, threatening, troublesome or undesirable in some way or another.” The problem with this definition, of course, is that it represents society as an actor. Who actually does the responding? Aren’t the deviants and undesirables part of the very society that supposedly deals with them? Don’t they interact with others? Or are we to assume that “society” in reality means the state and its agents and institutions? Then, what about social control in stateless societies? Clearly, the various pathways and trajectories taken by the concept of social control have led us to another dead end here.

Are we to conclude, then, that Ross’s legacy is totally confusing and worthless? In 1901, social control already referred to many things, and it has become more of a container concept ever since. Moreover, whereas some authors consider it primarily a by-product of all kinds of institutions and social interaction, others connect it squarely with the mighty apparatus of the state. Nevertheless, social control has been a successful concept, providing scholars with a convenient term whose connotations they understand. Let me underline again that Ross himself clearly meant it to cover both the formal institutions of the state and all kinds of nongovernmental arenas, some of them at the “bottom” of society. Thus, Ross allowed for top-down as well as bottom-up perspectives on social control. In this, we can still follow him today, but we need an updated and sharper focus. We cannot simply adopt all of Ross’s premises a hundred years later. Casting our net back to the sixteenth century for a moment, we must reject the prima facie equation of order with peaceful social relations and the idea that social control functions most smoothly in democratic societies. In fact, early modern communities tolerated a relative amount of interpersonal violence, if they thought it justified, and twentieth-century totalitarian regimes, known for their organized violence, still had to reckon with public opinion and accept a measure of compromise. Finally, Ross’s notion that social control is often based on a degree of consensus and ideals of harmony can be adopted and used to analyze communities and voluntary associations in the past.
Social Control As Conflict Settlement

The misleading notion of society as an actor is absent from the work of criminologists such as Donald Black (1984) and Alan Horwitz (1990). They do identify the controllers—as persons and groups who act upon other persons and groups. They acknowledge, moreover, that social control involves both formal control emanating from the state and a host of informal reactions and interventions at nongovernmental levels of society, including, for example, the power of gossip. Notably, Horwitz emphasizes that social control does not require the existence of consensus regarding the definitions of appropriate behavior. A recent book by Mark Cooney builds upon this work. Although it deals primarily with violence, it is relevant for our task of updating the concept of social control.

Cooney, too, acknowledges that the state, where it exists, forms merely a part of society and that top-down and bottom-up perspectives are equally important. His aim is to outline a formal theory of conflict. In particular, he addresses the question “when do conflicts erupt into violence and when do they end peacefully, through mediation, reconciliation or by still other means?” Admittedly, social control involves more than just regulating, repressing, or preventing the strife between two parties. The policing of men’s and women’s morals, for example, even in the absence of discord, falls outside Cooney’s framework. Yet, for a large part, social control has to do with regulating conflicts in one way or another. So-called third parties are the central feature in Cooney’s theory. These may encourage the contestants to fight or to facilitate physical aggression, but alternatively they may mitigate the contestants’ violence, stop it, or even prevent it from happening. As third parties Cooney considers “all those who have knowledge of a conflict, actual or potential.” They include not only the principals’ friends or enemies, bystanders, and possible mediators but also the police who can arrest one or both contestants (or decide not to intervene) and the judge who may punish them. Thus, “private” persons are included in the same category along with state agents. Whether social control proceeds top-down or bottom-up, the controllers are viewed consistently as a third party in a conflict.

Whether third parties are official law enforcers or self-appointed mediators, the status difference with the contestants is of crucial importance. According to Cooney, the judgment of third parties is most readily accepted if their social status is moderately superior to that of the principals. Thus, a too hegemonic state agency finds itself no less at a disadvantage than a mediator from the contestants’ peer group. Besides status, other factors affect the degree of effectiveness of informal as well as state-based third-party settlement. An analysis of the strengths and weaknesses of both comes down to a series of “yes-buts.” One advantage of state control, for example, lies in its broader jurisdiction. Informal control often operates in a local setting only, so outside it people must resolve conflicts in a different way. On the contrary, some stateless societies boast well-developed sys-
tems of informal settlement. However, they have no way of handling the minority of “intractably violent people”—those who constitute a persistent threat to their neighbors and won’t listen to any palaver. Obviously, state agents are better equipped to deal with such persons. The state may use coercion in settling disputes between ordinary people not especially bent on fighting or even force two parties to comply with its ruling if they both find it totally unacceptable. However, whereas state coercion is backed by greater force, it can alienate people and breed resentment or even protest and resistance. Informal settlement, by contrast, has greater acceptance potential, but it depends on cooperation and consensus. The moral authority of one’s community, to be sure, often ensures compliance. “Disputants may well find it harder to disobey the consensus of informal tribunals than the mandates of judges and police officers.”

Up to now, this is a formal analysis, with few historical-processual dimensions. The only element implying change is the proposition that reliance on the state to settle conflict may cause systems of informal settlement to wither away. Paradoxically, this statement alerts us to the historical situations in which it does not apply. Historians easily imagine the growth of state supervision supplanting or suppressing ecclesiastical discipline, community sanctions, and other forms of informal or semiformal control. However, this volume shows that, if informal means of conflict settlement decline before an advancing state, new informal controls often take their place. For example, the nineteenth century not only witnessed the establishment of the police but also industrialization, which brought industrial paternalism with it in some cases and, in others, a set of informal controls at the workplace. Simultaneously, community sanctions and ecclesiastical discipline remained alive in many regions of Europe. On the other hand, some modern inner-city neighborhoods witness both an ephemeral presence of state institutions and a decline of the moral authority of community elders. Thus, it is not always a question of either–or.

Having completed his survey, Cooney concludes that we lack a clearcut answer to the question whether state or informal settlement is more effective. Therefore, “from the point of view of reducing violence, the optimal social system would combine the moderate status superiority of informal settlement with the extensive jurisdiction of the state.” This is policy advice not unlike that offered by Edward Ross, with its implementation left undiscussed. A more adequate knowledge of the historical development of social control and conflict settlement in various sectors of society could help implement such proposals. One obvious amendment to Cooney’s scheme is the observation that in early modern communal settings with little state intervention, the community refrained from acting as a third party in certain situations. In particular, members would view some cases of violence as a form of redress by one principal upon another. Conversely, communities might act and pass judgment over single individuals thought to show improper behavior, sexually or otherwise. These amendments notwithstanding, Cooney’s
analysis has been helpful in furthering our discussion. Notably, his concept of third parties has made us alert to the fact that social control, when also based upon community consensus, always concerns interaction between a number of people, each of whom may have his own particular interest at stake.

To conclude, social control involves a variegated set of practices and beliefs. Sometimes it has the character of conflict settlement, at other times it can be viewed more adequately as the enforcement of norms or the regulation of behavior. Always it concerns people or groups acting upon other people or groups. There are at least two parties involved, but often a third party plays a crucial role. Settlement or regulation can be obtained through care and relief, through arbitration, or through containment and punishment of behavior judged unacceptable. The set of norms and values involved in all these processes is subject to change over time. Social control, then, essentially constitutes a sensitizing concept: It draws attention to the relationships between various mechanisms inducing people to act in a way that is desirable according to a certain standard or ideal. In all societies social control constitutes a major key to understanding violence, conflict, and problems related to the formation and acceptance of social norms. As the present collection and its companion volume show, this crucial function of social control is operative regardless of the period one examines or a country’s political system. It works in the early modern period as well as in recent times and in both democratic and authoritarian societies.

The Historiographical Background

An integrated study of social control—in modern Europe no less than during the ancien régime that preceded it—could hardly have been accomplished without the existence of several traditions of research, even though the concept of social control itself played only a minor role in each of them. Foremost among these traditions is the historical study of crime and criminal justice. The second, the history of church discipline, although concentrating on the Reformation period, has alerted us to the role the churches played in regulating the social and moral order also in the nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries. The third, the study of popular culture, equally extends from the early modern into the modern period. The last two, finally, the social history of industrialization and the analysis of totalitarianism, form a significant background to a number of contributions in this volume in particular. These five traditions are briefly indicated, taking European history from about 1500 onward into view.

The history of crime and criminal justice was first developed as a field of research in the middle of the 1970s. Historians discovered the value of court records as a major source to uncover the social world of the people who transgressed the
law as well as to understand the development of judicial practices and official responses to deviant behavior. This resulted in an interdisciplinary effort in which historians were joined by sociologists, lawyers, and a few anthropologists. Their investigations covered a broad period from the later Middle Ages until World War I. Less work has been done for the twentieth century though. Beginning in France, England, and the Netherlands, the study of court records later spread to countries and regions like Scandinavia, Germany, and Italy. Understandably, this research covered the crime as well as the control side of deviance. To the extent that it dealt with the latter, major themes include: the criminal law in its social context; the origins and development of the police; the impact of state justice on local communities; punishment as a cultural and political factor; the life of marginal groups and attitudes toward them; and banditry. The result was an increased understanding of the methods used, over time, to deal with criminal and illegal behavior as well as new insights into the sociocultural environment of lawbreakers.

It followed from the nature of its subject that the history of crime and criminal justice concentrated on the institutions of formal control: courts, police, and other state agencies. This was especially so until the beginning of the 1990s. Since then, however, a shift of focus has become visible. For one thing, crime historians began to take lower courts, like the French prévôtés or German village courts, into consideration. In rural areas as well as urban environments, such courts dealt for a large part with petty conflicts among neighbors. The studies making use of their records, therefore, focused on the character of communal relations, with gender, honor, and neighborliness as central issues. Similar studies have been published analyzing neighborhood and gender conflicts handled by police courts of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. A second recent trend concerns the history of violence, both quantitative and qualitative. We are now well informed about the long-term trend in the number of homicides, from the fifteenth century to the present day, in countries such as England, the Netherlands, and Sweden. On the qualitative side, studies of the sociocultural context of violence have alerted us to its Janus-faced nature, as a producer of both disorder and order, in past communities. These recent trends in the historiography of crime and justice make it easier to link up with the second and third traditions identified here.

The history of moral regulation by church bodies began as a largely independent field of study. The “classic” form of discipline was exercised by consistories or presbyteries in Protestant parts of Germany, the Dutch Republic, and among Huguenot communities in France. Investigators making use of consistory records focused on such issues as the process of confessionalization, social relations among church members, and the “civilizing” efforts of the church elite. Parallel studies into Catholic moral regulation, notably in southern Europe, primarily concerned the Inquisition. These studies have contributed to our knowledge of popular
culture and the elite offensive against such popular practices as love magic or unorthodox devotion.35 A question relating to both Protestant and Catholic Europe concerned the differentiation, analytically as well as in the minds of contemporaries, between crime and sin.36 Especially in the latter case, the opportunity offered itself for linking up with the history of criminal justice. In England, moreover, a strong link between crime history and the history of ecclesiastical discipline already existed because of the peculiar institution of the Church courts, dealing with matters related to marriage and the family.37 Because of its state backing, this institution came close to formal control, which also applied to the Inquisition. Although church discipline was on the wane already by the eighteenth century, it revived in some regions, the northern provinces of the Netherlands for example, in the following century. Apart from this, the ideological and institutional hold of church leaders, as well as common priests and pastors over their flock, remained an important source of informal social control well into the twentieth century.

In the wake of ecclesiastical discipline, poor relief agencies have functioned as agents of social control. During the early modern period, charity was often, but not always, a church matter. Poor relief functioned as a control mechanism to the extent that the people applying for assistance had to adjust their behavior to the norms and rules of those distributing relief. In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, charity was transformed into welfare, distributed by the state as a rule. However, social control remained an important feature of the relations between welfare agencies and their recipients. This was true of official welfare as well as the semiofficial initiatives by philanthropists.

The third research tradition, dealing with popular culture and elite attitudes, has obvious connections with the previous two, if only because judicial and consistorial records reveal a lot about the life of common people. Overviews of the history of popular culture date from the late 1970s.38 Although the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries constituted the heyday of Europe’s traditional popular culture, much work has been done also on the workers’ culture of the nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries. Local communities—rural villages and, increasingly, urban neighborhoods—were a central focus of this research. The popular culture embedded in these settings involved a shared world view and much feasting and merrymaking, but also the supervision of behavior. Charivari is only the most obvious mechanism of informal social control operating within local communities.39 In fact, control was an aspect of virtually all communal relationships. We may think of gossip, informal supervision, dispute settlement by community elders, and the negotiation of honor. Urban neighborhoods, moreover, sometimes knew formalized associations, which among other things regulated the common life of the inhabitants. Complementarily to communal agencies, guilds and fraternities exercised similar functions.40
Here we have the clearest example of a bottom-up perspective on social control. Unorganized communities as well as neighborhood associations, guilds, and fraternities, although exercising control functions, worked according to consensual concepts such as brotherhood, friendship, and harmony, rather than hierarchy and authority, which were the key concepts of formal control. Although the eighteenth-century withdrawal of the elites from popular culture meant that local communities lost a number of functions to overarching organizations, community life remained vigorous nevertheless. A couple of studies focusing on the modern period have shown that neighborhood ties continued to be strong and coherent until at least the early-twentieth century. In this case, too, neighborly life involved both shared pleasures and mutual scrutiny. A warning must be added here: a focus on social control at the community level cannot simply be equated with a bottom-up perspective, and neither should everything connected with the law and criminal justice be viewed as top-down social control. The notion of legal pluralism may help us to understand this. Scholars using that term emphasize the wide spectrum in the settling of disputes, from processes of negotiation to processes of adjudication. They view both the courts and a broad range of semiformal and informal institutions as suppliers of services, to which people may or may not choose to turn when they are in conflict.

The fourth and fifth types of research concern more specific subjects, but they fall squarely within the period discussed in this volume. The social history of industrialization has dealt with various themes. One of them revolves around industrial paternalism and the control of workers. In the modern period, industrial employers often embarked upon “civilization offensives” aimed at the moral behavior of their dependents. Simultaneously, the leadership of labor movements had their own disciplinary agenda, focusing on a change of habits from drinking in bars to regulated leisure and reading. Although regulating the behavior of members was not the principal or original function of economic institutions, they have exercised social control from an early date. This was true of the guilds and journeymen’s associations of the ancien régime no less than the industrial establishments of a more recent period. The historiography of totalitarian regimes, finally, comprises numerous studies, but the focus on social control is relatively novel. That focus has the additional advantage of remedying a neglect of the first tradition discussed. As explained above, the historiography of crime and justice has hardly extended to the twentieth century. Therefore, this book’s series of articles on social control, including policing and justice, in countries under Nazi or Fascist, or Communist, rule fills a serious gap. The authors all show a remarkable similarity in that none believe that the traditional notion of totalitarianism as developed by Hannah Arendt fits with reality. This conclusion forms the basis for a more general comparison of social control in twentieth-century liberal and authoritarian regimes.
Different as they are, these two research traditions complement each other nicely to the extent that they concern nonstate and state institutions, respectively. Thus, they reproduce the contrast between informal and formal social control, a distinction prominent in our discussion up to now. Although we may have to distinguish an intermediate category of semiformal social control for the early modern period, for the nineteenth and twentieth centuries the above dichotomy appears sufficient. We should of course realize that absolute dichotomies, without overlaps or cross ties, never exist in history. Given that, the first part of this volume focuses largely on informal control, whereas the second part is concerned primarily with the apparatus of the state.

Phases in the History of Social Control

It is important to realize that the period dealt with in this volume only represents the last two phases of what can be described as the long-term history of social control in Europe. As a rough chronology, five phases may be distinguished. Between about 1200 and about 1500, a system of criminal justice developed in Europe under the aegis of princes and urban patriciates. Originally, courts were merely complementary to community-based institutions for resolving conflicts. For example, the higher courts punished thieves whom the community could not handle. Urban courts largely dealt with outsiders to the locality. The sixteenth and seventeenth centuries must be considered a separate phase, because the three main forms of control—state justice, church discipline, and community supervision—all operated together. The late-sixteenth and the seventeenth centuries constituted the high point for church discipline. Thus, semiformal and informal means of control loomed large in the lives of villagers and townspeople. The state’s penal system, however, was attuned to social control at a general level, that of maintaining public peace and order. Although the eighteenth century saw much continuity with the preceding phase, the decline of church discipline still makes this period a separate phase in the history of social control. In addition, the eighteenth century witnessed an increasing social gulf between the elites and the popular classes.

Since the end of the ancien régime, according to the conventional view, the impact of penal law on the lives of the population became greater. The fourth phase, roughly from 1800 to 1950, covers the period when an industrial economy emerged as well as the European system of nation-states. In the wake of these developments, a new system of formal social control became firmly established. However, informal types of control did not suddenly vanish. As this volume shows, the activities of economic and moral entrepreneurs, among others, ensured a degree of informal supervision of behavior. Village and neighborhood
controls declined in some places but remained vigorous in others. Even Reformed church discipline was revived or had stayed alive in certain parts of Europe. It should be added that, with the shift from the small world of the guilds to the larger one of industrial paternalism, social control at the workplace lost a good deal of its bottom-up, consensus-based character. Finally, both formal and informal types of control continued to be permeated by patriarchal views of social order.

During the fifth and last phase, from about 1950 until today, formal control clearly predominated. Under the impact of the emergence of the welfare state, the principal overall development of this period, informal controls receded rapidly. State agencies, however, soon proved unable to exercise effective supervision in all social arenas. For one thing, they now face problems of control because of globalization. In particular, international criminal groups are organized more efficiently than the institutions of cross-state police cooperation set up to confront them. In this matter, informal controls are marginal, and it seems unlikely that in the future their role can become significant to any degree. This may be different in the case of the second arena in which problems of supervision have become apparent in recent decades: inner cities with a heterogeneous population. The disappearance of informal controls has been noted and deplored since the 1980s, by administrators at the national level and leaders of local communities. In every major European city, they are faced with an increasingly complex, multicultural variety of groups who share the urban space, giving rise to specific problems. Administrators have responded with a renewed interest in control, also, and especially by means other than the official state apparatus backed by criminal law. The development of future policies in this area might be served by a better understanding of longitudinal processes of shifting forms of social control, as discussed in this book.

General Themes and the Contributions

Although, obviously, there is no single master theory capable of accommodating all of this volume’s findings, a few general themes recur. Some contributors, for example, refer to the concept of social discipline, first developed by German historians. This concept, however, has been used most often with reference to the early modern period. As an alternative, the notion of civilization offensives may be useful. The campaigns that historians have studied under that rubric were especially characteristic of the phase 1800–1950. “Civilization offensive” refers to the more or less conscious efforts by powerful groups to change the norms and conduct of others in the direction of the former’s standards of civilized behavior. The term leaves open the extent to which they are successful, if at all. Political
elites, church people, philanthropists, and moral entrepreneurs are among the
groups who have launched civilization offensives in the past. The concerted cam-
paign, in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries, to improve the hous-
ing conditions of the poor constitutes an example. Through it, the campaigners
hoped, the moral standards of the targeted group, regarding cleanliness and sex-
uality would be uplifted as well. Civilization offensives are top-down phenom-
ena almost by definition. Standards of conduct, however, may also become more
“civilized” without such offensives, through pressure from below or from one’s
peers. That is the case, for example, when elite groups raise their own standards
because they feel that imitation of their conduct by others makes them less dis-
tinctive or when a religious community wishes to demonstrate its purity in the
eyes of the rest of the population.

Another important theme is that of the negotiation concerning imposed rules.
It is firmly acknowledged in this book that the regulation of behavior is always
a two-way process. Previous scholars have often viewed disciplinary efforts (reforms
of popular festivals by religious leaders, for example, or policemen’s activities as
domestic missionaries) as a top-down phenomenon: The “superiors” had specific
ideas about a godly life, the obedient worker, or the law-abiding citizen, with
which they impregnated the “inferiors.” Viewed from this angle, the principal
research question concerns the degree of rule enforcement’s success: How far did
the inferiors live by the rules the superiors held up to them? However, as this
collection demonstrates, people seldom act as passive recipients of social con-
tr. Sometimes they resist; more often, they negotiate and bend the rules of the
game. Such a top-bottom interaction is equally characteristic for preindustrial
local communities as for twentieth-century authoritarian states. To conclude, con-
siderable negotiation has always existed between the people and the state as well
as between ordinary churchgoers and ecclesiastical institutions, workers, and employ-
ers, and so on. Consequently, informal social control has been equally, or per-
haps more, forceful than formal social control in all societies over the past five
centuries, independent of whether they were monarchical, democratic, author-
itarian, or totalitarian.

The contributions to this volume are grouped into two parts. The first bears
the title “Communities and Entrepreneurs,” the latter term referring to both eco-

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nomic and moral entrepreneurs. These two types come together in the opening
essay by Jean-Paul Burdy. He discusses the disciplinary efforts of the Catholic
Church as well as the rise of industrial patronage in France, but he equally deals
with networks in working-class neighborhoods and the competing initiatives from
Catholic and Socialist organizations. Thus, his essay effectively combines the per-
spectives from above and from below. The subject of discipline and the world
of work is elaborated further in the contributions by Haia Shpayer-Makov and
Ulf Drugge, dealing with England and Scandinavia, respectively. In each case,
the efforts of entrepreneurs to create a kind of self-sufficient industrial commu-
nity form a major theme. Discipline, it seems, worked more effectively when combined with the provision of benefits. In a different way, this principle also operated in the Belgian situation, discussed by Jan Art. Liberal and Catholic organizations maintained the allegiance of their followers through the distribution of jobs, charity, and other social services. In addition, Art demonstrates the continuity, from the ancien régime, of religious social control, exemplified by the contemporary adage that one priest is worth ten gendarmes.

The principle that discipline works most effectively when combined with the provision of benefits was equally manifest in the relations between philanthropists and their beneficiaries. For the experts, many of them philanthropists, at the international penitentiary congresses discussed by Chris Leonards, the well-being of children came first. In connection with the benefit principle, the issue of negotiation, too, becomes prominent again. This emerges clearly from Rosemary O’Day’s case study of a London housing project. Although charity was the starting point, the philanthropists, who had set up the building project and continued to act as its patrons, also tried to influence their clients’ behavior. For their part, however, the tenants were able to manipulate their controllers to some extent. The latter were forced to accept, for example, that the tenants occasionally enjoyed an alcoholic drink, as long as they refrained from making a living from crime or prostitution. Thus, the relationships between working-class clients and middle-class patrons loosely parallel those between early modern local communities and representatives of overarching institutions. The final contribution of the first part, by Vincent Sleebe, explicitly addresses communal relationships. His study of the Netherlands shows that communal relationships were pervasive even in the modern period, although their importance declined as the preindustrial world slowly passed away.

Although the first part has its main chronological base in the nineteenth century, several contributions trace their subject matter well into the twentieth. Conversely, most contributions of the second part, titled “Policing and the State,” exclusively discuss twentieth-century events. This section compares social control under authoritarian regimes with its counterpart in liberal democracies. Again, the principal focus is on the day-to-day relations between the people and state agencies, rather than on such formal institutions of control like prisons. This emerges clearly from Clive Emsley’s introductory essay, comparing the police—including their relations with the public—under various regimes. Paul Lawrence examines the attitudes of the English and French police to the poor, concluding that the severity of repression depended on the person and the offense. For example, contrary to the opinions of contemporary social commentators and the intentions of legislators, the police treated gamblers and prostitutes with much greater understanding than tramps. This image of a compromising and differentiating social control is reinforced by Leo Lucassen’s case study of police supervision of foreign immigrants, many of them female domestic servants, in Dutch towns in the 1920s.
The principal question giving unity to the contributions on the authoritar-
ian regimes of the first half of the twentieth century is “How radical was the
break?” The authors concerned are all critical of Hannah Arendt’s notion of total-
itarianism as a system that daily intruded into the lives of every citizen. As it
turns out, the repression from totalitarian regimes was selective, primarily
aimed at certain target groups. Having reached this conclusion earlier in a book
on Nazi society focusing on Gestapo and court records, Eric Johnson here sup-
plies new evidence, based on extensive survey research, to bolster his argument.
In particular, he compares the first-hand experiences of Jews and non-Jews from
several German cities and demonstrates that although both groups of people fre-
quently violated the laws of the Third Reich (in mostly minor ways, such as lis-
tening to outlawed foreign radio broadcasts, telling anti-Nazi jokes, criticizing
Hitler in discussions with friends, etc.) only Jews were usually punished for such
behavior. Most “ordinary Germans,” on the other hand, were not Jewish, and
the Gestapo generally seems to have had very little interest in trying to punish
them.

Johnson’s fellow contributors largely corroborate his German findings and place
them in a comparative European perspective. Thus, Jonathan Dunnage argues
that the police in Fascist Italy, its institutional structure largely left unchanged,
continued their surveillance of the Left, whom they had distrusted equally before
Mussolini’s takeover. Likewise, in Franco’s Spain, repression essentially meant tar-
geting people who had actively supported the “vanquished” (the groups
defeated in the Civil War). As Angela Cenarro shows, denunciations played a
significant role in this effort. For the years of World War II, the thesis of a “non-
radical break” can be tested in occupied countries and satellite states. In Vichy
France, as Jean-Marc Berlière shows, there was a kind of break indeed, to the
extent that its rulers immediately felt the need to purge the police of leftists and
alleged freemasons. However, successive governments were uncertain how to pro-
ceed in this, and a more or less loyal police force was not created until the regime’s
final months. The example of the Netherlands is instructive as well. As
Geraldien von Frytag Drabbe Künzel argues, the politicization of the agencies
of justice came about only in a gradual fashion. The occupiers instituted a dual
system, in which the Dutch courts and police were supplemented by German
courts and the Gestapo. The brunt of repression fell upon resistance groups and
persons evading transport to Germany for forced labor. In a complementary essay
on policing in occupied Amsterdam, Guus Meershoek concludes that, although
a few totalitarian elements can be observed, on the whole Arendt’s model does
not apply.

Thus, even the “ultimate example of social control” involved a measure of
accommodation and negotiation, and the break was less radical than previous
scholars assumed. The totalitarian model did not imply a complete contrast with
previous practices and certainly not an all-encompassing supervision of the entire
The notion of an all-encompassing supervision should be qualified even for the Communist dictatorships established in eastern Europe after World War II. In a wide-ranging essay, Mark Pittaway argues that concepts such as “totalitarianism,” “total dictatorship,” or “thoroughly dominated societies” do not adequately describe the reality of these eastern European countries. On the other hand, the leaders and regimes of the twenties and thirties, the military occupations of the forties, and the party dictatorships of the fifties through the eighties do contrast markedly with the experience of the liberal democratic states of the last third of the twentieth century. In practically all of the latter, problems of control have intensified and become more complex during recent decades—a development highlighted by increasing homicide rates no less than petty crime. Politicians are hoping to restore the kind of communal supervision prevalent in the distant past. However, as Sebastian Roché argues in a provocative essay that concludes this volume, various recent trends constitute a formidable impediment to such policies. Paradoxically, the extension of state-sponsored institutions has led to a weakening even of formal controls.

As the essays of this volume show, the study of historical social control forms an important contribution to assessing the possibilities and impossibilities in our present predicament.

Notes

I am grateful to Clive Emsley and Astrid Ikelaar for their comments on a draft version. Some ideas developed by Herman Roodenburg, while he was working with me on various introductory texts, also resound in this introduction.

1. Unless otherwise mentioned, the biographical data on Ross are taken from McMahon, *Social Control and Public Intellect*.
2. Ross, *Social Control*, 432. This 1939 edition, the only one available to me, is an unaltered reprint of the 1901 original.
3. Ibid., 293.
4. Ibid., 125.
6. Ibid., 110.
8. We find this idea already in Ross, *Social Control*, 87–88: In “the century we are just entering on” the state should be strengthened in order to counter powerful private interests.
10. The sample refers to works devoted exclusively to social control. Of course, major
sociological theorists such as Talcott Parsons amply discussed the subject in their general works.


13. Ibid., x.


15. Ibid.

16. Ibid., 16.


18. Yet, Mayer’s contribution to the volume (17–38) criticizes such a top-down view, without mentioning the editors.


22. Ibid., 63.


24. Hay et al., *Albion’s Fatal Tree*; Faber, Strafrechtspleging en criminaliteit; Beattie, *Crime and the Courts*; Diederiks, *In een land van justitie*; Huussen, *Veroordeeld in Friesland*.


30. See, among others, Frank, *Dörfliche Gesellschaft*; Gowing, *Domestic Dangers*.

31. See, for example, D’Cruze, *Crimes of Outrage*.

32. See especially Johnson and Monkkonen, eds., *The Civilization of Crime*.

33. One example is Spienerburg, ed., *Men and Violence*.


37. See especially Houlbrooke, Church Courts; and Ingram, Church Courts.
38. Burke, Popular Culture; Muchembled, Culture populaire; Yeo and Yeo, eds., Popular Culture.
39. Le Goff and Schmitt, eds., Le charivari; Rooijakkers and Romme, eds., Charivari.
40. See, among others, Garrioich, Neighbourhood and Community; Brennan, Public Drinking; Roeddenburg, “Freundschaft.” Ongoing research by Aries van Meeteren into seventeenth-century Leiden will increase our understanding of the mechanisms of control at the neighborhood level.
41. In particular: Burdy, Le soleil noir. See also his contribution to this volume.
42. Aspects of social control are discussed in Gellately, The Gestapo; Gellately, Backing Hitler; and Johnson, Nazi Terror. The article by Jan T. Gross “Social Control under Totalitarianism,” 59–77 is rather superficial and focuses only on Poland at the beginning of Soviet hegemony.
43. A recent assessment of the growth of state control in the German world is Härtter, “Soziale Disziplinierung.”
44. For the Netherlands: Sleebe, In termen van fatsoen; for Davos: Schmidt and Brodbeck, “Davos zwischen Sünde und Verbrechen.”
45. See Miller, Transformations of Patriarchy.