CHAPTER 4

Social Control and Social Value

Abstract There is something about research and theory on well-being and social value that seems naïve. It appears to ignore the vast evidence of human suffering through the centuries, and right up to the present, from the mechanisms through which power-holders exercise social control. It is as if Subjective Well-being measures the extent to which idiotic humans can ignore the impact of these cruel and degrading systems on their lives.

Keywords Coercion • Power • Surveillance • Deviance

Social theory and social policy analysis has not lacked abundant evidence of the power dimension of social experience. Especially since the early 1970s, there has been a vast literature about social control, both analysing its processes and cataloguing its consequences. Furthermore, there is also a convincing case to be made for the idea that it is becoming more pervasive in its reach, and more sophisticated in the technological means for its exercise.

For instance, in her account of the growth in the penetration of everyday life of these technologies, Shoshana Zuboff (2019) describes how every aspect of present-day activities is monitored through the machinery of Surveillance Capitalism. Devices in the home such as thermostats, and everyday items like street cameras, mobile phones and credit cards, all
supply raw materials for ‘prediction’ products to be traded in ‘behavioural futures markets’. These allow large corporations to nudge and steer us in a form of behaviour modification, predicting and controlling through secretly gathered data.

This is a new variant of the kind of analysis first advanced by the French historian and sociologist Michel Foucault in the 1970s. Recalling the model of social control invented by Jeremy Bentham at the dawn of the Industrial Revolution, he called this ‘Panopticonism’ – a form of totalitarian regulation and coercion through constant observation, originally deployed in prisons and Poor Law workhouses, as well as the earliest factories, in which external controls were eventually internalised by inmates. But under the latest regimes, subjects do not know that they are being watched (Thomas McMullan, ‘What Does the Panopticon Mean in the Age of Digital Surveillance?’ The Guardian, 23 July, 2020).

During the coronavirus pandemic, the Australian government introduced a phone app called COVIDSafe, used for contact tracing. It allowed the authorities to impose fines for breaches of its lock-down legislation; these were scheduled to continue for up to a year (Michael Bartos, National Affairs, 27 April, 2020).

The purpose of the latest systems of social control is as much to steer behaviour towards conformity with market-orientated norms (consumerism, embracing latest fashions and fads) as to reduce forms of deviance and illegality. This raises questions about whether statistics on SWB really measure ‘happiness’ of the kind created in positive relationships of all kinds, or whether they reflect adaptions to the various institutions by which regimes reward or punish behaviour in the systems of regulation in societies.

THEORIES OF DEVIANCE AND CONTROL

Perhaps one reason why theories about social control were so prevalent in the 1970s was that Western societies were emerging from the relative political consensus that followed the Second World War. The new ideas reflected the scepticism of a young generation, which had received a broader education than its parents’, and was disillusioned with the social order their elders had come to accept. The new generation recognised and resented limits on the freedoms and aspirations of its members, and aspired to more creative possibilities than were available, especially in the industrial regions of the Western economies.
The philosopher who encapsulated the new aspirations was Herbert Marcuse, whose *Essay on Liberation* was published in 1969. He argued that corporate capitalism exercised insidious controls which imperceptibly conditioned populations to the requirements of technological production and consumption (p. 11). This had created ‘a second nature of man which ties him libidinally and aggressively to the commodity form’ and which ‘militates against any change that would disrupt or perhaps abolish this dependence of man on a market ever more filled with merchandise’ (ibid.).

This in turn created ‘a social system [which] reproduces, by indoctrination and integration, a self-perpetuating conservative majority’ (p. 69). A revolutionary ‘New Man’ would emerge from youth culture, with a different culture, language and impulses, and ‘an instinctual barrier against cruelty, brutality and ugliness’ (p. 21); the process of liberation would bring a socialist Utopia, and a transformation of all social relationships. It was such visionary writings which inspired the new generation.

The interactionist school of sociologists, led by Howard Becker (1974), had also studied subterranean and subversive cultures, such as that of drug-users, and how they defied the agencies for social control (Young 1971). They drew attention to the ways in which state interventions which labelled such behaviour as deviant tended to increase the alienation and disaffection of the groups in question. These ideas tended to glorify the rebellious groups as standard-bearers of a new age of liberation, which would prevail against systems of social control and usher in new freedoms for all.

But such notions receded as the market-minded regimes of Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan came to power. Their programmes for privatisation of public services dampened the libertarians’ disdain for state control; it was minorities of those who lived in marginal districts and relied on benefits for their livelihoods who were worst hit. Their ‘deviance’ was a response to poverty and exclusion, not bourgeois alienation (Jordan et al. 1992; Jordan 1996).

Within a decade, the ‘choice’ and ‘liberty’ that had become the watchwords of the UK and US regimes had penetrated to the former Soviet Bloc countries’ citizens (US security services were said to have subverted their regimes by broadcasting endless pictures of supermarket shelves in the West). Such disciplines as were exercised by their new rulers seemed quite generous after the controls they had endured for more than 40 years.

So it has only been since the financial crisis of 2008–9 and the austerity years which followed that explicit issues of social control have again arisen for a new generation on both sides of the former Iron Curtain. Indeed, in
all the developed countries, the prospects of young people had been severely limited by the absence of any growth in real earnings for more than 30 years; hence the mass protest marches (some, as in France, by middle-aged as well as young citizens) of the most recent decade, as those who feel dispossessed signal their disillusion with the prospect of a decline in their standards of living, compared with those of previous generations.

Many protests have been met by quite violent counter-measures by the police. This has been particularly the case in France, where the _Gilets Jaunes_ have mobilised weekly over many months, and challenged the authorities in several regions and cities. Disappointment with the Macron presidency has led to increasing disillusion about France’s future, and a long-term issue about social control in a political culture with a revolutionary history, and where theories of social control had been extensively developed since the 1970s (Foucault 1975).

**Conclusions**

The coronavirus pandemic brought about an economic recession far deeper than that associated with the financial crisis of 2008–9. The fact that this was the result of policies aimed at saving lives by reducing person-to-person contacts meant that it commanded very general popular support, but the consequences for incomes – declines of up to a third among those laid off – led some economists to question whether these measures might even cause more deaths (through deprivation) than they saved through social isolation.

In a BBC Radio 4 programme titled ‘Will the Cure be Worse than the Disease?’ (presented by Tom Chivers) on 5 May, 2020, epidemiologist and economists debated this question. At the start of the outbreak, the leading researcher of the former science at Imperial College, London, Professor Neil Ferguson, had predicted that hundreds of thousands would die in the UK if the disease was unchecked, and his influence on the government was pivotal in the lock-down decision. Looking back at this decision, Philip Thomas, Professor of Risk Management, suggested that any meaningful comparison between these alternatives involved comparing lives with lives; if the economy contracted by more than 6.4 per cent, more lives would be lost through this decline of income among poor people than would have been in the pandemic. By then a fall of double this amount was predicted. Emily Jackson, Professor of Medical Law, said that more people would die from unemployment and social isolation than
from the virus. There were differences between the views of philosophers over the ethics of whether all lives should be seen as of equal value, or whether those of younger people should be given priority over those already in poor health and of a great age.

Issues of social value were explicitly debated by economists and insurance experts in a programme the following day, ‘How to Value a Human Life’ (BBC Radio 4, 6 May, 2020). Experiences such as terrorist atrocities had given rise to insurance claims requiring values to be put on the lives of victims with a variety of educational qualifications, work experiences and recent earnings profiles, as well as ages and health histories. In decisions over public funding for medical research, trade-offs over pain relief and length of probable survival were made. But it was agreed that the coronavirus situation was unique, because it involved something like ‘the fate of humanity’, almost in the same category as climate change, and the value of the relationships at stake was extremely difficult to assess. There was also the question of how to compare the value of life in a poor country with one in an affluent society.

All these issues, which are very seldom debated in ‘normal’ times, have been made urgent ones by the pandemic. Social control and risk management are related in complex ways. The pandemic saw unprecedented levels of controls, which would otherwise have been unacceptable in liberal democracies in peace time, being rolled out in all these societies, with only fairly minor variations, seemingly not related to the political character of their governments. The kinds of issues which pre-occupied sociologists in the 1970s seemed very remote in this situation, with the virus more akin to an alien invasion or armed foe at the border than any ordinary threat to the health of the population.

The paradox of the pandemic was that, as social control became more explicit and obvious, it also became more acceptable, and even welcome. In this sense, it was very like the war-time controls enforced by the UK government, which did nothing to diminish the morale of the population. But this was not obvious in the early months of conflict, as the German Army’s breakthrough led to the British retreat to Dunkirk, awaiting the flotilla of ‘little ships’ to take them across the Channel.

In the film Darkest Hour (directed by Joe Wright, 2017), the newly appointed Prime Minister, Winston Churchill (played by Gary Oldman), who had been in the political wilderness for many years, and whose return to the Cabinet had been marked by a disastrous attempt to invade Nazi-controlled Norway, is shown facing an agonising decision over whether to
attempt a deal with Hitler, in order to stave off an invasion. He faces strong pressure from his immediate predecessor, Neville Chamberlain, and his Foreign Minister, Lord Halifax, to enlist Mussolini’s Italy to help negotiate the truce. He lacks support in his own party, or from the Labour opposition.

In the film, Churchill impulsively leaps from a taxi taking him to Parliament, and boards a tube train (for the first time in his life). Recognised by the (working-class) passengers, he consults them about his dilemma; they are unanimous in supporting defiance. As he enters Parliament, the news comes through that Hitler is intransigent regardless. He makes his famous speech, inspiring all but the two best-known appeasers to cheering resistance, and creates the basis for the war-time coalition government.

In this moment of crisis, the nature of social value in British society during the war was redefined. Instead of deriving from love of peace with other nations, it consisted in stoical survival and solidarity, against all odds. Citizens, including the royal family, suffered and endured without complaint, in a community of common interest.

In most other situations, social controls are either disguised or applied only to those least able to resist them in overt ways. It is only in crises such as pandemics and wars that they are accepted without complaint, because of an external threat of real gravity. The coronavirus pandemic is unlikely to make current controls acceptable for the length of time (more than five years) that rationing of many consumer items lasted after the Second World War. The media were already pressuring for relaxation of many of these measures by the end of May, 2020.

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