Recent Findings of Research in Economic & Social History

Was social control a key factor in the shaping of modern capitalistic society as some social historians have argued recently? Did social control tame and civilise the working classes in moulds shaped to fit the needs of bourgeois society? Professor F. M. L. Thompson provides a critical appraisal of these and related questions, and suggests an alternative interpretation.

Social Control in Modern Britain

All good history, which is to say lively, interesting, and intellectually challenging history, borrows concepts from other disciplines. These instruments for the dissection and interpretation of the past may come from law, theology, economics, politics, psychology, anthropology, and many other sources. Without them history is a simple chronicle of events; and it could be said that the narrative historian in order to be good needs to acquire the skills of the story-teller. The appearance of the term 'social control' in the vocabulary of social historians, a concept developed by sociologists and anthropologists, is thus part of a long-standing and continuing process which is continually broadening and deepening the field, and the texture, of historical writing. The trouble is that while the tools used by the historical demographer, such as 'gross reproduction rate', or the economic historian, such as 'net national income per capita', have precise technical meanings which give them a clear cutting edge, encouraging them to be used with care, equipment taken from the sociologist's tool-bag tends to look homely, familiar, and harmless, encouraging a certain amount of unreflecting and unskilled use for inappropriate jobs. Thus 'social control' is at once a phrase which appears to have a plain, commonsense, uncomplicated meaning - that those in power and authority are always trying to control the rest of society in one way or another - and also a concept drawn from theoretical sociology. This ambiguity has spread confusion and incoherence in much recent writing on modern social history; while the fashionability of the new terminology has led some early modernists to introduce essentially superfluous and redundant verbiage into their work.

Social control and socialisation

'The concept of social control' A. P. Donajgrodzki could write in 1977 when introducing a collection of essays on Social Control in Nineteenth-Century Britain, 'will be unfamiliar to many historians.' [1] Since then the phrase has become familiarised into textbooks, even though the concept itself may not have become any better understood.

The missionary zeal kindled by the discovery of a new philosopher's stone has inspired a school of thought which portrays the social order and its cultural and ideological underpinning as the product of ceaseless manipulations and refinements of mechanisms of social control. These are said to influence a whole array of social institutions and mechanisms, including churches, schools, music halls, or football matches. Besides the services which are their ostensible and explicit object - salvation, education, amusement, excitement - these institutions and mechanisms send coded messages which determine the morals, standards, values, and general patterns of behaviour of the people. They do so by infiltrating the desired norms into those parts of their lives which are spent as worshippers, students, audiences, or spectators. It might seem to be a truism that any social institution at any period in history and in any type of society, be it feudal, capitalist, communist, authoritarian, fascist, democratic, Christian, Moslem, Hindu, or Hottentot, necessarily has rules, codes of conduct, and accepted ways of behaving with which its members are constrained to conform by a variety of moral and physical sanctions. Not even a family can exist as a social unit without some structure of accepted relationships between its members and some agreement on their

Michael Thompson is Director of the Institute of Historical Research of the University of London. Among numerous publications on social and economic history are English Landed Society in the Nineteenth-Century and an article on Social Control in Victorian Britain.
understood roles, whether achieved by affection, calculation, or compulsion. Indeed, in some senses the family is the basic cell in the machinery of social control, the institution which socialises (or when broken, or defective, fails to socialise) children into the manners and mores of the segment of society which they inhabit. This implies that the mechanisms of social control may have profoundly traditional, conservative, and conformist purposes, being designed to sustain and reproduce the beliefs and behaviour which the controlling authority (parent, teacher, priest) deems to be acceptable and normal. It is therefore unsurprising that the concept originated (well over half a century before social historians got to hear of it) as part of a highly conservative sociology, designed to provide a theoretical basis for explaining how groups in the community cope with deviants, nonconformists, and rebels. At that stage in the discourse the terms 'socialisation' and 'social control' were interchangeable. Or, more precisely, the socialisation of individuals into an acceptable life style and conformity to acceptable standards of behaviour simply described the process, and condition, produced by the exercise of social control. This was wielded by those with authority as guardians of the group's rules and customs. In effect what was happening was the development of a specialised language to describe the mechanisms of social discipline. The language was made difficult and obscure, as is normally the case when specialist professionals invent a vocabulary for their subject. But it was useful in describing what might be called the social 'potty-training', or social conditioning, which is perpetually going on so that society can reproduce itself. The terms had descriptive but no explanatory power. They could describe how such attitudes were transmitted and reproduced within an essentially static society.

**Historical applications**

History, however, is concerned with understanding the processes of change. It was natural, therefore, that when social historians began to incorporate these concepts into their own tool-kits they should re-design the tools to perform dynamic and explanatory tasks. The key step was to differentiate between 'socialisation' and 'social control' in a way which had not been originally intended. 'Socialisation' was reserved to refer to the processes by which a social group or association (family, church, chapel, public school, regiment, trade union) transmits its special imprint of values and customs from generation to generation, and especially to its new recruits. 'Social control' was uncoupled from this whole area of environmental conditioning. It was liberated for use in describing and analysing the processes by which groups with power and authority impose their value systems on the rest of society. This was normally by indirect cultural and ideological pressures rather than by brute force and direct decree. The social order, as one formulation has put it, '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 including, for example, leisure and recreation, education, charity and philanthropy, social work and poor relief.' Social control is thought of as one of the functions, although not as the sole purpose or motivation, of all these institutions.

The attractions of this approach for modern historians have been three-fold:

1. **Explanation.** They are looking at the rise of an urban and industrial society from the middle of the eighteenth century onwards, and it appears that the social bonds and largely informal social institutions of traditional society were breaking down under the pressures of population growth, urban concentration, and industrialisation. Successful manipulation of the levers of social control by the ruling class and the middle class seems to provide an explanation of how the working-class masses, after a few scaring episodes of disorder and insubordination like Peterloo and Chartism, by the twentieth century, were tamed and conditioned to accept their role at the bottom of the class structure of modern society.

2. **Integration.** The notion that one of the aims of all manner of extremely diverse and heterogeneous voluntary associations and pressure groups was to influence and mould the character and behaviour of the poor or the masses provides a unifying and integrating framework for a welter of miscellaneous and disparate activities.

3. **Context.** Individual historians who are colonising new territories for social history and studying subjects like holidays, music halls, parks, pubs, or sport which have not seriously been investigated before, find valuable moral and intellectual support in drawing on the conceptual apparatus of social control to show how their particular research fits into the context of wider historical significance.

**Leisure, recreation and education**

Social control theory has been fruitful in opening up the history of leisure, recreation and education. The social control thesis on popular leisure and recreation is supported by upper and middle class efforts at interference and regulation; attempts to substitute healthy, improving and disciplined pursuits for unsupervised, mindless, and disorderly debauchery. In popular education social control purposes were evident in the aim of the voluntary schools to impart codes of morality, religion, obedience, cleanliness, and discipline as an integral part of the method of teaching the three Rs. On inspection both of these turn out to be, in a broad sense, manifestations of the same social force: early nineteenth-century evangelicalism.
Evangelicals in the Anglican church and in the Dissenting chapels, especially among the Methodists, were deeply concerned about the irreligion, immorality, sinfulness, frivolity, ignorance, and mere pleasure-seeking of much of the society around them. They set out to remedy that state of affairs through their preaching and example, and through institutions like Sunday schools, voluntary schools, clubs, temperance halls, or charitable bodies, which would cultivate and implant virtuous habits. The ideal of a genuinely Christian population whose beliefs informed everyday actions and behaviour was all too easily diverted into the hypocrisies of middle-class Victorian ideas of propriety and respectability. Highly principled disapproval of cruel sports, or of apparently unbridled drink and sex at traditional fairs, was readily confused with the sectional self-interest of groups of property owners and residents anxious to suppress particular local nuisances. Nevertheless, there was an influential evangelically inspired body of opinion.

This led to a campaign for rational recreation - meaning healthy, mind-improving, and orderly recreations like organised games, athletics, and gardening - and for popular education in schools managed on Christian principles and guided by religious beliefs in their teaching. The explicit aim was to bring about a reformation of morals and manners, to instil a new cultural order, and to instruct the lower orders on the duties and demeanour appropriate to their place in it. To that extent the cultural purposes and methods of evangelicalism were those of social control. It would be a mistake, however, to suppose that this was a class movement aimed at subordinating the working class to bourgeois values under the cloak of muscular Christianity.

For one thing evangelicals had loose-living, self-indulgent, gambling, and adulterous aristocrats in their sights, as well as rough, blasphemous and ignorant sections of the working class. For another, evangelicalism cannot be described as the religious or ideological instrument of middle-class interests. It was viewed with detachment or distaste by probably the majority of practical men of affairs and businessmen in the middle classes. And it was adopted by a large minority of the working class; chiefly among the skilled and the miners, who saw self-improvement and social dignity as the rewards for self-help, thrift, discipline, godliness, and temperance.

It would be a greater mistake to imagine that working-class adjustment to, and broad acceptance of, the forms of modern capitalist society, which was apparent by the last quarter of the nineteenth century, were due to the successful operation of the social control devices which have been outlined. Religious feelings and sectarian rivalry were certainly responsible for the origins of the voluntary schools were carefully designed on class lines to provide elementary education suited to the needs and status of the lower classes, while superior education was provided in separate schools grammar, private, and public - for the higher classes. Such features encourage belief in a religious-social control thesis. So too does the statement by Sir James Graham, when introducing his abortive Education Bill in 1843, in the midst of the Chartist disturbances.

The police and the soldiers have done their duty, the time is arrived when moral and religious instructors must go forth to reclaim the people from the errors of their ways.' These schools, however, became markedly more secular and utilitarian in their emphasis, and less didactic, from the 1850s and particularly from 1862. In any case, attendance by any individual child was likely to be so short, and so irregular, that the capacity of a school to leave a permanent imprint on character, morals, or beliefs was extremely limited.

**Rational recreation and temperance**

Rational recreation, which set out to eliminate pubs, cruel sports, gambling, street games, and much else besides, was possibly even less successful. The public house was, and remained, the centre of much working-class culture. At the beginning of the nineteenth century the public house had a virtual monopoly as a meeting house for working people. The nineteenth-century attack on pubs as centres of an underworld of sex, indecency, depravity, crime, cockfighting, gambling, and subversion was an expression of a traditional attitude. But it was a strikingly articulate expression, and one which was orchestrated by energetic evangelical and dissenting hands into the nationwide temperance movement. However, the overall impact of efforts aimed directly at curtailing the number and accessibility of beerhouses and pubs was rather limited. Most temperance reformers looked for better results from the provision of teetotal substitute meeting places and social centres which would lead the masses to a willing and joyful rejection of the demon drink. Clubs and societies for working men were launched with this end in view, under middleclass patronage. By the 1860s a whole network of working-men's clubs was coming into existence. No bourgeois lesson was required to teach working men the benefits and pleasures of association. A takeover of the works of middle-class benefactors and would-be social controllers ensued, in which working men assumed club management, and introduced the sale of beer. And the pub, as the centre of working-class culture, was stoutly defended, and survived into the age of canned beers and television without great difficulty.
Street games and street life more generally were suppressed, controlled, or swept into back alleys not by moral pressure but by police action. Some historians, indeed, have presented the new police forces and their social effects in the language of social control, and it is true that their discretionary powers to decide what constituted a ‘nuisance’ or an ‘obstruction’ were used to harass ordinary working-class people who were doing nothing that they had not always done, and whose offence was to disregard unwritten and essentially middle-class rules about proper and improper conduct in public places. It is, however, misleading and confusing to see the police as agents of social control; they are agents of government and their authority rests on the sanctions of the law and the coercive power of the state, not on the techniques of influence and persuasion. It is, of course, perfectly possible to argue that neither the law nor the police are necessarily objective, detached, and socially neutral. They can be, and have been, used as instruments of class discrimination and oppression, as well as of religious, ethnic, or gender discrimination. But this is a separate issue, concerning the exercise of power and authority, and its attempted inclusion in the social control thesis makes that concept meaningless in its vagueness and generality.

Many popular recreations of the bull-running, cock-fighting, or village ‘football’ fight variety were indeed replaced in the course of the nineteenth century by more orderly and controlled diversions. But this was due less to the gospel of rational recreation than to the provision of counter-attractions through the commercialisation of leisure. Music halls, trips to the seaside, excursions trains, funfairs and fairgrounds, cycle tracks, and spectator sports, above all football, grew vigorously in the second half of the nineteenth century (especially in the last quarter), and were eagerly incorporated into popular culture. No doubt they had significant cultural effects, both as attractions which diverted working-class energies from pursuit of leisure, and incorporation of the leisure time and work time. In so doing they reinforced the regularity and discipline of industrial work, which had been disrupted by older practices of casual absenteeism. It is also true that the entrepreneurs who provided these commercial entertainments had an interest in ensuring the orderly behaviour of their customers, for they had valuable plant and equipment to protect from damage. To risk courting police intervention and closure could be extremely bad for business. All the same, these were but the indirect behavioural consequences of commercial operations, of a kind which economic activities always produce. The leisure entrepreneurs supplied entertainment, amusement, fantasy, and illusion because it was profitable to meet a popular demand, that was generated by the working classes. To call the proprietor of a music hall, the owner of a steam roundabout, or the manager of a railway company, unconscious agents control is mere verbiage which tells us nothing about them which we did not know already from knowledge of their occupations and the nature of their businesses.

**Conclusions**

A critical appraisal of the social control approach leads to an alternative interpretation of that process of social transformation which led to a social order appropriate to an urban, industrial, capitalist society. It can be accepted that this social order was sustained not only by legal systems, police and prisons, but also by the non-coercive agencies discussed in this article. However, it should be recognised both that there was often a yawning gap between the aims and achievements of such social controllers and that improvers and reformers were often socialisers rather than controllers. The great change in the social habits of the masses came about as a result of many convergent factors, material as well as attitudinal. Notable amongst them were: the discipline of factory work; the enforcement of law through more professional police; an improvement in living standards and, related to this, a process of emulation embodying a self-induced socialisation of ambition and aspiration. Most important in this re-assessment is the renewed appreciation that working-class history had its own vitality and rationale; it was more than a derivative series of responses to middle-class educators and manipulators.

![Image](image-url)

There is a truism lurking here: that economic relationships are also social relationships. The most powerful and direct influences over workers are exerted by employers, and over citizens by the state and its apparatus of laws and administration. The extent to which ‘Victorian values’ of self-help, thrift, hard work, independence, punctuality, sobriety, cleanliness, and respectability in general, were ever widely accepted can be doubted. But insofar as they did become part of working-class culture they derived from the work experience, the presence of the police, and the influence of the chapel. These influences may, if desired, be described as forms of social control. But it is more straightforward to say that employers manage and control workers, police control crowds, and ministers lead congregations. There is no separate and additional function which they perform beyond these, which can be labelled ‘social control’. Social control as a theory for explaining class relationships dissolves when it is approached closely. What is left are a couple of words that act as a salutory reminder that all political, social, and economic institutions have some effects on types and standards of behaviour and contribute to the shaping of cultures or life styles.

**References**

(1) A. P. Donajgorzki, ed. Social Control in Nineteenth-century Britain (Croom Helm, 1977).

(2) Gareth Stedman Jones, Languages of Class (Cambridge, 1983).