

Controlling Processes

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Introduction

This volume is about processes of control that emphasize the importance of ideas as dynamic components of power. Inherent in the nature of idea systems is the capacity to diffuse and to penetrate all parts of society—not all ideas and not to all parts, but certainly ideas linked to the dynamics of power are often ubiquitous. The term *controlling processes* encompasses knowledge of how central dogmas are made and how they work. While power is both *means*—ways in which people are controlled—and *ends*, the prize of political strategy—a concern with controlling processes focuses on power as means—the way in which individuals and groups are influenced, persuaded to participate in their own domination, and thereby controlled. The study of controlling processes reveals "the historical situatedness, production, and hegemonic force of cultural meanings..." (Keesing 1994:309). The essays in this volume, written by my students, speak to this point, but the reader will find them as much a critique of current anthropological practice as examples of ethnographic work in the United States.

As an introduction to the essays that follow it may be useful for me to clarify my position. I begin by calling attention to political critiques of the culture concept, then situate the concepts of cultural control and social control as they have developed in the United States in isolation from European theory, noting how a different view of the cultural has the effect of changing the questions we ask. The next section draws stimulus from the literature on ideology as social control, and finally the last section draws on Roger Keesing's notion of the "political economy of knowledge" as a conceptual introduction to the ethnographic studies that follow these background notes.

The Culture Concept

Barbara McClintock (Keller 1983:178) used the term "tacit assumptions," to refer to an implicit adherence to models that prevents people from looking at data with a fresh mind. Her observation applies to most professionals, and certainly to anthropologists in their use of the notion of culture. Many anthropologists and others still see culture as mainly the result of people participating in human groupings, something that develops bottom-up. In this regard it is useful to read the contributions in *Assessing Cultural Anthropology* (Borofsky 1994) that examine culture as a historically situated idea, a romantic idea appearing as:

social criticism directed against the disintegrating and debasing effects of industrialization... "culture" was an ideal of harmonious personal and collective perfectibility, "a body of values superior to the ordinary progress of society, the true standard of excellence for people." (1994:246).

So too the late Roger Keesing (1994:307) notes the relevance of cultural nationalism, rooted in ethnic and folk traditions during the rise of nation-states in Europe. In the same volume Robert Borofsky underscores the observation that these two events—industrialism and nationalism—are formative of cultural concepts as generally used today. Understanding notions of culture as historically grounded allows us to comprehend the tacit assumptions about cultures that may be preventing anthropologists from looking afresh at our contemporary condition. Keesing (1994:161–162), in one of his last writings, gets to the core of the problem when he emphasizes the politics of the concept of culture, referring to hegemony; the framing of culture by fundamentally dominant groups:

The voices of subalternity...contradictions and conflicts, the hegemonic force of dominant ideologies, cleavages of class and gender, are glossed over with a wave of the analytical brush...anthropological characterizations of Melanesia...persistently edit out Christianity, trade stores, labor migration, contemporary politics, and cash economy...(Keesing 1993:306).

Keesing does not mean to indicate that all contemporary anthropology is committed to the “portrayal of exotic cultural alterity” (1993:306), but he is drawing attention to the innocent or naive side of anthropology and a lingering cultural concept that implies a consensual, collective, coherent, integrated and rather stationary character. I recognized the pattern he is speaking about from many years of trying to uncover the history of the harmony model of disputing, and to understand why voices of contradiction and conflict, and hegemonic forces are so often glossed over (Nader 1990). But while Keesing is dealing with our description of the other what he says also applies to our description of ourselves, which was the point of my earlier piece “Up the Anthropologist” (Nader 1972). Jules Henry (1963) and Dorothy Lee (1959) must have discovered when they read reviews of their works that there is widespread discomfort amongst anthropologists in describing our culture as it is, especially when tacit assumptions are examined. Just as anthropological characterizations of the Melanesians edit out certain aspects, we do the same when writing about the United States. As John Honigmann observed “most often field workers, guided by what they had come axiomatically to expect, desperately searched for order, ignoring the inconsistencies, contradictions, paradoxes, and flux that their experience revealed” (1976:355). American anthropologists or sociologists who write about power in the United States, hegemonic or otherwise, will not likely be decorated by their peers. It is because of this personal observation about the imbalance in research approaches that I began to teach my students how to discover controlling processes in our midst.

The research on controlling processes explores the dynamics of culture constructed instrumentally. The notion of hegemony, as developed by Antonio Gramsci (1971) implies that such systems of thought develop over time, and that they reflect the interests of certain classes and/or groups in the society who have managed to universalize their own beliefs and values. These beliefs serve to reinforce control as they are produced and reproduced through the work of intellectual elites, broadly defined as all of those who are involved in the production of culture—academics, writers, mass media producers, and others. See Edward Said's work for tangible examples of how intellectual elites work in this manner (1978).

A key factor in constructing dogmas is the restriction of discourse on alternative conceptions of reality. This may be accomplished through what Foucault (1980) terms the construction of "true discourses." Foucault emphasizes that there are a variety of ways of conceptualizing reality and what becomes accepted as truth depends on the intimate association of power and knowledge. Like Gramsci's notion of hegemony, Foucault's notion of "true discourses" emphasizes the important ways in which individuals internalize power and control. Foucault's attention to the importance of "restrictions on discourse" is central. What is needed is a political language that moves the subject *into* the world without locking it into the *terms* of ongoing social arrangement.

What we see depends on what we know, and what we know depends in great part on how knowledge or knowing is produced and by whom and when and how it is filtered by experience. In industrialized countries such as the United States, culture appears natural and inevitable, even when it is made to appear so by the manipulation of cultural images that often articulate what people should be, should think, should buy or buy into. The belief in free will is strong and impedes understanding how lives are changed by cultural practice external to the individual that seeks to modify individual behavior by means of cultural inventions.

The ethnographic essays that follow result from serious inquiry into a whole host of questions important to the contemporary United States: sex education, disputing practices, gambling, breast implants, and teenage rebellion. The questions are straightforward; the answers complex. Jessica Jerome examines how it is that AIDS education is received by high school students into whose immediate world AIDS may be far removed and what it means to "inform" or educate youth when the message received is not the message sent. Bjorn Claesson explores what alternative dispute models mean for the lives of potential plaintiffs now turned victims or patients in workman compensation cases, and for the justice system that seems to be moving, as happened in the criminal law, to remove the individual plaintiff from the civil justice system. Mike Panasitti and Natasha Schull ask how did gambling come to be accepted behavior, entertainment and ubiquitous over a 100 year period as the start of which the status of gambling was tinged with the criminal, the sinful, and certainly not a proper activity for family outings. Linda Coco probes the mechanisms of power asking to what end has flat-chestedness for women become a disease and why do millions of women accept such medical diagnosis as authoritative to the point of risking their lives through invasive surgery in order to achieve "perfect" standardized breast dimensions? Finally, Marianne McCune questions how it has come to be that the revolt against parental authority by adolescent girls delivers such youngsters into the hands of unseen authorities with such efficiency. The themes that run throughout these essays on *controlling processes* indicate the power of incremental (not abrupt) change in altering our view of what is natural and acceptable, the co-optation of the notion of choice, of what choice and freedom mean in a society where tacit assumptions are constructed and broadly disseminated, as in most of these examples, with financial gain in mind.

Anthropologists have witnessed, indeed we have experienced the construction of culture for financial gain, but we have barely begun to modify our thinking about the concept of culture with attention to such experience as a priority. Alas, our situation is analogous to that of the anthropologists who have been criticized for writing during the colonialist period about "pure native" culture before it disappeared while all around them were changing native

cultures and the colonizers themselves. Today we practice anthropology in much the same way, and Keesing is correct in noting that present day work might well be subjected, to the same critique as functionalist sociology was earlier. Many, though not all of us, close our eyes and minds to research possibilities on contemporary colonizers. Others self-censor research from inclusion of the commercial world and the multinationals—as if they were not changing all of us, resistant or not. Colonizing minds is not new, but colonizing minds with the present day intensity indicated in these essays is facilitated by modern technologies, population movements, and changing social organizations.

The Development of Control Concepts: Changing Questions

In order to place in perspective the work on controlling processes in the United States it is important to review briefly the history of the concepts of social and cultural control in the American social science literature. In 1901 American sociologist Edward Alsworth Ross first advanced the concept of social control. It was a period of high immigration rates. Order was a concern especially in the wake of the post Civil War period, the populist movement, and the consolidation of American industry. Ross's work broadly surveyed human practices and arrangements that contribute to social order, and that influence people to conform. His general thesis was that social order exists because of the conscious control of the individual on the part of society.

In the more recent literature the term has been used to refer to how people define and respond to deviant behavior. Sociologist Donald Black (1984) reiterates that social control includes all of the legal practices by which people define and respond to deviant behavior, and notes that the work on social control has been too intricately associated with the phenomenon of law. He urges that we extend the study of social control beyond law, to include other ways in which people respond to and define control: self-help, restitution, ridicule, gossip, avoidance, homicide, and suicide.

Although I have used the concept of social control in work on law I am increasingly dissatisfied with this term, and believe that such dissatisfaction may be more general among anthropologists. Few anthropologists use the term social control, and when they do it is within the same vein of thought as the sociologists. For example, Spradley and McCurdy (1975) speak about an orderly social life being an astonishing achievement that requires mechanisms of social control that induce members of a society to keep their actions within well-defined limits. Others use the term as synonymous with politics or law. Society is reified and social control is consensual. It is these last points that many have found problematic. Both sociologists and anthropologists have studied societies that are stratified and differentiated. In the Pacific we examined societies with chiefs, in Melanesia we studied the "Big Men." In Africa we examined large and highly stratified kingdoms, and elsewhere autocracies, caciques in Mexico, and more. By now it has been generally conceded that there are different kinds of control, but the distinction between social and cultural control could be made clearer.

In their fieldwork anthropologists describe various cultural and social mechanisms of control. Interestingly, unlike the sociologists who adopted the term social control we did not coin the term *cultural control* although ethnographers have written extensively about

language, ritual, symbols, and ideology, in light of cultural control. Unfortunately, some anthropologists move their research site to industrialized societies and study control in the context that Ross imagined, rather than studying control in its widest manifestations which today are deeply cultural. But winds of change are moving in new directions (Kairys 1993).

Scholars in critical legal studies noted early on that changing the questions asked in criminology changes the paradigm from the social control paradigm to the cultural control paradigm. The question asked by traditional, criminology scholars, “why is it that some people commit crime while others do not?” in the face of civil rights demonstrations, anti-war protests, the middle class usage of marijuana and cocaine, and blatant criminality by giant corporations and political leaders—changes to, “why are some acts defined by law as criminal while others are not?” The study of criminal law creation, according to Chambliss (1982:236) became a cornerstone of criminological inquiry. The challenge then became to link the study of crime with political and economic forces shaping American institutions and social relations.

In critical legal studies, scholars are using both the concepts of social and cultural control (without using the terms) to examine the control functions of law—as it socializes law students to an ideology of law as neutral, objective, and quasi-scientific while training them for hierarchy (Kennedy 1982). They study how law as ideology is used as a vehicle for the maintenance of existing social and power relations with the consent or acquiescence of various income classes.

Ideology as Cultural Control

The renewed interest in culture as control by anthropologists and sociologists is found, particularly in the literature on ideology. In a pioneering sociological work, *The American Business Creed* Sutton, Harris, Haysen and Tobin (1962) define ideology as “...any system of beliefs publicly expressed with the manifest purpose of influencing the sentiments and actions of others.” Some years later, social psychologist William Domhoff (1979) used the concept of ideology to refer to the numerous processes by which the American power elite attempt to shape the beliefs, attitudes, and opinions of the underlying population. Anthropologists (See, Rude:1980) use the term ideology as more akin to cultural postulates, or world-views connected with specific goals. Ideology when viewed in this manner could exist in any cultural domain—science, sex, religion, business, or politics. Other anthropologists, such as Louis Dumont (1977) use the term to describe the ideas, beliefs, and values of an entire civilization. Implicit in all of these usages is the idea of control by means of culture. Usually this control is not dramatic. In fact, the less dramatic the better. Some of these functions were described in Geertz's paper *Ideology as a Cultural System* (1973) as relating to the formulation of social categories, expectations, norms and consensus, and tensions.

In the 1970s and 1980s I was studying law and the management of economic grievances in the United States and also making forays into other facets of American culture: science, energy and resources, the regulation debate, and the social organization of child-rearing amongst other topics. I was discovering controlling processes (Nader, 1972, 1977, 1980a, 1981, 1985, 1989a, 1990, 1992). I first used the term controlling processes in the 1980 work on economic grievances, published in the book *No Access to Law*. Having written

on how American consumers respond to deviant behavior of corporations, such as unmet expectations within the social control paradigm, I was unable to use the same model to understand why it was that economic grievances had been met with so few solutions throughout the period of United States industrialization in spite of a spate of solid policy recommendations. I was pushed to examine the ideology of law, the concepts that curtail the ideal development and function of complaint processes and those that weaken the impact of new laws that are intended to make a difference in dispute processing. Ideologies exemplified by *caveat emptor* can effectively block reform and discourage the organic growth of the law by means of a wide array of users. *Caveat emptor* ("buyer beware") is based on a belief in equality between buyer and seller; protection of confidentiality is connected with the personalization of the corporate entity and contributes to a reliance on the custom handling of complaints; handling judicial cases one by one encourages the belief that public rights should be in government hands, and so on. Moreover, clusters of ideologies are interrelated in various ways forming an opaque net. Together the ideologies reinforce marginal use and a marginal array in the courts.

In modern ideologies, the notions of progress, science, and technology are prominent symbols, so we would expect them to play important roles in relation to control. As Kroeber wrote some years ago, progress "...is adhered to with considerable fervor of emotion" (1948:297). Progress as cultural control has been written about by anthropologists but not necessarily labeled as such. As a concept it not only gave rationale for the European expansion over the globe, it also justified why they behaved as they did as well as where they went—in relation to acts of conquest, genocide, slave labor, and exploitation of natural resources. Progress was also implanted in the third world as a goal to be emulated if modernization was the goal. It further operates as control in the contemporary U.S., and progress is an underlying theme in all the papers in this volume: in entertainment, in "civilizing" the plaintiff, in educating our young in the latest acceptable sex education, and in achieving beauty standards.

One cannot study culture as hegemony without dealing with the tacit assumptions that geneticist Barbara McClintock (Keller 1983) refers to. The idea of progress is encountered as control in a number of instances. It is a driving force in energy research, and is often equated with technological progress (Nader 1980). The presence of complex or simply new technology rather than its use or consequence will commonly be used to indicate progress, and when scientists shift the focus onto use or consequence there are sanctions to discourage such questioning. Central dogmas are powerful regimes of truth. Some progressives propose that the problem of dogma can only be ameliorated by replacing the concept of technological progress with social progress, arguing that "progress" is too deeply embedded to eliminate.

On the question of gender and the status of American women, the control is of a different sort. Because American women generally believe that the status of American women today is better than it was in the past and better than it is anywhere else (that is change for us has been incremental) the majority remain politically apathetic, while feeling positionally superior to women elsewhere. The ideology of progress works here to control women in the west and in the rest of the world (Nader 1989). Again there are sanctions in challenging "true discourses."

An examination of controlling processes requires examining key concepts. For example, the task of reconceptualizing the regulation debate involved re-extending the term regulation to include the multiple systems of regulation by which different parts of society govern the behavior of their members, and constructing a holistic method to understand both the formal and the informal regulatory process as part of one network, reflecting power differentials. The regulation debate demanded a questioning of tacit assumptions: the equation of regulation with government regulation (Nader and Nader 1985).

In work on children, or on the social organization of child-rearing, the task again became one of reconceptualizing what it meant to parent in a society in which the state, the corporations, the schools all take part in rearing America's children, but where only the parents have sole responsibility (Nader 1980). Understanding the social organization of child-rearing required taking a vertical slice, an action which moves against the view in social science fields that reinforce the notions that all the power is in the home.

There is now a good body of research that illustrates the relative power of cultural control as compared to Ross's notion of social control, and their positions to one another in a model of change. Cultural control is impersonal; it is deeply embedded. Those who exercise control through culture are sometimes unaware because such control is glossed as marketing for example. The study of impersonal forces as controls is now accepted in the domain of social analysts who write about such things as video games, sexual preoccupations, standardized testing, and television programming as they channel our time, our behavior, and our values. These impersonal forces are in a sense non-ideological, or anti-ideological manipulations which, if questioned, are defended in terms of some ideological construct such as free market competition, free and open science, meritocracy, or self-realization. As Huxley put it in 1958 in commenting on *1984* and *Brave New World*: "in the democratic West there is economic censorship and the media of mass communication are controlled by members of the Power Elite...concerned in the main neither with the true nor the false, but with the unreal, the more or less totally irrelevant...." Huxley's comments extend to the politician's reliance on "...repetition, suppression, and rationalization—the repetition of catchwords which they wish to be accepted as true, the suppression of facts which they wish to be ignored, the arousal and rationalization of passions which may be used in the interests of the Party or the State...." None of these kinds of materials fit within the concept of social control. Certainly the control is not consensual although it may be hegemonic, and certainly it is not in response to deviant behavior—that it is not reactive, but proactive.

Social control researchers focusing on formal systems have generally paid less attention to the impersonal, indirect, implicit forces controlling our lives, as for example, with ideologies, although it is with those symbols placed by any society outside the jurisdiction of its formal social control system that cultural controls operate most adamantly. Ideologies seem to be increasingly used in modern industrial society because they are less vulnerable to abrupt change; they are not dependent on particular people or family dynasties. They are used because they are efficient mechanisms of control through which powerful groups may operate to maintain structural continuity while the point of origin of such control remains vague or unclear.

The Political Economy of Knowledge

Although both the concept of social control and the concept of cultural control are subsumed under controlling processes, we know least about how cultural controls actually work. In Dumont's view (1977), ideology is that part of culture which provides a blueprint for social organization and social life. He would assign ideology a more prominent role in control than political or economic control over resources. His, however, is a static model. Michel Foucault (1967) in *Madness and Civilization* demonstrates how changes in ideology related to the concept of madness lead to changes in the diagnosis and treatment of the mad and of social attitudes toward them. Foucault describes how changing perceptions of the mad in parts of Western Europe from the Middle Ages to the end of the nineteenth century led to their being separated from the rest of society, classified as deviants, and finally subjected to social control. Foucault focuses on the ideas that lead to social change; I would argue that he focused on the cultural controls that led to the social controls. In Piven and Cloward's book *Regulating the Poor* (1971) the authors find that relief rolls expand when civil disorder rises, and contract when it subsides and industry needs a supply of low wage workers. Again the model is incremental. In the film *Rosie the Riveter* cultural controls are used to urge women to work in war work, in factories, and later another set of cultural controls encourage women to stay at home because their families need them there. The techniques are now easily recognizable as propaganda pure and simple.

In all of these works, and in the examples mentioned earlier, the sum total of social and cultural control but in particular cultural control is used as a masking device, a legitimizing strategy, or as a model for social life, strengthening dominant powers by rationalizing action, by socializing members of society to internalize salient value and belief systems, and also by controlling resistance and suppressing dissent where need be. They are the kinds of controls that carry sanctions. It is often not enough to walk away.

A systematic theory of controlling processes recognizes the difference between control that is consensual, asymmetrical, and hegemonic. The ethnographic essays that follow indicate the theoretical movement from the contributions of Ross in 1901 when he spoke of social control as consensual, to a controlling process perspective that sees consensus as control. Control in the late twentieth century is predominantly cultural because cultural control is more efficient than social control, an idea that European social thinkers were quicker to grasp than were their American counterparts.

In this volume Jessica Jerome's ethnographic piece, *The Social Practice of AIDS Education*, is an argument for reconfiguring education so as to move it beyond existing cultural construction, a loosening up of the discourses around AIDS education that is often unaware of the micro educational context. In *The Privatization of Justice: An Ethnography of Control*, Bjorn Claeson explores the incremental transfiguration of the injured worker. The plaintiff becomes a patient to be healed by a private justice system that isolates them from other injured workers. For Claeson this intensification of control renders the injured worker an object under surveillance by their healer-antagonists. The ethic of right and wrong recedes as the ethic of treatment takes the foreground. Panasitti and Schull, in *Re-articulating the Moral Economy of Gambling* illuminate the ways in which the American relationship has evolved from the demonization of gambling to its valuation, its legalization, its "truth," and the

downward diffusion of moral responsibility. They challenge notions of free will that justify the corporate ethos that has been constructed. Linda Coco's paper *Silicone Breast Implants in America: A Choice of the "Official Breast?"* examines the internalized imperative that makes women feel that "most women feel they are making the decision for breast implants on their own and for themselves." As she explains, however, this choice often can be distilled to economic survival. She concludes that women in America in fact do not choose implantation because the women she interviewed were neither freely situated nor critically informed. Finally, *Skeletons in the Closet: The Staging of Female Adolescent Identity* brings us full circle; Marianne McCune writes about how adolescents she is observing are not rejecting rules and structural authority, rather they define their identity in contrast to parental identity and establishment norms. It is into this arena that covert authorities slip, and it is their unmasking that is the subject of her efforts. The cultural processes that feed and are fed by adolescent behavior are of very different origins.

In sum, these ethnographic studies of controlling processes are cutting-edge contributions to our understanding of the mechanisms by which hegemonies work the broader culture, the bottom-up culture. It is not that everyone succumbs to hegemony, however, it is clear that the impact of hegemonies invite a rethinking of the politics of the concept of culture, and as well their meaning for concepts like free will and democracy. To close our eyes to what Roger Keesing refers to as "the political economy of knowledge" is to edit out powerful contemporary colonizers of minds.

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