



CONTROLLING PROCESSES
SELECTED ESSAYS
1994-2005

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LAURA NADER

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Controlling Processes: Selected Essays 1994-2005

Guest Editor: Laura Nader

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Preface

Laura Nader, University of California, Berkeley

In 1994 the Kroeber Anthropological Society Papers published the first set of *Essays on Controlling Processes*. In the introduction to that first issue I described the concept of controlling processes as dealing with processes of control that emphasize the importance of ideas and beliefs as dynamic components of power, a concept that encompasses knowledge of how central dogmas are made and how they work. The essays in the 1996 and 2002 volumes speak to many of the same issues focusing on power as means—principally the manner in which individuals and groups are influenced and persuaded to participate in their own domination.

As the papers in this selected volume show, the domains of influence and persuasion are often multi-sited. They are found in the law, in the workplace, in university dormitories, in museums, on Native American reservations, and are generally ubiquitous. Because of the interpenetrating qualities of hegemonic controlling processes, the concept of resistance has been recognized as important, requiring an ever more careful and critical eye to understand when resistance is resistance and how it matters.

There are some pragmatic insights in this selected collection of papers: culture easily impacts on a fragile or vulnerable mind, and hegemonic influence often limits our imagination. Furthermore, the importance of ideas as dynamic components of power often emanates from their appearance in clusters or interlocking systems. Institutions of entrenched power and privilege are supremely aware of the power of complex cultural codes. The essays in this volume speak to the processes of entrenchment.

Introduction

Laura Nader, University of California, Berkeley

In societies undergoing rapid change there is a flow of power linking ideas, institutions, and human agency, a situation in which power is double-edged, simultaneously centered and decentered. The study of controlling processes in such power contexts presents a formidable challenge for scholars to connect the complexities of individual experiences without losing sight of the multilayered connections. Perforce, various research strategies in studying control as the means to power involve combinations of historical, ethnographic, and critical approaches.

In 1997, “Controlling Processes: Tracing the Dynamic Components of Power” was published in *Current Anthropology* as the Sidney W. Mintz Lecture for 1995, along with ten commentaries and a reply from me as author. This paper presents a framework, both methodological and theoretical, for elucidating the dynamics of power by understanding how ideas about culture are interwoven with notions of control. I indicate how control is redistributed in the professions—in law, by coercive harmony, moving people to view harmony rather than justice as desirable; in medicine, by an ideology of choice inducing women to undergo body-altering surgery under the illusion of free choice; in museology, recontextualizing science work and by so doing demystifying an idealized version of science. These examples illustrate what has become normalized, the intention to document not only how cultures are invented but how invented cultures work to shift standards of value or taste, and how they move through multiple sites, discourses, and practices. In particular, these accounts show how control through naturalization works to control “First World” citizens.

Social scientists are increasingly writing about the twentieth century as an age of ideologies among them fascism, Marxism, and corporate capitalism now in the context of globalization. Anthropologists in particular are struggling for an understanding of the means by which ideologies, as distinct from the non-instrumental idea of culture, create forms of subordination and conformity. Indeed, even in the three examples in my 1997 paper, one cannot help but notice the interaction between harmony, choice, and science. The beauty of a controlling processes approach to power, which has roots in the theories of Gramsci, Foucault, Bourdieu, and others, is that it allows us to look at old questions in new and provocative ways that point to the potential of reconfiguring the mundane or “normal” in a way that is not bereft of human agency. For example, the redefinition of previously normal moods and behaviors as medical disorders is a case in point, one that goes far beyond the widespread uses of Prozac and Ritalin. As I noted in 1997, the final colonization is

the colonization of the mind and not surprisingly anthropologists themselves are not immune to such processes, a challenge for us all.

The present volume is a selection from a series of KAS volumes on controlling processes research principally carried out by students at the University of California, Berkeley. The first two volumes were published in 1994 and 1996 covering a variety of sites and consisting mainly of ethnographic material. The 1994 volume included papers on the social practice of AIDS education, the privatization of justice, the moral economy of gambling, silicone breast implants in America, and the staging of female adolescent identity. The 1996 volume ranged even further afield including: the new industrial relations, the storage plans for nuclear waste on Native American lands, the science and anti-science debates at the Smithsonian Institution, dormitories at UC Berkeley, and historicizing social science models of agency. This work consists of understanding how power works through control in contemporary societies. In all these papers the search was for better understandings of the principles of control, not all control, but particularly public control which operates coercively through interpenetrating institutions, and which operates in a manner that is sometimes covert or at least unknown to individuals or communities. The present 2002 volume builds upon the earlier two in scope and depth using documentary materials in addition to ethnographic data, offering a diversity of sites and orientations: the national security state and Native American lands; the links connecting neoclassical economic theory, biological determinism, and the subordination of women; the construction of the corporation as a legal person; the media's role in presenting the Gulf War as virtual violence; internal colonial mechanisms of control over what constitutes knowledge and belief and the resistances to such manipulations; and finally, an examination of the inevitability syndrome as it operates in the U.S. House of Representatives, our media, and our workplaces.

From the outset it is clear that, in these papers, researchers are attempting to understand how control works, realizing of course, that it works unevenly and thus is not total. The theme of "expert" and "non-expert" knowledge and their relative voice helps illuminate how environmental racism and nuclear colonialism co-occur.

Another deals with how scientific paradigms are used in the repackaging of ideology to explain inequality. Both biological determinism and neoclassical economic models in tandem "frame gender inequality as being independent from cultural forces and therefore beyond the realm of normative debate." Gender inequalities are thereby decontextualized.

In Michael Zara's paper, the story is about how the corporation came to be a legal "person" with the legal rights of human beings. His research further explains how the fictitious person—the corporation—came to be legally considered a psychological person as well. He traces the evolution of this legal-political concept from the 1807 Supreme Court case *Bank of the United States v. Deveaux*, through

several other cases over two hundred years that incrementally increased the economic and political rights of the corporation. The cumulative drift is antithetical to Sir Henry Maine's historical evolutionism. Zara spotlights how the private-and business-oriented individualism of American industrialism gets legitimated through law, which over time threatens to displace the natural individual in favor of fictitious corporate persons.¹

In the ethnographic study of pharmaceutical sales practices, Michael Oldani explores the workings of double loyalty. Pharmaceuticals contribute through research for the good of mankind. At the same time they contribute to a bottom line mentality for shareholders through aggressive promotion of their products. Sales people are caught in a double bind between profit and health care. As a true participant-observer, that is as a former salesperson, Oldani was apparently also caught in this sales dilemma. As it turns out, it was not a necessary dilemma, but a manufactured one, resulting from ideological moorings created in opposition to the Food and Drug Administration (FDA). Sometimes such corporate tactics erupt in scandals, followed by a cracking down within the industry on "spinselling." He describes the sales indoctrination, the sales process itself, as well as rituals of the trickster salesperson being caught. In the end, he labels his subject "the culture of cheating" in the context of "the culture of winning." He concludes by pointing to the gap in the literature on the "rep and the doctor," while at the same time pointing out how pharmaceutical corporations (and he as a salesperson) use the authority of science and knowledge of anthropology to "spinsell."

In Nader's piece on "Coercive Harmony," the use of the harmony law model is used as a technique of pacification. Nader traces the harmony law model from its use by Spanish colonizers in Mexico to its use in the United States and then as a tool of modern imperialism. Linda Coco's paper "Silicon Breast Implants in America: A Choice of the 'Official Breast?'" brings us full cycle. She writes about the internalized imperative that makes most women feel that "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. 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.

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 essay on "Brace New Workplace" compares the techniques of the new industrial relations with those of thought reform programs. Roberto Gonzalez uses as material experience in work, teams and quality

circles in a General Motors automotive assembly plant. He asks: "Are quality circles coercive, and if so, how—that is, through what mechanisms are workers coerced?" C. Jay Ou's paper on the political economy of nuclear waste storage projects in the United States focuses on negotiations between the federal government, Native American tribes, and the nuclear industry in searching for potential sites for nuclear waste disposal. Exploring the new radioactive colonialism highlights the problematic nature of industrial interests on Indian land of which the Nahavo case is probably the most well-documented. Tribal sovereignty and economic development of cultural capital are at issue.

Kathleen Wilusz's essay is about the media and the Persian Gulf War. Her work is based on survey materials on how the war was presented as a virtual event. She posits that having learned from public protests during the Vietnam era, the media repeatedly presented sanitized images of the Gulf War without death or destruction. These antiseptic presentations allowed for the continued bombing of Iraq after the declaration of the cease-fire, without media coverage. And the censorship plan worked—dissent disappeared and war without protest was the way the Gulf War was billed in the media. What protesters there were got depicted as negative or dangerous as compared to other Americans. Stories were systematically paired—Iraq was dangerous to its opposite, that is, the American way of life. The media portrayed "expert" testimony as "strategic ritual," increasing its credibility and authority. Unique to this war was the absence of reports detailing human destruction or even counts of the dead. The Iraqis were portrayed as destroyers of civilian populations while Americans employed advanced technologies (e.g., "smart bombs") that avoid unnecessary destruction. The stage was set for primetime media events. Names of operations resembled video war games. Following the war, the sanctions allowed for a new type of aggressive war—the economic embargoes. The silence continued, and the author claims that the absence of a formal declaration of war by the United States Congress allows escape from legal redress.

In the final paper, Peter Shorett focuses on the irreversibility of "the inevitability syndrome" and shows how "inevitability thinking" works in practice in three contexts: (1) in United States House of Representatives hearings on the World Trade Organization (WTO), (2) in the media presentations of neoliberal globalization as a natural and inevitable process, and (3) as a manipulative device for managing workforces. Such inevitability exercises result in a "strategic form of misrecognition," a prelude to passivity, acquiescence, and helplessness because there appear to be no other options. In addition, he describes the most extraordinary use of sociology, more specifically the knowledge of group processes, in Rosebeth Kanter's work indicating that such applied sociology might well be a violation of social science codes of ethics, written or unwritten.

In summary, these last essays discover how control works and with what consequences: slow corporate take-over case-by-case for over a century has meant the

corporation as a person has become normalized; ideologies that work in tandem have a lock-in effect; the culture of cheating is paired with the culture of winning, both mind-bending techniques that threaten public health; inevitability thinking is part of a heritage of progressional and progressivistic philosophies in the West that silences critical thought while dispensing “Western” thought globally.

The methods used in the study of controlling processes are: first, the practice of exoticizing the dance between the dominant players, the complicit parties and those making counter-hegemonic moves; second, the highlighting of complexity, thereby revealing simplification as a standard rhetorical tool of mind colonization and normalization. Progressional hegemonies may be undergoing decentralization. If Foucault is right in his fundamental assertion that knowledge is power and that power is decentralized and a fluid force that permeates all aspects of social life, then as Gramsci points out, we are all complicit in our own domination. That very realization of complicity, of course, is the key move towards liberation.

At this point one theoretical point of departure might be a re-evaluation of the concepts of agency, choice, volition, will, and various related notions. Many of these concepts are subject matter in allied fields of cognitive science and psychology for example, and not-so-regarded disciplines such as physics, philosophy, or mathematics. For example, Daniel Wegner’s new book *The Illusion of Conscious Will* (2002) is the result of many years of research on memory and thought suppression and on the relation between thought and action. In his work, Wegner suggests that the illusion of will or agency may be useful to us as a species, but the social aspects of agency in his research are not broadly contextualized. With all the problems that an anthropologist might see in his work and in its interpretation the unanswered questions remain an interesting challenge—if people do not control their lives the way they think they do, what does control them, and to what degree is the illusion of conscious will a Eurocentric idea? My motive in raising the issue of agency in this brief introduction is to provoke future ethnographers to take seriously the question of complicity and agency in relation to empowerment.

Notes

¹ The boldness with which corporations are still pushing for rights of personhood is illustrated in a recent bid by corporations in Vancouver, British Columbia for the right to vote in municipal elections. The Aurora Institute in Vancouver, a non-profit group, not only opposed the initiative, but is leading the movement to remove corporate person-hood.

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