



Social Control after Foucault.

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Abstract

After the Foucauldian model, often misunderstood and projected without nuance onto the present, the study of social control has not progressed much. Meanwhile, changes on the ground call for the construction of a new theoretical paradigm which should take account of three contemporary tendencies: a) the embedding of control in the widespread and often consensual interaction between the user and the outlets and systems of institutional action; b) the emergence of an 'unintended control', that is not oriented towards values; and, c) the inherent contribution of sociotechnical systems, which at once regularise social behaviour and project onto their users a consciousness formed around invisible, yet ubiquitous, threats. The paper proposes to understand these tendencies as part of the contemporary transition towards institutional normativity and institutional sociality, two concepts that the author has developed in other works.

Introduction

Whilst one cannot pretend that the question of social control has been completely forgotten, it is in many respects stagnant. The smokescreen of globalisation and the link between crime and immigration are two perspectives that, both on the left and right, produce simplistic demonizing and idealizing discourses on control. For the remainder, the stagnation takes different forms inside different analytical cultures. If in continental Europe there is little discussion or writing on the question of control, the international, English-speaking, debate mainly develops on two levels: the definition of terms that are appropriate for the conduct of the debate (for two very different examples see: Galloway, 2001; and Valier, 2001), and the link between reflection on control and the debate around modernity in its past and present forms (for example: Staples, 2000; Poster, 1990).

It is not difficult to explain this stagnation. In spite of its diversity, it reflects the difficulty of introducing the problematics of control into a post-Foucauldian stage. There are several reasons for this. First of all, the question of control presents itself inevitably in the light – or should one say in the shadow? – of its social utility. Secondly, it seems impossible to separate the analysis of control from questions of domination and stratification. Thirdly, theoretical propositions on

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contemporary society have not succeeded until now in providing any serious explanatory answers regarding the organisation of domination and stratification and their relationship with the restructuring of culture and identity. In other words, it is difficult to find the next link in the intellectual chain from Durkheim to Foucault.

It would not be useful to review once more Foucault's contributions, both direct and indirect, on the question of control, via his analyses of power and the subject. These contributions are still actively discussed, particularly outside France, but this has not abated the persistence of several conspiratorial and centralising interpretations, which do not do justice to his ideas (see: Lacombe, 1996). The first step towards a less biased approach of Foucault's contribution on control would be to focus on a consistently disregarded point: that the Foucauldian model of control, and consequently its explanatory power, *refers to the past* and is not concerned with the emergence of the contemporary postindustrial subject. This is almost self-evident but often put aside in order to make things easier for today's analysts and to project Foucault's thesis on modernity unaltered onto the late capitalist present. Such unconscious blindness also disregards the fact that the analysis of control was for Foucault yet another axis of a clear cross-cutting theme in his research: the constitution of the human being as subject (ibid.: 348-349). However, things have advanced too far to reverse all that is based on this arbitrary reasoning. Only a model which takes the risk of referring directly, and not by analogy, to the contemporary condition, can supply the debate on control with a sound basis for addressing the questions of the late modern environment.

It is certain that such a model could not exist if one approached control as an isolated subject. Several questions exist upstream, namely the question of a theory of the socio-cultural development of contemporary capitalist society as a whole. It is only within such a broader explanatory frame that the debate around control can take on new meaning. Furthermore, such an informed debate on control would be useful only insofar as it reinforced the explanatory capacity of its theoretical frame and was in harmony with parallel research in other areas. The theses put forward in this article rely partially on such a theory of the post-industrial society, the first volume of which has been published in French (Lianos, 2001a). Without expanding on this approach, it is possible to introduce here some major strands of the proposed theoretical model of control and to illustrate some aspects of its specificity in relation to contemporary western societies. Naturally, this model revolves around some important transitions in current social conditions that must be seriously taken into account for an adequate reconceptualisation of social control.

Institutional Control

"Institution" is used here to indicate any source of mediating activity between human beings. In this sense, all private and public organisations and establishments are institutions because they regulate aspects of human behaviour as third parties, i.e. without being subject to cultural negotiation (Lianos, 2001a: 16ff.; 2001b; 2000). A super-market, a bank, a ministry and a web portal are all important sources of institutional sociality and normativity, and they should be

understood, because of their combined effects on their users, as parts of the same regulating universe. These combined effects generate a new stage in the development of social regulation.

Until very recently it was not difficult to avoid the question of the origins of social control. Social control was understood as a diverse social register produced by human coexistence, and the role of that register was to maintain that coexistence on one of its possible lines of coherent continuity. It depended on socio-economic and historical conjunctures which of these lines would be followed. At this level, it matters little for the social analyst to know whether this type of control is intended or conscious as it is in either case obvious that the social universe is shaped by certain aspects of the relations that make it up. However, the development of organisational systems devoted exclusively to such aspects of human relations poses new problems. The spectrum of such systems expands rapidly and ranges from private services in law and order to bureaucracies that monitor and validate highly specific sides of citizen behaviour, e.g. accident prevention authorities or credit-rating agencies. This organisational processing introduces an entirely new level into the constitution of the human subject. From paying local tax instalments to taking cars for an MOT, we live through a multiple range of institutional activities that monitor and verify conformity. It is rather easy to observe that the largest part of behaviour regulation is not generated in today's capitalist societies by the relational networks of sociality but as a result of operating within institutional frames of activity. Little attention has been paid to this, although *Discipline and Punish* considerably generalised and deepened our suspicions regarding all structures that channel and homogenise social behaviour.

There is, however, a series of problems with the propagation of this Foucauldian suspicion. The first one is that this suspicion has been propagated without pairing each phase of its development with a proper analytical base. Control is accordingly conceived of in terms of arbitrarily presumed restrictive effects and not in terms of a reliable analysis of its production, content, reception and articulation with other social registers. This preconceived mistrust, to which several authors have fallen victims to various degrees (for example: Cohen and Scull, 1983; Cohen, 1985; Marx, 1988; Mathiesen, 1980), conceal important developments that have been sweeping the domain of control. A second problem is that the same deep mistrust underlies both the production and the reception of research on control. This results in a particular climate, which defines this research as a discourse that refers as a matter of routine to the erosion of liberties and the capture of society by dark and totalitarian forces. This preconceived assimilation of research and political critique damages both areas because it is superficial and analytically unfounded, and because it pre-empted the feelings and opinions of the public, usually with great inaccuracy³.

It is possible that this state of things be at the same time a symptom of intellectual laziness and a desire to continue to confuse perspectives of class struggle and emancipation, with an opposition to the institution as such (see for example: Fox, 2001). Whatever the reason, it is a simplification to attribute as a matter of course specific intentions to all acts or mechanisms of control without taking the trouble to carry out an analysis of the complexity that causes their birth, survival and

³ As it happened, for instance, with the public acceptance of CCTV.

proliferation. On the other hand, it is necessary to examine the question of social control in relation to the institution, that is to say, the instrument for the conscious and planned management of socialised human activity. In the first place, it is for several reasons very useful to distinguish between control generated by the skein of links between groups or individuals and control deriving from the activity of institutions.

a) This institutional control is not spontaneous as is the case in social communities. It is produced as a planned *managerial* activity corresponding to the complex mode of organisation of contemporary Western society.

b) It is *integral* to specific acts or activities, usually bureaucratic, and is part both of the rationale and the outcome of these activities. It would be reductive and unjustified to see such activities as relating exclusively or principally to control; it would be equally simplistic to insist on the distinction between the 'controlling' and the non-controlling aspects. For instance, one could look at a CCTV system which monitors the traffic on a road network; is this *dispositif*⁴ about repressive surveillance (traffic offences), detective surveillance (stolen vehicles), the regulation of traffic flow (reduction of congestions), support for planning (recording information on all aspects of traffic), accident prevention (transmission of information to drivers on obstacles to anticipate) or the improvement of access times for emergency services (breakdowns, accidents)? Evidently, this list is far from exhaustive but it is comprehensive enough to lead to a useful answer: the *dispositif* is about everything at once. It is the same for insurance forms that ask if the potential client is a smoker (to calculate premiums, assess, and sanction behaviour); the request to present identification to collect a parcel sent in the post (verification of effective management, simultaneous constraint and protection of the privacy of the individual) and a myriad of situations that make up everyday life. This type of activity is not divisible into categories that are comfortable for the analyst and this shows in itself the increasing impossibility of talking about control without examining its connection with other domains and registers of social organisation.

c) This institutional control is often perceived as *beneficial* and sometimes even *liberating*⁵ as much as constraining; it establishes a pre-existing set of conditions and is often part of a service offered to the public as a whole in their capacity as 'users'. For the client, controlled parking space in a shopping centre is a good reason to choose it compared with another shopping centre which offers free-access parking without security personnel or CCTV; baggage control in airports delivers welcome protection for the controlled user, and requesting 'no smoking' at the reservation desk avoids one being surrounded by smoke.

d) In parallel, these types of service necessarily fragment the social environment as they attempt to isolate the legitimate user from a dangerous Other ('thief', 'terrorist', 'smoker'). This process of fragmentation is an efficient machine for producing social identities and ideotypical situations of threat that are subject to the broader structures of social stratification. Thus, unlike control in

⁴ Translator's note: as used by Foucault, the French word *dispositif* has no single direct English equivalent; it can mean any or all of 'socio-technical system', 'device', 'mechanism' etc.

⁵ See also Pecora's original argument (2002) on the profound need to be the subject of surveillance.

relational networks where sociality operates directly, institutional control is centrifugal and fragmenting.

e) Finally, let us remind ourselves of what clearly follows from this. Institutional control is neither intersubjective nor group-based. On the contrary, it is by definition *impersonal* in its origin and *atomised* in its reception, because it is conceived and applied by an institution as part of the homogeneous distribution of a certain activity. Between the institution and the user, there exists no interaction, except for a managerial monitoring and feedback cycle. The growing emergence of precision in the delivery of services and their establishment as high-class contemporary commodities, makes the capitalist market and the Western State unable to function without users who are completely individualised in their contacts with administrations and businesses. Therefore a remote, often invisible and diffuse, entity provides its services to isolated individuals. This immediately raises the question of the contribution of this state of affairs to the evolution of socialisation and sociality as such. To respond, it is necessary to examine in more detail how institutional services are being provided.

I have already described a context which allows us to conceive of institutional control as a factor embedded in the development of the institution, further still as an aspect of all institutional mediation, including domains of relations that exist as a matter of individual option, such as consumption, exchange, life-planning, etc. In the first instance, this confirms the forgotten truism that all organisation involves control. But at the same time, it is important to clarify that in the postindustrial condition *this does not mean that organisation is built on control*; this nuance is a new development in comparison with the past, both pre-modern and modern, and a development that remains largely unassimilated by the analysts of normativity. Observing this development is more a question of perception than of reference to any 'objective' external indicator. It is, however, crucial to take that nuance into account because in current conditions *the majority of what one can call control does not focus on practices of constraint, nor on oppressing behaviour and expression, but on the organisation and the contextualisation of what is often intended or even desired by a sovereign subject*. Thus, analysing everyday environments like the supermarket and the Underground in terms of incarceration makes little sense, whereas the inverse seems more and more justified (see: Digneffe *at al.*, 2002). This inversion is not neutral; it calls for the construction of a new framework of analytical premises. The most useful characteristic of such a framework should be to acknowledge that *the criterion for deciding what belongs or not to the sphere of control is neither the consciousness of the subject or the group involved, nor the will of those who produce the 'controlling' effect in question, but mainly the conditions that shape the interaction between those two parties*. This does not imply that control itself is 'neutral', in terms of its production or its reception, but that there is no longer any reason to believe in direct correspondence and symmetry between these two stages. It is, consequently, necessary to recognise the existence of types of activity where control arises in many ways that were often not intended to produce a controlling effect.

Technology

There is a powerful inertia when it comes to updating analytical tools regarding the technologies of control. The epistemic, methodological and empirical conceptualisation and practice seems to have solidified under the weight of the ‘disciplinary’ era and has been unable to reshape itself since. As a result, present developments are immediately drawn into a binary disciplinary/anti-disciplinary problematics. This explains the fact that the technological systems have been considered solely with regard to their operational or quantitative potential in a generalised context of surveillance (Marx, 1988; Ocqueteau, 1992; Ocqueteau and Pottier, 1995; Haggerty and Ericson, 2000). In his examination of the recent development of surveillance technologies, Marx (2002: 15) remarks:

The new surveillance relative to traditional surveillance extends the senses and has low visibility or is invisible. It is more likely to be unintended. Data collection is often integrated into routine activity. It is more likely to involve manipulation than direct coercion. Data collection is more likely to be automated involving machines rather than (or in addition to) involving humans. It is relatively inexpensive per unit of data collected. Data collection is often mediated through remote means rather than on scene and the data often resides with third parties. Data is available in real time and data collection can be continuous and offer information on the past, present and future (ala statistical predictions). The subject of data collection goes beyond the individual suspect to categories of interest. The individual as a subject of data collection may also become the object of an intervention. There may be only a short interval between the discovery of the information and the taking of action.

We can see here how data-matching, resulting from “routine activities”, can easily come to be represented as menacing ‘manipulation’, rather than what it really is, i.e.: an accessory side effect in the operation of an institutional web that is ever more dense and efficient in the provision of services, and on which our life depends almost entirely with the exception of very intimate moments. Marx opens his most recent critique of the ‘new surveillance’ with the following incident:

In an interview with the individual responsible for an all-purpose student ID access card used for building entrance, the library, meals and purchases at a large Southern university I encountered the following case:

The registrar came into his office and discovered an arson effort that failed. A long burn mark on the carpet led to a Gatorade bottle full of flammable liquid in a closet. In an adjacent building police found the area where the bomb was assembled. They requested card access records for that building. A review of the logs found some early morning card swipes which looked suspicious. They also checked the lot number on the Gatorade bottle that was holding the liquid and determined it had been delivered to a campus convenience store. Upon matching the records of purchasers of Gatorade with those entering the building where the bomb making materials were found, the police got a hit. They

confronted the suspect and he confessed to arson. His motive was to burn up his academic records, as he was failing several classes and didn't want to disappoint his parents. This high tech discovery of human spoor needs only to be bolstered by a video camera, DNA matching and thermal lie detection to serve as a paradigmatic case of the "new surveillance". New technologies for collecting personal information which transcend the physical, liberty enhancing limitations of the old means are constantly appearing. These probe more deeply, widely and softly than traditional methods, transcending natural (distance, darkness, skin, time and microscopic size) and constructed (walls, sealed envelopes) barriers that historically protected personal information.

What is brushed aside in approaching such incidents is that the lot numbers on products are not put there to fight against arson but to transport goods quickly and precisely for the lowest cost, which consumers appreciate. In the same way, supplying access cards reassures the residents of a large building more than it annoys them; in most cases, access cards tend to substitute for the constant presence of people in many areas, which was previously taken for granted and which would have probably guided the police in the same direction. There is in fact nothing more efficient than good old communitarian social control – which resembles more what Marx calls "traditional methods" – to saturate the socialised being to its greatest depth. The 'external' power of data-matching, albeit effective from a forensic angle, does not target the 'soul' of the subject. It only logs practical conditions and facts that can be of investigative use.

Theoretical 'BigBrotherism' undoubtedly seduces us as much with its simplicity and its capacity to mark our thoughts, as with its interpretation of control and domination. However, after scratching the surface, one rapidly discovers the limits of these analyses that look at contemporary control as part of a larger scheme of socio-political domination or hegemony. An obvious pitfall is that we are asked to accept a 'Big Brotherism' without 'Big Brother'. This, besides the injustice done to Orwell, speaks more of our need to subject the development of a highly technological environment to conceptual schemata that refer to the pre-modern world or at most to the emergence of modernity. This predilection for the past patently disregards the understanding of technology itself and the consequences of specific technological applications whose effects are not only varied (see for example: Bellamy and Hanewicz, 1999) but sometimes in conflict and competition with each other. Building socio-technological dystopias peopled by clones and cyborgs (for example: Bogard, 1996) responds to this heterogeneous melange of perspectives which fails to take into account an essential point: *the organisation and the nature of power cannot remain immutable and subject to atemporal criteria whilst sociality transforms itself in a radical way*. Once the dynamics of the social universe are disregarded, it is easy to produce dark visions by simply focusing on the likely operation of future technological systems, which will presumably become more complex and accurate in their interaction with human behaviour, social, private or intimate.

The first thing that is noticeable about technological applications is the huge and growing field that they open up for shaping and monitoring their environment. A technological system is by definition a system of control of a certain environment. When this environment has a direct link with socialised human behaviour, the social universe is faced with new constraints. For many

authors this implicitly presupposes the false idea that the social and the technological are two independent registers and that the first imposes itself in some way upon the second in an external, occasional and atemporal manner⁶. This then produces a circularity of reasoning which confirms that the mechanisms of control indeed control effectively, threaten our liberties and lead to totalitarian developments⁷. I will discuss here as an example a concrete technological device⁸ and I will try to briefly sketch out an alternative perspective to that circular reasoning, which approaches the issue in a manner at once more synthetic and more empirical.

The magnetic tagging of products against theft is by now an old practice. A magnetised element (button, band, etc.) is attached or inserted into the protected object. Magnetic sensors exist at all the exits of the protected space and an alarm is set off if a magnetic tag passes between. Besides stores and shops, most libraries use such systems. It is clear from the start both for the user and for the observer that this is an anti-theft device. The sensors are visible at the entrances and, if the system is to be effective, it is necessary to detect and isolate objects taken in from outside which might set off the alarm. The device transforms its field of operation into an isolated and isolating universe, that is to say an environment that needs to be self-referential in order to be effective. The position of the user can be seen as an obligatory acceptance of the preconceived and pre-applied rules of the game to which she adheres by the simple fact of having entered the space protected by the device. This is often reinforced by a material reminder for the existence and role of the anti-theft system which maintains the system's visibility in a constant way, for example the magnetic studs attached to clothes, which are removed when one pays at the counter. It would be, however, preposterously biased to argue that the involvement with the system is a central part of the experience of the customer. In the first instance, it seems plausible that the customers are more interested in the clothes than in the magnetic studs which accompany them. Secondly, the device is by now too familiar to attract any interest as such; it represents a rather banal element integrated into the space, an expected component absorbed into the architectural background and forgotten in the middle of the principal, consuming purposes of the protected space.

To those excited by surveillance, this set-up poses a problem because the behaviour of the users is not directly monitored⁹. At the same time, it is difficult to suggest that the device is about indirect surveillance, properly speaking, since the movements and the condition of the tagged objects are not monitored either; the only thing that is detected is their eventual contact with the limits of the delineated space. On the other hand, the proponents of situational prevention (Clarke 1992) see here only an effective and fair application of a justified defence principle,

⁶ Even in the case of theoretical models that wish to reconcile these registers in a 'seamless fabric' (Latour 1991), this problem persists in a less visible but nevertheless clear manner. The central question remains that of the 'integration' of technology in the context of the distinction between nature / culture / society, rather than the analysis of its content, which would bring to light the implicit modalities of the proposed continuity of different registers.

⁷ See Salomon 1984 for a discussion that separates the managerial centralisation that results from processing information in general, from the danger of totalitarianism.

⁸ I use "device" here in the broadest sense, to include both technological applications and the notion of the *dispositif*.

⁹ This explains perhaps the unilateral concentration on CCTV devices and the exclusion from the debate on control of many other systems, which do not focus on channelling or monitoring human behaviour directly.

particularly since the liberty of the users is not affected; the system does not infringe on their private lives and the only loser is the possible offender whose job becomes a little more difficult.

It is possible to accept the well-rehearsed, dominant dilemma between ‘security’ and ‘liberties’, often presented as a trade-off in the sphere of citizen well being; the proliferation of views that take this trade-off for granted is rather worrying, for a critical perspective on the question should address every security device as a generator of conditions and circumstances that modify the social environment and the relations that develop – or are kept from developing – in it. This critical perspective can be summarised in a twofold question: what is the impact of a security device on the relationship between the users and their activity, and between the users and the institution? Firstly, the device is not applied to persons but *to things*, with a reference to a *possible* activity of persons. Otherwise put, we are dealing here with an indiscriminate form of control which aims to isolate a single, specific type of behaviour, the attempt to take an article beyond spatial limits; this possibility presumably justifies the saturation of the entire environment, without any distinction, with the uniform functions of a security device. Several conclusions can be drawn from this:

a) The system projects onto all the users a uniform, collective reasoning. The environment is controlled to avert what is presumably disapproved of on a social level, i.e. shoplifting. The integration of controlling parameters into a specific principal activity (in this case shopping) implicitly projects on all users their passive approval of certain values. From this point of view, the protected space becomes a field of ubiquitous, albeit subconscious, normative reminders; something like a theme park on the prevention of shoplifting.

b) The device transforms the spatial threshold of the institution into a threshold of legitimacy. It is completely legitimate to carry a tagged object up to the line that is determined by the magnetic sensors and completely illegitimate to cross this threshold¹⁰. The interesting point here is that all situations of uncertainty are suppressed. We deal with a binary choice between yes and no, legitimate or illegitimate, accept or be sanctioned. This is a serious qualitative transition in the development of control. As a primordial aspect of all human relations, social control – even in its most formal expressions – has always been based on the ‘regressiveness’ of conformity, that is to say, on the possibility of negotiating via degrees of behaviour seen as ‘suspicious’, ‘dubious’ in relation to a norm. If one observes the increasingly rare situation where a shop is still supervised by its owner, or by personnel whose principal professional activity is not surveillance, one can notice there a relative extension of relational control that is not qualitatively different from social control as we knew it. This control, which is based on ‘direct sociality’, reacts to a person or a behaviour that seems suspect, without predetermining a threshold of tolerance, but by monitoring what happens and negotiating its limits (Lianos 2001b). Such conditions are structurally impossible in the case of the device that I described. Otherwise put, the spectrum of regressive legitimacy that is constantly recreated by the inherent negotiation of social relations, is now being transformed into a normatively binary domain, exclusively determined in advance by

¹⁰ There are of course ‘false alarms’, e.g. an object that has not been properly demagnetised can set off the alarm and lead to the security guard asking for proof of purchase; these exceptions reinforce the suggestions put forward here, but I preferred not to complicate the argument excessively.

the institution.

c) It is implicit in the description so far that the functioning of the device radically changes in effect the framework for the perception of theft prevention and of the practices developed in relation to it. If control – and more specifically surveillance – by humans is possible, this is largely due to the constant assessment of their social environment. This assessment is being made on the basis of social representations applied to concrete circumstances and produces an anticipation of either conformity or deviance regarding the norm. Put differently, suspicion is selective and contains a large part of *preconception* as to who and what is suspect, so that a considerable gap is being formed between the – prejudiced and unjust – assessment of a young male from Brixton and that of an old woman from Hampstead. Inversely, it is the mobilisation of signs that are likely to inspire trust that makes cultural negotiation and normative regressiveness possible. It is the use of such cultural and behavioural signs that decides whether the surveilling gaze will be attracted or a suspicion will be raised, and determines which thresholds of legitimacy will be applied and what will be the nature of any likely sanctions. All this social know-how is rendered completely irrelevant by the technological device. On the contrary, it is the device itself, which now stands above all suspicion because it is simply absurd to suspect that it may change its reaction, depending on the user concerned each time.

The social consequences of this new configuration¹¹ are directly linked to the disappearance of the fundamental motivation of all socialised individuals to ‘appear’ credible by their *general* behaviour, that is to say the behaviour that is not specifically related to the domain of control (in this case, carrying a large bag, taking articles from shelves, trying clothes or shoes on, etc.). From this point of view, the technological device performs a strong ‘de-culturing’ function in the surveilled social environment. It erodes the norms and the modalities of their application in their capacity as intentional, accentuated aspects of social relations; then it reinvents them as non-negotiable constraints that are homogeneous and external to all participants.

d) The purpose of the device is made public by its very existence, contrary to control in direct sociality, where it is the knowledge of values formed by socialisation that silently establishes the acceptable limits of what is perceived as threatening. Put otherwise, it is a *fait accompli* by the very visibility of the device that the protected space is constantly subject to the threat of an offence and that this offence is incontestably a threat since a sophisticated protection is used to prevent it. *The device warns the users of a problem that they would otherwise not notice and projects onto them a shared consent*; as from the moment that one is conscious of an anti-theft device, two conditions must be taken for granted. Firstly, that all users share the idea that theft is an active threat, and secondly, that they position themselves by definition in either a positive or a negative way vis-à-vis the device by deciding whether they are likely offenders or not. The mere visibility of the system on the one hand sustains in users the constant awareness of the probability of a threat and, on the other hand, automatically transforms the usual consumer into a ‘non-thief’. This combination forms one of the most solid foundations for the growing culture of *dangerisation*, wherein others constitute by default a source of threat, unless one has

¹¹ These consequences are too extensive to summarise here. For a brief presentation, see Lianos 2001b and 2000.

good reason to think otherwise.

e) It follows that, seen from the outside, this combination of factors is oriented equally towards all users. For the device, there are no users who are less or more suspect, less or more dangerous than any others; this has two implications:

(i) a new type of equality emerges; its credentials are unquestionable since it is not only applied but *guaranteed* by the very technological nature of the device. From this point of view, the machine makes possible for the first time a non-stratified 'social environment', even if this development is based on a single criterion, that is to say, trustworthiness regarding a specific normative priority.

(ii) however, the make-up of this equality calls for discussion. What the device distributes equally is not the positive assessment of the users with regard to the norm, but with regard to breaching it; they all become suspects and, most importantly, suspects that are no longer presumed innocent. Although, this levelling out towards the lowest point does not call into question the egalitarian application of the function of the device, it does pose new questions. For example, to what extent can this normative discounting be seen as 'true' equality? What are the broader consequences for contemporary sociality as such devices become increasingly frequent? Is it possible to resist to such consequences? What are the issues that arise regarding domination? Is this negative equality in the last analysis desirable, and for whom?

These new questions will be increasingly debated as we become conscious of the problems posed by the deep transitions that take place in the sphere of control. It is impossible to tackle these questions without addressing the problematics of risk, the problematics of consumption, and above all, the institutional sociality that is engendered by the increasing density of the web of institutional activity. We also cannot separate these questions from questions around the fear of victimisation and the intentionality of contemporary control. Since I have already discussed the 'dangerisation' of control elsewhere (Lianos and Douglas, 2000; Lianos, 1999), I will focus here on the question of intentionality.

Intentionality

To acknowledge and understand the great changes in the field we must update the theorisation of control, which cannot start without calling into question the quality of *social* control. If the institution colonises the largest part the exercise of control and if it does this principally by using technological systems, is it a correct reading to see the result of this process as a socially articulated product? To respond, it is best to divide the question into several levels. More particularly, *we must separate the question of new developments in the sphere of control from that of a more general change in sociality*, so as not to mistake a change that is peculiar to a particular area from social change as a whole.

It is no longer helpful to think of control as a dimension of social interaction that is exclusively and *immediately* produced by individuals and groups. On the other hand, the modalities of

control in institutional contexts must be explored in detail. The thesis of the ‘dispersion of discipline’ in contemporary society (Cohen, 1979; Garland and Young, 1983; Shearing and Stenning, 1985) is not sufficient as an explanatory basis, above all because it ignores both the managerial rationality of socio-technical devices and the reception of this rationality by the users who assimilate it as a necessity for ensuring the delivery of goods and services that they wish to have. It is equally important to draw a similar conclusion regarding the relation between control and the will to control. Thus, in the majority of cases, a context or a device of institutional normativity does not involve any attempt to structure the internal premises of user behaviour. It is enough that one does not steal from the shelves and a matter of complete indifference whether one believes that shoplifting is acceptable or even legitimate behaviour. Ticket checks in buses aim at no more than reducing the loss of income for the operating company and safeguarding the general smooth running of the system. It is simply not part of managing the controlled environment to project values towards those who use it. The justification for the requested degree of conformity is exclusively limited to operating in accordance with the predetermined parameters of the formal channel of interaction that the institution designs and monitors, e.g. a till transaction to purchase goods for a store, a proper administrative request or decision for a local authority, joining the queue in a customer service lounge at a train station etc. Deontological and value-based perspectives are not part of such contexts of interaction. An ATM, that is to say a banking network, does not ask if the user is a legitimate client but compares a series of numbers (the ‘PIN code’) with stored information. So long as the match is assured, the transaction is authorised. What the subject thinks, does or believes, is irrelevant to what the institution controls; it is simply meaningless for the technological device. In the thousands of daily transactions with institutional outlets, which weave together the sociocultural resources of the postmodern subject, there is not a single wish to build and promote a cognitive and moral universe. The exclusive objective that is being pursued is to stimulate and facilitate behaviours that are favourable to the effective functioning of organisations.

As a result, we must stop looking at the purpose and the consequences of institutional control as a prolongation of subjection, either in the sense of submission or in the Foucauldian sense of the constitution of the socialised human being as a subject. The broad, moral and disciplinary, modernist vision of control is no longer operational in the overwhelming majority of contemporary environments where collective interaction takes place. On the contrary, institutional control is about the ‘de-subjectification’ of the individual, who is being largely transformed into a fragmented user, since the object of control is to regulate exclusively the specific institutional shell of activity concerned each time. In this context, the diverse forms of deviance are stripped of their evaluative context; a rise in shoplifting is for a department store a dysfunction, an organisational threat to tackle, exactly like long queues and uncompetitive prices. The distinction between the behaviour of the user and its channelling by the institution becomes superfluous as the two registers only exist inasmuch as they merge into a totality that is efficiently regulated by the institution. In both these registers, questions arise only as organisational problems that are dealt with as internal matters of the institution, and are resolved without reference to the user’s opinion, thought or values.

These conditions introduce three main lines of critique. Institutional control is: a) fragmented, not integrated or coherent, b) externally constrained but denuded of evaluative content,

c) normative, because it is managerial, but not the reverse. In a nutshell, we are faced with a new, ‘unintended’ control (Lianos 2001a : 25, 49-50, 198), which is produced only in as a *de facto* effect of institutional activity and which allows the subject total liberty, except in the area where that subject is engaged as a user of the managed environment. At the same time, it is important to note that the intention to control is not a necessary precondition for effectively producing serious consequences in the sphere of control. In breaking this correspondence between motive and outcome, *one can examine the causes and the results of diverse contexts and devices of control by analysing their specificity, without feeling obliged to have recourse to a centralised explanation, which is by the same token reductionist*. This perspective also leads to a more synthetic approach on the link between technology, values and meaning, and allows us to bypass the recurring question of whether it is possible to assign technology a particular organisational function and a coherent sociocultural role. In fact, both the critics of technology and its uses (e.g. Ellul 1988) and those who call for an ‘ideological design’ and a ‘social command of technology’ (Deforge 1993) are voluntarist positions because they approach the technological environment as observable and perceivable in itself. I suggest here that we should take the opposite direction and envisage substituting the theorisation of the technological with the analysis of its purely social content, which constitutes by definition its only meaning. It is precisely the way in which the technological device modifies the social world that makes technology meaningful at many levels at once. From that angle, it would be very useful to separate the analysis of technology from its critical, indeed philosophical, problematisation, with the aim of doing better in both areas.

‘Social’ Control?

The lack of a centralised and integrated dominant vision does not mean that it would be impossible to understand developments in the area of control in an organised manner. This conceptual organisation must respond at the same time to the transitions that take place in the interaction between the user and the systems that surround him, and to the theoretical questions regarding the role and the importance of these transitions in postindustrial societies. From this perspective we can now revisit the obvious question of the social nature of institutional, unintended control, which remains largely within the confines of technological systems. To what extent is this regulation of collective human existence properly ‘social’? *Firstly*, we are faced with a dilemma regarding the sociality that is introduced by institutional control. Its effects are profoundly atomizing because it is indispensable for the controlling device to deal with identifiable – thus indictable – individuals, and to avoid generating collective effects capable of blurring the parameters of the interaction between the user and the institution, thus diluting responsibility between individuals or among groups. From this point of view, institutional normativity leads to the destructuring of the social, to acute *desocialisation*. *Secondly*, it is becoming more and more difficult in such a context to mobilise the cultural resources that are peculiar to social stratification in order to avert control, both at the level of suspicion and at the level of its effects. This amounts to the elimination of a crucial margin of social negotiation and to the consequent decline of the motivation for acquiring cultural resources that are likely to increase respect, credibility and trustworthiness. The competition for reaching a social status that inspires respect and places its bearer beyond suspicion has been one of the most significant

foundations of social belonging. In the course of the few decades since the 1960s the 'egalitarian' premises and effects of institutional control have seriously eroded this foundation. In doing so, institutional normativity, and institutional sociality more generally, have created the ideal terrain for the rapid disengagement of users from social belonging. *Thirdly*, the evaluative base of institutional normativity is extremely weak. The previously indispensable evaluative grid of social control is replaced by an administrative, managerial and technological plexus, constituted as a *field of consensus* between the institution and the users, and exclusively focused on the effectiveness of their interaction. Thus, in an unprecedented development, the generalised conformity of relational networks undergoes precipitated atrophy and is solely substituted by the mediating capacity of the institution and the systems that serve it. On the other hand, all these tendencies develop in an arena clearly much larger than that of control, which involves environments, systems and devices which act upon a field of interaction in order to produce an integrated result in many domains at once.

We can best comprehend the transitions in control as part of the massive changes in the area of contemporary sociality and the broader atrophy of the social universe. Besides putting an end to the long and imaginative demonisation of control, this angle links the emergence of institutional normativity to overarching social change. Thus, it is not control that becomes desocialised, but sociality which institutionalises itself; it is not surveillance which intensifies and spreads, but the demand for systems and networks which propagates itself and favours the fluid – albeit atomised – channelling of individuals; it is not liberty that is in decline but its content that shifts towards access and use of systems; it is not stratification that disappears, but dependency on institutional mediation that increases; it is not the norm and its socialising function that founders, but its foundation that is being rebuilt beyond the boundary of internalised values.

Foucault's work, which was so important for the understanding of the grand enterprise of control launched by modernity, managed to bring the premises of moral engineering to the fore and show that they were put in place for the production of a mentally sovereign and normatively self-disciplining subject. At the same time, it has acted as much as a critique of the social sciences, their involvement in the humanist project and their analysis of that project; but the critique of the Panopticon, and of the technologies of control which the Panopticon symbolised so perfectly, has been passively projected by analysts of all convictions onto every possible setting and device of social regulation. Without much hesitation, we continue to take for granted that the wish to control is embedded in a project of shaping the self, and to accept uncritically that normative power is always exerted via the injection of values into the subject. In doing so, we brush aside the patent and complete explosion of the evaluative universe, the institutional competition for the legitimising gaze of the greatest possible number of individuals, the focusing of regulation and normativity on organisational effectiveness, and even the celebrated postmodern fragmentation and the death of the grand narrative as a totalising socio-cultural project. We disregard all that only to salvage a comfortable account that attributes control to moralising intentions and directs it to the soul, the soul which is itself put to death every day as much by the advances in biochemistry as by the uninhibited proliferation of lifestyles.

We could ask ourselves if the Foucauldian critique of modern normativity has not become, far from what its author intended, a sacred narrative which comforts the analysts of today by its

reference to a coherent project, and brings unity to disaggregated world in which the parties are linked only by an overall dynamic which supersedes them all. In the meantime, the evidence for profound desocialisation and the regression of collectivity to a defensive position is growing, as Castells (1997:11) remarks:

[...] the constitution of subjects, at the heart of the process of social change, takes a different route to the one we knew during modernity, and late modernity [...] While in modernity (early or late) project identity was constituted from civil society (as in the case of socialism on the basis of the labor movement), in the network society, project identity, if it develops at all, grows from communal resistance.

and further (1996:469):

[the] networking logic induces a social determination of a higher level than that of the specific social interests expressed through the networks: the power of flows takes precedence over the flows of power. Presence or absence in the network and the dynamics of each network vis-à-vis others are critical sources of domination and change in our society [...] characterized by the preeminence of social morphology over social action.

This unstable morphology, established on the power of flows of institutional and organisational efficiency, cannot reasonably tolerate the critiques addressed to the sovereign project of modern conditions. The flows of institutional efficiency restructure and fragment constantly the cultural and spatial conditions of existence (Graham and Marvin, 2001) and depend at every instant to maintain themselves in place as much on their capacity to seduce their users, as on fierce competition which weakens the individual to an extreme point¹². In the only other proposition¹³ that, to my knowledge, takes account of the consequences of these developments in the domain of normativity, Mathiesen (1997) reflects on a post-panoptic model in order to get to grips with social and technological control. This reflection does not explore the socio-cultural changes which inspire it, but it expresses the need to undertake such an exploration. My model (2001a) addresses the recasting of the problematics of control as an indispensable part of the theorisation of late modernity in terms of radical transitions in sociality. It attributes to institutional sociality a great capacity for social and cultural transformation, that leads, beyond the decline of the evaluative grid, to a new type of social regulation, which develops on the three tendencies of *privatisation*, *dangerisation*, and *periopticity*. These three categories are also useful when asking to what extent the new type of control remains social. A long examination indicates that the social character of control must be extensively reconceptualised under the pressure of the expanding institutional web. This reconceptualisation is a conscious attempt to maintain normativity within the domain of social relations rather than to address it as an ensemble of

¹² This process is indeed the motor for the production of organisational efficiency and of the institutional sociality which accompanies it (Dobré and Lianos, 2002; Lianos, 2003).

¹³ I do not include in this category the critical assessments of the theoretical work of Foucault and other authors such as Deleuze (for example: Hardt, 1998; Pfaff, 2001; Lyon, 1993).

constraints which are external to that domain. Although this second perspective is becoming increasingly legitimate today, it is not the most appropriate for representing the cultural internalisation of external constraints imposed by institutional normativity; this internalisation still remains an element of conscious thought and collective belonging, and in that sense, the last obstacle to a total desocialisation of control.

As a result of the transitory and complex change that is taking place across all dimensions of sociality, there can be several responses to the question of the social dimension of control. If one is tempted by a certain degree of theoretical positivism, one will conclude that control is much less social than it was when evaluative culture still operated as the principal assessment grid for behaviour in modern societies, that is to say until around the 1970s. We should, however, seriously doubt our capacity to conceptualise what we experience as daily present. From this point of view, it is possible to argue more moderately that social control still exists and it is simply the social universe which, expectedly, renews itself all the time. Whichever the argument, what is of primary importance is not to definitively establish the nature of contemporary social regulation, but to explore it with the same critical finesse that the analyses of Foucault applied to the exploration of the modern subject. To do this, we must stop projecting his analyses onto objects of study that they were not made for, and take the risk of approaching these objects of study with the subtlety and originality that they demand.

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