Social Control in Europe

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Chapter 8

Control and Legitimacy: The Police in Comparative Perspective since circa 1800

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When E. A. Ross coined the term “social control” at the beginning of the twentieth century, he argued that social order was not simply the product of law but involved the workings of much more complex phenomena. These phenomena could be moral and ethical, shaped from sentiment rather than utility, and enforced through, among other things, public opinion and personal discipline. They might also be more specifically the tools of policy, such as the law and education, designed or developed by a few to control and shape the many. The concept of social control was particularly in vogue among academics, and greatly expanded by them, in the aftermath of World War II; it was used by sociologists of the conservative, functionalist school as well as by radicals and Marxists. It was, and at times still is, deployed by historians, often as if it was clearly agreed what the concept meant and as if it was quite unproblematic.¹ This essay focuses on the agency that, more than any other, can be and has been perceived as a controller and supervisor within modern society—professional, bureaucratic police. Yet it is important to remember that discipline and supervisory strategies were employed within different communities long before the introduction of professional police. Many of these have virtually disappeared, but others have persisted and evolved.

Twenty years ago Keith Wrightson published an important essay stressing that there were commonly two views of order in the early modern English village: that of the community itself and that of the jurist. The latter sought “a coherent structure of social relationships and moral values” while the local communities’ aspirations were rather more intimate, seeking little more than the absence of disruptive conflict locally and conformity to “a fairly malleable local custom which was considerably more flexible than statute law.”² While Wrightson’s focus was specifically England, his argument had far wider resonances.
It might be argued that one of the key aims of the European state since the early modern period has been to impose on its territories the concept of order envisaged by its jurists and legislators. Since the early modern period the European state, jealous of its own authority, has systematically worn away that of its rivals notably the Church, the nobility and gentry, and the municipalities. Moreover, it has stressed to its subjects, and subsequently its citizens, that matters such as ensuring public conformity, enforcing good public behavior, preventing and punishing public transgressions should be left primarily to its agencies.

A variety of measures have been available within local communities for enforcing social norms. At the most basic and dramatic level was the vigilantism by which a community made a violent attack on those who transgressed. Such behavior can explode in modern, liberal democratic societies as was revealed by the outcry and attacks on the homes of suspected pedophiles in England in the summer of 2000. The folkloric practices of charivari—Katzenmusik, rough music, scampanate—appear increasingly to have declined in the industrializing and urbanizing world of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, though vestiges continued even in urban areas and in political protests. Community gossip, usually dominated by women, remained a means of marking out norms and stigmatizing those who transgressed. Both thefts and assaults—ranging from fights to rape—could be resolved by infrajudicial means, in other words by the meeting of interested parties before an independent, respected member of the community such as a priest, a notary, the mayor, his deputy, even a seigneurial agent, who would then seek some form of resolution in the form of a monetary payment, the return of disputed goods, or perhaps, in the case of rape or sexual assault, a marriage. There remain questions about both the scale of such behavior and its apparent decline. It appears to continue today, even in the most modern European societies, among marginal groups. Moreover, in communities where the state is weak or intensely disliked and distrusted, it is possible for infrajudicial activities to evolve into alternative structures. Mafia in Sicily is one such example where families and communities have preferred to preserve their affairs in their own hands through a system of clientage and reciprocity, rather than involve any external authority, particularly the representatives of an unpopular state. The unofficial “courts” and punishments administered by paramilitaries within the embattled communities of Northern Ireland provide another.

The concept of police, in the sense of the internal management of a state or a specific territory, has been around for centuries, but the nineteenth century witnessed the development of bureaucratic police organizations across the states of Europe and their empires, and across the United States. The state, Max Weber famously suggested, may be defined as that collectivity of institutions enjoying a monopoly of violence within a continuously bounded territory; and within the modern state the bureaucratic police officer is the only individual legally empowered to use force in his day-to-day dealings with the citizens. Popularly,
these dealings are perceived as the prevention of crime and the detection and pursuit of offenders, but more generally they concern the maintenance of order which can range from ensuring that the public highways are open to free access and movement, to the suppression of brawling and violent disorder. Of course, modern society would not collapse without such police control and supervision, but it could be more chaotic and more dangerous. The intention in what follows is to explore the extent to which the police have exercised control and supervision over society, and also to assess the extent to which such control and supervision may have changed and developed through time, the limitations upon it, and what alternative arrangements have been available for achieving such control objectives as the police may have had.

Origins of Police

Reading between the lines of the sources and contemplating hidden agendas is the stock-in-trade of the modern social historian. Traditional historians of the police in Britain, in contrast, tended to take their sources at face value. As far as historians like Charles Reith and David Ascoli were concerned, if Sir Robert Peel, the Home Secretary, told the House of Commons in 1829 that he was introducing legislation to establish a centralized police organization for London because of an increase in crime in the city, and if other police reformers argued similarly about increasing crime and disorder, then that was the reason why the police were created. Allan Silver’s influential essay on the demand for order in civil society, comparing concerns about crime and rioting and the resulting police developments in Britain and the United States, suggested a rather different perspective. Subsequently two seminal articles by Robert D. Storch, based on extensive archival research, took this perspective a stage further. Storch’s work suggested that the police in England were established essentially as domestic missionaries designed for imposing a new kind of order on the emergent working class. The issue, of course, was not resolved by Storch’s work though, arguably, a new broad consensus is emerging that recognizes the significance of both concerns about crime and the demand for a new threshold of public order.

The recent debates about the origins of the modern bureaucratic police have focused largely on the British experience and that of the United States; the major exception here is Hsi-Huey Liang’s assessment of the development of police in continental Europe from the end of the Napoleonic wars to the end of the Second World War, which, while ignoring developments in Britain, is still infused with traditional Whig teleology. Moreover, omitting the British or English model in discussing continental Europe is dangerous, since this model, which was really a picture of the Metropolitan Police of London often refracted through rose-tinted
spectacles, was popular with Liberals, and others, in nineteenth-century Europe, as well as with municipal reformers in the United States. Of course, there were other models of police available with different pedigrees, but their development has not been subjected to the same degree of detailed historical analysis and debate.12

Police reform was not something that began during the nineteenth century in continental Europe. Eighteenth-century France was generally regarded as the best-policed state in Europe and some of its policing organizations were seen as models by princes and their ministers elsewhere on the Continent. In Paris there were some three thousand men working under the lieutenant général de police; deterrent patrols of uniformed, armed men circulated the streets and manned police posts, while other agents, in civilian clothes, carried out a plethora of tasks ranging from the investigation of crimes to the regulation of markets and the supervision of wet nurses. Moreover, as the century progressed, the lieutenant général’s agents began to take over some of the welfare role of the Church, notably some aspects of poor relief, and certain of its pastoral roles concerning the admonition of libertine husbands and wayward children, and receiving complaints about prostitutes and the lax sexual morals of neighbors.13

In rural France the Maréchaussée was established in small brigades that patrolled the main roads, supervised markets and feast days, and were available for dealing with emergencies such as the appearance of a group of brigands, an outbreak of taxation populaire, or other instances of disorder. The oligarchies that ran the cities and towns in France were generally jealous of their rights and privileges; they sought to use the Maréchaussée to their own ends, or to limit its appearance within their jurisdiction. They financed and recruited their own police; but the size and effectiveness of these organizations depended upon the will of the municipal authorities to find money and to establish such.14

The French Maréchaussée was unique; elsewhere in rural Europe where such tasks were performed at all they were usually left to soldiers, and the facility generally disappeared when there were other demands on the military, most obviously a war. In Italy much policing, which was seen as a task without honor, was left in the hands of the hated sbirri, often little better than the brigands they were charged with pursuing. Princes and their ministers in continental Europe, as well as municipal authorities, aspired to the “well-ordered police state” and consequently published ordinances and new laws rooted in reason and involving the state ever more closely with its citizens, both developing the economy and supervising the population. These actors did not always find the money or the will to establish the institutions necessary for enforcement of the ordinances, though as the eighteenth century progressed there were significant developments.15 Economic upheaval pushed more and more people on to the roads and into towns and cities looking for work; the fears generated by vagabonds and wanderers on the roads and by the unemployed or underemployed in the cities and towns...
some institutional police developments. Debates about crime and how best to deal with offenders, which were given a particularly sharp focus with the publication of Cesare Beccaria’s *Dei delitti e delle pene* in 1764, fostered discussions that could not help but touch on policing arrangements. At the same time the aims of Enlightened princes and ministers to reduce the powers of intermediary bodies such as nobles, gentry, Church, and cities, involved undermining the legal and policing responsibilities of these bodies, and this, in turn, necessitated their replacement with effective institutions of the state.

The French Revolution and the Napoleonic imperium provided new fears, as well as incentives, opportunities, and models for developments in policing. The fear of popular upheaval such as that which had helped to bring down the old regime in France, and the contiguous concerns about Jacobin ideology, encouraged governments to improve their organs of political surveillance. The expansion of some states, particularly in Germany, brought them new populations of uncertain loyalty. The fears about vagabonds on the roads were exacerbated by twenty years of war with the accompanying menace of straggling or disbanded soldiers, draft dodgers, and deserters. But, at the same time, the reorganization of states under Napoleonic impetus often put state finances on a better foundation and provided new opportunities for limiting the power of the intermediary bodies. Moreover, the French police, both civilian *commissaires* and military gendarmes—the descendants of the old *Maréchaussée*—provided the models that appeared effective in pursuing and apprehending offenders, suppressing minor disorder, and bringing in conscripts and even taxes. In the aftermath of Napoleon’s fall there may have been attempts to gloss over the French imperial origins of gendarmeries—in Piedmont they became *carabinieri*, in Württemberg the *Landjägerkorps*—but the model remained essentially intact though adapted to different national contexts.

Yet, however different the pedigrees of the police organizations in continental Europe and in Britain, in the early-nineteenth century three distinct types of police can be perceived as common to most states. There were state civilian police, like London’s Metropolitan Police and the organization responsible to the Prefect of Police in Paris created by Napoleon; these were institutions that answered directly to the central government. Municipalities still had the power to recruit and employ their own police, at their own expense, but as the century wore on these powers were increasingly constrained by state regulations, and sometimes a superior, supervisory officer was appointed by the central state. This municipal model remained predominant throughout the United States, and here it developed without any interference from the federal government. Rural areas in continental Europe, and in European colonies, were commonly patrolled by gendarmeries—military policemen directly responsible to the central government. England was a notable exception here with rural policing based largely on a municipal model and directed by the county magistracies until 1888, when elected county
councilors were also given some involvement; but Ireland, and particularly rural parts of the British Empire, was patrolled by police institutions similar to the gendarmerie model.  

The Nineteenth-Century Police: Social Controllers?

Modern, bureaucratic policemen, whatever their type and whatever their origins, are by definition agents of the state—recognizing, of course, that the state can be local, or municipal, as well as national. As such, it was, and remains, the task of policemen to enforce particular policies established by the state. Leaving aside whether such enforcement has to be equated with social control, the exploration of police policy and practice, and the relations between police and the communities in which they operate, still constitute an important area for research.

The English police were instructed that their prime task was “the prevention of crime.” This emphasis first appeared in the initial instructions issued to the Metropolitan Police in 1829 and was taken up by many, perhaps most, other British forces as they were established.  

The idea of preventing crime was to be found in continental Europe, though it never appears to have become the mantra that it did in Britain.  

But it is one thing to identify a task; it can be quite another to achieve it. Moreover, when individuals announce that it is their intention to prevent crime, then it has to be assumed that they have a clear perception of what they mean by crime and who they believe to be responsible for committing it. In declaring his intention to introduce legislation for creating the Metropolitan Police, Peel deployed statistics to demonstrate rising theft in London. A few years later Colonel Charles Rowan, one of the two men appointed by Peel to command the new police, told a parliamentary inquiry that they saw it as their task to protect St. James, a district populated by the wealthy and respectable, by watching St. Giles, a notorious slum area, “and bad places in general.”

During the first two-thirds of the nineteenth century, British police reformers and senior policemen, while not using the term “dangerous classes” until the 1840s and “criminal classes” rarely before the 1860s, appear to have considered crime as something committed by a section of the plebeian order dwelling particularly in the least salubrious areas of the big cities. Theorizing crime and criminals in this way made it logical to develop police policy toward the supervision and management of those groups, not because the newly emerging society required a pliant workforce for its factory system, but because these were the people perceived as the criminals. Police reformers, who are now increasingly seen as overlapping with moral entrepreneurs in general, also had clear perceptions of what made people criminal, and often this was the very habits frowned upon by those
entrepreneurs: drink, idleness, love of “luxury,” irreligion. It was logical, therefore, that the new thresholds of order enforced by the police should include the supervision of public houses and the suppression of rough plebeian sports and pastimes—especially those enjoyed in public space. Moreover, since the able-bodied pauper was stigmatized as a potential criminal—for many moral entrepreneurs, such an individual was only a pauper because of a reluctance to do an honest day’s work for an honest day’s pay—there were those who wanted the new police to be linked with the New Poor Law. Indeed, in many Victorian police forces in England, individual policemen acted as poor law relieving officers (welfare functionaries) and as inspectors of lodging houses.

Moral entrepreneurs and police bureaucrats in continental Europe shared these beliefs. It was, after all, a French government bureaucrat with close links to the police, Honoré Frégier, who coined the term les classes dangereuses; and a leading detective from the Prefecture, Louis Canler, claimed to be writing his memoirs, at least in part, so as to warn the respectable about the tricks of malefactors. The French may have been suspicious of copying the English Poor Law during the nineteenth century, but both police and gendarmes regularly apprehended beggars, vagrants, and gens sans aveu, while their supervision of inns and lodging houses went back to the old regime. The Carabinieri Reali were given similar directives when established in Restoration Piedmont; and there was similar supervision in Germany, where from the eighteenth century police bureaucrats had circulated books of wanted offenders across state frontiers. From the early-nineteenth century these books suggest an increasing professionalism among the police, and also that the police, like other moral entrepreneurs, increasingly saw criminals as rooted in the plebeian order and not simply drawn from Gypsies, Jews, and general social outcasts. Police focus on drunks, prostitutes, vagrants, and on idle working-class men who were commonly suspected as thieves, was something that appealed to even the most liberal bourgeois in nineteenth-century Europe. It meant that in Germany, and in Prussia in particular, where the police had wide powers of arrest and imprisonment (Polizeihäft), the respectable bourgeois commonly turned a blind eye to the police use of these powers and paid the price in as much as their use contributed to the militarization of everyday life. In Italy, fear of the southern brigand and the red revolutionary contributed to governmental reluctance in curbing, and tacit bourgeois approval of, carabinieri and P.S. (Pubblica Sicurezza) agents whose first resort when confronting popular disorder at the turn of the century was often to use their guns.

Supervision and control of the dangerous or criminal classes was, of course, not the only task of the nineteenth-century police. In Restoration Piedmont, where the French-created ministry of police was rechristened Buon Governo, there was an earnest desire shared by Victor Emanuel and his advisors to maintain devotion to the Catholic Church and to enforce moral values in the face of what they
perceived as increasing, widespread licentiousness and a callousness toward the weak and innocent. In the Netherlands policing remained primarily in the hands of local authorities, but the state military police, the Koninklijke Marechaussee, first established to supervise the Catholic south of the country, was moved into the northern provinces during the 1830s and 1840s to enforce tax demands. The Catholic faith of the people of the southern provinces of the Netherlands made them politically suspect in the immediate aftermath of the Napoleonic wars, and across nineteenth-century Europe police institutions were expected to maintain a surveillance of political subversives. This was something that had a much more central role among the police of continental Europe than in Britain, and it could sometimes overlap with surveillance of the working class, as with, for example, the special unit of the Hamburg Police that, during the Kaiserreich, spent its time sitting in beer houses listening to the conversations of workers and then writing lengthy reports on what they had heard.

But policemen also ensured the free flow of traffic both pedestrian and horse drawn; and if a horse bolted, or a terrified animal escaped from an abattoir and ran amok in the streets, it was usually a policeman who tried to capture it, calm it, or put the unfortunate creature down. Policemen also fought fires and brought assistance in times of disaster. Edwin Chadwick, perhaps the most celebrated moral entrepreneur of Victorian England, hoped that these “collateral, beneficent services” would contribute to the general acceptance of the police by the public, “relieve the monotony of mere sentinel work” for the policeman himself, and become a more central part of the police role as time went on and “the preventive service against crime prevails.” If Chadwick was rather too sanguine about the potential for preventive policing, probably he was right in suggesting that the welfare and assistance provided by policemen brought them closer to the public. Moral entrepreneurs may have hoped that the police would control the plebeian classes. Some social scientists and police historians may have concluded that this was the reason for the creation of the police and that this was essentially the role that the police performed. But the relationship between police and different sections of the public appears to have been considerably more complex. Recent work on the control of public space in the Victorian town, for example, has shown the police receiving strong support from the anonymous gaze of citizens who, from a variety of perspectives—class, gender, temperance—used the correspondence columns of the local press to advise and exhort the police and others concerned with the supervision of urban space. The police themselves were not spared by this “gaze of civilization,” and they were commonly admonished from these same perspectives for any shortcomings.

There were never enough policemen to ensure absolute control over those sections of society feared by the respectable classes. The state, both central and local, gets its revenue from different forms of taxation, and during the nineteenth century even the absolutist empires of central and eastern Europe saw a limit to how
much they could demand from their peoples. Limitations on finances, together with the demands from elsewhere within the state, meant that there were limits on the number of policemen who could be recruited and deployed. The problem is seen, perhaps, at its clearest with the Habsburg Gendarmerie, which, established in 1849, reached a peak in numbers in 1857 with just under nineteen thousand men and then, as a result of the parlous condition of the imperial finances, was progressively reorganized and reduced in number until in 1876 there were just fifty-seven hundred gendarmes to patrol an empire with a population of around thirty-six million. At the turn of the century in Italy, successive disorders prompted demands to the government from some worried prefects for more Carabinieri or Pubblica Sicurezza police. At the same time prefects in more tranquil regions made counterdemands that the police in their jurisdiction not be reduced to deal with problems elsewhere as this would encourage local criminals and subversives. The government testily suggested that the danger was being overestimated, and then went on to emphasize that the numbers of P.S. police and Carabinieri were finite.

But however many police there were, and even in the most rigorously regimented states, it remained possible for even the strictest police controls to be circumvented and for police officials to be deceived into issuing genuine journeymen’s passes and travel papers for the wrong reasons. The police themselves were commonly aware of their limitations and, at times, preferred to allow rough areas to supervise themselves as long as the rough lifestyle, and any forms of criminal behavior, did not spill too obviously beyond designated boundaries. The police watched and contained but interfered only when absolutely necessary. Senior police officers were never simply the tools of moral entrepreneurs. They recognized the limitations of their men’s numbers and of what they could do; they also recognized that workers had the right to some forms of recreation and relaxation. Herman Hirsch, the director of the Royal Police in Eberfeld in the mid 1850s, was determined to eliminate unauthorized drinking establishments, yet he vigorously defended a legitimate, popular beer hall against accusations of impropriety originating from an ardent Protestant group. The Metropolitan Police of London resisted pressure for more rigorous action over brothels and drink, and for the abolition of the city’s fairs. And Jennifer Davis has shown how the same force was prepared to let the inhabitants of the tough tenements of Jennings Buildings police themselves, provided that their behavior did not disturb the peace of respectable Kensington. Such pragmatism was probably even more pronounced among some individual policemen patrolling alone on the streets, and among some small squads of gendarmes in isolated barracks far from the supervision of senior officers.

At the same time for all classes, but especially for the lower social groups in the countryside, the police were filling gaps left by the disappearance of the old intermediary bodies and by the decline of opportunities for the infrajudicial resolution of complaints and injuries. Most nineteenth-century states promised equality before the law and spoke of the police as providing security and welfare. On
occasion this provision of security could mean policemen stepping in to assist or to protect an individual who had been stigmatized by, or who was under threat from, a local community. This area warrants more detailed research, but there are examples of this sort involving female victims of sexual assault, stigmatized in their community for a past of sexual activity, and both men and women who had transgressed community norms of cohabitation or sexual mores. Even for those individuals who had little time for the police and who had little concept of the state as anything other than a distant entity making demands in the sense of money for taxes and young men for the military, the state’s promise of equality and of a life free from crime and disorder was an attractive one. The rhetoric of the state encouraged even these individuals to perceive of the police as agents who would make such abstract promises a reality. Prostitutes in nineteenth-century Paris were commonly abused by the police and were subjected to the rigorous supervision of the brigade des moeurs, yet these same prostitutes resorted to policemen as informal judges in disputes on the streets and, in times of trouble, sought assistance and refuge at police posts or commissariats. In Berlin in the period 1900 to 1914, roughly 40 percent of street disorder, usually involving young men on warm summer nights, was directed against the police; but as much as 13 percent was directed against different kinds of offenders and in support, or in the absence, of police action.

Twentieth-Century Police: Controllers, or the Public in Uniform?

During the twentieth century perceptions of the gap between the police of liberal democratic societies and those of the so-called totalitarian states probably became much wider than any similar differences perceived during the nineteenth century. Yet there has been remarkably little historical analysis of the extent of control aspired to, and exercised by, the liberal democratic police, while some of the recent research on the police of totalitarian regimes has yielded rather unexpected results.

In the first half of the century apologists for the British police, including their historians, held them up as the model for liberal democratic societies. They were “the best police in the world,” and foreigners were popularly quoted to this effect. Notions were presented of British policing being based on the consent of the policed. The police officer was no more than a civilian in uniform entrusted by the community with its protection. He took his authority from the Crown. He was nonpolitical, standing above both local and national party politics; his actions were governed only by the law, and he was answerable only to the law. The idea of “control” had no place in such rhetoric, except in so far as it was the policeman’s task to bring “criminals” under control. In effect, little had changed on
the streets. The British bobby still “pounded his beat” at the regulation pace of two and a half miles an hour, checking doors and windows after dark. He could still be felt as a pressure in working-class districts, but there continued to be negotiation and public service, as well as supervision. Harry Daley, who joined the Metropolitan Police in 1925, left a glowing portrait of the busy station to which he was first posted, Hammersmith Broadway, in West London:

the public seemed to spend most of the time popping in and out for help and advice, as chummy as you like and often on Christian name terms. Last night’s drunk popped in to see if we had his hat; women pushing kids in prams with squeaky wheels would cock a hopeful eye at the copper on the door and pop in to have them oiled; costers popped in to complain of being moved on with their barrows, and women to complain of their neighbours; old ladies feeling faint popped in for a glass of water and a sit down; and dotty people in great numbers, unwelcome in their homes till bedtime and knowing the vicar was too busy organising his money-making schemes to bother with them, popped in to unwind their endless rigmaroles, knowing they would be heard with sympathetic kindness. But then there were the genteel snobs, who “wouldn’t be seen dead in the police station for anything,” and “the wild inhabitants” from “the shocking” Rayleigh Road who seem to have been responsible for much of the petty theft in the district and who seem only to have entered the station when under arrest.44

Daley’s picture of Hammersmith Broadway police station fits with the comfortable, traditional image of the best police in the world. It is clearly not a picture of control being exercised over the community as a whole—Rayleigh Road was different and hardly under police control—but rather of a general acceptance of the police presence and a relaxed interplay between policemen and public. Yet Daley himself does not conform to a typical policeman’s image. Proud of his working-class origins, he expressed surprise that a working man could ever vote for the Conservative Party. But what really set him apart from the typical image was his homosexual orientation, something that provoked, from some of his colleagues, “malicious remarks, disguised as jokes . . . the sort of triviality that spoils lives and can cause as much unhappiness as a permanent prison sentence or illness.”45 Such behavior in itself may be seen as a form of social control designed to enforce a kind of self-conscious masculine conformity amongst men engaged in a tough, masculine, working-class occupation. It might have compelled some, perhaps most, to conform or quit; though it seems to have had little effect on Daley who never conformed to heterosexual “norms,” yet served in the police for twenty-five years, retiring as a sergeant and with a certificate of “exemplary” conduct.46
Daley’s description of the police is echoed elsewhere, but there is comment, from other policemen, that they expected respect on their beats and, when posted to a new beat, a man might consider it necessary initially to exert his authority forcefully so that his new community knew what he expected. Poor working-class districts could still be rough in the interwar period, and policemen relied on their personal toughness as well as the law to maintain their authority. Sometimes they might interpret the law to suit their purposes in what they jokingly referred to as “the Ways and Means Act.” Sometimes their personal toughness and preparedness to acknowledge and accept communities and their mores as they found them led to individual policemen becoming honorary members of the roughest communities.

Take, for example, Ginger (“Mister” to his face) Mullins, “of great physique and as strong as an ox,” who would put his helmet and belt on his neatly folded jacket before interfering in a street fight “with fist and boot.” Remarkably, “no one would ever think of stealing [his uniform] whilst he was restoring law and order.”

Moreover, even if the police were unpopular and generally unwelcome in some of the poorest working-class districts, they could still be called upon to protect wives and children from violent husbands and fathers and to help in times of emergency and tragedy. But poor, rough working-class districts were not the only areas that the police patrolled. The interwar years witnessed a massive expansion of the suburbs; in 1937, for example, the commissioner of the Metropolitan Police reported that, in the preceding seven years, the street mileage in just one of his divisions had increased by 226 miles, and the number of houses by 53,000. But police budgets, and in consequence police numbers, did not keep pace. Moreover there were other demands on police time.

Public disorder can be seen as the most striking instance of the failure of police control. Britain during the interwar years had a sprinkling of such disorder both economic and political, but the idea of special riot squads was decried as un-British, and the casualties overall were far less serious than in similar confrontations in continental Europe or in the United States. At the same time, the police found themselves having to confront major new traffic problems with the development of the motor car and, for the first time in Britain, this brought about direct, and frequent, confrontation between the police and the middle class. All of this leaves a rather fuzzy image of what the police in Britain were there to do, particularly of the extent to which control in its many manifestations was a central remit. In theory the situation should have been rather clearer in the repressive, totalitarian regimes of the interwar period.

In Weimar Germany there were attempts to liberalize the police, to make them less military and less obviously agents for enforcing petty regulations. This occurred partly as a result of allied pressure. The Sicherheitspolizei, or Sipo, established in the summer of 1919 was viewed by the allied victors as an attempt to get round
the restrictions on German military strength; it was disbanded in October 1920. But probably more significant were the ideas of men like Dr. Wilhelm Abegg, *Ministerialdirektor* and head of the Police Section of the Prussian Interior Ministry, and later *Staatssekretär*. Abegg wanted to create what he considered to be a modern police department, an organization different from the militarized institutions of the Kaiserreich. He saw the police as defenders of the state, but also as protectors and helpers of the public. He emphasized the need for the police to be professional, to be nonpartisan politically, and to embrace the opportunities provided by modern technology. It has, however, been forcefully and cogently argued that it was this supposedly nonpolitical, nonmilitary Weimar police, with its stress on professionalism and technical competence, which helped smooth the political transition of 1933. Moreover, this same organization was easily transformed into an agency of the so-called police state of the Nazis.50

The number of police that would be required rigidly to control every aspect of life in a society is probably far beyond the financial abilities of any state. This does not mean that a climate of fear cannot be created to help suppress dissent; nor does it mean that such police as exist do not play a significant role by warning and arresting different kinds of dissenters. The Nazi state created fear and authorized its police to take action against dissidents and deviants. Indeed, the development of *Polizeijustiz* enabled both the detective police, the *Kripo*, and the secret police, the *Gestapo*, virtual free reign over who should be dealt with by the judicial system. The police could employ preventive detention and ignore or even overrule court decisions if they considered it necessary. This freedom of action for the police contributed to the climate of fear within Nazi Germany, and it was accompanied by the dismantling of most of the liberal democratic institutions that the Weimar state had established. But, climate of fear notwithstanding, the police in Nazi Germany also relied heavily on denunciations from the general public.51

There should be no surprise at this; in many respects much within Nazi ideology was largely a logical, if particularly unpleasant, working through of the eugenicist theories that had emerged across Europe during the nineteenth century as a means of explaining, and hence controlling, deviants, dissidents, and those who were simply “different.” And a logical progression might also be found from the general acceptance among “respectable” social groups of police controls over the “dangerous classes” during the nineteenth century. No one wanted his property to fall prey to petty thieves, or to suffer threats from bullies, especially from bullying neighbors. It was but a small step from here to agree to, and to assist, the police in controlling the disrespectful young people of the *Eidelweiß Piraten* or those simply interested in “Swing.” Another small step led to the denunciation of those with a different sexual orientation, and thence to those who were from an alien “race.” Not everyone needed to take each of the small steps; silence meant tacit acceptance, but opposition might mean being
labeled as dissident or deviant. To the extent that the Kripo and, to a much lesser extent, the Gestapo used Polizeijustiz to control those perceived as petty criminals, thugs, and bullies, they were pursuing what might be called a policy of authoritarian populism. Policing in Nazi Germany may have been more clearly concerned with control than policing in interwar Britain, yet to see it purely in these terms is to ignore the complexities and the extent of popular support for the police and what they were doing.

There is also the problem of comparison between what are commonly labeled totalitarian police states. Nazi Germany contained relatively few secret, political policemen in comparison with its contemporary the Soviet Union; popular denunciations and other methods of what might be termed self-policing were generally helpful to the Nazi authorities. The authorities in the Soviet Union and, after 1945, also in the German Democratic Republic benefited from denunciations, yet in these states the secret police and the networks of informers were ever expanding and the element of self-policing and self-regulation within the community seems much less pronounced.52 In Mussolini’s Italy, as in Nazi Germany, much of the liberal democratic state was demolished for policing benefits. In Italy, however, while denunciation to the police may have been underestimated by historians, it does not appear to have been quite as common as in Nazi Germany. Tim Mason drew attention to this a decade ago, suggesting that this may have been one reason why the repressive power of the Italian dictatorship was not as great as that of Germany and urging that much more comparative research was needed into German and Italian cultural and social history during the period. He considered that the Italians thought denunciation more dishonorable.53 If Mason was right then clearly some explanation is needed. No doubt much here depended on differing attitudes to the state itself rather than on differing attitudes to policemen, but the work remains to be done.

Conclusion

Nineteenth-century police reformers, and senior officers of the early bureaucratic police organizations, may have considered the police role to be, at least in part, controlling problem groups within the plebeian order. Yet, given the increasing complexity of society together with the size of the police forces, something that has always been at least partly related to the other demands on state finances, it is both simplistic and naive to see the police as controllers, easily and successfully implementing the desires and decisions of government, even in absolutist or totalitarian societies. The state context within which the police have functioned—absolutist, liberal, totalitarian, democratic—has created the climate and
environment for police action and specified the scale of regulation for that action. Police numbers, and the desire for a degree of legitimacy, have always prompted some degree of negotiation between police and people and of pragmatism on the part of the police. These are variables that require further research and comparative assessment; and detailed comparative assessment of this sort remains a challenge for social historians to accept.

Notes

1. Ross, *Social Control*. A useful, sympathetic introduction to the term and arguing its potential for social historians is to be found in the introduction to Donajgrodzki, ed., *Social Control in Nineteenth-Century Britain*. An important essay collection surveying the development of the concept and its continuing validity is Bergalli and Sumner, eds., *Social Control and Political Order*.


3. The disorders were well covered in the British press. The best publicized outbreak went on for several days in the first two weeks of August in the Paulsgrove district of Portsmouth.

4. The best introduction to this phenomenon is the collection of comparative essays, Le Goff and Schmitt, eds., *Le Charivari*.

5. Tebbutt, *Women’s Talk*.


7. I have a close relative who works as a solicitor in England, generally representing petty offenders in magistrates’ courts. Having acquired the trust of two Roma families by acting for members in this way, he was asked by the heads of these families to adjudicate in a conflict between them. He drew up an agreement, explained it to the parties, who were both illiterate, and keeps the agreement in the safe of his office. It has never been broken.


12. For a discussion of the different models of police during the nineteenth century, see Emsley, “A Typology.”

14. For an important comparison on the very significant developments in policing in five major towns on the Franco-Belgian border during the eighteenth century, see Denys, *Police et sécurité au XVIIIe siècle*.


17. Emsley, “A Typology.”


19. It is also worth noting that what appears to be the same word can have very different meanings in different national contexts. While preventive policing in England tended to mean a police officer patrolling his beat and preventing crime by his presence and alertness, in Italy *polizia preventiva* meant the surveillance of particular groups and individuals. The kind of patrolling that the English police considered to be preventive was, in Italy, *polizia repressiva*, and the last thing that any British government could sanction for its English national territory during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries was any form of policing that was called “repressive.”

20. *Parliamentary Papers*, 1834 (600) XVI, Select Committee on the Police of the Metropolis, q. 166.

21. An important, recent study of one of the less well-known of the English moral entrepreneurs is Philips, *William Augustus Miles*.


25. Lucassen, “‘Harmful Tramps,’” 33–35.


29. Sleeb, *In termen van fatsoen*.


32. Croll, “Street Disorder, Surveillance and Shame.”


35. Evans, *Tales from the German Underworld*, 154–55.


38. Davis, “From ‘Rookeries’ to ‘Communities.’”

42. See, for example, *On and Off Duty*, June 1926, 88–89, for praise from “an American” and a “Polish lady.”
43. I use the male personal pronoun advisedly since there were no women police officers in Britain until World War I, while their authority, responsibilities, and numbers were greatly restricted until after World War II.
45. Ibid., 112–13.
46. My thanks to the staff of the Metropolitan Police Museum and Archive for information on Daley’s police record, which like other police personnel files remains closed to public scrutiny.
49. Emsley, “‘Mother, What Did Policemen Do When There Weren’t Any Motors?’”
50. Bessel, “Policing, Professionalisation and Politics in Weimar Germany.”
53. Mason, “Whatever Happened to ‘Fascism?’” 259. See also Dunnage in this volume.