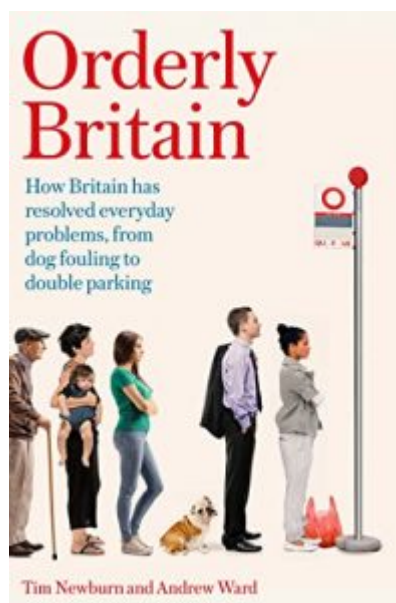


# Q and A with Professor Tim Newburn on Orderly Britain

We speak to **Professor Tim Newburn** about his new co-authored book, **Orderly Britain**, written with Andrew Ward, which explores facets of daily life – dog mess, smoking, drinking, parking, queuing, toilets – that reveal the changing patterns of social order and organisation in Britain from post-war to the present day.

**Q&A with Professor Tim Newburn on *Orderly Britain: How Britain has resolved everyday problems, from dog fouling to double parking.* Tim Newburn and Andrew Ward. Hachette. 2022.**



**Q: You have undertaken extensive research on riots and disorder – what inspired you to turn your attention to orderliness?**

I had always been struck by how generally rule-bound we are, but also that words like ‘disorder’ can easily mask how even things like riots are patterned and socially organised. While much of my professional life as a criminologist has been dominated by a focus on crime, deviance and formal control such as policing, I’ve always wanted to focus on the other side of the coin. Alongside that I’ve long wanted to write for a different audience – one that might have academic interests but is not primarily academic. [Orderly Britain](#) was really my first stab at doing both of these things.

**Q: *Orderly Britain* explores ostensibly mundane matters, like dog mess, parking and public toilet provision. How did you choose the examples you discuss in the book?**

It was dog mess that started the whole thing going. Out walking one day I noticed my elderly aunt taking a bag from her pocket to remove her dog's poo from the side of a country lane. Her behaviour was very much in contrast with what I had experienced as a child in Merseyside where no-one picked up after dogs and the pavements were littered with mess. Quite clearly something happened in the intervening period to change our expectations and our conduct. And it was considering this that prompted me to think more widely about social change, albeit in a quirky way. From there what I was looking for were other everyday subjects that all readers could find some personal link to, some way of identifying with. Social change in relation to many of these matters – drinking, smoking, even dog mess – turned out to have many of the classic features of social problem creation: claims about dangers and risk – often at least initially health-related – followed by spirals of action and reaction.



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**Q: Are these ‘social problems’ purely a matter of state intervention or has the market played a part too?**

They are far from simply a matter of state intervention. Although state regulation has been very important in relation to many of the subjects covered in the book – drinking, smoking, parking and so forth – corporate interests and the market are also often very significant sources of influence. One brief example. Where smoking is concerned it is clear that the overall trend in the post-war period is toward far greater state intervention and regulation – turning smoking from a popular, even fashionable activity, to one that is largely considered deviant. But it is worth remembering that more than half a century passed between the publication of clear empirical evidence linking tobacco consumption to significantly increased risk of lung cancer and the eventual banning of smoking in public places such as pubs, clubs and workplaces. There are multiple reasons for this but one, and quite possibly the most important, was the power of corporations to limit the nature and degree of official intervention. The regulatory regimes that govern everything from smoking and drinking to the provision of public lavatories are heavily influenced by commercial interests.

**Q: Another theme in the book seems to be a shift towards self-regulation whereby people internalise the idea of being ‘a responsible citizen’. Has this become a more powerful norm in recent decades?**

Well, of course in many respects self-regulation, and mutual regulation through interaction, are ever present. One of the truisms of criminology, and one of the things that also lay behind the desire to write *Orderly Britain*, was that what we might refer to as ‘informal social control’ is, by and large, more important in day-to-day stability than the work of formal control agencies such as the police and the rest of the penal apparatus. The book reinforces that classic sociological observation that order is not the product of top-down control but is the outcome of everyday interactions. That said, I do think in the *longue durée* – much longer than the period covered by this book – we have witnessed complex social processes involving increased pressure toward self-control: what the German sociologist Norbert Elias referred to as increased social constraint toward self-constraint, or what Michel Foucault argued to be a shift toward the disciplining of the soul.

**Q: One of the chapters discusses queuing – does Britain deserve its reputation as a nation of queuers?**

I think the answer to this is tricky. In the main we have to acknowledge that the linking of queuing to British national character is long-established and widely believed. It is, however, a conceit. Waiting in line is pretty much a universal activity, albeit practised in different ways in different places and times. Our reputation for queuing dates back to the Second World War and the queues that became an everyday experience as a consequence of rationing. The association of queuing with the war effort in part helps to explain some of its positive associations. Subsequently, queuing was utilised more negatively as an indicator of a lack of social and economic progress, first by Winston Churchill's Tories in the 1950s and later by Margaret Thatcher's Opposition to underpin its claim that 'Labour Isn't Working'. It's fascinating how queuing has become one of those stories we like to tell about ourselves. Any chance of our throwing off this conceit about our national character has been undermined by the ten-mile-long queue to see Queen Elizabeth II lying in state. Once again, so far as the world is concerned, we are a nation of queuers.



Photo by [Matt Seymour](#) on [Unsplash](#)

**Q: Parking is the one example in the book where you point out that it really does need formal input for the system to work – why is this the case?**

The bulk of the chapters in the book focus on examples of quite significant social change and, broadly speaking, tend to demonstrate the power of informal social control (as well as formal regulation) with consequently high levels of compliance. Parking appears to be an exception. It not only requires the presence of formal regulatory systems and officials but is also characterised by quite high levels of non-compliance. There are close to 16 million parking tickets issued each year in Britain, for example. I think there are likely a number of factors at play. As drivers we often feel 'invisible' and consequently behave in ways we might not in face-to-face interaction. The complexity of parking regulations often makes compliance tricky and can become something of an excuse. Also, I think, drivers feel a sense of entitlement and find a range of rationalisations – what criminologists have referred to as 'techniques of neutralisation' – to justify their lack of compliance and to normalise it.

**Q: You turn to the impact of COVID-19 at the end of the book. How did the pandemic affect your perceptions of orderliness in Britain today?**

I think the broad contours of the pandemic tended to reinforce the main messages in *Orderly Britain*. In many of the areas I consider – dog mess, drinking, smoking – the pace of change was often quite modest. That raised the question of what would happen under conditions of crisis or emergency when things change much more rapidly. The COVID-19 pandemic gave us the answer, and it was that we adapt quickly and are compliant so long as we view the new expectations as broadly legitimate. Government responded to the pandemic by introducing huge legal changes as well as issuing formal advice about civic conduct on a regular (and occasionally confusing) basis. These formal requirements were important – particularly in symbolising new expectations – and research suggests that the [British public were remarkably observant of these new rules](#) most of the time. Importantly, in the main it was not formal surveillance or enforcement that kept us in line but the very swift embedding of new social norms and shared social beliefs about how we should behave.

**Q: Your co-writer Andrew Ward sadly passed away during the writing of the book. How did you come to work together on *Orderly Britain*? What parts of the book most strongly convey his vision?**

Andy and I first worked together on a book on the Hillsborough disaster in the nineties. In the period since he had worked as a freelance author, writing dozens of books on a wide array of subjects but with football remaining his main focus. The basic idea for this book came to me many years ago but because it was a ‘hobby’ rather than my job, I made very slow progress on it. Thankfully Andy came on board to help out and it is terribly sad that he was unable to see it to completion. His illness meant his role in its eventual form became quite limited but any reader who knew Andy would immediately be aware that it is the humour in the book that most strongly conveys his character.

**Q: Given the proliferation of rules and regulation over the past decades, has Britain become a more orderly place? Or is the construction of social order more complex than this?**

We say explicitly that we don’t try to answer the question of whether Britain is more or less ‘orderly’. I think this is effectively an impossible question. The focus is more about

charting how our orderliness is managed and some of the ways in which it has shifted. But, overall, I think it's fair to suggest that Britain is now a more *ordered* society than it was in the early post-war period. What we have witnessed in all the areas we consider is a proliferation of phenomena that seek to guide and direct our behaviour, from laws, regulations and rules to what some scholars referred to as the 'official graffiti of the everyday', the explosion of signage indicating more or less forcefully how it is expected that we will behave.

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*Note: This interview gives the views of the author, and not the position of the LSE Review of Books blog, or of the London School of Economics and Political Science. The interview was conducted by Dr Rosemary Deller, Managing Editor of the LSE Review of Books blog.*

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