

The Master–Slave Concept in History, Philosophy, and Education

David Snelgrove, Oklahoma State University

Introduction

Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712–1778) writes in his *Social Contract* that “Man is born free; and everywhere he is in chains. One thinks himself the master of others, and still remains a greater slave than they.”¹ He thought he could establish the reasons for this change in the human condition through analysis of society. For Rousseau the social order was just that—social—not a gift of nature but emanating from and evolving with society. The idea of a social contract did not originate with Rousseau, though. John Locke (1632–1704) wrote about such a theory of natural rights and an implied social contract which empowers the consent of the governed with the alternative being the devolution into what amounts to a general slavery.² But I am beginning in the middle of the story. One purpose of this essay is to track the historical impact of the concept of slavery in the literal case of permanent chattel servitude, the temporary condition of indentured service, and in the metaphorical sense of becoming a subject to another or others through social, economic, or personal conditions. A second purpose is to examine the impact of the idea of slavery as a metaphor for social and economic relations on philosophy and the impact of Hegel’s so-called master–slave dialectic. Although a brief discussion of the institution of slavery is necessary, I do not intend this essay to detail an extensive examination of slavery’s history, impact, and legacy in the American experience, for that project would require a much differently focused, lengthy investigation.

Slavery in practice and in abstract has a long history. Before the Age of Discovery slavery was a consequence of the growth and expansion of some societies at the expense of other societies. Plato (424/423–348/347 BCE) considers slavery a given fact of social existence. This is not to say that in his writings he does not struggle with the concept of slavery, since he recognizes that, absent slavery, individuals have an opportunity to find their own position in society. The presence of slavery and its necessity in Athenian society mitigates against any significant changes and, in fact, Plato expands the concept of slavery to include the relations among social classes so that all members of society are subject to gods, laws, rulers,

elders, parents, and so on. Plato maintains individuals should accept their station, justified by his idea that individuals are all subject to or slaves of their inborn nature. Laborers are governed by their appetites, artisans by creativity, guardians by seeking glory, and philosophers by the search for wisdom.³ Aristotle (384–322 BCE) believes human beings are meant to live in a complex and stratified social setting (*polis*) dominated by the aristocracy with a laboring slave class. He indicates his acceptance of the idea that free men and slaves were born to their positions, the former to participate in the life of the *polis*, the latter to make such participation by free men possible.⁴ This social structure lasted throughout the ancient period up to the change to serfdom which tied an individual to the land rather than the master. Thus, slavery in practice, well known among older societies, became the metaphor for slavery in the abstract, an idea which considers the social structure a system of servitude. Therefore, Rousseau reasonably can say humans are “everywhere in chains” and Locke can claim the “state of equality”⁵ as still lacking. It is then up to philosophers to elaborate on the conditions of slavery in all its forms.

Idealist Thought and Slavery

Rousseau greatly influenced the thinking of Immanuel Kant (1724–1804). In his analysis of reason Kant finds Rousseau’s view of human nature expresses the moral and spiritual world and that view influenced his interest in basic moral philosophy, his appreciation for the common man, and his quest for a practical philosophy.⁶ Kant sought to counter the empiricism of Locke, David Hume (1711–1776), and other English philosophers. He writes that Hume “interrupted my dogmatic slumber ... and gave my research in the field of speculative philosophy quite a different direction.”⁷ Kant rejects the empiricists’ dependence on sensory experience, cause-and-effect connections, slavery to the passions, and the empiricists’ turn away from *a priori* reasoning in favor of the inner experience, the power of reason. Carl Friedrich (1901–1984) writes that, “Indeed, the problem of freedom, the freedom of the human personality to unfold and fulfill its higher destiny, is the central issue of all of Kant’s philosophizing.”⁸ This quest for freedom through reason opposes the bondage of one person to another and opposes the idea of a person as an end and never a means.⁹ Kant’s questioning of the rationality and legality of the practice of voluntarily selling oneself into slavery challenges the ancient view of slavery as a natural if unfortunate condition of human existence, establishing the view of the wrongness of enslavement of one person by another.¹⁰

The source of the more modern, expanded view of slavery as an abstract description of many social relationships is the master–slave dialectic of G. W. F. Hegel (1770–1831), who, in his *Phenomenology of Spirit*, develops the dialectical reasoning devised to allow for the development of science. His phenomenology refers to a particular means to derive from apprehendable sense-experiences an encompassing scientific approach

to acquiring knowledge. This process depends on human consciousness and the activity of consciousness using a dialectic method of temporal movement through a process of opposition, positive and negative, thesis and antithesis. Hegel posits “three relations of conscious subjectivity to its object: the sense-certainty ... the Perception ... and finally the Understanding ... [of] their manifest, phenomenal surface.”¹¹ For Hegel, individuals are simultaneously independent and dependent, self and other, lord and bondsman.¹² He introduces the concepts of lord and bondsman (master and slave) in an earlier work as a

...relation [that] is immediately and absolutely established along with the inequality of the power of life. At this point there is no question of any right or any necessary equality. Equality is nothing but an abstraction—it is the formal thought of life, of the first level, and this thought is purely ideal and without reality. In reality, on the other hand, it is the inequality of life which is established, and therefore the relation of lordship and bondage.¹³

Hegel believes that, based on the unequal distribution of power, “where there is a plurality of individuals, there is a relation between them, and this relation is lordship and bondage.”¹⁴ In his *Phenomenology*, however, he examines the individual’s self-consciousness. This self-consciousness consists of two aspects: the powerful and the powerless. For the powerful, “the lord is the consciousness that exists for itself...[and who] relates himself mediately to the thing through the [powerless] bondsman.”¹⁵ This interconnectedness forms the basis for the development of self-awareness or self-consciousness necessary for the rise of science. Hegel writes,

The genesis of Science is the theme of the Phenomenology of Spirit. This genesis starts from Spirit immediate or spiritless Spirit, i.e. from the consciousness of sense, and must tread a long road before it can become true Science, can give birth to its true concept or element. Such a genesis will not be a fancied illumination of the road to science, nor yet an actual founding of science, nor yet a pistol-shot of illumination aiming straight at absolute knowledge.... The task of proceeding from the uncultured to the knowing mind is really performed by the universal individual, i.e. self-conscious Spirit as such.¹⁶

Hegel establishes the dialectic, the structure of thesis : antithesis : synthesis : thesis, as a method of acquiring knowledge. He develops the idea of the bifurcation of the individual into Lord and Bondsman, establishes a connection between the ideal and the perceived and anticipates the development of the role of science and truth. He observes that

The true shape in which truth exists can only be the scientific system of such truth. To help bring philosophy closer to the form of Science, to the goal where it can lay aside the title “love of knowing” and be actual knowing—that is what I have set myself to do.¹⁷

Hegel later clarified his master and slave thinking, explaining that “knowing” exists on two planes: the sensible and the abstract. Hegel holds that “The slave knows not his essence, his infinitude, his freedom, he does not know himself in his essence, and not to know himself is not to think himself. The self-consciousness, which by thought apprehends that itself is essence.”¹⁸ Hegel indicates all are born into the sensible, slave world and can only escape through learning.

In his direct life, before it is idealized by self-consciousness, man is merely a natural being, standing outside of his true conception. Only through the education of his body and mind, mainly by his becoming conscious of himself as free, does he take possession of himself, become his own property, and stand in opposition to others.... The standpoint of the free will, with which right and the science of right begin, is already beyond the wrong view that man is simply a natural being, who, as he cannot exist for himself, is fit only to be enslaved.... There is thus by this movement brought to pass a struggle for recognition, and, as a necessary result, the relation of master and slave.¹⁹

Hegel recognizes the conundrum created by the opposition of status of master and slave as well as the interpenetration of the two. “Hence slavery,” says Hegel,

...is a wrong not simply on the part of those who enslave or subjugate, but of the slaves and subjects themselves. Slavery occurs in the passage from the natural condition of man to his true moral and social condition. It is found in a world where a wrong is still a right....²⁰

and “It lies in the nature of the matter that the slave has an absolute right to make himself free.”²¹ Hegel’s focus is on scientific progress and he provides the notion of consciousness of the will in order to move between the sensible world of the slave to the abstract world of the master. It was then left to Karl Marx (1818–1883) to apply the Hegelian Master–Slave Dialectic to Marx’s theories of class warfare, economic determinism, and social movement toward proletarian hegemony.

The Marxist Conception of the Master–Slave Dialectic

Among philosophers who advanced Hegel’s thought, it was Karl Marx who applied Hegel’s dialectical to the examination of social and economic conditions. Marx and his collaborator, Friedrich Engels (1820–1895), aligned themselves with a group called the Young Hegelians who were largely concerned with the philosophical denunciation of religion.²² Among the Young Hegelians was Ludwig Feuerbach (1804–1872), a student of Hegel with whom Marx shared anti-religious and materialist views used to construct historical materialism. Like Hegel, Marx views historic processes in terms of contradictions. For Hegel these contradictions are developed through consciousness.²³ Notwithstanding the fact that Marx never

mentions the *Herrschaft–Knechtschaft* dialectic, he understood that when Hegel talks about *Herrschaft–Knechtschaft* in *Phenomenology of Spirit* (1807) he differentiates between *Knechtschaft* and *Sklaverei*, leaving a discussion of slavery for a later time in his *Philosophy of Right* (1821).

Marx, however, uses the slave metaphor to describe social, economic, political, gender, religious, and family relations. He describes the relation of lower classes to upper, proletarian workers as wage slaves, landless farmers to landowners, common citizens as slaves to government, women as slaves to men, the devout as slaves to their church, and children as slaves to parents. Instead of making things better for workers, the growth of industry and the development of new means of production made things worse since the machines required less-skilled workers, devaluing human labor.

Marx's dialectic focuses on material processes in society, especially the growth of capitalism, labor, and production which result in a social-class structure rife with struggle. For Marx, the human movement toward and thirst for freedom in personal and social life represents a master–slave dialectic described by dialectical materialism. In this dialectic, early communal social relations are the thesis, the rise of domination of one group over another in a master–slave relationship is the antithesis, and feudal society rises as the synthesis. Feudal society then becomes the thesis, industrial society the antithesis, and capitalist society the synthesis. Capitalist society is then challenged by proletarian upheaval resulting in socialism, which ultimately becomes a classless, communist society. Marx focuses on the new industrial working class, the proletariat, as an exploited, marginalized, and alienated class of society. He believes the consciousness of the proletariat contains the antithesis to capitalist society.

The Marxist dialectic contains the Hegelian concepts of the qualitative shift, the interpenetration of opposites, and the negation of the negation. This qualitative shift is the idea that change occurs quantitatively up to the point at which a new structure is formed. The interpenetration of opposites postulates that the meaning of things is found in the relationship with their dualistic opposites while the negation of the negation is a restatement of the Hegelian dialectical process of thesis–antithesis–synthesis. Marx sees his materialist Master–Slave dialectic as the basis for various forms of capitalistic oppression and slavery, both real and metaphorical, and as the descriptor for industrial economic relations. Hannah Arendt (1906–1975) observes that “When Marx made labor the most important activity of man, he was saying, in terms of the tradition, that not freedom but compulsion is what makes man human.”²⁴

Challenges to the Marxist Slave Dialectic

In his critique of Marx and Marxism, *Otázka Sociální*, T. G. Masaryk (1850–1937) writes that Marx gives various definitions for Historical Materialism such that “As we view all Marx's definitions and explanations

and the explanations of his followers, it appears to us that the entire teaching of historical materialism is confused."²⁵ In Masaryk's analysis of Marx and Marxism he concludes that,

Marx proclaims a permanent revolution.... Revolution cannot be the end ... only a means, and even that only in extreme circumstances.... There is really little new in what Marx has to offer. Up to now society has been built more on death than on life. We have not yet learned to live, to live fully, positively.²⁶

Nonetheless, it is the master–slave dialectic that forms Marxist class struggle. Masaryk writes, “Murder and suicide are only acute manifestations of the chronic destruction of life.... We are still masters and slaves. And more—we are barbarians. We want excitement, not work. We enjoy exciting sports, including revolution.”²⁷ Masaryk does not deny the mutual bondage of master and slave but concludes that revolutionary action can only change the occupants of the slave and master roles. He suggests this relation is already made manifest within the rise of capitalism. He writes, “Capitalism begins with the liberation of production from feudalism. The fight against feudalism appears politically as a fight for freedom and equality; but that freedom and equality meant in fact something quite different, it meant proletarianization and capitalization.”²⁸ Instead Masaryk proposes the expansion of the social democratic process gives rise to free citizens, equality before the law, and the withering of class privilege.

Hannah Arendt's thought contributes greatly to the understanding of individuals and their political lives. She designates the lives of individuals in terms of their activities. Like Plato she identifies different impulses for the day-to-day lives of people. Arendt's *Vita Activa* consists of individuals as workers, *animal laborans*; as creative artisans, *homo faber*; and as free social actors, *zoon politikon*.²⁹ Arendt believes that the important relationship is the relationship between the social, political, life, and labor. She writes,

Politics in the original Greek sense of the word began with the liberation from labor, and in spite of many variations remained the same in this respect for nearly 3,000 years; and this, as we know, was first made possible through the institution of slavery.³⁰

The intolerable conditions of slaves led to many violent slave revolts which kept alive the desire for freedom from chattel servitude. Arendt theorizes that, slave revolts notwithstanding, slavery was not sustained as a political issue. She analyzes the role of violence during the social and political upheavals of the 1960s, writing about organized violence in student insurrections and anti-war movements and the spontaneous violence that arose as a reaction to intolerable conditions in many inner-city regions. She reasons that “rage is by no means an automatic reaction to misery and suffering as such; ... [that] only where there is reason to suspect that conditions could be changed and are not does rage arise.”³¹ Arendt warns, however, that “The real rift between [B]lack and white is not healed by

being translated into an even less reconcilable conflict between collective innocence and collective guilt.”³²

Existentialist Applications of the Master–Slave Dialectic

Nikolai Berdyaev (1874–1948) also had an interest in the relationship between freedom and the master–slave mentality. He writes,

Man is in a state of servitude. He frequently does not notice that he is a slave, and sometimes he loves it. But man also aspires to be set free. It would be a mistake to think that the average man loves freedom. A still greater mistake would be to suppose that freedom is an easy thing. Freedom is a difficult thing. It is easier to remain in slavery.³³

He finds the answer in what he calls the philosophy of personalism. Personalist philosophy comes from Berdyaev’s concept of personality which exists in all individuals as an “ethical and spiritual...absolute existential centre.”³⁴ Berdyaev’s *Slavery and Freedom* uses the Hegelian master–slave dialectic to examine the human condition. He writes, “the inward motive forces of philosophy are determined elementally: the primacy of freedom over existence, of spirit over nature, subject over object, personality over the universal, creativeness over evolution, dualism over monism, love over law.”³⁵ For Berdyaev, personality exists independent of any social, economic, biological, or historical condition. The socialized, the civilized, maybe even the educated are sociologically enslaved and objectified, but the conditions of servitude are considered acceptable. There exists, however, a contradiction. Personality, while highly individual, is

...also social, in it there are traces of the collective unconscious. It is man’s way out from isolation. It belongs to history, it realizes itself in society and in history. Personality is communal; it presupposes communion with others, and community with others. The profound contradiction and difficulty of human life is due to this communality.³⁶

From personality, theorizes Berdyaev, character is developed.

Character is the possession of power over oneself, it is the victory over slavery to oneself, a triumph which makes possible victory over slavery to the surrounding world also. Character is revealed above all in relation to environment. Temperament is a natural gift; character is conquest and attainment; it presupposes freedom.³⁷

In the first section of *Slavery and Freedom*, Berdyaev examines the role of personality, the importance of the individual person, and his philosophy of personalism with the opposing master–slave idea. In the second section he considers the problem of individual freedom versus slavery in its many different social and psychological aspects, such as one’s slavery to being, to God, to nature, to society, to culture, and to individualism. Berdyaev goes on to lay out historical and economic slavery to: sovereignty, war, nationalism,

aristocracy, and consumption; revolution; will and slavery to revolution and utopian; slavery to love in its multiple forms (erotic, compassionate); and, finally, slavery to the aesthetics of beauty, art, and nature. Finally, he engages the religious, historical, and ideas of time. In its essence, Berdyaev's personalist philosophy is an expansion of Kant's imperative to treat others as an end, not as a means to an end. Berdyaev opines, "every human personality, the personality of the least significant of men, bearing as it does within itself the image of the highest existence, cannot be a means to any end whatever."³⁸ The conflict between freedom and objectivization exists in the existential struggle for the expression of personality. "The source of slavery is always objectivization," writes Berdyaev, "that is to say exteriorization, alienation. It is slavery in everything; in the acquisition of knowledge, in morals, in religion, in art, in political and social life."³⁹ In this Berdyaev signals agreement with his contemporaries of the Frankfurt School and the New School for Social Research.

Jean-Paul Sartre (1905–1980) locates the expression of the master–slave dialectic in the concept of oppression: "exploitation of man by man...characterized by the fact that one class deprives the members of another class of their freedom"⁴⁰ In her work Simone de Beauvoir (1908–1986) incorporates not only the Hegelian dialectic of master–slave but also the Nietzschean genealogical model of investigating social contradictions. She develops the notion that the most important aspect of becoming an adult is the socialization into gender-specific roles.⁴¹

Critical Theory Applications of Master–Slave

In the 20th century, the mixture of Hegel's and Marx's dialectics, sociological, psychological, and economic investigations culminated in the development of Critical Theory. Herbert Marcuse (1898–1979) observes that "the dialectical method, with its uncompromising 'spirit of contradiction,' was the essential without which the critical theory of society would of necessity become a neutral or positivist sociology."⁴² Marx's idea that modern industrial production and mechanization, "the very means that should liberate man from toil, makes him a slave of his labor,"⁴³ establishes the relationships of the hegemonic social and political power. Modern societies' structures, posit critical theorists, result in the domination and oppression of the less-powerful. For critical theorists, enslavement is life without consciousness, without agency, without the ability to participate meaningfully in a society, and as subject to demagoguery.

Marcuse likens critical theory to Hegel through Marx to modern social relationships. In *Reason and Revolution*, Marcuse theorizes that the connection between the consciousness of freedom, i.e., the freedom of the mind and the exploitation, alienation, and resentment, is caused by the opposing economic and social forces of capitalism. He writes, "the unity of identity and contradiction in the context of social forms...means that the state of negativity is not a distortion of a thing's true essence, but its very essence itself."⁴⁴ "...material historical conditions...cast off their philosophical

form as soon as they are subjected to the scrutiny of critical theory and are seized by conscious social practice.”⁴⁵ Max Horkheimer (1895–1973) wrote in 1937 that “...[critical] theory never aims simply at an increase of knowledge as such. Its goal is man’s emancipation from slavery.”⁴⁶ Identifying social, economic, and political life with slavery and employing the dialectic of contradiction enabled the rise of a critical theory of society from which forces of domination and liberation could be identified and analyzed.

The Frankfurt/New School philosophers identify hidden ideologies as the unacknowledged source of all human action and social systems. Such ideologies go largely undefined, yet are accepted as the norm. Critical theorists seek to expose the ideological superstructure by bringing it into the open, by illuminating how the ideological elements control social institutions and relationships. Antonio Gramsci (1891–1937) theorizes the role of class-based relationships on society and how hegemonic power and dominance function in society, how the economic and social conditions of society are judged to be natural and inevitable, dependent on the dominated groups’ agreement, buying into their own domination, and selling themselves into slavery. Thus, critical social theory in its many manifestations seeks out the contradictions of society’s expressed values in relation to the reality of day-to-day lived experiences of its members. Critical Race Theory especially identifies the inequities in society that have historical roots in the legacy of slavery and continuing contemporary presence of racial bias, social inequality, economic injustice, and increasing disenfranchisement.⁴⁷

Critical Race Theory is used to explore some of the same issues as the unique U.S. situation identified by Myrdal and his colleagues in *An American Dilemma*, theorizing that

- Race is not biologically real but is socially constructed and socially significant;
- Racism is a normal feature of society and is embedded within systems and institutions, like the legal system, that replicate racial inequality; and
- Racism is codified in law, embedded in structures, and woven into public policy.

Fighting racism means, among other things,

- Embracing the lived experiences of people of color, including those preserved through storytelling, and rejecting deficit-informed research that excludes the epistemologies of people of color;
- Exposing the ways racism is often cloaked in terminology regarding “mainstream,” “normal,” or “traditional” values or “neutral” policies, principles, or practices; and
- Analyzing how racism has affected the experiences of various people of color.⁴⁸

The recent increase in politically motivated and supported race-based violence is a sign the animosities towards minoritized groups today thrives and can be provoked through rhetoric.

Theorizing Social Equity

In the Western Hemisphere, slavery's existence did not become controversial or political until the formation of the nation. Jefferson, for example, in his draft of the *Declaration of Independence* notes the role of the Crown in creating and maintaining the slave trade, then supporting a slave uprising against rebelling colonies.⁴⁹ Hannah Arendt observes U.S. political conditions lacked the precursor of feudalism that was broken by the rise of the merchant class and then the Industrial Revolution. Another aspect of U.S. slavery is that slaves, kidnapped and brought forcibly from Africa, were unlike indentured servants who served under contract for a finite time before their release, nor were they like European immigrants who often suffered oppression in the early generations of their presence. For former slaves and their descendants, the process of emancipation was slow, painful, and incomplete. While there are regular calls for reparations, and that call has a significant history, there is significant opposition and purposeful forgetting in play.⁵⁰

Gunnar Myrdal (1898–1987), aided by many able social, political, and economic thinkers of the time, studies the conditions of minority groups' oppression and obstacles to their social equality. He focuses on the differences between society's expressed values and the reality of daily life. He finds a disconnect between what he calls the American Creed and the lived experiences of the social relationships between majority and minoritized citizens,⁵¹ since such a dilemma had never occurred historically and uniquely is based upon the institution of U.S. slavery. Myrdal finds that "America, compared to every other country in Western civilization, large or small, has the *most explicitly expressed* system of general ideals in reference to human interrelations."⁵² His exhaustive study, now dated, and ideologically questionable, delineates the major issues of the dissonance between the American Creed, which he describes as "centered in the belief in equality and in the rights to liberty,"⁵³ and the continuing discrimination, bigotry, and hatred that still thrives in U.S. society. Criticism of *An American Dilemma* focuses on the sociological descriptions of African-American life, offered without examination of society's power relations and corresponding deficit-based discourses.

Ralph Ellison (1913–1994) finds "the main virtue of Myrdal's *An American Dilemma* lies in its demonstration of how the mechanism of prejudice operates to disguise the moral conflict in the minds of whites produced by the clash on the social level between the American Creed and anti-Negro practices."⁵⁴ He credits Myrdal with exposing the ideological underpinnings of race-focused sociological studies and challenging

mythologies about “anti-democratic and unscientific racial attitudes and practices.”⁵⁵ Ellison finds *An American Dilemma* to be

...the blueprint for a more effective exploitation of the South’s natural, industrial and human resources. We use the term “exploitation” in both the positive and negative sense. In the positive sense it is the key to a more democratic and fruitful usage of the South’s natural and human resources; in the negative, it is the plan for a more efficient and subtle manipulation of [B]lack and white relations, especially in the South.⁵⁶

Ultimately Ellison finds *An American Dilemma*’s “positive contribution is certainly greater...than those negative elements,”⁵⁷ but maintains “It will take a deeper science than Myrdal’s, deep as that might be, to analyze what is happening among the African-American masses.”⁵⁸ Finally, he warns that “a full solution will lie in the creation of a democracy in which the Negro will be free to define himself for what he is and, within the large framework of that democracy, for what he desires to be.”⁵⁹ For Ellison it is up to “liberal intellectuals to get busy to see that *An American Dilemma* does not become an instrument of an American tragedy.”⁶⁰ Ellison recognizes that education, not the paternalistic philanthropic education focused on a narrow conception of African-American ability, but an inclusive and democratic education that recognizes talents will have a great role to play in the advancement of economic opportunity and social equality.

Education

Recent social and political history is replete with issues that illuminate society’s shortcomings. Radical and reactionary unrest seems indicative of society’s deep divisions along lines of economic, racial, nationalistic, and gender identity. Continued protest responses to violent, oppressive policing behavior exacerbates these shortcomings and indicates a visceral reaction to intolerable conditions. Certainly educational intervention clarifying the issues of social stratification and concomitant problems can be of help. The question then becomes, Is there a master–slave dialectic at work in education and the philosophy of education? Or more to the point, perhaps: What form does the master–slave dialectic take in educational philosophy? Hegel’s analysis of the rival consciousness of *Herrschaft* and *Knechtschaft* results in broad interest in the roles of lord and servant in society manifested not only in true slavery but also in the metaphorical slavery of social relationships. If we follow Aristotle with the belief that there is a separate slave class or a separate slave morality, that thinking implies that education for the masses should somehow be different than for the master or ruling class.

John Dewey (1859–1952) first studied Hegel under the tutelage of H. A. P. Torrey (1837–1902) at the University of Vermont during “a year devoted privately under his direction to a reading of classics in the history

of philosophy and learning to read philosophic German.”⁶¹ That Hegel influenced Dewey is undoubtable. Dewey writes, “acquaintance with Hegel has left a permanent deposit in my thinking.”⁶² While he rejects much of Hegel’s dogmatism, schematism, and idealism, Dewey is drawn to, in his words, “Hegel’s treatment of human culture, of institutions and the arts, [and] dissolution of hard-and-fast dividing walls.”⁶³ Dewey rejects the dualism of the Master–Slave dialectic and focuses on Hegel’s desire that the procedures of science would become the basis for philosophic enquiry. In contradistinction to Kant, whose *a priori* categories are separated from scientific method, Hegel’s categories are the result of the process of knowing and its continuous reconstruction. Bothersome to Dewey was the observation that

...since Hegel was haunted by the conception of an absolute goal, he was obliged to arrange institutions as they concretely exist....
 ...individuals have no spiritual rights; personal development, and nurture, consist in obedient assimilation of the spirit of existing institutions. Conformity, not transformation, is [for Hegel] the essence of education.⁶⁴

Such conformity, perhaps, is the moral equivalent of slavery and was anathema to the democratic ideal which Dewey identifies as “the recognition of mutual interests as a factor in social control ... [the] freer interaction between social groups ... but change in social habit—the continuous readjustment through meeting the new situations produced by varied intercourse.”⁶⁵ He recognizes there are problems in a society which professes liberty and justice yet does not extend social equality to all its citizens. Dewey wonders,

Are we entirely free from that racial intolerance, so that we can pride ourselves upon having achieved a complete democracy? Our treatment of the Negroes, anti-Semitism, the growing (at least I fear it is growing) serious opposition to the alien immigrant within our gates, is, I think, a sufficient answer to that question. Here, in relation to education, we have a problem.⁶⁶

He asks,

What are our schools doing to cultivate not merely passive toleration that will put up with people of different racial birth or different colored skin, but what are our schools doing positively and aggressively and constructively to cultivate understanding and goodwill which are essential to democratic society?⁶⁷ [and,] What are we doing to translate those great ideas of liberty and justice out of a formal ceremonial ritual into the realities of the understanding, the insight and the genuine loyalty of the boys and girls in our schools?⁶⁸

Marxist and critical theoretical interpretations seek to educate the young for class-consciousness focused on the role of economic relations in the society. A look at the U.S. educational system of the 1970s convinced some authors the Marxist interpretation and the Deweyan observation that education's objective is conformity are essentially correct. Public education serves to perpetuate the socioeconomic status quo as an essentially predetermined winnowing process: training for wage slavery, filtering out the "unsuitable" through expulsion for non-conformity, drop-out/push-out through alienation, and sorting the rest into their labor roles. Despite the promise of The American Dream, real U.S. social-class mobility continues to be severely limited and occupational roles narrow according to social structures. Bowles and Gintis write in *Schooling in Capitalist America*, "The structure of social relations in education not only inures the student to the discipline of the work place, but develops the types of personal demeanor, modes of self-presentation, self-image, and social-class identifications which are the crucial ingredients of job adequacy."⁶⁹

The existential perspective on the master–slave relationship exposes societal conflicts and contradictions that give rise to social, political, religious, and economic relations that provide a basis for social control of individuals. The process of education as objectification through conformity, alienation, and exploitation therefore, by design, deprives individuals of the opportunity for freedom.

Conclusion

If there is a recurring theme in the master–slave metaphor it is that consciousness or awareness of the social situation in which one finds oneself is critical to escaping social or economic limitations. The role of the school as an institution of a democratic society is to raise this consciousness, or what Paulo Freire (1921–1997) calls *conscientização*, or critical consciousness, in support of a more egalitarian society. John Rawls' idea of justice as fairness, based on liberty, equality, and opportunity with the goal of a well-ordered society and a moral, educated person led him to write that educated citizens should "understand the public culture, participate in its institutions, ... [become] economically independent and self-supporting members of society ... and in ... developing the political virtues, [and] all this from within a political point of view."⁷⁰ Doing so, believes Rawls, means focusing resources on the most vulnerable. Dewey observes that,

...because the conditions of life change...the problem of maintaining a democracy becomes new, and the burden that is put upon the school, upon the educational system is not that of stating merely the ideas of the men who made this country, their hopes and their intentions, but of teaching what a democratic society means under existing conditions.⁷¹

He therefore asks,

What are our schools doing to cultivate not merely passive toleration that will put up with people of different racial birth or different colored skin, but what are our schools doing positively and aggressively and constructively to cultivate understanding and goodwill which are essential to democratic society?⁷²

This returns us to Rousseau and Locke and the social contract under which the people have the power to change the society. Plato, if we believe the *Republic*, might have focused on students' achievement to indicate whether they would ascend in society, the assumption being all students have the same opportunity, that social status and agency are somehow equalized. This, however, is still a goal to be sought.

Endnotes

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