

# Slavery and strong asymmetrical dependencies<sup>1</sup>

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Abstract: The paper looks for a general analytical perspective that allows to understand and compare slavery and its related institutions (serfdom, debt slavery, forced labor) in premodern and modern societies. The paper starts with a theory of asymmetrical control that identifies six cumulative dimensions of social control and thereby allows to understand the totalizing character of social relations based on a multiplicity of unilateral controls. In opposition to control there arise balancing operations. Any specific institution of asymmetrical dependency can then be described by an equilibrium of control and balancing operations.

In the next step the paper explores the historical space that creates social role categories such as stranger, guest, slave, member, kin – and looks at all of them as special cases of inclusion and exclusion. This points to the relevance of the theory of inclusion and exclusion that makes visible that all strong asymmetrical dependencies are based on combinations of constitutive exclusions (from fundamental societal forms of belongingness) with imposed inclusions that are characterized by their control intensity and totality. These are paradoxical structures and they mirror the other paradox that the ultradependents of premodern societies are as well dishonored as they are valued because of their extensive contributions to societal functioning. Their totalizing inclusion takes place in households and organizational contexts and therefore they do not build a stratum of their own in society.

Finally, the paper looks at global modernity and its non-hierarchical character. It tries to find out why strong asymmetrical dependencies persist in an egalitarian society. The reason seems to be that asymmetrical dependencies change over from being normal institutions in hierarchical societies to being oppositional and deviant institutions in horizontal societies that because of their looseness and complexity are not able to suppress the multiple possibilities of opposition, deviance and alienation.

## I Slavery and related institutions

Slavery is an institution of pre-modern societies which are pervaded by patterns of hierarchy, asymmetry and inequality as their most basic social structures. Often hierarchy is not just the structure of society, but is also perceived as the structure of the universe. As structure of the universe, it then affirms and legitimises the hierarchical structure of society (Davis, 1966, esp. Ch. 2-3).

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'Homo hierarchicus', as Louis Dumont called him, may therefore not have been surprised to find himself as a 'slave' or in any of the other social roles close to or similar to slavery in a premodern society, and may have accepted this position as the "will of providence" (Davis, 1966, 47). For sociology it is a major task to analyse and compare these multiple social roles and institutions using a conceptual vocabulary that serves as the basis for a comparative strategy that includes many societies in its analysis. The same conceptual vocabulary should even be able to identify 'modern slavery' and the continuities and structural changes that perhaps allow the persistence of slavery even in the non-hierarchical structures of global modernity.

The core concept for the following considerations will be "strong asymmetrical dependency". The concept was advanced by the excellence cluster "Beyond Freedom and Slavery. Asymmetrical Dependencies in Premodern Societies" at the University of Bonn (Bischoff & Conermann, 2022; Stichweh, 2022b), and it seems to suggest a family of terms that allows for a comparative study of the institutions surrounding slavery. There is "dependence" or "dependency" as the core concept for identifying relevant social relations that imply differentials of power or of influence and control; dependencies are universal in all human societies, they have to be "asymmetrical" to function as building materials for a specific set of hierarchical institutions; finally one may have to add the attribute "strong" to focus on those institutions that radicalise the hierarchical character of an asymmetrical society.

## 2 A paradigm of control

A first important condition for the emergence of strong asymmetrical dependencies is asymmetrical control. Asymmetrical control means that one participant (alter) can take selection decisions that are binding on another participant (ego) in a way that ego is unable to reciprocate. Six control dimensions can be meaningfully distinguished:

- Control over resources that another person would like to have (Coleman)
- Rights of control over the actions of another person (Coleman)
- Determining the social relations a person can maintain (Patterson)
- Cutting off opportunities for "voice" (to speak, to protest) (Hirschman)
- Blocking the ability to "exit" (to leave a given situation) (Hirschman)
- Limiting and controlling the way another person experiences the world (Luhmann)

These six control dimensions are cumulative. The more dimensions are present and institutionalised, the more one can speak of strong asymmetrical dependencies. When all six are realised, one speaks of a total institution that encompasses all dimensions of life (Goffman) or of totalitarian control. Another key question is whether there is a sequential order built into this control paradigm. This would mean that the later dimensions in the sequence entail the earlier dimensions and enhance the effectiveness of their control (Stichweh, 2022a, 92-4).

### 3 A paradigm of balancing operations

The hypothesis of cumulative dimensions of control can be complemented by a theory of balancing operations. The rise of strong asymmetrical dependencies can perhaps be understood as a kind of struggle between, on the one hand, control strategies chosen by actors with strong social positions, and, on the other hand, balancing reactions which are forms of resistance and adaptation available to weaker actors. Being “strong” or being “weak” are obviously temporary positions that can be changed on the basis of these struggles between control strategies and balancing operations. This combination of control strategies and balancing operations seems a good tool for building a flexible analytics for the understanding of strong asymmetrical dependencies. Below is a list of plausible candidates for balancing operations (Emerson, 1962, 35-40).

A Withdrawal – motivational disinvestment, indifference

B Extension of network

- Addition of more network addresses
- Diffusion of dependencies
- Examples: educational organisations, economic organisations

C Coalition formation

- Evolutionary background in primates – coalitions of weaker animals balance power asymmetries
- Transformation of the person-person relationship into a group-person relationship (collective actor vs. individual actor)
- Group formation – role prescriptions, norm formation, value genesis, institution building (the invention of “generalised others” who shape the lifeworld of the group).

D Status attribution

- Domestication of very powerful individuals through the attribution of very high status – asymmetrical dependency is simultaneously affirmed and limited by status-bound obligations (early modern monarchs who still have “subjects” but are obliged to ensure “welfare”)

E Constraint absorption

- Takeover of the “strong” by the “weak”
- Paradoxical balancing strategy: Merger, marriage, martyrdom

F Gift exchange

- Excessive gifts and exchanges; destruction of advantages, buildup of dominant social status. Significant resources are given away in order to achieve dominant status.

## G Socialization

- Training for submissiveness and subordination vs. training for enlightenment.

### 4 The stranger/slave continuum

There are nearly in all human societies roles for strangers. But these roles often have strong temporal limitations. For a short period of time, the stranger is welcome and treated as a guest, and as guest he or she can count on a certain amount of generosity, even and especially in societies with limited material resources. When a permanent solution must be found, different options are open. One option is to expel the stranger; alternatively the stranger can be adopted into a kinship group and treated to some extent as a normal kin member of the group; or, finally, the stranger can be integrated as a slave in a position of strong asymmetrical dependency. There is an interesting essay by Igor Kopytoff and Suzanne Miers that looks at African slavery before European colonisation as a case of social marginality (Kopytoff & Miers, 1977). And if one understands marginality in the way suggested by Robert Ezra Park as a status on the boundary between two social systems, this is close to the situation described by Kopytoff and Miers: a stranger adopted by one kinship group may later revert to the slave status and as such be sold to another kinship group, which then treats him/her as a slave or as a member or both.

### 5 ‘Including exclusion’ as a condition of slavery and other strong asymmetrical dependencies

The situation just described of the stranger who becomes either kin or slave, or first kin and then slave at a later point in time, implies inclusions and exclusions. The move into a strong asymmetrical dependency starts with an exclusion from kinship (as the most important dimension of inclusion in hunter-gatherer societies).

What is observed here is probably part of a more general pattern. Most if not all strong asymmetrical dependencies begin with an exclusion of the persons involved from a dimension that is constitutive of the core structure of the society in question. These exclusions concern kinship, or political membership or citizenship (in societies that have a set of institutions that can be tentatively called a state), or religion as the constitutive symbolism of many societies. Ethnicity is probably another dimension that could be a candidate for such a fundamental exclusion. Ethnicity is an ascription that can be changed. The persons in question are then called ‘strangers’ again. Our general hypothesis is that societies need a significant act of exclusion in order to see someone as a potential object of strong asymmetrical dependencies.

If such an exclusion is the beginning of a strong asymmetrical dependency, one has to ask what happens next. The answer is obvious. The society in question has to invent and stabilise an institution of inclusion, specifically designed to make use of and find a place for those who were previously excluded. This may be called an *including exclusion* institution. This term is well established in contemporary sociology, where it has been introduced without an explicit

theory of asymmetrical dependency (Stichweh, 2016). A good example is the sociological theory of the prison in modern society, which clearly identifies the prison as an institution of including exclusion. A prison career starts with multiple exclusions that are defined and detailed in the penal judgment. Mandatory sentencing relies on the prison as institution of inclusion for the offender, and there is no doubt that the prison is built on strong asymmetrical dependencies. If the multiple forms of slavery (serfdom, forced labour, debt slavery) are somehow paradigmatic of the strong asymmetrical dependencies of premodern societies, it could be argued that the multiple forms of prisons and camps (camps based on political and not so much on legal decisions) are a paradigmatic form of strong asymmetrical dependencies in modern society.

## 6 'Excluding inclusion' as oppositional structures in pre-modern and modern societies

Slavery and prisons/camps are only two cases that can be compared with other institutions of including exclusion that realise strong asymmetrical dependencies, in premodern and modern societies respectively. Besides 'including exclusion' there is another form of combining inclusion and exclusion, which may be called *excluding inclusion*.

This form refers to structures that are not institutions of the society as such, but that constitute groups, social movements or organisations in opposition to society. 'Excluding inclusion' always starts with disaffected people who no longer feel bound by many of the rules of their societies. To these disaffected people inclusion offers a made by oppositional groups and movement organisations (one could also call them deviant groups). Once included into them, there is often no way out of these groups and back into society. And it is from this state of irreversible exclusion from society that strong asymmetrical dependencies can emerge. Examples include religious dissidents in late medieval or early modern Europe and some religious sects in contemporary society, the peasants in the German "peasants wars," the "social bandits" of Eric Hobsbawm, the members of extreme and marginal political parties, terrorists and many others. In the oppositional groups, strong hierarchies and asymmetries exist from the outset or soon arise. Exit is no longer an option, and other strict forms of control are added. This is why the groups of excluding inclusion soon become total institutions from which you can't escape once you have become a member. Combining the sociology of including exclusion and of excluding inclusion offers significant potential for analysing the rise and persistence of strong asymmetrical dependencies in pre-modern and modern societies.

What distinguishes excluding inclusion from including exclusion is that in the case of including exclusion we are dealing with institutions of strong asymmetrical dependency that find their place at the centre of the respective societies. In the case of excluding inclusion, we are dealing with groups and movement organisations that are oppositional to society and the polity. They negate core norms and values of the societies they arise in – and the strong asymmetrical dependencies they build are entirely internal to the group/movement and are mostly illegal/illegitimate in the wider societies and polities.

There is a clear difference in legitimacy between ‘including exclusion’ and ‘excluding inclusion’. The first strategy seems to be favoured by pre-modern societies that are hierarchical at their core. For them, slavery and other institutions of including exclusion add further hierarchies that are congruent with the entire organisation of society and therefore have a high legitimacy. It is entirely different in modernity. Modernity abhors hierarchy and so the hierarchies of excluding inclusion are built by and for people who haven’t found their place in the non-hierarchical structures. The oppositional organisations in which these people find their home defy societal norms and accept the illegitimacy attributed to them. For them, everything revolves around their will to opposition.

#### 7 Ambivalence, paradox, contradiction in strong asymmetrical dependencies

Another important aspect of strong asymmetrical dependencies is that persons who are included in institutions of including exclusion may be perceived as objects of sociological ambivalence (Merton) from the societal point of view. They are denied constitutive dimensions of societal belongingness. These denials form the basis of the forms of inclusion imposed on them. Inclusion is here an imposition, not a choice, and it is accompanied by a whole range of control strategies, thus creating strong asymmetrical dependency. But these inclusions also confer societal functions and relevancies, and persons who may have been dishonoured in extreme forms may also acquire an importance and value based on the fulfilment of functions expected of them; this acquired value contrasts with the key characteristics of slavery, such as natal alienation, dishonour and totalitarian control (Patterson, 1982/2018).

The dependent persons are of value, often of significant economic value, and in many cases they have skills that are otherwise not available in society. This imbalance between the extreme dishonouring of persons living in situations of including exclusion and of the positive valuation attributed to them constitutes the core ambivalence of strong asymmetrical dependencies. This positive valuation is dictated by a realistic perception of why these human individuals, who sometimes are not even considered to be persons, are needed in the midst of the same societies that dishonour them.

#### 8 Social differentiation and strong asymmetrical dependencies

The most general theoretical perspective on strong asymmetrical dependencies and their societal embeddedness is probably to be found in the theory of social differentiation. This theory can be interpreted as integrating the analytical perspectives previously discussed in this entry – and it adds further perspectives. First, there is the question of the relationship between strong asymmetrical dependencies and societal complexity. It is plausible that a certain level of societal complexity is needed to find a place for the institutions of strong asymmetrical dependency. Therefore, in societies with a very low level of institutional differentiation, slavery

and other strong asymmetrical dependencies are unlikely to exist. The social structure simply finds no place for the paradoxical forms of including exclusion.

Strong asymmetrical dependencies are most likely to emerge in societies that have both internal and external inequalities (i.e. inequalities in relation to societies in their vicinity). Using data from G. P. Murdock's *Ethnographic Atlas*, Pittsburgh 1967, Jack Goody has attempted to quantify the correlation between the type of society and the existence of slavery. He reports the following results on the incidence of slavery (Goody, 1980, 24):

Hunting and gathering societies	3%
Incipient agriculture	17%
Fishing societies	34%
Advanced agriculture	43%
Pastoral societies	73%

Goody argues that hunter-gatherer societies with slavery are most common in the American Northwest. They are comparatively rich in resources (e.g. salmon) and are on this basis able to control other societies from which they take slaves.

In complex societies there arise "status gaps" (Rinder, 1958). That is, a complex order of societal statuses emerges. The more complex it becomes, the more likely it is that a society will not be able to fill all statuses with its own members. Then external solutions become probable. One can look for strangers to whom one grants privileges, or one can make use of persons who can be controlled through strong asymmetrical dependency. The difference between internal and external solutions is fundamental to the creation of strong asymmetrical dependencies. Patterson uses the distinction of intrusion and extrusion. In the case of intrusion, persons from foreign societies are enslaved and thus incorporated into an institution of including exclusion. In the case of extrusion, persons from one's own society are involved, and thus strong reasons have to be found to bring about the enormous status degradation that is necessary to force them into a strong asymmetrical dependency. In both cases, intrusion and extrusion, inequalities within societies and inequalities relating to relations between societies (here they should be called asymmetries) are necessary in order to find the socio-structural spaces from which persons can be taken and into which persons can be placed.

There is another point to be made about inequalities. As soon as inequality becomes stratification, i.e. as soon as there are large corporate structures of strata into which one is born and to which one belongs for one's whole life, the institutions of strong asymmetrical dependency rarely or never – there is obviously a need for further research here – form a stratum of their own. Dependents in strong asymmetrical dependencies are mostly part of households in one or more strata, and this makes a stratum or a caste of dependents unlikely. Patterson even claims that in none of the societies that have both castes and slaves does the

slave population constitute a separate caste or outcaste (Patterson, 1982/2018, 50), but this may be different for manumitted slaves and for groups of maroons.

A final point is that once strong asymmetrical dependencies are embedded into social structures, ongoing processes of social differentiation are slowed down. Strong asymmetrical dependencies have a fossilizing effect on macro-societal features. They are coupled to extremely powerful positions for individuals and families who are on the controlling side in the strong asymmetrical dependencies (planter households in the antebellum South or households of the Russian nobility before World War I). New social practices and new manual skills are often institutionalised as additional tasks for the dependent persons who never achieve a sufficient level of specialised competence. The very fast processes of professional and occupational differentiation and specialisation that are a central feature of nineteenth- to twenty-first-century modernity often do not occur in regions and states shaped by strong asymmetrical dependencies. A good example of this are Islamic countries in which marriage relations between men and women function as strong asymmetrical dependency. These countries pay for this with low occupational differentiation and low per capita income (Goldin & Katz, 2008, 16-18).

## 9 Modernity, functional differentiation and asymmetry

From the perspective of strong asymmetrical dependencies, there is a clear boundary between pre-modern societies and global modernity, when modernity is a social order that is no longer compatible with dependency values but is based on non-hierarchical structures of functional differentiation and value preferences for equality and freedom. Human individuals are seen as autonomous, and in terms of governance structures in states and organisations, self-organized forms of democracy have become a normative expectation in many regions of world society, even though democracy is an improbable and fragile order that is constantly under attack from power holders, ideologues, kleptocrats, populists and all those who believe that current decision-making processes are biased against them. Therefore, the non-hierarchical character of modern society cannot be guaranteed by democracy as the preferred political form. Instead its primary societal basis is functional differentiation itself as a symmetrical societal order, which is much more stable than any specific structure in any of the individual function systems. It is relatively probable that deviant orders will succeed in any function system of world society (and the breakdown of democracies or the failure of markets are good examples), but it seems highly improbable that alternatives to functional differentiation can be established anywhere in world society, and it is this improbability that is at the root of the ultrastability of modernity.

What does this mean for the reality and probability of strong asymmetrical dependencies in the modern world? An answer will be found by looking again at prominent cases of 'including exclusion' and 'excluding inclusion' in modern world society.

I will start with 'including exclusion'. Processes begin on the exclusion side. There are deficiencies and deviances that are attributed to persons, and these deficiencies and deviances are used as reasons for excluding these persons from the complexity of life in a modern functionally differentiated society. Persons for whom this is the case have to switch or are



transferred to a relatively specific, functionally limited inclusion context, which functions for some time as a near-total environment or near-total institution.

Form of deficiency legitimising exclusion	Organisation for including the person
Deviance, criminality	Prison
Illness	Hospital
Lack of income and property	Labour administration
Lack of knowledge and education	School and university
Political dissent, cultural difference	Re-education camps
Infirmity in old age	Care

In these near-total institutions, asymmetrical dependencies or even strong asymmetrical dependencies can arise, as can be the case in schools and universities. It was no coincidence that Thorstein Veblen called the American college a “penal institution”. But these asymmetrical dependencies – and this is the core difference with pre-modern institutions – are *benevolent asymmetrical dependencies*. Their function is to bring about a significant improvement in the situation of persons included into them. The hospital claims to cure the sick, schools and universities provide relatively young people with knowledge and education, employment agencies provide people without income with a new job, care institutions should offer old people a life context of reduced complexity and decent living conditions. The two exceptions that show the failures of modernity are the prison and the camp. The enlightened version of the prison communicates the same benevolent intentions called “resocialization”, but in reality this often doesn’t take place. Instead strong asymmetrical dependencies arise that lack benevolence, and sometimes (in the USA after 1865) prisons are explicitly understood as substitutes for slavery. And the labour and re-education camps that emerge after the breakdown of democracies destroy people and dishonor them. They even lack the positive valuation of dependents that is often characteristic of slavery.

The other side is excluding inclusion. As global modernity is only a loosely coupled social system there are greater spaces for deviant and illegal institutions. There are many persons who are marginal in their regional societies, and who, unlike Robert Ezra Parks’ “marginal men”, do not have a second membership. For them, a second and new context of inclusion is offered by deviant organisations based on disrespect for ‘official’ norms and values. There are many such deviant organisations: organisations involved in the global transfer of labourers, which they often force into indebtedness; local and global gangs active in drug trafficking and other illegal activities; religious sects; terrorist groups; radical parties seeking to overthrow political power; ships that exploit the possibilities of total control provided by the ocean as a stateless space. All these organisations offer inclusion (to the marginalised) and create exclusion from other social systems (there are always mechanisms to prevent exit from the organisation). And using this structure of excluding inclusion, they build strong asymmetrical dependencies that subordinate the marginalised they claim to help. In this way, they point to a core aspect of strong asymmetrical dependencies in modernity. In contrast to pre-modern societies, strong asymmetrical dependencies are no longer a constitutive part of a hierarchical

world. Instead they are oppositional structures. At the global level and in regional social structures, however, there are insufficient control capacities to combat them effectively. It is the liberality, complexity and looseness of the global order that gives rise to oppositional structures and thus to new strong asymmetrical dependencies.

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