

Masters and Slaves

by Bill Herbst

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I don't need to know any more about masters and slaves. Though I don't claim to know everything — every historical fact, every nuance, every outrage, every tragedy — I know enough. Whether it's Egyptian pharaohs commanding the building of the pyramids, Southern white plantation owners buying African blacks, German Nazis setting up and carrying out the Final Solution and the Holocaust, or young Enron traders laughing about the hardship their "legal theft" swindle imposed on elderly energy customers, I learned all I needed to know a long time ago.

In fairness, whether the stories are all true, partially true, or mere cautionary fables doesn't really matter to me. I've encountered Master and Slave mentality enough times in real life (from others and from myself, and from both sides of the coin) that I accept the parables as revealing something significant and less than wonderful about our tendencies as human beings.

Both my parents were racists. They believed that negroes were inferior to whites innately, by nature. They weren't pharaohs, plantation owners, Nazis, or Enron traders. They were just aspirants to America's burgeoning white middle class. They moved to the new California ranch-style suburbs of St. Louis, Missouri, in the early 1950s — which might just as well have been any major American metropolis: Chicago, Detroit, New York, Atlanta, Nashville, etc. White flight to the suburbs was a thing back then. They fled the city when I was barely three years old, in part to gain the benefits of home ownership, but also to escape and avoid colored people.

The racial beliefs they held — deeply and mostly unconsciously, but at times with apparently willful certainty — and tried to teach me — mostly unintentionally, but sometimes pointedly — struck me, even as a child, as somehow wrong and screwed up. I don't know exactly why I reacted so negatively to their belief in white racial superiority, but I did. Clearly, though, my intellectual rejection of their racism didn't make me immune to the implantation of their fears.

Growing up as a child in my lily-white suburb and public school system, I didn't encounter or know any black people, but I was afraid of them nonetheless. By the time I was in my late teens and early 20s, I'd lost any respect I had for those fears. Yes, I had racial anxieties (and probably still do at the age of 70), but I refused to give them any credence. I already knew that the real bogeyman was

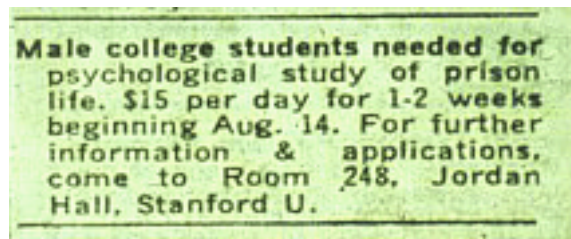
not “out there,” but inside myself. That’s not to suggest that real threats don’t exist. They do, but the unreal threats inside us are every bit as powerful.

I didn’t need to watch the miniseries *Roots* in the 1980s, but I did. I didn’t need to watch the new Amazon Prime Limited series *The Underground Railroad* this past week, but I watched that, too.

I don’t know how much of what’s shown in these Hollywood presentations is literally true, metaphorically true, or just mythically true. Every performance produced on stage, in movies, television, or YouTube videos, is fictional. Doesn’t matter whether it’s a documentary or a drama, cinema verité or the filming of a novel, nor whether stated to be true, claimed to be based on truth, or entirely made up. Without any question, there is bias and agenda and propaganda involved. Art may reflect life, but art is not reality. Reality is what actually happens. Art is a reduction of that to something different — allegorical and archetypal. So, I regard everything with a certain degree of skepticism.

What I am sure of, however, is that Masters and Slaves has always been a fundamental element of civilization, a kind of terrible bedrock. The entire edifice of civilization has been built on the work and suffering of the many in bondage to the wishes of and benefits for the few who rule. That much seems inescapable to me. Everything I’ve learned about human beings supports it in one way or another. Not everyone buys into the game of masters and slaves (thank god), but many people do, perhaps even a majority, and it’s a difficult game to refute, avoid, or opt out of.

The Stanford Prison Experiment is among the most famous studies in 20th-century psychology, perhaps not quite up there with Pavlov’s Dogs and Skinner’s Boxes, but not too far behind. The “Experiment” was a role-playing simulation set up and conducted by psychologists and other social scientists at Stanford University in 1971. The researchers wanted to study the dynamic of masters and slaves and see how regular people would react when arbitrarily placed in these superior and inferior roles. To find subjects, the researchers placed a Part-Time Job ad in a local newspaper. The picture below is the actual ad:

A photograph of a newspaper advertisement for the Stanford Prison Experiment. The text is printed in a bold, sans-serif font on a light-colored background. The ad reads: "Male college students needed for psychological study of prison life. \$15 per day for 1-2 weeks beginning Aug. 14. For further information & applications, come to Room 248, Jordan Hall, Stanford U." The ad is framed by a thin black border.

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The applicants who responded were given diagnostic interviews and personality tests to screen out anyone judged to have psychological problems. In other words, all of the students chosen as participants were deemed to be normal, middle-class young men. They were then divided into two groups: designated as “prisoners” and “guards.” A simulated prison block had been set up in an academic building on the Stanford campus.

I'm going to cut to the chase here, but if you'd like to read the entire story of the Experiment in detail — how it was conceived and planned, what happened, and the aftermath — go to *The Stanford Prison Experiment* web site:

<https://www.prisonexp.org>

The experimental study was terminated after only six days instead of the planned two weeks. Why? Because a sizable portion of both guards and prisoners had "transformed" very quickly from "normal" into extreme stereotypes of their respective assigned roles: Some guards acted out as cruel and sadistic monsters, gleefully inflicting harsh punishments on the prisoners, and some inmates devolved into criminal deviants or were reduced to helpless, wounded, and terrified victims. The creators of the experiment quickly realized that they had wandered into unanticipated territory and bitten off more than they could chew. So, alarmed at what was transpiring, the researchers shut it down.

In the five decades since then, *The Stanford Prison Experiment* has been the subject of many articles, a couple of books, and a film documentary. Did we learn anything? Apparently not, given what followed in America over the next decades — mass incarcerations and the privatization of prisons into a profitable industry, scandals in the military around torture (think waterboarding and Abu Ghraib), and the recently heightened public awareness of police brutality through the use of lethal force.

Then too, there's the Master-Slave shtick in sexuality. This is often consensual role-playing, so that's a little different. And I'm not just talking about *50 Shades of Grey*. America has a fairly sizable shadow culture and an entire industry built around sexual dominance and submission — devotees in the BDSM world (for the innocent, that's the acronym for Bondage, Discipline, and Sado-Masochism) get together in actual conventions where hotel ballrooms are decked out as dungeons, for folks who like that sort of public display and group sharing. At that level, whips and chains are just good clean fun, I guess. Then there's the classic stereotype of the hanging judge who officially metes out harsh sentences every day, but secretly visits a dominatrix once a week for his paid fix of humiliation. Hey, fronts and backs, you know?

But there's a lot of sex-as-power that isn't so funny. America has too much non-consensual domination and sadism that masquerades as "normal" sex or is kept hidden. Not just the headline scandals involving celebrities like Harvey Weinstein and Bill Cosby, or the sex trafficking of rich perverts like Jeffrey Epstein, but also hundreds of thousands (and possibly millions) of regular couples and families trapped in cycles of sexual abuse that we hardly ever hear about.

What interests me most about all this are the disturbing implications of how deeply embedded this dynamic is in human beings. The old saying that "*power corrupts, and absolute power corrupts absolutely*" has some merit, but doesn't tell the whole story. Power itself may be less the *cause* of corruption than a

trigger to release something lurking within us. I accept that it's risky to venture into the murky swamp of "human nature" based on anecdotal evidence, but how much more evidence do we need? I don't actually wish to assert that having too much power inevitably *produces* moral corruption. It tends to, I think, but there's more going on than just that. Perhaps those who are corrupted as Masters always had an inner leaning toward cruelty. On its face, the Stanford Prison Experiment seems to imply that we all embody such tendencies, and that it takes relatively little to encourage those shadow facets to rear their ugly heads.

Whether the Master-Slave dynamic takes the form of abusive civil authorities or the depredations that often come with great wealth, human beings don't seem equipped to sanely handle too much power. Those and other conditions that encourage (either crudely or subtly) reduced empathy or sympathy, and easy disrespect for another person's dignity morph all too easily into extreme versions of Us-versus-Them and Winners-versus-Losers writ large.

Excessive influence over others tends to be associated more with sociopaths or psychopaths than with humanitarians or good Samaritans. But any of us can fall into the trap, lording it over others as Masters, or suffering the obloquy of forced enslavement. To give up the role of Master requires humility, while refusing to be a Slave risks even more suffering. My best guess is that the dynamics behind Masters and Slaves are probably much more complicated than we realize, and their expression likely more widespread than we'd like to think.

What isn't complicated, though, is the end result — abuse and suffering. I don't care whether we're talking about the despicable ways we treat animals raised for food in this country in the agri-business production of chickens, turkeys, hogs, and cattle; the very personal examples of abusive marriages and families; or how we collectively treat other humans we see as different from ourselves (by denying their humanity or even bombing them back to the Stone Age...). All of it falls under the heading of Master-Slave bullshit. Yes, the Civil War formally ended chattel slavery in America. No longer can any person be bought and sold as property. But that didn't rid us of the basic Master-Slave mentality, which remains deeply embedded in nearly every aspect of society.

What we've tried so far in America to reform or alleviate this tendency hasn't worked very well, to the point even of sometimes provoking more resistance than progress. We're there again now, mired in the throes of terrible backlash.

As with so much of what I write about in these commentaries, I have no viable solutions to offer beyond the inner work toward maturity that progresses so very slowly, one person at a time. I don't know how to fix it collectively. I just want it to stop.