

The Violence of the Deed

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16-12-02

As the legal basis for slavery withered and it became possible for families such as Jacobs's to have both free and enslaved members, the slave-owners faced the challenge of maintaining their social order and the supply of cheap labor. Their solution was to minimize the effect of freedom by attempting to rationalize or normalize the enslaved condition of people in the eyes of their free relatives and demanding that these free people perform roughly the same work as slaves. The brutal bodily punishments used to control slaves had to be modified once the bodies of workers were no longer the private property of an owner, but the control that took its place was still dependent on bodily punishment.

To clarify the transformations that power underwent and what was created, I will draw on behavioral psychology, a science of control. While it is important that the motives for hard work were expanded from merely the desire to avoid punishment to encompass rewards such as legal freedom and home-ownership, I will attempt to use the behaviorist paradigm to explain the way in which the new power relationships that developed were built directly on the foundation of the old forms of power, especially physical violence, and that they would be totally ineffective without this threat of violence.

The original problem facing slave-owners was that the work they were demanding of slaves was extremely undesirable and unrewarding. Being offered no compensation for their labor aside from decreased abuse, there were no mechanisms of self-reinforcement in operation and slave-owners had to constantly apply coercive methods to the enslaved workers. In other words, tilling fields for a person that considers you inhuman is hardly something that would go down without an external motivation.

In response, the form of social control that was invented under slavery was based almost entirely on torture. This can be equated to a simple form of classical conditioning in which undesired behavior is punished directly, here using whipping to form an association between the man with a whip (the head slave, overseer, or owner) and docile, hard-working behavior.

Modern concepts of coercion show us that this strategy suffered from several flaws which may have made a change in the mode of power a historical necessity.

First, power is only exerted in a direct interaction of the overseer and slave, so it is necessary that an overseer always be present:

Instrumental behaviors are brought under discriminative stimulus control if their occurrence is associated with differential consequences depending on the presence or absence of particular stimuli. This process is most clearly illustrated in simple laboratory studies in which certain responses are reinforced only in the presence of one stimulus (e.g., green light), but never in a different stimulus context (e.g., red light). (Bandura, 24)

The threat of punishment is ubiquitous, but the source of this punishment is something eluctable--the person physically in charge of its administration. Therefore, it makes sense for Harriet and William to run away, since this will distance them from the cause of their misery. While this may seem like a trivial point, it is an essential difference from the type of power that replaces slavery. Once Harriet's grandmother Mary purchases her freedom and a house, running away becomes an inviable strategy. Escape is no longer liberatory.

Second, the overseer had to be continuously violent, something that Prince documents in detail: "Both my master and mistress seemed to think that they had a right to ill-use [two young, enslaved boys] at their pleasure; and very often accompanied their commands with blows, whether the children were behaving well or ill.... their lives were passed in continual fear" (66). From the behaviorist perspective, the punishment here has deviated from conditioning by becoming indiscriminate and is almost an end in itself, intended to maintain the master-slave relationship through fear alone. This need for such totalizing violence can be viewed as a sign of the failure of the structure of control, as an indicator that the master's position is tenuous. We have an example of a far more stable slavery, since both Jacobs and Prince describe childhood relationships of slavery based on something closer to affection than to fear. Even those perpetrating this violence recognize its dehumanizing effect on themselves and to some degree would prefer an alternative way to impose power, which Jacobs concisely illustrates with a letter from Dr. Flint, "It expressed regret for the blow he had given me, and reminded me that I myself was wholly to blame for it. He hoped I had become convinced of the injury I was doing myself by incurring his displeasure" (45). This need of the oppressor to transfer guilt onto the oppressed

for their condition is central to issues of savagery and salvation in what we have read about slavery. In this case, Flint is implying that Jacobs could become less abused and more free by behaving in the way he wants, in this case moving to Louisiana to be his paramour.

He exerted his power in striking her to create a hierarchical division between the two of them, and his letter is a second and distinct strategy of power, promising to reward her by diminishing this division between them. Flint attempts a similar maneuver years later,

There must be no communication of any kind between you and [your children's] father. I will procure a cottage, where you and the children can live together. Your labor shall be light, such as sewing for my family. Think what is offered you, Linda--a home and freedom! If I have been harsh with you at times, your wilfulness drove me to it. You know I exact obedience from my own children, and I consider you as yet a child. (Jacobs, 93)

A system of reward (positive reinforcement) is necessary at some points because, although Jacobs and Prince describe unimaginable levels of brutality and sadism, it never seems that the whites perpetrating it throw parties to celebrate this part of the arrangement. Also, aside from the moral dilemmas they confront or suppress, constantly whipping is physically inefficient--the whites might as well just do their own work in the first place: "she stripped and flogged me long and severely with the cowskin; as long as she had strength to use the lash, for she did not give over till she was quite tired" (Prince, 68).

A society functioning at this level is unstable, as shown by Nat Turner and John Brown both leading rebellions in the space of Jacobs's narrative. Cuguano elucidates these dangers of direct punishment, threatening revolution and making it clear that those who choose to live by the (overt) sword will die by it:

And when it became necessary to punish those that wronged others, when the punishers went beyond the bounds of a just retaliation, and fell into the same crimes of the oppressors, not to prevent themselves from harm, and to deliver the oppressed and the captive, but to oppress and enslave others, as much as they before them had done, the consequence is plain, that an impending overthrow must still fall upon them likewise. (Cuguano, 60)

This danger of revolution was probably the ultimate limitation of physical coercion. In the West Indies and the southern U.S., there were far more enslaved people than enslavers, and the example of Haiti in particular kept the slave-owners awake at night.

In successful conditioning, the stimulus (whipping) takes on a symbolic depth in which the symbol alone serves the purpose that the stimulus formerly served. This symbolic nature allows the conditioning to apply to more general circumstances, and to function in the absence of whipping itself:

Social situations... seldom recur with exactly the same constituent elements. Because of the constant variation in the nature and patterning of stimuli, social learning would be an interminable and exceedingly laborious process if responses were entirely specific to the situation in which they had been originally reinforced. However, performances that have been reinforced in the presence of certain cues are also controlled by other stimuli which are related to them either physically or semantically. After generalized stimulus control has been established it can be narrowed, if necessary, by differential reinforcement of responses to stimuli whose differences are progressively reduced. (Bandura, 25)

This symbolic, generalizing aspect of the slave-owner's conditioning is demonstrated by Jacobs's brother William in his reaction to his young master,

[The young master was] rubbing up pennies with quicksilver, and passing them off for quarters of a dollar on an old man who kept a fruit stall.... I [Harriet] told him it was certainly wrong to deceive the old man, and that it was his duty to tell him of the impositions practised by his young master. I assured him the old man would not be slow to comprehend the whole, and there the matter would end. William thought it might with the old man, but not with him. He said he did not mind the smart of the whip, but he did not like the idea of being whipped. (Jacobs, 21. Emphasis original.)

Jacobs has given us an exact description of the classical conditioning process, where her brother suffers an avoidance reaction to the thought of speaking against his master. He is not whipped for this particular thought and never has been, but the symbol of the whip is for him paired with disobedience to his master, and when this symbol enters his mind he reconsiders his actions.

In addition to classical conditioning through torture, slave-owners employed this symbolic response in what would now be called the vicarious conditioning of emotional responsiveness, or punishment as a spectacle:

It is generally assumed that persons develop emotional responses on the basis of direct painful or

pleasurable stimulation experienced in association with certain places, people, or events. Although many emotional responses are undoubtedly acquired by means of direct classical conditioning, affective learning in humans frequently occurs through vicariously aroused emotions. Many phobic behaviors, for example, arise not from actual injurious experiences with the phobic objects, but rather from witnessing others either respond fearfully toward, or be hurt by, certain things. (Bandura, 167)

During slavery, this process was used in a simple fashion by publicly beating the disobedient to set an example for others, vicariously associating disobedience and pain. Often an owner would furthermore have a symbol of the relationships of power and painful experience, a favorite location or weapon to remind all, "The barn was her particular place of torture" (Jacobs, 53), or might serve as the symbol themselves. Although this concept of punishment through example is commonplace to us who see it operate every day, it is still remarkable that a person would be able to coerce others with physical force without ever beating them directly. Adam Smith and Bandura agree that this operation of power depends on the sympathetic use of the imagination, "Though our brother is upon the rack.... it is by the imagination only that we can form any conception of what are his sensations" (Smith, 9).

Conditioning in humans is frequently mediated through self-generated symbolic stimulation, which also plays an influential role in vicarious responding... In personality theory vicarious emotional arousal is typically discussed under the concept of empathy. Within the personality framework it is generally assumed that an observer becomes empathetically aroused as a result of intuiting the experiences and affective states of another person. The research reported by Stotland indicates, however, that a somewhat different process may be involved. Observers reacted more emotionally to the sight of a person undergoing painful stimulation when they were previously asked to imagine how *they themselves* would feel if they were being hurt than when they were told to imagine how the *other person* felt during the treatment. These findings suggest that modeled affective cues produce vicarious arousal largely through an intervening self-stimulation process involving imaginal representation of aversive or pleasurable consequences occurring to oneself in similar situations. (Bandura, 171. Emphasis original.)

The other dimension of coercion through imagination and sympathy, blackmail, is not explained by behaviorism or Smith. Jacobs is threatened with continued slavery or other hardships for her children on several occasions, and each time it is the extension of control over her by attacking people that she cares about. Similarly, Flint puts most of her family in jail with

the hope that she will turn herself in to the authorities to save them. This power is clearly based on the other forms of power exercised on the people used as the weapon, but it has the distinct feature of forcing a judgment between emotional ties and obedience.

All this is to say that power did not instantaneously transform on Juneteenth. The search was at least implicitly underway for alternatives to direct punishment and conditioning. I believe that at roughly this point in time, a process took place which enabled the whites to stabilize their tottering social structure: a level of symbolic abstraction entered punishment and rewarding which shifted the apparent locus of power off of the people exercising power. Also, as it became necessary sympathetic relationships between family and friends were more effectively exploited with the effect of obscuring the possibility of an alternative existence (escape). It is an ironic twist that these processes which allowed white people's power over black people to persist were in turn modeled after the caste structure within white society. The practical effect of these processes was that as there arose an opportunity to buy one's personal freedom, slaves and former slaves would work for the same white community as previously, but rather than being compelled by fear directly, they were compelled by the idea of liberating themselves and their children. This idea of liberation, of course, could only exist as long as most people were being subjugated to its opposite, continued slavery and brutality.

What is the nature of the freedom Mary and Harriet (Linda) win? If the principal objective of the oppression of slavery is to extract very cheap labor from black people, how is it that after their respective emancipation and escape, both women continue to work in white homes for little money? In this crucial regard, the south (especially) has remained stable for over 100 years. Consider that in 1961, the minimum wage in Mississippi was \$1.25 an hour, and with few exceptions white people held these jobs (Belfrage, 34). A middle-aged black woman who had been working from 6 AM until 8 PM every day of the week her entire life was making a typical black worker's wage of \$2.50 per day, or 17 cents an hour (73).

In exchange for thirty years' savings, Mary purchases her own freedom and her son Mark and later purchases several other family members (Jacobs, 234). Upon the liberation of Harriet's uncle Mark (Phillip), the family concludes, "He that is *willing* to be a slave, let him be a slave" (29). This echoes Dr. Flint's letter and offer mentioned earlier here, in which Harriet is

responsible for her own position. If slavery is the fault of the enslaved, there must be a proper behavior that leads to freedom. In this case, liberation is purchased at the expense of years of labor. It appears that white society has succeeded in defining an artificial goal which is internalized by those attempting to escape slavery. If they so choose, the owners can set a price on the life of their slaves, and the former slaves will work even harder than before in an effort to free their loved ones, a twisted version of Cuguano's prediction that, "the free and voluntary labour of many, would soon yield to any government, many greater advantages than any thing that slavery can produce" (92). Alternatively, the owners can choose not to sell their slave as in the case of Harriet and Dr. Flint.

Another means of instilling self-regulatory functions is ... for participants to enact role behaviors toward peers that are ordinarily performed by regular change agents. Specifically, this entails delegating progressively more of the standard-setting, evaluative, and reinforcement functions to members of the group as they progress in the program. The members themselves, with staff guidance, thus become the contingency managers. In order to enhance participants' willingness to adopt new role behaviors, increased privileges and rewards are associated with increased responsibility for guiding member behavior. Active participation in decision-making, application of rewards and sanctions for regulating the behavior of peers in accord with institutional standards, and performance of other counterattitudinal behaviors would be expected to exert greater influences on values and preferences than a program in which contingencies are simply imposed on covertly resistant members. It might also be supposed that those who willingly implement reinforcement contingencies advocated by a social agency for modifying the behavior of their associates will similarly alter their own standards of self-reinforcement in the practiced direction. (Bandura, 620)

Even with excellent intentions, by purchasing freedom Mary is effectively continuing slavery. The practical effect is to free her own relatives and to give the owner the return on investment she or he needs to purchase another slave. Interpreted through the previous quotation, the effect is even worse. Mary has become a respected member of the community only through a lifetime of hard work and obedience to whites, and indeed reproduces their rationalizations for oppression in an attempt to make herself and her children more comfortable with the lives they have. The most clear example of this is in her adherence to the slave-owner's rendition of Christian philosophy: "Most earnestly did [our grandmother] strive to make us feel that it was the will of God: that He

had seen fit to place us under such circumstances; and though it seemed hard, we ought to pray for contentment" (Jacobs, 19).

Mary is far from one-sided in her respect for slave laws, since she gladly harbors her fugitive slave daughter for over six years at an extreme risk to herself and all of her relatives. Mary help Harriet flee rather than purchasing her because Flint repeatedly refuses to sell her, so it is clear that Mary's motivation is purely the desire to see her children and grandchildren free, and that she will do everything in her power to achieve this. She has probably not internalized any work ethic or other nonsense, and it is likely that she has ever bothered purchasing anybody rather than helping them escape because it is easier and safer. Harriet is strongly opposed to the idea of buying freedom: "I have heard her say she would go to the ends of the earth, rather than pay any man or woman for her freedom, because she thinks she has a right to it" (221). However, although she is living in a free state her friends are eventually compelled to purchase her to protect her from the Fugitive Slave Act (223). She is horrified by the fact that she could be purchased her voyage to escape exactly this treatment, yet glad that she will no longer be subject to the relentless pursuit of slave-traders.

This clarifies the essence of freedom as it applies to her and her grandmother, simply that freedom causes laws permitting limitless physical violence against them no longer apply. Whites may still burn down Mary's house in anger on finding Harriet, but in situations like the pogrom inspired by Nat Turner's rebellion the surrounding white middle-class community is forced to protect the family to some degree. For these black women, freedom in either half of the country means protection from the violence they would otherwise be subjected to as black people. At all times they have self-determination, and while they would ideally have a much greater possibility of realizing their desires once free, the greater part of their time is spent in similar labors as when enslaved. Prince dramatically shows us the desperate condition faced by black people in society that could only view them as slaves when her master is spiteful and "indecent" enough to compel her to run away, but, "I went away to a neighbouring house and sat down and cried till the next morning, when I went home again, not knowing what else to do" (78).

For individuals who present gross deficiencies in conditioned reinforcers, and who are therefore responsive only to primitive physical consequences, an important initial objective of treatment is to endow social and symbolic stimuli with reinforcing properties. The development of social

reinforcers is particularly critical, since human behavior is frequently strengthened, sustained, and modified by praise, approval, encouragement, positive attention, and affection. (Bandura, 237)

Could we say that black people were certainly considered to be in this category of individuals who need beatings to behave properly, and that slaves were given their freedom only once it was proven that they agreed to society's value structures? They had to save immense amounts of money and show that they "would never be any expense to the town or state" once emancipated (Jacobs, 234). Attempts at freeing others without the proper payments being made and the blessing of the "owner" would result in an end to the would-be-liberator's own freedom--imprisonment--yet another effect of physical violence.

This freedom or enslavement, being a social arrangement between people, can be nothing but symbolic. The same principle holds as with the other forms of private property which were the only factor keeping the poor laboring away in the north: documents are possessed by the owning party which symbolize the state violence that will be brought to bear on transgressors. The symbol of the whip becomes the conditioned stimulus in higher-order conditioning, where totally intangible ideas are linked together to modify behavior and even imagination. For instance, a hungry (landless) farmer sees barren land, yet associates the land with a deed, perhaps with abstract disobedience, then with jail, and finally the whip or other jail-house humiliations. Once this process is ingrained, the land itself becomes a conditioned stimulus, and merely looking at the earth can cause us to think about savings accounts and violence.

It is perhaps misleading to talk of behavior being internalized since, after response patterns have been acquired, it is doubtful that they can undergo any further interiorization. The major issues, therefore, are less concerned with the *locus of behavior* than with the nature of its *controlling conditions*. (Bandura, 615)

The ultimate aim of the training in self-reinforcement is to produce a level of functioning at which participants can control their own behavior with minimum external constraints and artificial inducements. (Bandura, 620)

It seems that social learning in the presence of hierarchical power lends itself to a the type of conditioning mentioned earlier, in which those being conditioned will uncritically learn the game rules in the process of teaching others. In an advanced stage of this conditioning we won't need to be offered anything for playing the game, and will repeat the justifications of those in power

for their and our positions exclusively out of self-regulation: out of a sense that we believe in these ideas. Representations of violence are necessary for maintaining possessive and exploitative relationships, and without a doubt jails and police persist as a symbolic mechanism to condition aversion to disobedient behavior. I call them symbolic because control is exerted without needing to imprison most members of majority society. The six million or so people under the judiciary's thumb show that it is performing additional social functions such as indiscriminate violence which inspires terror that reinforces class and race oppression, the suppression of the reserve army of labor, or simply the direct extraction of profit by demanding of public tax money a price for every captured head.

Any instance of agreeing to something undesired should be examined to determine what the sources of coercion are. The abstractions that intervene at each step of power make linear analysis difficult or impossible, but I think that physical violence is unique in its central and dual role: it is a symbolic element that must be linked to almost any decision that might be made in a society of the Deed, and it is the ultimate determinant of socially agreed-upon reality, present whenever expectations and this reality conflict.

Exo-curricular Bibliography

Albert Bandura, *Principles of Behavior Modification*. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1969.

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