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The Slave Syndrome

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In any society in which slavery was a rare or nonexistent institution it would be quite obvious that the *Stockholm Syndrome* is itself just a more rare and special case of a far more common, though equally perplexing, *Slave Syndrome*.

In the 1979 robbery of Kreditbanken at Norrmalmstorg – a square in Stockholm, Sweden – several bank employees were held hostage in the bank vault for most of a week during which time they began to increasingly identify with their captors. While their captors were under siege by police, the hostages went on to reject assistance from government agents. And after the captors were themselves captured by police the former hostages defended them. This example of abused victims becoming emotionally attached to their captors has since become widely known as the *Stockholm Syndrome*. It has been widely reported, studied and theorized to the point where it has nearly become a sociological cliché.

Identification with powerful figures has been a commonplace of life throughout recorded history. Despite all delusions

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of modern social progress it is as fundamental to institutional functioning as it has ever been since the dawn of civilization. What is particularly unusual in the situation that unfolded in Stockholm was the rather quick switch from fearful hostages *involuntarily* cooperating with their captors under duress to fearful hostages *voluntarily* cooperating with their captors under duress. In a matter of days, a number of hostages went through huge changes – with some of these changes persisting well past the physical crisis of capture and confinement. (Including a later marriage between hostage and captor.) It was the quickness and unity of this conversion of identification that led to the naming of this type of situation. And its occasional, if rare, repetition around the world has kept awareness of the *Stockholm Syndrome* current.

More interesting – and far more revealing of the nature of modern civilization – than the rare episodic instances of *Stockholm Syndrome*-style dramas is the near-complete lack of attention paid to the huge importance of identification with powerful figures in the everyday functions of modern institutions, especially all of the institutions of modern enslavement. There may be little overt drama as the vast majority of people in contemporary societies grow in age, but fail to ever mature to the point where they can stand on their own two feet and make their own decisions about their world without feeling obsessively compelled to attach their identities to those of rich and powerful bullies. However, anyone perceptive enough to be concerned has to wonder how this situation can remain, not only unreported, unstudied and untheorized, but *even unnamed* in the current sensationally media-crazed culture.

In any society in which slavery was a rare or nonexistent institution it would be quite obvious that the *Stockholm Syndrome* is itself just a more rare and special case of a far more common, though equally perplexing, *Slave Syndrome*. But in our society of *modern slavery* – in which this slavery cannot be officially acknowledged or named, recognizing the existence of

the *Slave Syndrome* is also tabu. What is worse, even among those most libertarian of social critics, the anarchists, it can barely be named.

The *Stockholm Syndrome* is rare (and scandalous) because the situations in which it can occur (tiny prolonged hostage dramas) are also so rare. On the contrary, the *Slave Syndrome* is everywhere (and entirely unremarkable to its observers and victims) precisely because the situations in which it occurs (prolonged institutional hostage dramas) are ubiquitous and in a society of modern slavery, even those few slaves aware of their condition are not often eager to announce the fact of their enslavement.

What makes the *Slave Syndrome* even more invisible is the fact that it is far more the *institutions* of modern slavery than the particular *persons* who run them, that are now the powerful figures with which people most identify. The nearly unanimous belief in the substantial reality of imaginary, reified entities (like gods, Santa Claus, science, society, the state and laws) means that rather than identifications with actual living persons – although such identifications still remain common – most people now identify more closely with reified abstractions, and the institutions able to operate under the cover provided by mass-belief in these abstractions. Of course, these institutions in reality only consist in the sum of actions pursued by the people participating in the constitution and maintenance of their symbolic “existence.” But this fact is lost on people who have learned to prefer the modern enslavement to abstractions to traditional forms of enslavement to persons. Thus the whole set of modern institutions of enslavement (hiding behind these abstractions) have become the primary contemporary incarnation of traditionally rich and powerful bullies. This is the central fact of modern civilization, the paradigm upon which the entire social world rests: a system of enslaving institutions, in which people have been trained from birth to

participate and identify, while also being trained to call the various forms of this slavery “freedom.”

Especially amongst the most depraved slaves to modern bullies – those who sing their praises the most strongly, continuously and publicly, the people who make up the modern mass media, one cannot possibly count the times that identifications with these bullies are repeated over and over and over. For those who haven’t already gotten the message through exposure to parental submission and humiliation, or private and public schooling, the mass media (including social media) insist on telling us ad nauseam that we are beholden to “our government,” “our military,” “our businesses,” “our police,” “our laws” and on and on....

In a world of modern slavery in which slavery is invisible because liberty has been largely reduced to following laws and orders issued, not (for the most part at least) by particular persons, but ever increasingly by abstractions (incarnated by institutions), is modern slavery still slavery when there are fewer and fewer people left able and willing to point it out? That remains to be decided. Where do you stand?

We can each refuse identification with our enslavement by rebelling against it here and now at every opportunity. By refusing to let ourselves be encompassed in the silent consent implied whenever “we” or “our” includes the abstractions or institutions of modern slavery. It’s “their” system, not “ours” or “mine.” It’s the system of those who continue to believe in it, not of those who genuinely fight it. If you identify with it, you’re a part of it. The more you refuse identification with it the more its power is reduced by each and every one of us whenever we act on this refusal.