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# BETWEEN INTEGRATION AND REPRODUCTION SOCIAL WORK AS REFLECTED IN TALCOTT PARSONS AND KARL MARX

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## ABSTRACT

*Social work moves in the field of tension between help and domination. While Talcott Parsons describes it as a functional subsystem for the integration of individuals who deviate from the norm, Karl Marx interprets it as part of the ideological reproduction of capitalist class relations. This review systematically analyzes both social theories, transfers them to central fields of practice (SGB II, youth welfare, homeless assistance) and reflects on the ethical implications. It shows that social work is not a neutral authority, but acts at the interface of discipline and solidarity –with ambivalent effects.*

**KEYWORDS:** Social Work; Talcott Parsons; Karl Marx; social theory; Class relations; Integration; Control; Critical Social Work; Theory of the profession; Ideology critique

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Social work is a discipline in the field of tension between help and domination, between individual support and social control. While on the one hand it is regarded as a helping authority for disadvantaged population groups, it also acts as an extended hand of state institutions when it comes to controlling deviant behaviour, establishing usability on the labour market or securing social order (cf. Galuske 2013: 78; Staub-Bernasconi 2007: 184). This dual role has always led to a profound ambivalence in the professional self-image, which can find its starting point in the scientific examination of theories of society.

In this context, two classical strands of theory gain particular importance: the structural functionalism of Talcott Parsons (1951, 1971) on the one hand and the social critique of Karl Marx (1867/MEW vol. 23) on the other. While Parsons assumes that social systems are oriented towards stability, consensus and integration, Marx argues diametrically opposite by understanding society as a field of conflict between antagonistically structured classes whose relationship is determined by exploitation, alienation and structural violence (cf. Wright 2000: 21; Therborn 1980: 59). Both perspectives offer different frameworks for analysing the role of social work in modern society – either as an integrative subsystem (Parsons) or as an institutionalised reproduction of domination (Marx).

Parsonsian theory understands social work primarily as a functionary within a social system that is held together by normative consensus and role expectations. In this model, social work contributes to the integration of marginalized social groups by working on social deviance and contributing to the restoration of functional roles (Parsons 1951: 223–245; Luhmann 1984: 133). In this context, case management, youth welfare and sanction practice in SGB II appear as functional building blocks for maintaining social order (cf. Wendt 2016: 121).

Marxist theory, on the other hand, emphasizes the reproductive logic of capital and points out that institutions such as social work are by no means neutral, but part of an ideological superstructure that supports the prevailing class order (Marx & Engels 1846/MEW vol. 3: 9–72; Althusser 1970/2006: 125–136). Social work does not appear here as a place of integration, but as an element of social discipline – a kind of "repair shop" for managing the symptoms of capitalist inequality (cf. Wacquant 2009: 206; Böhnisch 2012: 47). Under conditions of precariousness, neoliberalism and compulsion to work, clients are less likely to benefit from voluntary help than to become a coercive field of state performance logic (cf. Butterwegge 2015: 94; Dörre 2009: 31).

These systematically divergent images of society – integration vs. reproduction, consensus vs. domination, order vs. conflict – generate very different perspectives on the practice of social work. The aim of this article is to systematically analyze and critically contrast these two theoretical perspectives in the light of current social conditions. In doing so, both the theoretical basic assumptions and exemplary fields of social work practice (e.g. employment promotion, youth welfare, homeless work) are used to make the structural implications and limits of both interpretive frameworks visible. At the heart of this is the thesis that social work in the current capitalist system not only organises help, but is increasingly becoming the executor of state and economic interests – be it through activation measures, controls, or the depathologisation of structural poverty (cf. Lessenich 2015: 57; Sennett 1998: 101). While Parsonsian models frame these functions as necessary for social stability, the Marxist view allows a power-analytical decoding of the disciplining logics behind the claim to "help for self-help".

This results in far-reaching ethical and professional theoretical consequences for social work, the reflection of which will be discussed in the final part of the article. For a theory of social work that is not aware of its integration into social power relations runs the risk of depoliticizing itself – and thus becoming an agent of the status quo.

## 2. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

### 2.1. TALCOTT PARSONS' STRUCTURAL-FUNCTIONALIST THEORY OF SOCIETY

Talcott Parsons (1902–1979) is one of the most influential sociologists of the 20th century. With his work *The Social System* (1951), he laid the foundation for a theory in which society is understood as a highly complex, normatively integrated system. The central assumption is that societies strive for equilibrium, and their components – including professions, roles, institutions – contribute to maintaining this equilibrium through their respective functions (Parsons 1951: 5–36).

Parsons' so-called AGILE scheme is particularly important for the understanding of social professions. It describes four functional imperatives that every social system must fulfill in order to survive in the long term:

- A (Adaptation): Ability to adapt to environmental conditions.
- G (Goal Attainment): Ability to define and pursue collective goals.
- I (Integration): Ability to ensure coherence and order within the system.
- L (Latency/Pattern Maintenance): Ability to pass on cultural values, norms, and motivations (Parsons 1971: 11–29).

In the light of this model, social work is primarily understood as an instance of integration : it fulfils functions that are essential

for social cohesion – for example, through the socialisation of children in youth welfare, through the management of deviant biographies in delinquent assistance or through interventions in the case of psychological disintegration in a psychiatric context. The aim is always to make people (re)integrable – be it into the labour market, into family roles or into normative expectations (cf. Luhmann 1984: 125; Wendt 2016: 94).

A practical example: In case management according to §16 SGB II, it is not only checked whether someone is able to work, but also whether he or she is motivated, structured and self-disciplined – i.e. whether the person is equipped with the culturally expected self-techniques of a functioning market actor. If this fit fails, social work intervenes as a supportive, but at the same time also controlling authority (cf. Kessl & Otto 2013: 88).

However, this view largely ignores structural power relations. For Parsons, conflicts appear as disturbances, not as inherent dynamics of social processes. In a functionalist manner, power is understood more as the coordination of performance than as the exercise of power (Parsons 1963: 250). This interpretation leads to a depoliticization of social institutions – including social work – by bringing their functionality to the fore without addressing their ideological dimension.

## 2.2. KARL MARX'S MATERIALIST THEORY OF SOCIETY

In contrast to this is the theory of Karl Marx (1818–1883), which understands society not as an order based on consensus, but as a historically changeable constellation of struggle between antagonistic classes. The focus is on the relationship between capital and labour, between the

bourgeoisie and the proletariat, with the relations of production forming the basis for all other social structures (Marx 1867/MEW vol. 23: 55–71).

While Parsons sees social order as functionally necessary, Marx sees it as the expression and result of prevailing conditions that are stabilized by ideology, violence, and economic coercion (Marx & Engels 1846/MEW Vol. 3: 30). Institutions such as law, schools, the media or social policy are also located in the so-called superstructure: they contribute to the legitimation and reproduction of the existing relations of production (cf. Althusser 2006: 134). In this way of thinking, social work does not appear as a neutral service to the needy, but as an instrument of securing power. It manages misery without eliminating its causes – and turns social need into an individual problem. This process is ideologically highly effective because it prevents people from understanding their situation as an expression of systemic injustice (cf. Fraser 2014: 165).

A practical example: A social worker who looks after a young man from a precarious background may help him find an apartment – but she cannot change the fact that the rental system itself is based on displacement, speculation and property logics. Their help remains selective, temporary – and ultimately system-maintaining. To put it bluntly: social work disciplines, normalises and utilises – not always voluntarily, but often structurally. In his study on urban marginality, Loïc Wacquant (2009) describes how social policy in neoliberal societies is increasingly linked to security and control policy. Social work becomes the "moral police" of the precariat (ibid.: 220).

## 2.3. BETWEEN THE POLES – CRITICISM AND ADDITIONS

The two strands of theory mark epistemologically opposing poles: Parsons reproduces a system- affirmative, stability-oriented thinking, Marx unfolds a power-critical analysis of social inequality and its reproduction. However, both approaches are not completely congruent with the current realities of social work.

Pierre Bourdieu (1983), for example, builds a bridge with the concept of symbolic capital : social work also operates with moral claims, but within a field that is structured by social power struggles. Their habitus, their language, and their practices are the expression of a symbolic order that not only reflects social differences, but also reproduces them (cf. Bourdieu 1998: 99–117). Antonio Gramsci (1971) provides a further corrective: in his concept of cultural hegemony, he shows how rule is maintained not only by force, but by consent. Social work is not only repressive, but also consensus-building – it contributes to making certain interpretations of poverty, education, upbringing or achievement appear "normal". These theoretical extensions allow for a more differentiated view: social work is neither merely a functionary of a functional system nor merely a henchman of capital. It is an ambivalent field in which help and control, solidarity and discipline, emancipation and adaptation are always intertwined (cf. Sommerfeld 2011: 63).

## 3. SOCIAL FUNCTIONS OF SOCIAL WORK IN COMPARISON

### 3.1. TALCOTT PARSONS' PERSPECTIVE: SOCIAL WORK AS A SYSTEM STABILIZER

From the perspective of structural functionalism, social work is a central component of social integration. It fulfils specific functions to absorb disturbances in the social system, to correct deviant behaviour and to maintain the normative order (Parsons 1951: 248–269). As a "professional subsystem" within the social structure, it acts in coordination with other subsystems such as education, justice or health – comparable to an organ in the organism (cf. Luhmann 1984: 145).

Parsons highlights that professions such as social work institutionalize normative expectations by modeling and reproducing certain roles. In child and youth welfare, for example, social work contributes to "repairing" familial "disturbed" socialization – not through political intervention, but through individual behavioral adaptation. This practice appears functional because it establishes conformity and systemic fit (cf. Wendt 2016: 117). A concrete example is case management in SGB II, which aims to transfer "non-employable" persons into "active participation". Social workers act as mediators between normative requirements (personal responsibility, gainful employment) and the reality of individual life (risk of poverty, educational deficits). Even if this action appears to be individually supportive at first glance, it remains stuck in the logic of a system based on productivity, self-discipline and normative agreement (cf. Kessl 2005: 212). Parsons' approach thus offers a coherent, albeit strongly normative, picture: social work is necessary because it makes deviation workable, defuses conflicts and thus enables social order. The danger of this model, however, lies in its blindness to power relations. Anyone who understands poverty, deviance or marginalisation merely as an "integration problem" fails to recognise their structural causes.

### 3.2. KARL MARX'S PERSPECTIVE: SOCIAL WORK AS A REPRODUCTION MECHANISM OF CLASS SOCIETY

In the Marxist understanding, social work fulfils a completely different function: it is part of the ideological and institutional machinery that legitimises, reproduces and masks capitalist relations of domination. While it ostensibly provides help, it contributes in the background to the maintenance of a system that systematically generates inequality and dependence (Marx & Engels 1846/MEW vol. 3: 33–43; Althusser 2006: 125–136). In this interpretation, social work takes on central tasks in the management of the "surplus population segment" – that part of the population that is not (or no longer) directly usable for the labour market (cf. Wacquant 2009: 113). Instead of understanding these people as an expression of systemic misstructuring, they are individualized and morally evaluated. They do not appear as victims, but as failures.

An example: In debt counselling, financial "irrationality", "lack of budgetary discipline" or "compulsion to consume" is often worked on – but it is rarely discussed that many clients have been systematically pushed into debt relationships: through precarious employment, zero-hour contracts, rising living costs or housing as a speculative asset. The structural dimension disappears behind the psychologizing perspective. The Marxist view makes it clear that social work does not deal with the causes of social problems, but with their effects. In this way, it prevents social protest from being articulated. This function is all the more effective the more the aid appears professional, ethical and neutral – and not as what it can be: a tool of social control in the service of capitalist reproduction (cf. Staub-Bernasconi 2007: 244).

### 3.3. THE AMBIVALENCE OF PRACTICE: BETWEEN HELP AND CONTROL

The dichotomy outlined here – Parsons as a friend of the system, Marx as a critic of the system – is analytically fruitful, but it does not capture the full complexity of social work action. In practice, social work is always both: helping and controlling, supporting and disciplining, subject-centered and system-preserving (cf. Böhnisch 2012: 41; Sommerfeld 2011: 64).

This ambivalence is particularly evident in areas such as child and youth welfare, where social workers are both confidants and guardians of child welfare endangerment. Or in homeless assistance, where support is often linked to conditions such as sobriety or willingness to perform – a practice that follows the logic of "promoting and demanding" that has become hegemonic in neoliberal welfare states (cf. Butterwegge 2015: 113). Social work thus finds itself in a structural dilemma that cannot be resolved by individual attitudes. Their social function is determined by overarching power relations, legislation and the political economy of the welfare state – and not solely by professional ethos or logic of action (cf. Kessl & Otto 2013: 132).

Table 1: Comparative Review of Theories: Parsons and Marx

Aspect	Parsons	Marx
Image of society	Order and integration	Conflict and domination
Function of Social Work	System stabilization, standard communication	Reproduction of social inequality
Perspective on clients	Deviant, to integrate	Precarious, systemically devalued
Goal	Functional Role Recovery	Avoidance of social destabilization through control
Relation to power	Power as coordination	Power as a mechanism of domination
Understanding of ethics	Neutrality, role adequacy	Ideological Critique, Unmasking of Rule
Criticism	Blind to domination	Danger of ideological narrowing

#### **4. CASE STUDIES FROM PRACTICE**

##### **4.1. LABOUR MARKET INTEGRATION IN SGB II – ACTIVATION OR DISCIPLINING?**

The basic security for jobseekers according to the Second Social Code (SGB II) is probably the most paradigmatic field in which the theories of Parsons and Marx collide. On the one hand, the system of employment promotion represents an institutionalized mechanism for the re-integration of the unemployed into the social production process – entirely in the sense of Talcott Parsons' functionalist reading. On the other hand, on closer inspection, it reveals a multitude of structural coercive dynamics that appear from a Marxist perspective as mechanisms of social control and valorization.

##### **PARSONSIAN PERSPECTIVE:**

In the terminology of the AGIL scheme, SGB II can be understood as an attempt to do justice to the imperatives of adaptation (adaptation to the market), goal attainment (achievement of acquisition goals), integration (participation in society) and latency (internalization of norms such as personal responsibility). Social work acts as an intermediate subsystem that mediates between the normative order of the gainful society and the biography of the individual (Parsons 1951: 239–244). The social worker as a case manager in a job centre assesses not only formal qualifications, but also informal skills, motivation, self-organisation and adaptability. The aim is not only to take up work, but also to internalise a habitus that conforms to work (cf. Kessl 2005: 215).

##### **MARXIST PERSPECTIVE:**

What is labeled as "help for self-help" is recognizable in the Marxist understanding as an instrument of discipline. The unemployed are forced to be employable, the help is conditioned by obligations to cooperate, sanctions and control. It is – in the sense of Wacquant (2009: 207) – an instrument of welfare state governmentality that does not fight poverty, but manages it. An example: The integration agreement is referred to as a "contract at eye level" – but from a legal point of view, it is a coercive instrument, as its rejection entails sanctions up to and including the withdrawal of benefits. Marx's category of wage dependence is extended here by a state-regulated obligation to exist, the breach of which is associated with existential consequences (cf. Dörre 2009: 29). Social work thus becomes the extended executive of the logic of exploitation: it not only mediates in the labour market, but at the same time disciplines subjects who do not (yet) find a place in the logic of the market.

##### **4.2. CHILD AND YOUTH WELFARE – PROMOTION OR REPRODUCTION?**

Another field of practice that is deeply embedded in social processes of power and standardization is child and youth welfare. Here, ideal images of "child welfare", "successful socialisation" and "educational assistance" collide with socio-structural realities such as educational inequality, milieu discrimination and institutionalised exclusion.

##### **PARSONSIAN PERSPECTIVE:**

In functionalist logic, child and youth welfare is understood as a compensatory system that corrects dysfunctional family systems, compensates for developmental deficits and enables successful socialization (Parsons 1971: 39–56). Social work helps when the family – the central socialisation system – fails and temporarily takes over its function. The aim is re-integration into the normative order, not its questioning.

A practical example is socio-pedagogical family assistance (§ 31 SGB VIII), in which social workers visit the families weekly to strengthen "parenting skills", build up household structure or improve parent-child interactions. This work is undoubtedly helpful – but at the same time, a socially coded normative family is implicitly assumed to be the target image (cf. Böhnisch 2012: 89).

##### **MARXIST PERSPECTIVE:**

The Marxist analysis points out that child and youth welfare is not neutral. It operates in the context of social inequality – and contributes to its reproduction. The families, which are often classified as "educationally disadvantaged", are not in precarious situations by chance, but are structurally disadvantaged – due to class relations, capitalist property relations, unequal educational opportunities (cf. Rehbein 2021: 114). When youth welfare intervenes, for example, in the case of "child welfare endangerment", this happens with a high concentration of cases in socially disadvantaged neighbourhoods – but rarely in rich families with dysfunctional dynamics. The Marxist reading sees a knowledge of domination at work here: social work intervenes where the class order seems to be endangered by "visible" deviation – not where silent privileges are inherited (cf. Bourdieu 1998: 118).

##### **4.3. HOMELESS ASSISTANCE – SUPPORT OR CONTROL?**

A particularly acute field for the theory-practice tension is homeless assistance. Here, questions of access, control, coercion and social exclusion are directly noticeable.

##### **PARSONSIAN PERSPECTIVE:**

Parsons would interpret homelessness as the result of dysfunctional adaptation and integration. Social work fulfils a stabilising



function here by maintaining a certain system commitment through low-threshold offers (e.g. emergency shelters, counselling centres, day care centres). The aim is to (re)establish social connectivity – be it by taking up work, addiction treatment or finding accommodation (Parsons 1951: 255).

### **MARXIST PERSPECTIVE:**

The Marxist perspective recognizes in homeless assistance a form of institutionalized control of the marginalized. It manages exclusion instead of overcoming it. Often, the support is conditional: only those who are "willing to cooperate" have access to services. Those affected must prove that they are "willing to work", "willing to change" or "clean" – otherwise they will be left behind in the grey area of informal help (cf. Wacquant 2009: 226). Social work here not only manages poverty, but also selects according to norms and behavior. Housing is not treated as a right, but as a reward for adaptation. Marx's theory of class rule becomes concrete here: aid becomes a commodity, performance a condition for human dignity.

## **5. THEORETICAL AND ETHICAL IMPLICATIONS**

Social work finds itself in a complex field of tension between normative ethics, professional practice and structural constraints. This field of tension cannot be adequately grasped without explicitly reflecting on the basic assumptions of social theory under which social practice takes place. The examination of Talcott Parsons and Karl Marx has shown that, depending on the theoretical frame of reference, social work appears either as a systemic integration achievement (Parsons) or as a disciplining institution for the reproduction of class relations (Marx). Both perspectives raise fundamental questions about the ethics and self-positioning of the profession.

### **5.1. BETWEEN AUXILIARY PROFESSION AND AGENT OF DOMINATION**

In the discourse of professional sociology, social work is often located as a semi-professional activity – with a paradoxical double orientation: On the one hand, it is oriented towards the model of individual help, care and participation. On the other hand, it operates under a state mandate, often in a coercive context, and is thereby integrated into the disciplining regime of welfare state rationality (cf. Eberle & Milotay 2007: 93; Galuske 2013: 88). This ambivalence is often described in professional theory as a "double function" : help and control, support and surveillance, proximity and distance (cf. Müller 2010: 41). However, especially from a Marxist perspective, it becomes clear that this duality does not merely refer to situational conflicts of action, but to a structural function of social work in late capitalism: it is supposed to manage social crises, secure legitimacy and depoliticize poverty (cf. Lessenich 2015: 71). Social work ethics is often overloaded with norms – idealistically charged by human rights discourses, empowerment concepts or the emphasis on "helping at eye level". However, these ethical ideals regularly come up against systemic limits: sanctions, compulsory accommodation, performance conditions and institutional objectives often contradict an ethics aimed at autonomy and subject orientation (cf. Staub- Bernasconi 2007: 183; Kleibl et al. 2019: 134).

### **5.2. ETHICS IN THE CONTEXT OF STRUCTURAL VIOLENCE**

From a Marxist perspective, ethical action in social work is not simply a question of individual attitude or professional values. Rather, ethics itself is socially situated – integrated into a structure that not only presupposes inequality, but produces it. The philosopher Emmanuel Levinas (1993) emphasized that ethics begins with the "face of the other". But what if this face appears in a system that recognizes its dignity only under the condition of usability? If help is conditioned – to sobriety, participation, adaptation – the question arises as to whether it can still be called moral. An ethics that does not reflect these conditions runs the risk of becoming functionalist – i.e. the vicarious agent of systemic logics (cf. Fraser 2014: 171). The claim to protect human dignity then becomes a façade behind which the administrative administration of people in a "state of unworthiness" is hidden. The theory of structural violence (Galtung 1969) is helpful in this context: it makes it clear that not only direct coercion, but also institutionalized inequality – e.g., through underfunded education, limited access to health care, or controlled support services – are forms of violence. Social work moves in the midst of such structures without being able to fully control them.

### **5.3. EMANCIPATION AS A PROFESSIONAL CLAIM?**

In the tradition of critical social work, it is therefore demanded that the profession not only reflects on its role inherent in the system, but actively politicizes it (cf. Hyslop 2012; Kleibl et al. 2019). Silvia Staub-Bernasconi (2007) argues that social work can only remain credible as a human rights profession if it recognizes social inequality as structurally caused – and turns against these structures. In concrete terms, this means:

- Education about systemic causes of individual emergencies,
- Solidarity with those affected, also against government requirements,
- Advocacy for structural changes,
- Reflection on one's own participation in power processes.

For example, a social worker who works with homeless people can either accompany reintegration measures – or advocate for a structural right to housing. The two paths are not mutually exclusive, but they mark ethical paths with very different social

implications.

#### 5.4. BETWEEN AGENCY AND COMPLICITY

The question remains: Can social work free itself from its structural entanglement – or does it necessarily remain an accomplice of the system that it claims to overcome at the same time? The answer to this is not clear. Rather, what is needed is a professional self-image that does not take refuge in normative purity, but acknowledges the ambivalence of practice – without submitting to it (cf. Sommerfeld 2011: 66). Such a self-image would not be affirmative, but reflexive: it would recognize its own position in the power structure, critically address institutional constraints and use room for manoeuvre for solidarity in both small and large ways (cf. Schrödter 2015: 109). The ethics of social work then does not begin with idealistic postulates, but with the radical question of its social role: stabilizer or transformer?

#### 6. DISCUSSION AND SYNTHESIS

The juxtaposition of Talcott Parsons and Karl Marx reveals two diametrically opposed views of society – and thus also of the role of social work. While Parsons presents a stability-oriented theory that understands social work as a functional reaction to individual deviation, Marx exposes social services as instruments of class reproduction and legitimation production within capitalist power relations. Both perspectives set different normative premises and describe different images of society – one harmonizing, the other conflict-theoretical.

The Parsonsian view offers a consistent model for a normatively regulated society in which social work acts as a mediator between the individual and the system. She explains how stability and order are maintained through institutionalized role expectations. However, it remains blind to structural violence, power asymmetries, and systemic inequality – phenomena that are central to the Marxist perspective. Marx makes it clear that many social problems are not individual aberrations, but products of capitalist dynamics – for example, through the logic of exploitation, the system of property and relations of exploitation. The ambivalence that can be observed in practice – between help and control, subject support and system adaptation – cannot therefore be explained monocausally. Rather, social work must be understood as an ambivalent field in which contradictory requirements overlap: on the one hand, it is professionally and ethically oriented, and on the other hand, it is embedded in institutional and political structures that are not neutral.

Particularly in fields such as employment promotion, homeless assistance or youth welfare, it becomes apparent how closely support services are linked to normatively defined behavioural requirements. Anyone who does not "cooperate" will be sanctioned or expelled. What appears to be care can turn out to be a sanctioning intervention. Help thus becomes a condition – and not infrequently a form of subtle control. In this tension, social work can only remain professionally credible if it recognizes and reflects on its own entanglement in power relations. Neither the functionalist model of harmony nor a purely antagonistic concept of domination are sufficient to grasp the complex reality. What is needed is a reflexive social work that takes into account both structural conditions and individual possibilities for action – and constantly questions its practice in this field of tension. Social work is not a neutral profession, but a social form of practice that stands in political-economic power relations. It can stabilize or irritate, manage or change – depending on whether it sees itself as an executive organ of the system or as a critical instance of its time.

#### CONCLUSION

Social work stands between system preservation and social criticism. Talcott Parsons shows its function in stabilizing social order, Karl Marx exposes it as part of capitalist reproduction mechanisms. Both perspectives are necessary in order to understand the ambivalence of social work practice. Because social work helps – but it also controls. It empowers individuals – and at the same time manages social inequality. Her future lies in the conscious reflection of this dual role and in the decision as to whether she sees herself as a henchman of existing conditions or as a co-creative force for social change.

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