In his study on *Slavery and Social Death*, Patterson overcomes the view of slavery as a static relationship based on personal domination of a powerful master over a passive and powerless slave. Instead, he examines the phenomenon as a broader social process. According to his definition, the institution of slavery includes three major constitutive elements: (1) On the social level, the slave is seen as a “social nonperson” (p. 5) who exists merely through his/her master. (2) On the cultural level, the slave is a socially dead person: by means of “natal alienation” all his/her former social bonds are cut and the slave is only attached to his/her master. Connected to these first elements is another important feature of slavery, the “fact that the slave could not be a proprietor: he or she was, quintessentially, a property-less person” (p. 182). (3) On the sociopsychological level, the status of the slave is characterized by dishonor as a general condition – the Sambo stereotype in the US South being one example of how this dishonored status is reproduced and communicated by symbols and images. Dishonor of the slave thereby comes along with increased honor of the master. In fact, Patterson argues that the slaves’ honorific value rather than their economic productivity was the main purpose for maintenance of the institution in many slaveholding societies – a claim that is supported by the direct causal link between slavery and a timocratic character and culture.

This general dishonor however, is not internalized by the slaves themselves. Instead, a dialectic relationship develops between their struggle for recognition and dignity and the masters’ permanent promise for redemption. Consequently, the possibility of manumission – though theoretically incompatible with the very concept of slavery – is an important part of the whole institution. By promising exactly what has been denied, manumission is used as a motivating force and slavery becomes a “self-correcting institution” (p. 101).

Unlike earlier studies of slavery, Patterson does not merely describe the phenomenon in legal terms but shows that slavery is a social process that has been inherent to many cultures. While the US can be considered the “last and most perfectly articulated slave culture since the fall of the Roman Empire” (p. 76), they are far from being the only or most important
slaveholding society. Part II of *Slavery and Social Death* therefore contains a comparative analysis of different slaveholding societies. It becomes clear that under different societal and historical circumstances the institutional processes are differently embodied. Influential factors thereby include the society’s mode of subsistence and the kind of work the slaves are used for as well as the personality of the slave, for Patterson argues against the notion of the slave as a merely passive victim. Various different means of enslavement, acquisition and trade of enslaved persons exist, and so do explanations and practices of manumission and the slaves’ living conditions. As a universal phenomenon however, it always has as its basic mechanism the absence of power and honor on behalf of the slave.

By not relying on traditional views on slavery and on ‘obvious’ features that determine membership, e.g. color of skin, Patterson manages to go beyond traditional studies on the subject. Due to his broader understanding of slavery as most other scholars, Patterson is able to explain slavery as one basic social process rather than as a societal anomaly. Neither power nor slavery can therefore be understood as “static institution[s]” (p. 248) but have to be seen as social processes. Unlike most other scholars, he comes to interpret slavery as an instable “relation of domination rather than as a category of legal thought” (p. 334).

Regarding a sociology of membership, one aspect that remains important for me is the acceptance of another group’s superiority by a subordinate group. According to Patterson, “nothing more confirmend the loyal slaves’ acceptance of the condition of slavery and their own enslavement to the master than their willingness to own slaves themselves” (p. 184). How come that even if the inequal character of the relationship between groups is obvious, members of the disadvantaged group merely try to enhance their own individual status instead of questioning this underlying condition? Why are power relationships and oppression of one group by another – with slavery as one example – conceived of as “part of the natural order of things” (p. 184) rather than as subject to change? And is this phenomenon a general condition within all societies, or have there been disadvantaged groups that challenged the whole structure as inherent to the social system?