



# Globalization, Degradation and the Dynamics of Humiliation

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**abstract:** Our analysis of how sociologists should respond to social degradation should take into account the way humiliation drives those who have suffered degradation to anger and action on their own account. Cycles of fear, revenge and victimization are liable to result from the moments of defeat, relegation and exclusion brought by humiliation processes. Globalization has produced these conditions not simply through the logic of the market but also through the residual strength of the imperial impulse and the increasing pervasiveness of the anomic cosmopolitan condition. Sociologists should bring their knowledge of the dynamics of humiliation into their creative exchanges with those experiencing social degradation.

**keywords:** action ♦ anger ♦ fear ♦ humiliation ♦ revenge ♦ social degradation ♦ victimization

## Degradation

The question posed is what can we do about the degradation of social existence in our globalizing world? Degradation, in other words, being forcibly pushed down into a lower grade of existence, is one form of humiliation. Other forms of humiliation include being outrageously entrapped, enslaved, excluded, neglected or killed.

A widespread sense of humiliation is one result of two overlapping world-historical processes. One is the slow, nearly century-long collapse of the great European land- and sea-borne empires: beginning with the American defeat of the Spanish navy in 1898 and ending with the collapse of the Soviet Union after 1989. This process released conquered peoples from their colonial captivity, from Ireland to India and beyond. They still feel their wounds, but now they are able to express their resentment more

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openly. Those who lost their colonial 'possessions' also feel resentful, though it is not 'politically correct' for them to say so openly.

The other process is the long battle to fill the global space vacated by the European empires. Lenin and Hitler, two early contenders in this battle, both knew how to work upon the sense of resentment their potential followers felt against their old political masters. In this respect, they were following the precedent already set by the Americans. The Statue of Liberty, erected in 1886, advertised the United States as a place of refuge and promise for the world's wretched refuse.

Initially, all contenders in this battle for the hearts and minds of the world's oppressed turned their fire upon European imperialists, undermining their political authority. Soon, they were directing their contempt against each other. During the 20th century, the world was preoccupied with the three-way struggle between communism, capitalism and fascism. That struggle is not yet over. However, two things have happened. First, all forms of political authority have been weakened. Second, the fires of humiliation and resentment have been thoroughly stoked up and are now blazing merrily.

### **Humiliation, Anger and Action**

Degradation is a process, not just a condition. It is a key part of the dynamics of humiliation, resentment and response currently shaping our world.

Degradation is the middle 'moment' in a sequence that encompasses the range of humiliating experiences. The first moment is defeat, conquest and partial disablement (pacification, reduction of autonomy). The defeated are forced into their lowly place within a new social hierarchy of 'noble' people (those who won) and 'base' people (those who lost). This is the humiliation of those who once were free and independent but who became 'base' and subservient, subject to the impositions of upstart masters, colonial or otherwise, that had not been there before.

The second moment of humiliation is relegation, being pushed downwards within the social hierarchy of respectability and worth; in other words, degradation. This is the main form in which humiliation is experienced these days and there are many examples. Workers forced out of steady jobs into casual employment; local traders reduced in circumstances by the arrival of supermarkets; and aspiring university graduates pushed down into a lifetime of causal and menial work in big cities on every continent: these and many others belong to the army of the degraded, those who remember better, brighter times before they were humiliated.

The final moment of humiliation is expulsion or exclusion from 'proper' society: being thrown into jail 'because' (or at least so it seems)

you are poor and/or black; or put into detention or denied entry 'because' (or at least so it seems) you are Islamic and have a 'suspicious' name; or beaten or killed because you belong to the 'wrong' ethnic, national or religious group.

What is to be done? A key fact is that humiliation is, by definition 'unacceptable' even if those who suffer it are forced to acquiesce and conform, temporarily at least. Acquiescence is accompanied by anger, even if that anger takes the muted form of resentment. Anger is troubling and disruptive to those who experience it. It demands action to ease the situation.

In fact, whenever there is humiliation, action is already taking place. Those who are humiliated continue to be agents, however reduced. They 'do' something in the face of the unacceptable. Some try to change the social structures and processes that are damaging them. Others try to change themselves, individually and collectively.

There are at least two ways of changing the self or one's group when faced with humiliation. In both cases, the object is to reduce the huge discrepancy between the victims' self-perception and the message about 'who they are' embodied in the way they are treated. This discrepancy is at the core of humiliation's unacceptability to the victim. The tormenters ask, with contempt, 'who do you think you are?'. The victims ask, with outrage, 'don't you know who we are?'.

Those suffering from humiliation may act upon their own perceptions and feelings, adapting their perceptions of 'who they are' and their patterns of thought and behaviour so they conform more closely to the views of those causing them to suffer. If this self-adaptation is 'successful', three things follow: humiliation turns into shame, the suffering becomes a 'just' punishment and the prospect of forgiveness and even reward for successful adaptation comes into view. That is, more or less, the strategy offered by those who imposed the so-called Washington Consensus onto unwilling governments in Africa, Latin America and parts of Asia.

Alternatively, those who have been humiliated may equip themselves with the skills, knowledge and muscle power needed to change the social structures and processes that are degrading them. This was Nelson Mandela's message to his followers at Soweto in February 1990 following his release from prison. He told them to stop taking revenge on their enemies, go back to work and school, maintain discipline and build effective political organizations.

In fact, the actions of the displaced and excluded are profoundly shaping our globalizing world. A large scope for political initiative lies in the hands of the resentful in Eurasia, Africa and America, North and South. Not just terrorists, but a multitude of men and women within the urban populations from which they spring.

## Reluctance at the Top, Resentment Below

Why is this so? The underlying reason is that our globalizing world has no effective global political authority. It lacks the means of enforcing human rights and social justice. The US no longer has a strong desire to act as global monarch, if it ever did.

The US government is equipped with a global panopticon, watching us all, and impressive military resources. However, its basic political self-image is the pioneers' wagon train, drawn into a circle with sentries on constant guard through the night, weapons at the ready. This is the posture of the acquisitive settler, taking what they can while the going is good, moving on or moving away when the going is bad.

This is not the posture of the proud overlord, immovably confident in his own role as a secular god. Those who see America in this way are making the mistake of transposing Eurasian traditions rooted in the Roman and Chinese empires onto an overgrown settler society that wishes above all to escape the 'old world' where those traditions flourished. In fact, the American state is either unwilling or incapable of filling the gap left by the European imperial system that finally collapsed in 1989. Washington is not going to be the world's policeman, teacher or social worker.

Neoliberalism has had two lasting negative successes, in the West at least. It has undermined the state and the public sphere; and it has fostered a political climate in which people under the age of 40 find it difficult to think beyond individualism. Meanwhile, the West is divided and becoming less dominant globally. The resentment produced by colonialism and economic exploitation continues to be very strongly felt but the capacity of states to either mollify or repress this resentment has weakened. In these circumstances, the dynamics of humiliation have plenty of room to strengthen and work themselves out with relatively little hindrance.

## A Complex and Unstable World

The world is both complex and unstable. Our 'degraded' social existence is not the result of just one aspect of globalization, namely marketization (or *the logic of the market*), however loudly its importance is proclaimed both by business interests and their ideological opponents. Equally significant in producing humiliation are two other aspects of globalization.

One is *the imperial impulse*, whose 'purest' expression in modern times is not capitalist greed but politicized fear and anger expressed in a fundamentalist drive to dominate or destroy. The other is the *cosmopolitan condition*, that anomic mixing of cultures and creeds filling the world's cities with crowds of displaced people searching for order, meaning and someone or something to blame for their discontent.

In fact, the dynamics of humiliation interweave not only with globalization but also with the human rights revolution. When honour rules, humiliation is a fact of life like the weather. By contrast, the spread of the idea of human rights turns many forms of degradation that were previously accepted as natural and normal into avoidable and illegitimate acts. Resentment intensifies as a consequence, even if the legal and political machinery to enforce human rights remains underdeveloped, especially, but not only, at the global level.

The dynamics of humiliation (expressing the resentment produced by displacement and exclusion), globalization (shaped by the imperial impulse, the cosmopolitan condition and the logic of the market) and the human rights revolution (struggling against the still-resilient honour code) all weave around and through each other in a helix-like fashion. Each of these processes works upon the others. They interpenetrate in ways we do not yet fully understand.

### **Four Types of Sociologist**

What outcomes will the triple helix of humiliation, globalization and human rights produce? What effects will they have upon the current degradation of social existence in our globalizing world? How should sociologists respond?

Michael Burawoy has his own answer to this question, a specific way of reacting to the plight of groups experiencing degradation. He argues that the time has come for a strengthening of public sociology. In fact, Burawoy identifies four main types of sociologist:

- *public sociologists*, who, in their organic (as opposed to traditional) form, engage in creative two-way dialogue with specific local publics (mainly subordinate or subaltern groups) whose members are actively opposed to the mainstream values that legitimate their degradation;
- *policy sociologists*, who operate on the basis that the state can be mobilized to make markets less exploitative and, by implication, social existence less degrading;
- *professional sociologists*, who regard detachment from society and politics as essential to doing good social science and presenting objective findings; and
- *critical sociologists*, who complain that this professional stance is a self-deceiving sham, disguising or ignoring the distorting effect of self-serving values and interests.

## Sociology and Humiliation

Burawoy recommends the approach taken by the organic public sociologist. In this role he has spent considerable time working on factory shopfloors from Chicago to Syktyvkar (Russia). He has educated himself about workers and managers the hard way. Recalling these times, he told *The Village Voice* in 2001: 'It's good to be humiliated from time to time. . . . It's quite healthy.'<sup>1</sup>

Burawoy is, of course, right. Experiencing humiliation in the course of this kind of research can do good in some ways: for example, by stopping the researcher from 'getting above himself' or thinking that he was somehow protected from the threats endemic in his situation, and by helping to create solidarity with other workers who had suffered similar experiences. However, there is another point to make.

If a sociologist engaged in participant observation experiences humiliation as a result of sharing the life and social location of a particular group, this fact may allow the researcher to *take away* from that situation new insights into the group's code of values, sense of justice and world view. It may also show the researcher that specific situations and events he or she may not have thought about have the potential to inflict humiliation.

However, the sociologist should also *bring into* that situation a broader understanding of the dynamics of humiliation, and an overall picture of the ways in which individuals, groups or whole societies might deal with their anger and resentment. In the following sections I go on to give a brief outline of this broader picture as I see it.

### Four Ways to be Humiliated

The essence of humiliation is forced acquiescence in unacceptable actions or events that displace or exclude you from what you understand is your rightful place in the group, network or hierarchy to which you feel you rightfully belong. It entails a radical reduction in one or more of the following: your freedom, your capacity to exercise agency, your security and the respectful recognition you expect to receive from others.

Forced acquiescence in something unacceptable is an unstable and uncomfortable situation. This is especially so when it is accompanied by anger or resentment that is impossible to either express openly or conceal completely.

This kind of acquiescence can only be a half-way house en route to a more stable response. It is a way of providing emergency first aid to diminish pain and discomfort.

One quick way of diminishing pain, the pain brought by opposition, is passive *surrender*. A more active approach is to experiment with the mental

acts required to enact *conformity* with your oppressor's expectations about how you, the humiliated one, should think of yourself.

Another form of acquiescence in humiliation is *separation*, splitting yourself into an inner and an outer self, protecting the inner self from the deeper effects of humiliation so that it can deal with the challenge of escaping from or rejecting it. Finally, there is *reversal*, turning your wounds into weapons, defiantly wearing with pride the supposedly demeaning label you have been given, or cleverly playing the politics of victimhood.

### Three Ways to Respond

Each of the forms of emergency first aid available within the half-way house of forced acquiescence points towards more stable responses to humiliation. Surrender and conformity lead towards acceptance. Separation leads towards escape or rejection. Reversal is en route to rejection.

Escapees from humiliation may feel reborn but, at the same time, wounded, sensitive and chronically afraid. They often seek a protected special place of their own but find it difficult to trust their neighbours. They are liable to fall into a *fear cycle*, involving repeated, pre-emptive attacks against real or imagined dangers, inciting attacks against themselves in return.

The strategy of acceptance means identifying with the values of the humiliating party. For example, the humiliated party might take the role of the shamed penitent. If this works, there are two rewards: forgiveness by the dominant group or individual; and integration within the group or hierarchy over which they rule. But if the victims are being tormented not for what they do but for who they are (e.g. female, black or Muslim), then their submissiveness and self-blame will merely confirm the abusers' perception of their unworthiness. The result is likely to be a *victimization cycle* in which submission is followed by further punishment.

Finally, there is rejection, which may involve either attempted resistance, which limits damage to the threatened party, or the search for revenge, which is intended to damage one's tormentor, either materially or symbolically. In some cases, searching for revenge may undermine the strategy of resistance. That was the underlying point of Mandela's Soweto speech, quoted earlier. Revenge is an idea rooted in the honour code, which judges a person or group on its capacity not only to impose and resist humiliation but also to exact revenge by repaying humiliation with more humiliation, this time turning the perpetrator into the victim.

This may lead towards the *revenge cycle* so familiar in honour societies. Such cycles often illustrate the revenge paradox, which is that many of those who claim that they wish to see their enemy destroyed also wish to keep that

enemy in existence, as a justification for their own violent activities and the world view that informs them.

Cycles of fear, victimization and revenge are not predestined to follow from the responses of attempted escape, acceptance and resistance. However, when they do, humiliation is perpetuated, often in a context of violent destruction. Preventing or overcoming such humiliation cycles is a worthy objective, one to which sociologists should be able to contribute. How should they do this?

### What is to be Done?

*Public sociologists* who engage with groups that are experiencing social degradation or other aspects of humiliation should bring with them (and later add to) the knowledge we are developing about the dynamics of humiliation.

The only way to develop this knowledge further is by applying the whole range of comparative, historical, micro and macro approaches available to *professional sociologists*.

Preventing or overcoming cycles of fear, victimization and revenge may often involve the intervention (or sympathetic involvement) of third parties, in many cases backed by state power.

It is preferable that the *policy sociologists* who advise these third parties are familiar with the knowledge and insights about humiliation provided by public sociologists and professional sociologists. All three types of sociologist should take heed of the warnings against self-deception issued by *critical sociologists*.

### Notes

The case made in this article is a development of part of the argument in Smith (2006). See also [www.globalhelix.org](http://www.globalhelix.org)

1. Quoted in the last few lines of Jeff Byles (2001).

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**Biographical Note:** Dennis Smith's most recent publication is *Globalization: The Hidden Agenda* (Polity Press, 2006). He is professor of sociology and head of the Social Sciences Department at Loughborough University, UK. He has also written books on subjects such as the rise of historical sociology, Barrington Moore, Norbert Elias, the Chicago School of Sociology, Zygmunt Bauman, theories of capitalist democracy from Tocqueville to the present, and a comparative study of Birmingham and Sheffield between 1830 and 1914. He is editor of *Current Sociology*.

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