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Abstract. *Humiliation is both an emotional state and the social situation that produces it as well. This paper inquires into both dimensions, departing from Georg Simmel's perspective and questions in his sociology of emotions, especially his thoughts on shame. Based on historical cases and literary examples, the paper analyzes humiliation as a composite emotional state (mixture of shame, wrath and sadness), and the distinctive features of it as a «form» of interaction. Regarding the latter, it is highlighted (a) its relational character, (b) the realization of a type of action whose purpose is degrading, (c) a representation of human value which is injured precisely by that action, and usually (d) its public character. It is warned about the main effects that humiliation may have at the subjective (resentment and thirst for revenge) and at the social level (increase of conflict, maintenance or instauration of an asymmetrical balance of forces, divisive effect and social stigmatization). In view of such negative consequences, the essay concludes by considering the main ways in which humiliation could be limited in our social life.*

The Kunstmuseum Basel exhibits a drawing by Hans Holbein that stands out for the pathetic nature of its motif. A man trying to mount his steed in the middle of a crowd appears in it. There is nothing extraordinary up to here, but at the bottom the image shows an old man lying on the ground, on all fours. With a pitiful gesture, this old man looks as the rider poses his foot on his back to help himself ride the horse. With hard strokes Holbein embodied in 1521 an event allegedly occurred more than twelve centuries earlier: Valerian's humiliation at the hands of Shapur I. It is said that the Roman emperor, taken as a prisoner, was used by the Persian king as a bench to mount his horse. With such gesture, Shapur showed his superiority, while lowering the highest dignitary of the Roman Empire to the unspeakable.

Humiliation dyes like a great stain human history. Its ubiquitous presence leaves no scope untouched. In the political field, in international relations, in the religious domain and certainly also in everyday life, individuals and communities have denigrated each other until they are fed up. Therefore, it is striking that it has not been until very recently that social sciences have addressed this issue. Undoubtedly, it has been psychology that has shown the greatest effort in researching the motivations and psychosocial effects of humiliation (Elshout et al., 2016; Klein, 1991; Hartling, Luchetta, 1999; Statman, 2000). On the other hand, international relations scholars have drawn attention to the perverse dynamics that it can trigger within and among national states (Lindner, 2006; Badie, 2017).[1] Historiography has tried to trace the historical development and the various cultural manifestations of humiliation (Miller, 1993; Frevert, 2017). The same applies to philosophy, whose conceptual and ethical reflection has problematized the link between humiliation, recognition and human dignity (Hilgendorf, 2011; Kaufmann et al., 2011). Despite the valuable but few exceptions (Schützeichel, 2019), there is not much that sociology seems to have contributed so far. For this reason, this essay seeks to contribute to the reflection on this dark emotion, its conditions of possibility and the effects that it can cause on a social level. The most useful way to do it is from a relational perspective (Cantó-Mila, 2016), whose fundamental lines were originally drawn by Georg Simmel (1858-1918). I start then with a very brief presentation of his sociology of emotions, especially his study of shame. This will serve as theoretical and practical guidance in our inquiry of humiliation.

[1] In this field there are also multiple risks of falling into compositional fallacies, blaming for the same kind of emotion entire states and regions. Such is one of the major mistakes of the book by Moïsie (2009), especially pp. 93-138.

1. Emotions and Shame in Simmel's Sociology

In the field of sociology of emotions prevails a consensus in regards to considering Georg Simmel as one of his most important precursors (Gerhards, 1988; Flam, 2002). Yet, this author never came up with a systematic theory in this respect. This certainly was not his intention, since he didn't even bother to define what he understood by «emotion». And still such an opinion about his significance is neither paradoxical nor free. Through very diverse and original essays, Simmel managed to capture the essentials of relevant emotions as shame, gratitude, love and trust. It is true that his observations do not usually derive from a strict empirical foundation and that his conclusions are sometimes debatable. Yet, it is not the answers but above all the perspective and the kind of questions what we are interested in retrieving from Simmel. Such was basically his pedagogical intention by the way: to stimulate in others incessant questioning about their own reality (Vernik, 2009).

Simmel's questioning about emotions can be summarized in two fundamental questions. In the first place, how is it that the multiple interactions that constitute our social life can generate certain kind of emotions? Here, the fundamental question revolves around the social conditioning of our ways of feeling. Then, emotions are a result, like what in a certain type of research is usually called «dependent variable». The second question is, how do certain emotions in turn influence our social life? In this case, the question points in the opposite direction. It asks about the effects that emotions may have on our life in society. So, emotions are not treated as a result, but as a cause, an «independent variable» to continue with that vocabulary (Gerhards, von Scheve, 2018). Simmel himself would have preferred to talk about «secondary emotions» and «primary emotions». But such designation might cause confusion since it could lead to the impression that these are two different objects or that there is some kind of primacy between them. The truth is that it is one and the same object but considered from two different and complementary perspectives. The

distinction is not ontological, but methodological. It depends on our knowledge interest.

This inquiry of emotions is also marked by two fundamental features of Simmel's sociology. It is, first, the already mentioned relational perspective (Ziemann, 2018). Simmel's starting point is not the isolated individual, nor the hypostasized society. Neither psychological atomism, nor sociologism. His basic sociological unit is interactions or reciprocal actions (*Wechselwirkungen*) (Häussling, 2018). What one does, feels or expects has an effect on what another does, feels or expects. The sum of the thousands and millions of reciprocal effects among human beings, of their doing and suffering, is what we call «society». It is not one thing, much less static. Society is a unit of interactions characterized by constant and permanent flow. It is a network of relationships that are tied and untied and tied again. This relational perspective seeks then to «decompose the individual and substantial into reciprocal actions» (Simmel, 1992[1908]: 14, own translation).[2]

Second, Simmel's is fundamentally a «pure or formal sociology». Influenced by the Kantian distinction between «content» and «form», he seeks to apply this new type of scientific abstraction to the study of social reality. It is not primarily the reasons or particular purposes, in short the «contents», but the varied «forms» of their social realization what interests Simmel the most. The various configurations that our being assumes with others, for others or against others constitute the focus of attention of his sociology. But even if the emphasis is on the «forms» of sociation, it should not be forgotten that this is an analytical distinction, not an ontological one. According to Simmel, these are relative terms, because «what, in a certain relationship and seen from above, is presented as a form, in

[2] The original quote says: «das Einzelne und Substanzielle in Wechselwirkungen aufzulösen».

another relationship and seen from below, has to be considered as content» (Simmel, 1992[1908]: 492, own translation).[3]

The previous considerations may sound somewhat abstract. It is therefore appropriate to stop for a moment in the exemplary simmelian study of a particular emotion: shame. Though it was originally written as a review article and despite its misleading title, «On the Psychology of Shame» (Simmel, 2000[1900]), tries to reveal the social conditions that are the base of the feeling of shame (*Schamgefühl*). It is not an easy task since an overwhelming multiplicity of situations seems to produce the emotional reaction in question. From a slightly messy suit to the confession of a serious ethical fault. Sometimes, at first sight, some situations seem not to be related. But this does not discourage Simmel. Beneath the vast variety of circumstances, he observes three fundamental elements. Formally speaking, every situation of shame implies, in the first place, an accentuation of the self (*Ichgefühl*) (Simmel, 2000[1900]: 435). This is -so to speak- brought to the consciousness due to the attention received from other(s). It is not just a mere neutral awareness, but shame implies, in second place, a negative assessment of that same self (Simmel, 2000[1900]: 435). Such devaluation is due, thirdly, to the violation of some norm (ethical, aesthetic or any other type) to which the individual attaches (Simmel, 2000[1900]: 435). This awareness of the deviation of one's actual behavior from the one expected by others is a necessary but not sufficient condition for all feelings of shame.

It becomes clear why the already mentioned heterogeneity of circumstances. When changing historically and culturally the normative frameworks, expectations and ideals that guide individual's interactions, it also varies that whose deviation could generate the feeling of shame to which it should be added a differentiated sensitivity and adherence to norms based on status

[3] The original quote says: «so daß ebendasselbe, was in irgendeiner Beziehung, gleichsam von oben gesehen, als Form auftritt, in einer andern, von unten gesehen, als Inhalt bezeichnet werden muß.»

and positions in the social structure within the same group (Neckel, 1991).

But that is not all. The variability of feelings cannot be limited to the usual terms of historicists, Marxists or structuralists. Simmel considers two more sociological factors whose modification has effects on the form and intensity of shame. On the one hand, the level of individuality matters because if one acts as part of a collective, the degree of responsibility within that group tends to be diluted (Simmel, 2000[1900]: 438). The possibility of being embarrassed is mitigated by the socialization of the transgression. It is not just that the individual hides behind the group, but he loses -according to Simmel- his discernment as well: «the crowd does not lie or conceal, and it is precisely because of this state of mind that it lacks any sense of responsibility» (Simmel, 1999[1917], own translation).[4] On the other hand, social distance also matters, because depending on the closeness and familiarity we have to those with whom we interact, our feeling of shame also varies (Simmel, 2000[1900]: 438). This emotion is particularly favored by what Simmel calls «medium distance». The intensity of shame decreases as we find ourselves among close friends or with complete strangers who we will never see again.

The level of individuality and social distance, two typically simmelian factors influence the form and intensity of shame. These modifications of feeling might surely be completed even with the consideration of other sociological factors. But instead of continuing with the inquiry of the causes and conditions of shame, it is worth looking at its effects. The question now is what effect shame can have over the constellations of relationships and social interactions. In general, Simmel's response points to a positive and stabilizing effect of shame on the social fabric. When being embarrassed, the individual shows in some way to others that

[4] The original quote says: «die Menge lügt nicht und heuchelt nicht. Freilich fehlt ihr aus der gleichen seelischen Verfassung heraus im allgemeinen auch jedes Bewusstsein von Verantwortung.»

he/she recognizes the transgressed norm. This indicates a willingness to correct his/her behavior in the future. There is actually no guarantee for it, but the embarrassment awakes at least such expectation in others. Whether the maintenance of the normative order which mediates social interactions, should or should not be considered a positive effect is a matter more than debatable. For the scope of this paper however, I would rather use the questions raised above in order to inquire into a dark emotion whose effects could hardly be considered positive: humiliation.

2. Humiliation as Emotion

Humiliation is both an emotional state and the social situation that causes it. Having this semantic duality in mind from the beginning helps to avoid the usual confusion about it. In a later section, we will talk about the structural features of humiliation as a form of interaction. For now, it is sufficient to mention that it involves a social actor (individual or group) whose action has an effect on another that is interpreted by him/her as damaging his/her own worth, honor or dignity. The result, and that is what here matters, is a painful emotional experience articulated around the sensation of diminishment and debasement. Whoever is humiliated feels the contempt and undervaluation of the other to his/her own being. It is not a pleasant feeling at all, especially when it occurs in the presence of others. Hence, the amalgamation of those other sensations and feelings during and immediately after the degrading episode.

Humiliation is a compound emotional state. It does not constitute a distinct and independent emotion in its own, and it is neither defined by a single feature or element. It rather combines in a unit of variable intensity different emotions and sensations, all of them of a somber nature. Although confusingly intertwined in the

subjective experience, there are three major components of humiliation: shame, anger and sadness.[5]

Shame is what the person feels especially in front of others. Being object of denigration and being at the same time aware that other people is looking his/her vulnerable situation is embarrassing. The person blushes and an intense desire to flee and disappear from the sight of others invades him/her immediately. What is most important however is that this emotion that Simmel believed was founded ultimately on the violation of a norm or the discrepancy with respect to one's own ideal self is, in this case, originated in other person's action. This other person is the responsible for finding out and exhibiting the individual's shortcomings in one and the same demeaning act.

The embarrassing situation not only causes shame and a desire to flee, but also *wrath* shows up just as an emotional reaction against the aggressor. The fact that someone else is responsible for publicly revealing the shortfalls of the person also generates anger. Later, there might be resentment and thirst for revenge, but at the moment and while the humiliating situation lasts, the aggrieved person will be overwhelmed by a hostile feeling against the one who denigrates him. To him are targeted the whole anger and hostility, which are also nourished by another important sensation: that of injustice. The humiliated person suffers from a mistreatment that he/she considers undeserved. The truth is that in some cases, the humiliating situation happens in response to an earlier misconduct of the person, but this response seems entirely exaggerated. To the individual, there is no obvious link between action and reaction, no reasonable proportion between transgression and punishment. Humiliation usually occurs under the sign of excess.

Even though the humiliating act is considered abusive and arbitrary, it implies an asymmetry that shuts down options to act against it. One's power means helplessness of other. Unable to deal

[5] In this section I interpret freely the results of the research on humiliation to which arrived M. Elshout *et al.* (2016), under the «prototype analysis» perspective.

with the situation, the humiliated feels frustrated. The person suffers his/her own weakness and vulnerability, the difficulty to prevent the other from doing exactly what he/she does: humiliate. Then, abandoned to his/her own moral forces, the person usually gives up.

Finally, *sadness* overwhelms the humiliated. The individual observes himself/herself from an outside view and it is depressing what he/she sees. His/her own inadequacy is sufficient reason for bitterness. The person is affected not only by what happened, but also by its moral implications. He/she can imagine what others think of him/her, and he feels oppressed about not being able to do something to change it. Head down, the person feels that he/she is breaking apart inside. Humiliation hurts in a way that mere shame hardly could. It produces a deep suffering that left marks on the aggrieved soul. One can remember an embarrassing episode with some humor, but all smile will erase as soon as humiliation comes to mind.

The discontent that characterizes humiliation is actually a joint result of these and other emotions and sensations that could still occur. The different tone of the mixture, in other words, the fact that sadness highlights more or anger gains more strength, is of course due to the variable sensitivity of the social actors, but especially to the specific circumstances of the unpleasant event. These circumstances will be discussed in the following section.

3. Humiliation as a Form

If, apart from the emotional state just described, humiliation is also the social situation that causes it, then it is worth asking what kind of situation it is, what features distinguish it and what its constituent elements are. As Simmel observed in the case of shame, we also deal with a huge variety of circumstances here: from the individual who spits another in the face, to the imposition of draconian measures on a State by signing a peace treaty or an international loan. The heterogeneity is overwhelming. And yet, all

this must have something in common. In my opinion, there are three (chances are of a fourth) structural features that underlie any situation of humiliation.

First, humiliation has a *relational character*. It requires at least two social actors in interaction. A dyad in which one humiliates the other. Anyone can be humiliated, as anyone can also assume the role of humiliator. Eventually, both could even exchange roles. The one who humiliates can be both an individual and a group or other major social unit, and the same applies to those who are humiliated. A single individual can denigrate an entire group, just as a group can humiliate an individual, whether this is a member of the group or not. What places an actor on either side of this relationship is a type of action that we will talk about shortly. The important aspect, in any case, is the bipolarity of the relational constellation, whose dynamics would disappear by simply eliminating one of its components.

All the above seems to exclude the possibility of self-humiliation. That is, a situation in which it is oneself who seeks to be humiliated by performing demeaning acts. Such behavior frequently occurs in the religious sphere. Notably in the Judeo-Christian tradition, the so marked driving force of Western individualization (Simmel, 1995[1912]; Sabido, 2012: 117; Watier, 2005: 72), has known women and men whose devotion led them to self-imposed humiliations as a way of punishment, penance or spiritual exercise, but precisely at this point comes to our aid the simmelian category of interaction or reciprocal action (*Wechselwirkung*). It refers not only to individuals and groups, but it also applies to cultural notions and representations. It is before the idea of God that the believer humiliates himself. His representation serves as that other with whom effects are exchanged. Although modified at one of its poles, the dyadic relationship remains.

Second, humiliation is *mediated by a certain type of action.* It is not the actors by themselves who give rise to humiliation as a spontaneous generation. It is also required an action whose aim is to demean the other. And what action in particular could achieve this goal? The

answer is completely open to historical-cultural determination. All kinds of linguistic and non-linguistic expressions, gestures and behaviors of the most varied range can serve this purpose. It is not the particular features of the actions that give them the ability to demean others, but the meaning and interpretation with which these actions are given in a certain collective or cultural circle. This may seem too ambiguous, so it is noteworthy a couple of clarifications in this respect. First, the action has to be given a minimum of intentionality. The individual must consciously desire what he/she causes through his/her behavior. Of course, there will always be a chance of unexpected or undesired effects. Someone might feel offended and aggrieved by an action whose purpose was very different. An apology on time could perhaps clear up the mess, but the point is that true humiliation requires a minimum of will and denigrating intention on the part of the offender. This leads us to a second important point. The other, the person or the group to whom the action is addressed must interpret its content as denigrative. Said in a Weberian way, there must be a minimum of understanding or grasp of the subjective meaning of the action performed by the other (Weber, 1922). It is not a mainly cognitive issue, but also an affective one. The other, the potential humiliated must allow to be affected internally by the action in question. The person must feel degraded. If this is not the case and the receiver is not even taking the hint, the humiliation is then truncated. It is simply a failed attempt.

Thus, humiliation is not a unilateral phenomenon but to some extent negotiated. Negotiated -let us clarify it right away- in terms of its meaning. There is no willingness to be humiliated, and the target does not have unlimited power in determining the meaning of the action. There are certainly cases in which the degrading action seems to be voluntarily tolerated. This leads to doubts whether or not it can really be considered as humiliation. The name of Canossa comes to mind. For three days and nights, Henry IV, The Holy Roman Emperor, knelt in front of the closed door of the Castle of Canossa. Barefoot and covered only by a tunic in that winter of

1077, he hoped that Pope Gregory VII would free him from his excommunication (Morrison, 1962). Was it penance or humiliation? The issue is still under discussion. But the truth is that in the overwhelming majority of cases, the degradation usually has an eminently forced character (Lindner, 2006: 172). Yet, among other reasons, this example is important because it shows another interesting variation: humiliation is not always presented as a direct act. Sometimes it is more about placing the other in a situation that makes him/her to perform the degrading act. Primo Levi remembers the sense of helplessness felt by the prisoners of the concentration camp during the first days because they lacked a spoon. The humiliating situation was not the deprivation of that object but to be forced to lick their daily pottage, like dogs. Though, the situation was not justified by shortage or saving. Thousands of spoons were found after the liberation of Auschwitz. It was all about «a precise intent to humiliate» (Levi, 2017[1986]: 100).

Direct or indirect, mediate or immediate, the action involved always aims to the same goal which is demeaning the other. Valerian in Persia, Henry IV in Canossa. One on all fours, the other one on his knees. The representation cannot be more emblematic. Two emperors crushed on the ground. The highest and most powerful being demeaned. The term «humiliation» originates etymologically from the Latin *humilatio* which literally means the act of prostrating or being dragged in the ground, in the mud (*humus*). Thus, it symbolizes baseness. But what exactly is being demeaned? This question leads us immediately to another important issue.

Third, humiliation *presupposes a representation of human value*. The degrading action hurts the honor, the dignity or the self-worth. These terms refer each one in their own way to a characteristic that defines the value of individuals and groups. Although they tend to assume the status of absolutes in ethical discussions, sociologically speaking they are best understood as something relational and opened. Relational because they require the recognition of others for their effective existence. They are «normative statuses» (Schaber, 2017; Schützeichel, 2019: 252) that designate aspirations and

demands regarding the treatment that others must observe in their relationships and interactions. Such statuses are embedded in broader normative frameworks, and they usually relate to certain attributes or characteristics of individuals and groups. What kind of attributes or characteristics are those, is something completely «opened» in historical and cultural terms. It depends -so to speak- on a great variety of «systems of relevance» (Schütz, 1961).

Pre-modern societies, dominated by strict and inflexible hierarchies, had the idea of honor as a valuable foundation from which to structure and regulate the treatment in social relations. The honor was unevenly distributed in a long chain of gradations. More than a chain, it was actually a pyramid. Between the vertex and the base, there was a huge gap of human value. Here we talk not only about castes, strata and classes, but also we talk about the unequal relationships according to gender, ethnicity, age and other social categories. Reciprocal expectations of behavior were determined by the interweaving of such belongings. In fact, they still are. But today, the idea of unequal value among human beings as the ultimate basis for differential treatment lacks legitimacy. It has not lost its use completely, but the term «honor» sounds outdated each day (Sennett, 2003: 55). In comparison, the notion of «dignity» is more modern. Even though the term already existed long before, it is from the Enlightenment and the great revolutions of the XVIII century that the idea of equal value of all human beings gained strength (Todorov, 2010). This does not mean that such ideal guides the actions of all or most individuals, groups or states. On the contrary, everyday human dignity is violated and denied. This takes us back to our topic. Humiliation is, as Rainer Schützeichel points out, «the provisional or permanent and categorial denial or questioning of the aspiration to be recognized as a person with equal rights» (Schützeichel, 2019: 244, own translation). It would express something like «you want to be here, at this level, and be treated as equal; but you deserve to be there, below, and you will be treated accordingly». That is why, compared to other actions such as insult or injury, humiliation creeps deeper and it has more serious effects.

These effects will be discussed in the next section. Before that, it is worth enunciating a last element that, without being indispensable, makes a substantial difference in humiliation as a form of interaction: the public.

Humiliation can finally have a *public character*. It usually involves the participation of a third party that witnesses the demeaning action. The minimum nucleus of the social constellation is completed with that spectator, whose mere presence, physical or virtual, transforms the dynamic between the humiliator and the humiliated.[6] The person may be limited only to observe, but that is enough. His/her look is enough to boost the entire negative burden of the situation. «Any sensitive union of two parties -Simmel warned- is irritated through the presence of a spectator» (Simmel, 1992[1908]: 115, own translation).[7] By being observed, the humiliated will suffer the denigration even more. The individual wishes the ignominy was between two, in private, but he/she will have to deal now with the conscience of a witness. On the other hand, knowing this third party, the humiliator will try to show off. He/she will double his/her efforts to look merciless or perhaps benevolent. Anyway, from there, his/her actions will have something of *mise-en-scene*. Through gestures, murmurs and laughter the third party will let know his/her mood. Sometimes the third party will go a little further, actively participating in the denigration, gaining even more prominence. If it is a mass action, the responsibility will be diluted and the darkest side of the human spirit will appear. Today a whole entertainment industry feeds and encourages simultaneously a morbid delight in the audience with others' humiliation (Smith, 2013: 93-108; Janssen, Schwender, 2015). It goes without saying about humiliations in that boundless ocean of exposure and hostility called social networks. Laughter and

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[6] Regarding the social significance and function of the third see G. Simmel, «Die quantitative Bestimmtheit der Gruppe», in Simmel G. (1992[1908]), especially pp. 101ff., as well as O. Pyyhtinen (2018).

[7] The original quote says: «jedes sensitive Verbundensein von zweien wird dadurch irritiert, dass es einen Zuschauer hat.»

spitting have been symbolically replaced by laughing or vomiting emojis, but this in no way decreases the great pain that can be suffered after a viral humiliation (Ronson, 2015). The consequences will be discussed below.

4. Humiliation and its Effects

Earlier in this text, the emotional nature of humiliation was inquired. Then, the elements and structural features of humiliation as a situation of social interaction were analyzed. Now, what is left is to establish what the subjective and social effects are. In either case, the result is -as will immediately come clear- highly negative.

Humiliation produces *resentment*. It causes a hostile reaction that survives and transcends the original degrading situation. The memory of the painful event remains and revives occasionally. It is presented as fragments of an unpleasant film in which the protagonist is oneself. It is not a merely intellectual remembrance, but a true emotional experience. It is a re-feeling, in which the mixture of emotions and sensations is experienced repeatedly, and each time with equal or greater strength. Shame, sadness and anger are still there, deep inside the aggrieved heart. Like those stings that once they are embedded, they continue to inject their venom in small doses. It is no wonder that resentment has come to be known as an authentic «psychic self-intoxication» (Scheler, 2017[1913]: 2).

Along with resentment, humiliation also breeds *thirst for revenge*. It makes a revengeful attitude blossom, which is dressed as a longing after righteousness. Whoever has felt unjustly vilified could hardly tolerate that the cause of his/her grievance go unpunished. The very idea of impunity outrages and causes him/her reddening with anger. This may not be expressed openly, it could be hidden behind a facade of indifference, but repression cannot appease the overlapping hatred. The humiliated is overwhelmed by the wish of returning the insult and giving the humiliator a taste of his/her own medicine. This is not always possible. Reasons of convenience or weakness stand as obstacles in the way of translating resentment

into action. This revives, once again, the sense of helplessness (Scheler, 2017[1913]: 10, 21). But the fact that the humiliated cannot unleash the hostile impulse that overwhelms him/her does not mean that he/she does not dream about it. The fantasies of retaliation come across his mind every day. Eventually the grievances will be returned; the lost honor will be recovered. Meanwhile, bitterness; meanwhile, frustration. As already diagnosed by the first modern thinker who took these evils seriously: «to desire to revenge without possessing the strength and courage to carry out revenge means to carry about a chronic illness, a poisoning of body and soul» (Nietzsche, 2004[1878]: 42).

Resentment and revenge are not only addressed to the direct perpetrator of humiliation. Their range of action can sometimes extend, including the third party. The person may not have been more than a witness, a mute spectator, but his/her complicit passivity is exactly what the humiliated does not forgive. Whether by lack of empathy or by lack of courage, the fact is he/she did nothing to prevent what happened. That and the simple suspicion that the third party may have enjoyed the unfortunate degrading spectacle will be enough reasons for the humiliated to host a certain mistrust against him/her as well. Needless to say, if the person had a more active role. In that case the mistrust will transform into open hostility.

All this sounds too gloomy. Someone could claim the importance of forgiveness and reconciliation. Unfortunately, it is not the ethics of the Sermon on the Mount that has predominated mainly in history. As laudable as it may seem, that advice of turning the other cheek has few practitioners.

One of the main effects of humiliation at the social level can now be seen: *the conflict increases*. Relationships among the parties tend to sour. The damage received wants to be returned. The possibility of a vexation equal to or worse than the one infused is stalking all the time. Tensions and hostilities increase and can escalate to a point of no return. The effects of this perverse dynamic can last decades,

even centuries. Whole generations can grow in its shadow. «My family name: offended; my given name: humiliated; my profession: rebel; my age: the Stone Age» (Fanon, 2004[1961]: 44). These are the basic signs with which the inhabitant of a colony defines his being in the world. Humiliation can be socially mobilized and politically capitalized. Populist leaders and sectary movements use to draw upon it for their own goals. Violence and terror are presented then as a legitimate response for past aggrievances (Lindner, 2006: 88-124; Badie, 2017: 153-166).

Humiliation may contribute to the maintenance or rather the establishment of a new *balance of forces*. The degrading act not only creates or fuels the conflict, but it is also an expression of it. It is a weapon in the struggle for power. An ignoble weapon indeed, but whose effectiveness is well proven. Its use provides a more docile submission from the other. When being demeaned and diminished, the humiliated does not have more psychic or moral forces left to fight. He/she loses self-confidence, and bends. In the future, there may be new conflicts and struggles but immediately after the humiliation and until further notice, the submission will prevail. It could be mistakenly believed that the humiliated has nothing left to lose, but there is always the possibility of a new humiliation equal to or worse than the one already suffered. This is feared by the humiliated, who prefers not to take risks. The humiliator knows this too, and he takes advantage of it. By trampling on the dignity of the other, by disregarding his/her expectations of recognition, he guarantees the strengthening of the hierarchy and his/her advantageous position in it (Miller, 1993: 130).

In addition, humiliation often has a *divisive effect at the social level*. Ordinary interaction is altered and any previous sense of community is at the moment shattered. The humiliated does not want to be seen or brought into contact with others. He/she fears running into the witnesses of the degradation. A sort of agoraphobia invades and takes the humiliated away from the outside world. After suffering a ridicule, the once famous actor will

never let be seen in public anymore.[8] But it is not only shame what leads to isolation, but also a lack of self-confidence and trust in the neighbor. Apprehension and a certain sullen attitude are usual defensive reactions that after a vexation are developed in otherwise very sensitive persons.[9]

Humiliation can also have a *stigmatizing effect*. On a temporary or permanent basis, individuals and groups may suffer discrimination and social exclusion because of it. The denigration wants to be prolonged in time, forcing its victims to bear the visible marks of their abasement.[10] Thus, men suspected of being spies are forced to shave half a beard and cut their garments to the height of the buttock (2 Samuel 10: 4-5). Women accused of being collaborationists are obliged to shave their heads (Frevert, 2017: 14). The heretic must wear a distinctive habit, a sign of vileness (1992[1976]: 95-103). The signs vary, but they point to the same goal: foster contempt and avoid contact with the humiliated. The body of these men and women is a symbol and vehicle of repulsion. Wherever they may go, they announce their status as social pariah, despicable beings who could be treated without the slightest respect. Then, not only shame, but also humiliation can have a performative nature (Sabido, 2019). Again, there are laughter, malicious glances and gossip. Undoubtedly, «hell is other people».

Certainly not all participate in such derision. Some people rather show pity and sympathy for the fallen, but there is no relief from being the object of the compassion of others. Condescension is also degrading in its own way. It implies a new «not meeting the social expectations». There are haughty hearts that prefer open contempt, plainly disdain. All this leads us back to the problem of recognition,

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[8] Such is the case of Simon Axler, protagonist of the novel by Roth (2009).

[9] There are many examples to be quoted, but due to his psychological fineness and social realism we can still learn a lot from Dostoevsky (2019[1861]).

[10] For visibility and stigmatization see Goffmann (1961), especially pp. 48-51. On the contrary problem -so to speak-, on the humiliation that represents some kind of social invisibility, of looking through the people as if they were not there, see Honneth, Margalit (2001).

from which humiliation enlighten, even if it is only from its dark shadow.

5. Final Remarks

Humiliation is a human phenomenon, all too human. It is not because all people humiliate, but because only the human being is capable of doing so. Other animals can wound and hurt each other, but never humiliate. Its aggression lacks that essential element only present in our species, and that we usually represent as dignity, honor or our own worth. Only the *sapiens* can suffer and make their peers suffer in such an intangible but precious artifact. As long as such capacity exists, there will also be humiliation.

Such a pessimistic conclusion must be immediately nuanced. Humiliation is no eternal curse or punishment for some original sin. If its conditions of possibility are social, social must also be its limiting conditions. I want to close this brief writing with some reflections on the way that we might limit the extension of such a phenomenon in our social life. There are at least two ways for achieving that goal.

A first way is through institutional transformation. If as Honneth admits, the struggle for recognition does not occur in a social vacuum, neither humiliation should be conceived as a mere interaction between two actors (or three). Recognition as much as its denial by the degrading act are usually embedded in a broader normative framework (Honneth, 1995: 131-140).[11] However, the problem is that many of our institutions foster disrespect for human dignity. Institutions so lacking in transparency as prisons, psychiatric institutions, and the army find in humiliating acts one of their favorite mechanisms of exercising power. Notwithstanding, humiliation is not exclusively confined within the walls of these «total institutions» (Goffmann, 1961). Clinics, hospitals and social assistance institutions of the so-called «Welfare State» often show

[11] For a critical interpretation of Honneth from an institutional perspective see Renault (2011).

little respect for the humanity of those who already suffer physically, mentally and socially helplessness. Elementary schools, high schools and even universities have also admitted the vexatious treatment in their hallways and classrooms. For centuries, teachers and pedagogues justified humiliation as a punishment for indiscipline and from its supposed positive effect on character formation (Frevert, 2017: 82-110). The boy with donkey's ears on the corner of the room is just a harmless image of a much more serious phenomenon.

In a little known and inconclusive story, the writer César Vallejo reports the horrible vexations inflicted on the son of a housemaid in a Peruvian school (Vallejo, 2012[1931]). It is not only his other classmates, but also his teacher and even the school principal who humiliate the poor Paco Yunque from the very first day. Thousands of children and teenagers suffer daily degrading acts in institutions called to educate in the highest values. Youth suicides and shootings in schools often hide biographies full of psychological and moral suffering. Therefore, humiliation as a practice must be eradicated from the school space and beyond, from each and every single one of our institutions. This is the moral and political imperative of those who, not giving up on the dream of a just society, at least aspire to a «decent society» (Margalit, 1998: 271-291).[12]

It is not simply a mere legislative or regulatory change although this may be important in many cases as well. Institutions as the above mentioned have all their respective regulations and protocols, none of which will explicitly prescribe any degrading treatment, but there is a gap that separate the institutional routine from the paper. Institutions and officials make use of humiliation not because they have to, but because they can. The broad margins of discretion shake hands with the willingness to exhibit authority opening the door wide to degrading treatment. Reconfiguring the normative framework and institutional culture would be possible to close the space for humiliation. It involves preventing, discouraging,

[12] For a reception of Margalit in the theory of recognition, see Honneth (1997).

prohibiting, and punishing all action whose purpose be the degradation of the person, and so it would be interpreted by him/her. That no humiliation goes unpunished is an important step to its deinstitutionalization. And despite the painful defeats, one can also observe little and great triumphs in the struggles for recognition that individuals and groups historically excluded and humiliated win every day.[13]

A second way to limit humiliation is through the intervention of the third party. If he/she were to change his/her passive, even complicit attitude, that could transform the correlation of forces. The social constellation would no longer conspire against the weakest. Empathy is required for such change, the ability to put oneself in someone else's position. It is not a merely cognitive or intellectual quality, but affective and emotional. It is about feeling and even suffering from the suffering of the other. This is very different from mere pity and certainly from condescending compassion. It implies an attempt to abandon the comfortable immediacy and to identify oneself with the other as an equal. For this, imagination is essential. Only by projecting himself/herself beyond his/her personal situation, the third party can be touched by what happens to the other. Only in this way, the person can stand in solidarity and intervene, no matter how shy and modest the action may be. A single «no!» a simple «stop!» can prevent or at least hinder a denigrating process.

With a firmly «No!» Paco Fariña warns Humberto Grieve in the aforementioned story by Vallejo. «No! I won't let you jump over Paco Yunque again!» (Vallejo, 2012[1931]: 149). Fariña had a long time watching how Grieve enjoyed humiliating Paco Yunque during the school break. He forced Yunque stand on all fours in the middle of the schoolyard in front of his other classmates. He jumped on Yunque while kicking him in the back. He had more than twenty jumps and many other kicks when the child began to cry. It was at

[13] On social movements, recognition and distribution see the interesting analysis by Hobson (2003).

this point that, not being able of tolerating such abusive game anymore, Fariña intervened. These words got him some threats and a couple of punches, but the important aspect is that Fariña broke the indifference, his own and that of the others who intervene later. He stopped being a silent witness, and put an end temporarily or permanently to the humiliation of his weak classmate. «Civil courage» moved not only by courage, but mainly by empathy. Without the latter, no courage is worth. One can be very brave, but if what happens to the other is considered a matter of his own concern, then any possibility of intervention is closed. Therefore, educating in empathy is vital for a «decent society». This must be promoted and instilled in its citizens as the most important of their civic virtues.

However, there are situations in which none of this is possible and the imposition of factual powers closes every chance for the intervention of a third party. The Gulag, the concentration camps and other monstrous creations of human ingenuity are designed so that the individual have no other concern than their own survival. In such cases, the third party is not a mere spectator, but also is a victim. His/her integrity is at risk, and any hint of insubordination could cost the life. Demanding an impeding intervention in such conditions is not at all realistic. It is true that there were prisoners in the concentration camps who said «no!» to the abuse of their peers, but they paid a very high price for their signs of solidarity. As laudable as we consider their actions, we cannot demand their generalization as an imperative. Yet, the question remains: what to do? The only answer that I believe morally and humanly convincing is to resist. It is what we have left when there is nothing left. In reflecting on the reasons that may have contributed to his survival in situations of extreme violence and degradation, Levi states that:

I was also helped by the determination, which I stubbornly preserved, *to recognize always*, even in the darkest days, *in my companions and in myself, men, not things*, and thus to avoid that total humiliation and demoralization which led so many to spiritual shipwreck (Levi, 1987[1947]: 398, emphasis added).

One can avoid total humiliation through the perennial recognition of oneself and the others as human beings, not things. Not only because of the humanism they express, but also because they come from a person who experienced first-hand the most severe humiliations, these words could be considered some kind of motto for the *resistance in recognition* or, rather, the *recognition as resistance*.

Nevertheless, it should be noted that the bulk of humiliating situations are far from occurring under such extreme conditions as those experienced by Levi and his companions. Those are borderline cases that we can neither underestimate in any way, but nor treat as paradigmatic. Most of the time, the struggle for recognition is not presented as a struggle to the death.[14] This is, despite all, good news: apart from resisting, there is much more we can still do.

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[14] This is precisely the relevance of «recognition» for a modern critical theory. According to Honneth, therein lies the originality of the theoretical turn introduced by Hegel, unlike the primacy given to «self-conservation» in authors like Machiavelli or Hobbes. See Honneth (1995), p. 13.

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