Sociologist Richard Sennett has written:

“Lack of respect, though less aggressive than an outright insult, can take an equally wounding form. No insult is offered another person, but neither is recognition extended; he or she is not seen—as a full human being whose presence matters. When a society treats the mass of people in this way, singling out only a few for recognition, it creates a scarcity of respect, as though there were not enough of this precious substance to go around. Like many famines, this scarcity is man-made; unlike food, respect costs nothing. Why, then, should it be in short supply?”


I wish to explore the scarcity of respect in modern society from the point of view of agentless or systemic humiliation. Systemic humiliation is when although none was intended the insult is received, the slight acknowledged, the put-down is felt, the rejection absorbed and the body/mind mobilises its destructive and devious response in cavernous interiors. There is an epidemic in western societies from which people are literally suffering and dying the ‘death of a thousand cuts’. Many of our ‘social problems’ have their roots here.

I hope to examine two main sources of systemic humiliation in contemporary western societies: firstly, exclusion due to the privileging of certain key identities though the selection process of institutionalisation, and secondly through relative social inequality.