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HUMILIATION: THE ATOMIC BOMB OF THE FEELINGS

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The idea that ethnicity alone is the main cause of violence and war, is something that the researcher Evelin Gerda Lindner has little faith in. She believes that humiliation is often a more important driving force.

The University of Oslo psychologist has carried out extensive fieldwork in Rwanda, Burundi, and Somalia, and through her own experience as the child of refugees in Germany she has studied the psychology of humiliation in the light of genocide and war.

“What I have done is to single out humiliation as a concept of its own. Through my research I have turned the searchlight on the fact that there is humiliation everywhere: among different peoples, within the family, in society and in political life. A feature in common is that humiliation is always very destructive for those who are the victims of it.” In fact the English word *humiliation* is very illustrative. The root *humus* means “earth” in Latin. It is implicit in the word

that people who are humiliated have their faces pressed down towards the earth. “Humiliation is often an important driving force in violence and war. When the humiliated person gains power, the danger of genocide is greatest,” says Evelin Lindner, who has now taken a doctoral degree on this topic.

Humiliation may be an action, an emotional state or a social mechanism. The concept is to be found in many disciplines, for example, in anthropology, sociology, philosophy, social psychology, clinical psychology, and political science.

“The fact that humiliation is an interdisciplinary concept perhaps explains why no research worthy of mention has been done on this before. Humiliation has been mixed up with shame, the violation of honour or dignity. In our day it’s very relevant in connection with the violation of human rights,” she explains.

Humiliation and extremism

“The idea that ethnicity alone is supposed to be the main cause of violence and war is something I have little faith in. It’s not ethnicity that’s the great danger, but humiliation, which again leads to extremism. Extremist attitudes make people willing to play on ethnicity, even to create it, in order to instigate violence and armed struggle,” says Dr Lindner.

She points out that both Somalia and Rwanda are pretty homogeneous peoples with the same language and religion. This means that the most unitary societies in Africa that are guilty of having perpetrated genocide. Until 1978 Somalia was a country of people welded together in a great dream of unity. Then followed twenty years of violence, inter alia because the dictator Siad Barre played groups off against one another.

“In Rwanda, Hutus and Tutsis have in the course of history taken turns at playing the role of oppressor and oppressed. The last time it was the Hutus who killed the Tutsis (and the moderate Hutus). The victims were hacked to death with machetes. It went so far that victims who had a little money bought bullets and begged to be shot instead of being hacked to death. This shows how the feeling of humiliation – I call it the ‘atomic bomb of the feelings’ – can lead to violence that is not dependent on costly armies and weapons.”

At the beginning of her fieldwork Evelin Lindner went to Somalia with a structured questionnaire. She quickly understood that precisely her Western method humiliated her partners in conversation, in other words that she was destroying the conditions for what she had gone there to investigate. The result was that the responses were not reliable and valid.

“I began to talk to people about my own and their experiences. I then understood that they consider us from the West as arrogant and collectively responsible for the bad treatment they have received. I was given clear notice: ‘You colonise us, then you introduce so-called democracy, which is alien to us. After that you are amazed that dictators come to power. Then you give them weapons so that they can kill half of us, and then you come here and want to ‘measure’ our suffering!’ I met their frustration by telling them that my family too had suffered in their resistance to Nazi Germany. Then I immediately met greater understanding,” she says.

Marked by German history

Evelin Gerda Lindner has university degrees in both medicine and psychology from Germany. She has also studied psychology and medicine in New Zealand, China, Thailand, Israel, West Africa and the USA, at the same time as she went in for becoming a part of the culture in all the places where she was working.

In Egypt she was a psychological adviser at an American university and had her own practice in Cairo. Then she wrote a doctoral dissertation in medicine on “The Good Life” in Germany and Egypt. At this point she moved over into social psychology.

Evelin Lindner's career brought her via marriage to Norway, where she feels most at home, and where she feels at home for more than twenty years.

Dr Lindner's interest in the psychology of humiliation has its source in what she experienced as the child of refugees (more correctly "displaced people" or "Vertriebene") in Germany after the war. Several million ethnic Germans were forcibly removed from areas that were taken over by Poland.

"We were guests in West Germany, at the same time as we felt unwelcome."

Also Germany's recent contemporary history is interesting from her perspective.

"After the fall of The Wall the East Germans believed that after having been oppressed in their own country for over 40 years, they would be welcomed with open arms by the West Germans. Instead they were looked down upon. This experience made them decide to emphasise their otherness. Therefore they feel themselves drawn back to the positive things they had in the former East Germany.

Mandela as a model

"What can we do to prevent people from being humiliated?"

“We need relations and institutions that do not humiliate people. Germany felt humiliated after the First World War, which provided the seeds of the Second World War. An important principle of the Marshall Plan was that Germany should feel respected, so that the country would not go to war again.

Furthermore we must create something constructive out of the wounds caused by humiliation and ensure that they do not provide a breeding ground for extremist attitudes. Moderates in all camps must unite in a common cause.”

“Can the experience of humiliation be turned into something constructive?”

“Nelson Mandela is an example to be followed. He has turned the victim’s humiliation into something positive by putting 27 years of imprisonment behind and moving on without revenge. We must try to build more personalities like him.”

EXTENSIVE FIELDWORK: *Evelin Gerda Lindner* conducted fieldwork for her doctoral degree in Rwanda, Burundi and Somalia, as well as Kenya,

Germany, Belgium, France and Switzerland. Photo: Private (©)