Power, Humiliation, and Violence: Understanding Identity-Based Conflicts

Book Project

Abstract

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Description

In a vast majority of today's violent conflicts, the violence is perpetrated by militants who are engaged in a fight for survival, presumably seeking to protect their affiliated group—religious, nationalistic, ethnic, or racial—from the perniciousness of their adversaries. How should we understand such violence that in many cases extends for decades and engulfs large segments of society? From a realist perspective the answer is found in the struggles over power—power that is unjustly denied, limited, or selectively distributed. The contested powers are many—the political power of governance, the economic power needed for minimal sustenance, the symbolic power that is often deployed to glorify the ingroup and denigrate a marginalized segment of the population. Yet the realist notion of power tends to be narrowly conceived. There is another kind of power that, though less obvious, is more insidious: the power of a dominant group to get inside the heads of a marginalized group, warping their thought processes and distorting their sense of social reality. This power can also have a pernicious effect on a group's sense of self-identity and its sense of security and place in a sociopolitical order. This kind of power can also contaminate a group's sense of self-worth as valued beings with inherent dignity and as the bearers of rights of various kinds. It is a power evident in systems of humiliation that are developed, solidified, and enforced to dominate marginalized segments of the population.

This book project focuses on these systems as a dominant force in the outbreak of identity-based violence, a force that is charged with political and moralistic meaning. A system of humiliation typically includes the strategies of society's elites, the mechanisms that establish and maintain their control over a stigmatized group, and an ideology for "lording over" marginalized people that affirms humiliating practices as normal, necessary, and even critical for society. The architects and operators of such systems are empowered to dominate by degrading the marginalized groups to beings of lesser or no value, which in turn casts them as potential targets for manipulation, abuse, or neglect. This is sort of power is not limited to one-on-one verbal abuse or to a physical assault against flesh and blood, although such acts can be its effects. Rather, it is a power manifest in certain practices that are executed in the quiet offices of government officials and behind closed doors among political elites, and enforced by police or military authorities. Humiliation-power is embedded systematically in society, a mechanism of that gives the exploiter the invasive power to get under the skin of the exploited, infecting and manipulating their consciousness.

In order to understand these kinds of systems and their effects, I invoke a perspective that is rare among the social scientists who examine this topic: the perspective of philosophical

inquiry. From philosophy we learn that humiliation is an injury to the moral plane of one's life. The questions "Who am I?" and "Who are you?" demand attention to the moral plane of one's life—a plane that is steeped in moral judgments about how to live in right relations with others. This is the part of life that privileges one's sense of self-worth and one's bonds with and breaks from others. These questions about the authenticity of one's existence are motivated by the sobering realization that human beings are vulnerable to forces greater than themselves. The contours and trajectory of our identities—as people with dignity—rest upon evaluating actions as being morally good or bad and character traits as being positive or negative. The sense of oneself as a person worthy of esteem is inseparable from discriminations between what is morally good or bad, worthy of doing or not, and important or trivial. Such discriminations are thoroughly embedded in the sense of oneself as dependent upon, yet distinct from, others (H. Arendt, M. Buber, R. Harré, N. Nussbaum, P. Ricoeur, C. Taylor, B. Williams.) From the perspective of one's moral life, collective humiliation functions as a fundamental denigration of existence, a moral injury to the soul, like an existential malaise that fosters a sickening feeling of having diminished worth, as if invisible from one's moral-political community.

This philosophical perspective is informed, guided by, and grounded by in the insights from other fields. Most notably, the scholars and practitioners in dignity and humiliation studies has broken new ground, creating vistas of understanding of humiliation as a deeply destructive force. More than simply a feeling of hurt at being accused of having some negative character trait, humiliation as an emotion of diminished self-worth, status, or power—of self-attention, where one self-consciously monitors an affront or a challenge to one's life. At the societal level the suffering of stigmatized groups—caused by the verticality of essentialist social positioning—can suck individuals into a downward spiral of self-loathing, isolation, and even violence. The conflicts that erupt from this vertical positioning are clashes of enmity systems, which are systems of humiliation. (E. G. Lindner, L. M. Hartling).

Researchers in social identity theory have shown that humiliation is the result of an imbalance between one's egoistic need for distinctiveness and one's need for social affiliation. This struggle is steeped in moralistic notions, as I have argued elsewhere (H. Tajfel, C. Turner, and M. Brewer). From conflict theory, we learn how structural violence finds its source in systems of oppression that seek to dominate through norms, rules, and institutional practices (J. Burton, J. Galtung).

Plan of Chapters

Chapter 1: Introduction [not complete].

Chapter 2: Humiliation as Moral Injury [complete]. Drawing upon the insights of philosophers, I argue that humiliation is a source of identity-based conflicts, a moral injury to the soul, and a devastation to one's quest for meaning in one's life. Examples of such moral injuries are drawn from the testimonies of veterans of Iraq War II.

Chapter 3: Case Study: Arabism and Ethnic Cleansing in Darfur [complete]. In this chapter I argue that the campaign of Arabism that is advanced by the central government of Sudan is a driving force behind the ethnic cleansing that peaked in Darfur in 2002–2005 and still continues to this day. Such a campaign is driven by an ideology that segments society into the pure citizen and the dangerous subject who become targets of systems of humiliation.

Chapter 4: Case Study: Humiliation of IDPs in India [complete] [with Sudha Rajput]. Many internally displaced persons (IDPs) experience a deep sense of social-psychological devastation accompanied by shame, humiliation, and guilt. For IDPs from Kashmir, their lives are awash in humiliations, beginning with the forced exile from their ancestral homeland, continuing through their search for safety, and echoed repeatedly in their struggles to acquire even the most basic needs for themselves and their loved ones.

Chapter 5: Case Study: A Counter-Narrative to the Rwandan Genocide: Hutus Rescuing Tutsis [complete] [with Jessica Cooley]. The primary narrative in Rwanda today depicts the perpetrators of the 1994 genocide as Hutu extremists who launched a campaign of genocidal violence against Rwandan Tutsis. Yet many Hutus actively sought to rescue Tutsis, providing safe haven, essential material goods, and emotional support to those hunted by the Interahamwe. Based on their testimony, these rescuing efforts arose from their moral obligation to others, an obligation anchored in the belief in the dignity of all.

Chapter 6: Case Study: Systematic Humiliation in the Jim Crow South [not complete]. I explore whether these policies of segregation drive the current criminal justice system. I address the following question: are the current U.S. anti-drug laws instruments of racial control that function to systematically humiliate African Americans? I examine the testimony of the legislators and government officials who were the architects of the current anti-drug laws, probing for their racial underpinnings.

Chapter 7: Case Study: Propaganda, Identity, and Violence in the Bosnian War [not complete]. In this chapter I examine the ideologically charged propaganda disseminated by the architects of the Bosnian War that occurred from 1992 to 1995 between the militant forces of the Republic of Bosnia and Herzegovina and the forces of Serbia and Croatia.

Chapter 8: Humiliation and Literature [not complete]. The full scope and depth of systematic humiliation is revealed through literature, which offers a corrective to the constraints of social scientific research methods for the familiar dichotomies between a public affair and a private experience, and between the description of one's personal sentiments and the prescription of a moral judgment. I provide literary analysis of racial divisions in the U.S., ethnic-based hierarchy in Israel, and gender-based practices in Afghanistan.

Biosketch

Daniel Rothbart is Professor of Conflict Analysis and Resolution at the School for Conflict Analysis and Resolution, George Mason University. He is director of the program on Ethics and Conflict and chair of the Sudan Task Group. His work centers primarily on violent conflicts involving identity groups—ethnic, racial, nationalistic, and societal— toward the goal of understanding and reversing the downward spiral of intergroup violence.

In this field he developed an original perspective for understanding identity and difference, a perspective that gives prominence to the moral lives of conflict protagonists, highlighting their value commitments for intra-group and inter-group relations. This perspective is developed in scholarly publications and a co-edited volume: *Identity, Morality, and Threat: Studies in Violent Conflict* (co-edited), Lexington Books: 2006. As director of the program on Ethics and Conflict he has published extensively on the militaristic mindset to war and peace, demonstrating the anti-civilian underpinnings of military practices, norms, and rules of engagement. This theme is developed in the following books: *Civilians and Modern War: Armed*

Conflict and the Ideology of Violence (co-edited), Routledge Press: 2012; and *Why They Die: Civilian Devastation in Violent Conflict* (co-authored), University of Michigan Press: 2011. As chair of the Sudan Task Group, which is committed to peacebuilding in the Darfur region of Sudan, he co-developed and co-facilitated a series of dialogues, known as the Siena Series of Conflict Resolution workshops, among the stakeholders of the Darfur crisis. The workshops brought together representatives from the major resistance movements in Darfur as well as influentials from various sectors of Sudanese society—political, civil, and academic. His current book project, entitled *Power, Humiliation, and Violence: Understanding Identity-Based Conflicts*, extends his earlier activities toward a deeper understanding of the centrality of humiliation and dignity as central to conflict analysis and resolution.

After earning his Ph.D. in philosophy from Washington University, St. Louis, Professor Rothbart was a visiting research scholar at Linacre College, Oxford, at Dartmouth College, and at the University of Cambridge. Before joining the faculty of the School for Conflict Analysis and Resolution, he was a professor in the department of philosophy at GMU. In that position Professor Rothbart taught and engaged in original research in the philosophy of science and social science, which led to the publication of thirty academic articles and four books on the nature of scientific knowledge.