

Introduction to ‘History and Humiliation,’ A Special Issue of Social Alternatives

**Bertram Wyatt-Brown, 2006
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Evelin Lindner, the co-editor and the initiator of this collection of essays, “Humiliation and History in Global Perspective,” has devoted her scholarly and teaching life to the subject of humiliation. Debasing actions are often treated as if they were only of passing interest. Questions of honour, shame, and other related topics have been treated liberally in recent years. Humiliation, as a separate category, however, has received surprisingly little theoretical or systematic attention from historians, anthropologists, political scientists, psychologists, or scholars of literature. In Lindner’s interpretation, it is far from being justly neglected or treated simply as a momentary source of embarrassment. Rather, she perceives it as a nearly unrecognized psychological, political, and military imposition with enormous and tragic consequences in every part of the world for centuries past as well as in our own day.

It is Lindner’s contention that while nearly all individuals seek the respect of their fellows, repudiation of that common expectation can develop into savage recriminations, frustrations, desire for revenge, and violence. Moreover, humiliation has, she argues in a brilliant article, has a repetitive, cyclical life. Those resentful of their disgrace in the eyes of others may well become the humiliator against the first tormentor or some weaker party. That victim, in turn, may continue the ferocious pattern against another set of scapegoats. Differences of ethnicity, religion, social status, degree of wealth or poverty do not necessarily result in conflicts and repressions. Often enough, these human diversities can lead to harmony and consensus—but only, Lindner insists, if the “diversity is embedded within relationships characterized by mutual respect.” It is this moral realm that she and others hope can create more

peaceable and empathetic responses. When mutual esteem does not occur, Lindner observes, “those who feel victimized by humiliation are prone to highlight differences, in order to justify rifts that exist or that are created.”¹

The term itself requires definition. Lindner supplies it: “The act of humiliation involves putting down, holding down, and rendering the other helpless to resist the debasement. The feeling of being humiliated emerges when one feels one is unable to resist the debasement and one deems it to be illegitimate as well as unwanted.” Needless to say, those in different cultures express their contempt for others in different ways and perhaps for different reasons.

The following articles will demonstrate that point. In all instances of coerced degradation, “the victim is forced into passivity, acted upon, made helpless.” As a result, the humiliated party is stripped of inherent “pride, honor, or dignity.” In wartime and periods of civil unrest, those with lethal weapons may act in ways quite uncharacteristic of their peacetime conduct. Ordinarily, soldiers, whether professional or conscripted, may not in civilian life have raped and abused women. Under conditions of chaos and war, however, some veterans may become sexually sadistic in order to impress upon their victims their power, contempt, and fury. Lindner points out that during the Rwandan massacres, it was not sufficient simply to slaughter helpless innocents. “The victims were humiliated before they died. Why else would an old woman be paraded naked through the streets before being locked up with hungry dogs to be eaten alive?”² To be sure, as these essays indicate, the employment of humiliating force may consist merely in demeaning words or gestures of ridicule, but all too often more physical and deadly events are part of the process.

Thanks to Evelin Lindner's exemplary recruiting, we were enabled to assemble a coherent set of articles. At the same time, it must be added, they cover different continents, disparate cultures, distinct periods of time, and dissimilar circumstances. In the first section, the European experience is treated, with the first essay, appropriately, being Evelin Lindner's. Her exploration of German reactions to Adolph Hitler's defeat and suicide in 1945 grows out of her family's encounters with humiliation as refugees from Lower Silesia. That country had been a German province, but the Poles were accorded it in the early postwar months. The new occupiers forced out hundreds of thousands of ethnic Germans, her family among them. Lindner interviewed her parents' generation to find that many of its members at first denied the past but gradually came to recognize how Hitler had seduced and corrupted them. That recognition involved self-humiliation. This was an internalized form, different from what most others in these essays explore.

Anne Wyatt-Brown's essay grasps another aspect of the post-World-War-II period in Germany, but her conclusions are not, as mentioned, dissimilar. Using a memoir, *A Woman in Berlin*, she examines the horrors that the advancing Russian soldiers inflicted on German women. The diarist, a mature, brave, and self-possessed woman, had to endure multiple rapes, a traumatic humiliation that few others under similar circumstances could have handled so effectively. Wyatt-Brown sees in the diarist's account the opportunity that she had to carry out the cycle of revenge that Lindner noted. But psychologically affected though she was, she did not pursue the course of retribution. In the midst of her suffering, she probes her own culpability sooner than the Germans in Lindner's investigation.

The third essay, Paul Stokes, "'The Troubles' in Northern Ireland, 1968-2005: A Case of Mutual Humiliation," discovers a seemingly endless cycle of humiliation. The Catholics and the Protestants, most especially their radical wings, perceive the other sect as the victimizer whose insults and offenses must be answered with equal violence. The rounds of retribution may be triggered by instances both small and highly significant.

The American experience, in which different forms of humiliation arose, also consists of three essays, two of which concern the South in the nineteenth century. The first of these, Bertram Wyatt-Brown, "Honour, Irony, and Humiliation in the Era of American Civil War," explores the reasons why the former Confederates reacted so violently to their bitter defeat in 1865. Not only had their armies been overwhelmed but their way of life and the black bondage, upon which their culture and economy relied, had also been crushed. The Northern Republican victors sought to establish a two-party democracy with the newly franchised freedmen and white allies. Ku Klux Klan violence, intimidation, and bribery humiliated and demoralized the Republican voters. In their triumph, the white ex-Confederates overcame their sense of military loss and social humiliation. They reasserted their self-proclaimed honour and right to rule within a decade after the war.

Fitz Brundage, "The Ultimate Shame: Lynch-Law in Post-Civil War American South," offers a further and most telling examination into the way Southerners held the black population hostage to violence and forced submission. Evelin Lindner noted that death alone was an insufficient infliction in the Rwandan genocide, during which atrocity every sort of torment was employed. Likewise, Southern whites extended the agony of alleged black offenders as long as

possible before a final round of bullets rendered the sufferers lifeless. This form of social and racial control, Brundage proposes, was part of a broader and equally purposive pattern that terrorized the subordinated race in order to perpetuate white dominance.

The third paper, "Humiliation and Domination under American Eyes: German POWs in the Continental United States, 1942-1945," offers another example of humiliation compounded. German prisoners had suffered the humiliation of defeat and capture on the battlefield, but in the American camps, spread across the continent, a further degradation awaited the 400,000 soldiers. Because of U.S. military indifference and ignorance of the language, the politics, and the culture of their captives, the Nazi elements were the harsh and sometimes murderous enforcers in the barracks. Their victims were usually prisoners who had been drafted into the *Wehrmacht*, though not ethnic Germans themselves. The essay suggests that in the current war in the Middle East lessons might be learned from the blunders and missteps of the past.

The experience of developing nations forms the third and last set of essays. Appropriately, the first of these, "Humiliation and Its Brazilian History as a Domain of Sociolinguistic Study," by Francisco Gomes de Matos, provides an analysis of the humiliation theme as it finds expression in words. Drawing in part on his personal experience, Gomes de Matos concentrates on how the language of humiliation can play upon the victim's distinctiveness in terms of age, class, ethnic origin, and gender.

Taking a different approach from Gomes de Matos in "Humiliation in India's Historical Consciousness," Michel Danino argues that India has undergone many invasions and resettlements. As a result, the country has experienced a variety of humiliations that have

distorted the Hindus' collective understanding of who they are. Western renditions of India's past continue to have a colonialist slant that has inhibited any "healing process," as he puts it.

The cases of Rwanda and Iraq take us into more recent and poignantly tragic examples of humiliation and death. Like several of its predecessors, Jean-Damascène Gasanabo, "The Rwandan *Akazi* (Forced Labour) System, History, and Humiliation," is concerned with escalations of humiliation that finally resulted in the genocide of hundreds of thousands in the 1990s. According to his account, the origin of the conflict between the Tutsis and the Hutus should be attributed to the deliberate manipulations and distortions of the Belgian rulers as a means of fuller control over the Rwandan population. Ownership of cows, not linguistic, ethnic, or religious factors, separated the two groups, with the Tutsis holding property in cattle, whereas the Hutus chiefly farmed. The Belgian authorities privileged the Tutsis to the point that after independence the Hutus sought revenge for their prior humiliations. That led to the massacres.

In the final essay of the series, Victoria Fontan in "Hubris, History, and Humiliation: Quest for Utopia in Post-Saddam Iraq," explains the blunders of American occupation, particularly in violations of Iraqis' sense of honour. For instance, so thorough was the abrupt and thoughtless dismissal of the Ba'athist armed forces and bureaucracy that insurgency, as she demonstrates, became a spontaneous reaction to the humiliation of lost dignity and self-possession. She discovers just how ignorant the American occupiers were of Iraqi customs and protocols, particularly with regard to the protection of their women in so sexually conservative a society.

In sum, these articles adopt different approaches to the common theme and show how human dignity can be so tragically jeopardized that the result is too often uncompromisingly vengeful and ruinous for all concerned.

Endnotes

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1. Lindner, Evelin Gerda (2001). "Humiliation as the Source of Terrorism: A New Paradigm," in *Peace Research*, 33 (2), 59-68, quotation 59.
 2. Lindner, Evelin Gerda (2006). *Making Enemies Unwittingly: Humiliation and International Conflict*. Westport, CT: Praeger, in press.