

BOOK REVIEWS

Making enemies: Humiliation and international conflict

Lindner, E.

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You may not have given much thought to the role played by humiliation in international relations or even in interpersonal contact, but it is a topic which Evelin Lindner has made her own. In this book she seeks to bring to our attention the key role she believes it plays in the vicious spiral of ever-worsening conflict in the world and to suggest, largely through the example of Nelson Mandela, that humility can serve as its antidote in constructing a virtuous spiral.

A social scientist with advanced degrees in both medicine and psychology, Lindner founded and heads Human Dignity and Humiliation Studies, a global network of researchers and practitioners, and is affiliated with a number of universities around the world. Her fieldwork has taken her to some of the major flash-points of international conflict in the last two decades, Rwanda and Somalia in particular. It is when she writes of these two specific contexts that her argument is most convincing and moving.

The example connecting humiliation and conflict with which people are most familiar is that of post-World War I Germany, where the humiliating terms of the Versailles Peace Treaty are generally considered to have led directly to the rise of Hitler's Nazi Party and further massive conflict in Europe in World War II. Lindner refers to this sequence of events throughout the book and shows how

it is duplicated in conflicts large and small throughout the world. In the opening pages, she describes the familiar scenes from Baghdad at the culmination of the U.S. invasion, in which a large statue of Saddam Hussein was torn down. Initially, and momentarily, from a mind-set which can be seen as responsible for much of the continuing conflict there, Saddam's face was then covered with an American flag. These images of abasement and assertion of dominance are at the heart of Lindner's case that humiliation is a key motor of conflict.

She traces the roots of humiliation to a worldview which sees human worth, along with the whole of the natural world, as based on order and hierarchy: some people are intrinsically more important than others, just as humans themselves are seen as superior to other animals and animals to inanimate things. In this worldview, the idea of bringing somebody down or holding them in their rightful lowly position tends to be seen as a natural and important part of the order of being, so a servant might see his or her rough treatment by a master as no more or less objectionable than the cold of the winter or the searing heat of the summer, and the master may well feel duty-bound to assert dominance and superiority over servants. Revolution in this worldview consists of replacing one elite with another. How-

ever, Lindner contends, in the modern age a much more insidious form of revolution is afoot, as the Human Rights worldview becomes generally accepted throughout the world. In this view, all human beings are endowed with an equal amount of dignity, so that no person's life or happiness is, in theory, more important than that of any other. It is within this worldview that abasement becomes humiliation, a denial of the individual's dignity. Much of the conflict around us, Lindner goes on to argue, results from the clash between these two worldviews, where acts of abasement seen by some as ordained by nature are taken by others as acts of humiliation. We live, then, in a conflict-ridden age of transition from one worldview to another.

Perhaps surprisingly, given the thrust of her argument so far and the focus of her professional experience, Lindner's attitude is relentlessly optimistic. She refers repeatedly to the coming global village, which might equally well be called the Golden Age of Human Rights, in which a single world community pays much more than lip-service to the idea of equal human dignity, and humiliation, even of those who aim to destroy the community, is simply not tolerated. She sees signs in the movement towards globalisation that such a world community is being built. The missing element, she believes, in contemporary globalisation is egalization (her own word), a recognition of the equal rights of all citizens of the global village. Many of her practical suggestions for reaching this Golden Age are rather familiar: strengthening the United Nations, encouraging global cooperation, moving from armed intervention to true policing operations in a spirit of good-neighborliness. Other suggestions find their origins in the proclivity of social psychologists to apply models that work on the personal level to whole communities: global time-outs when conflicts heat

up, and a ban on letting people with certain psychological traits hold positions of leadership. Nelson Mandela's brand of humility is referred to several times as an "antidote to humiliation," but there is a surprising absence of analysis of how his humility functions in this way or how it might be adopted to bring about the Golden Age of Globalisation/Egalization.

Although Lindner's focus on humiliation is innovative, much of her agenda is standard fare for liberal commentators on world affairs, at least for those of them who remain optimistic about the future. The importance of her work, then, rests on whether humiliation does indeed function as a key lens for elucidating conflicts. This reviewer spent much of his reading time wondering whether the book would have been any different if she had chosen as its focus other concepts such as human rights, dignity, or the global village. These words occur just as frequently as *humiliation* in the book and are just as central to her argument. Is this, then, just a re-branding of the liberal vision? Maybe not. The assassination of Benazir Bhutto happened when I was part-way through Lindner's book; the bringing down of a popular opposition leader and the violence which followed clearly resonates with the idea of humiliation as a motor of conflict, but so too do parts of the international response: CNN's determination to explain to its viewers what her death means "for American foreign policy" and the insistence on an investigation led by people from outside the country are clearly humiliating to many Pakistani people in ways that seem certain to provoke further resentment. Lindner's gift to those of us who view international relations through TV and newspapers is a conceptual tool which allows us to overcome some of the limitations of these media, to share something of the perspective of the humiliated, and perhaps to begin to answer

the archetypal 21st century question: “Why do they hate us so much?”

The book, although divided into chapters with titles like “Humiliation at Work in the Mind,” “Humiliation at Work in the World,” and “The Future of Humiliation” actually works by accretion. Although each chapter seeks to highlight a specific aspect of Lindner’s argument, many of the examples are interchangeable between chapters (and are in fact often repeated), but it is through these examples that Lindner really shares her insights. At least half of them are passing references, almost trite appeals to common knowledge: Hitler, Hussein, and Mandela are the leitmotifs of an account which skips the Cold War almost entirely. But when Lindner writes of the lived experiences of the individuals she has interviewed in Somalia, in Rwanda, and in Palestine, the examples really sing. We are there with her in the villages and refugee camps listening to people trying to make sense of experiences of conflict which have cost them almost everything. Again and again, we hear the concepts of dignity and humiliation, not from the social psychologist but from humiliation’s victims. Then the book comes alive, not as a Utopian treatise but as a testa-

ment imbued with determination to build a better, more equal world.

Any work on social psychology is bound to be subject to the tensions between individual experience and society-wide generalisations, and Lindner’s is no exception. When she writes, though, of observing how passers-by resolve a conflict over a traffic accident in Cairo, we begin to see how deeply rooted her thinking is in the lives of the people she has met. The value of this book may lie, in the end, not in the construction of a theory of humiliation or in the provision of a lens which helps us to see and respond to humiliation in others’ lives, but in foregrounding the personal accounts of those who live with humiliation, who wrestle with its consequences, and who speak to us of the importance of human dignity.

Editor’s Note: This book was honored as an Outstanding Academic Publication in the 2007 list of *Choice*, a journal of the American Library Association that reviews academic publications. These reviews, many of which may be of interest to SIETAR Japan members, can be viewed online at (<http://www.ala.org/ala/acrl/acrlpubs/choice/home.cfm>).

