

# Humiliation and the Human Condition: Mapping a Minefield

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## Abstract

A major cause of socio-political violence is the social process of humiliation, whose main elements are closely related to central aspects of the cultural repertoire of complex societies. This paper presents a theory of humiliation, showing that the capacity to humiliate and be humiliated are aspects of a dense web of 'hot' filaments wired into the tissue of culture, giving it a potentially explosive character that is too little recognised. This paper probes this dense web and explores how it acquired its present character. It is shown that our conceptualisation of humiliation has changed as our sense of human dignity has grown. Humiliation should be understood as not simply an extreme or marginal condition but a central feature of the social order. Viewed within this broader context, the elements that constitute humiliation should be recognised as fundamental mechanisms in the formation of modern society.

## The streets of Mogadishu

One of the defining images of the late twentieth century is a dead American soldier being dragged by a triumphant crowd through the streets of Mogadishu in Somalia. It was an act of humiliation. The Somali crowd were wreaking vengeance upon America and the UN. In the words of a former Somali diplomat, 'the UN came with the agenda that they know what is good for the Somali people [,]...got entangled in the fight with [General] Aideed, ... spent so much money on that ...[and] caused the death of no less than 10,000 Somalis!' The Somalis felt humiliated by the apparently well-meaning intervention of the UN and reacted with an act of counter-humiliation.

American troops serving with the UN had to fight for their lives in Mogadishu and were forced out of Somalia. The impact upon American public opinion of this humiliating experience was so great that in subsequent years the American government was very unwilling to commit ground troops in similar situations.

Humiliation has been a potent force in domestic politics and international affairs. It is an important dimension of organisational life in all spheres, including government and business. When examples like this are cited its importance is easy to see. However, the nature and role of humiliation are not well understood. The purpose of this article is to provide a new analysis of humiliation and its implications for social and political order.

The case of Somalia reinforces one of the great lessons learned from the two world wars during the first half of the twentieth century, which is that if people feel humiliated they strike back when they can. The Versailles treaty at the end of World War I included the now infamous war-guilt clause<sup>1</sup> imposing complete responsibility for the war on the Germans and demanding that they ‘make complete reparation for all... loss and damage’ caused. The allies’ demands were ruinous and enforced in a high-handed way.

After World War I the Germans were thoroughly and deliberately humiliated. It is now recognised that this had disastrous results. The hurt of humiliation created a hunger for retaliation. Hitler promised to do the job. He claimed that he could restore Germany's power and pride, putting it beyond the reach of enemies who wished to impose further humiliations upon it.

After Germany's defeat in 1945, care was taken not to repeat the mistakes of 1918. Instead of facing draconian demands for reparations, Germany was given help to rebuild its industrial economy and was brought into NATO and the European Community (now the European Union). The clear intention was to avoid a third world war against Germany with all the terrible costs that would entail.

The two world wars provide evidence for the proposition that humiliation can lead to war, Holocaust, genocide, ethnic cleansing and terrorism. At the turn of the millennium those very issues are all very high on the world’s political agenda. In recent years, genocide has occurred in Rwanda and Burundi, ethnic cleansing in ex-Yugoslavia, atrocities have been committed in East-Timor and many other places. The freedom to travel abroad of Americans, especially, but, more generally, of people from the rich world is often limited by the fear of terrorist attack. Not even humanitarian workers such as Red Cross and Red Crescent staff are safe from kidnap incidents, such as the one that occurred in Somalia in April 1998.<sup>2</sup>

As already noted, European experience in the first half of the twentieth century suggests that humiliation can lead to war, Holocaust, genocide, ethnic cleansing and terrorism. Global experience in the second half of the century suggests that the same proposition is true worldwide. In other words, it is a highly plausible hypothesis that deeply damaging experiences of humiliation are a major cause of the widespread occurrence of genocide, terrorism and kidnapping in Africa and elsewhere; not the only cause but a factor whose characteristics merit detailed investigation. As argued earlier, if people feel humiliated they strike back when they can. It is urgently necessary to discover more about the nature of humiliation and how it operates.

In fact, humiliation has hardly been studied at all and certainly not in a systematic way. The list of relevant publications is very brief and covers a highly divergent collection of themes. For example, William Ian Miller wrote a book entitled *Humiliation and Other Essays on Honor*,

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<sup>1</sup> ‘The Allied and Associated Governments affirm and Germany accepts the responsibility of Germany and her allies for causing all the loss and damage to which the Allied and Associated Governments and their nationals have been subjected as a consequence of the war imposed upon them by the aggression of Germany and her allies’ (Versailles Treaty 1919, part VIII, section I, article 231).

<sup>2</sup> Eight Red Cross and Red Crescent staff were kidnapped at the airport in Mogadishu North.

*Social Discomfort, and Violence*. Two journals have dedicated issues to the topic in recent years.<sup>3</sup> Humiliation has been addressed in such fields as international relations, love, sex, and social attractiveness, depression, society and identity formation, sports, serial murder, war and violence. A few examples from history, literature and film illustrate humiliation.

Recently, however, more systematic work has been undertaken on the different ways in which humiliation processes contribute to armed conflicts, genocide and terrorist activity. The main focus has been on the cases of Somalia and Rwanda.<sup>4</sup> In the case of Rwanda, in 1994 Rwanda's Hutu-led government orchestrated a genocidal onslaught against the Tutsi minority during which at least half a million people were slaughtered in a period of eight weeks.<sup>5</sup> In the case of Somalia, President Barre ordered attacks upon the Isaaq clan in the north during the 1980s. The military implemented a scorched-earth policy in rural areas between Hargeisa and the Ethiopian border.<sup>6</sup> Tactics included 'extra-judicial executions of unarmed civilians, detentions without trial, unfair

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<sup>3</sup> *Social Research*, in 1997, the *Journal of Primary Prevention* in 1992. Also Cviic 1993, Luo 1993, Midiohouan 1991, Steinberg 1991, 1996, Urban et al. (Eds.)1990, Baumeister et al. 1993, Baumeister 1997, Brossat 1995, Gilbert 1997, Proulx et al. 1994, Vogel et al. 1990, Brown et al. 1995, Miller 1988, Ignatieff 1997, Markus et al. 1996, Silver 1986, Wood et al. 1994, Hardman et al. 1996 Hale 1994, Lehmann 1995, Schlesinger 1988 Masson 1996, Vachon 1993, Znakov 1989, 1990, Peters 1993, Stadtwald 1992, Toles 1995, Zender 1994.

<sup>4</sup> In 1997 the Norwegian Research Council started a social-psychological research project at the University of Oslo with the following title: *The Feeling of Being Humiliated: A Central Theme in Armed Conflicts. A Study of the Role of Humiliation in Somalia, and Rwanda/Burundi, Between the Warring Parties, and in Relation to Third Intervening Parties*. As the researcher, I would like to thank the Norwegian Research Council, and Royal Norwegian Foreign Ministry for making this project possible, and the Institute of Psychology at the University of Oslo for hosting it. I extend my warmest thanks to all my informants in and from Africa, many of whom survive under the most difficult life circumstances. I hope that at some point in the future I will be able to give back at least a fraction of all the support I received from them! I thank Reidar Ommundsen at the Institute of Psychology for his constant support, together with Jan Smedslund, Hilde Nafstad, Malvern Lumsden (see also Lumsden 1997), Carl-Erik Grenness, Jon Martin Sundet, Finn Tschudi (see also Ekelund 1994), Kjell Flekkøy, and Astrid Bastiansen. The project is interdisciplinary and has benefited from the help of many colleagues at the University of Oslo. I would, especially like to thank Johan Galtung (see also Galtung 1996, Galtung and Tschudi 1999), Dagfinn Føllesdal (see also Føllesdal 1996), Thomas Pogge, Helge Høybråten Thorleif Lund, Thomas Hylland Eriksen (see also Eriksen 1993), Unni Wikan (see also Wikan 1984), Asbjørn Eide and Bernt Hagtvet (see Eide and Hagtvet, Eds.,1996), Leif Ahnstrøm, and Jan Brøgger (see also Brøgger 1986). The project would not have been possible without the help of Dennis Smith, professor of sociology at Loughborough University (UK) (see Smith 1981, 19983, 1984a, 1984b, 1991, 1997a, 1997b) and Lee D. Ross (see also Ross 1996), Stanford University, who is a principal investigator and co-founder of the Stanford Center on Conflict and Negotiation (SCCN).

<sup>5</sup> According to Human Rights Watch on June 6<sup>th</sup>, 1994, as quoted by Jeff Drumtra, Africa policy analyst of the US Committee for Refugees, in his report entitled 'Rwanda, genocide and the continuing cycle of violence,' presented to the House of Representatives' Committee on International Relations, Congress, Subcommittee On International Operations And Human Rights. See [www.refugees.org/news/testimony/050598.htm](http://www.refugees.org/news/testimony/050598.htm).

<sup>6</sup> He had earlier directed a similar policy against the Majerteen clan in the regions of Mudug and Bari.

trials, torture, rape, looting and extortion... the burning of farms, the killing of livestock, the destruction of water-storage tanks and the deliberate poisoning of wells.<sup>7</sup>

The aim of this research is to clarify the part played by humiliation as a factor in two relationships, firstly in the relationship between opposing parties and/or perpetrators and victims in massacres committed in the contemporary world as Holocaust, genocide, and ethnic cleansing, secondly in the relationship between third parties (international community, United Nations and international humanitarian organisations) and parties in conflict.<sup>8</sup>

As will be seen, the research began by investigating social-psychological factors that find expression in particular feelings and emotions. It became clear that these feelings and emotions were closely related to the development of distinctive cultural repertoires within the societies concerned. The following questions inspired the research: What is humiliation? What happens when people feel humiliated? What is it that they experience as humiliating? Under what conditions are those particular experiences defined as 'humiliating'? What does humiliation lead to? Which particular perceptions of justice, honour, dignity, respect and self-respect are connected with the feeling of being humiliated? How is humiliation perceived and responded to in different cultures? What role does humiliation play in aggression? What can be done to overcome the violent consequences of humiliation?<sup>9</sup>

Both the relevance and the complexity of feelings of humiliation are shown by a private letter to the author, quoted here with the writer's permission. Sam Engelstad, UN's Chief of Humanitarian Affairs, and, on several occasions Acting Humanitarian Coordinator in Mogadishu in 1994,<sup>10</sup> wrote: 'During my own time in Somalia in 1994, humiliation was never far from the surface. Indeed, it pretty much suffused the relationship between members of the UN community and the general Somali population. In the day-to-day interaction between the Somalis and UN relief workers like ourselves, it enveloped our work like a grey cloud. Yet, the process was not well understood, and rarely intended to be malevolent.'

Engelstad added that 'Among the political and administrative leadership of the UN mission, however, humiliation and its consequences were far better understood and were frequently used

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<sup>7</sup> Taken from the evidence of Aryeh Neier, vice-chairman of Human Rights Watch, to the House of Representatives' Committee on Foreign Affairs, Sub-committee on Africa on 14<sup>th</sup> July 1988. See [www.anaserve.com/~mbali/hearing.htm](http://www.anaserve.com/~mbali/hearing.htm).

<sup>8</sup> The interviewees included people involved in the conflicts in Somalia and Rwanda/Burundi, and representatives of third intervening parties. Further details of the research will only be given here to the extent necessary to show that the concept of humiliation came to seem increasingly problematic in the course of carrying out the investigation. More than 200 interviews were carried out during 1998 and 1999: in Hargeisa (Somaliland), Kigali and other places in Rwanda, Bujumbura (Burundi), Nairobi (Kenya), and in Cairo, Oslo, Hamburg, Geneva and Brussels.

<sup>9</sup> In carrying out the research, the researcher was able to draw upon her own biographical experience as a German national from a 'refugee family.' See also Goldhagen 1996; Fest 1993; Ahrendt 1964; Adorno 1964; Landau 1998.

<sup>10</sup> See also: The Lessons-learned Unit of the Department of Peace-keeping Operations & The Norwegian Institute of International Affairs UN Programme (1995). *Lessons Learned from the United Nations Operation in Somalia: At the Strategic and Operational Levels 19-20 June 1995*. Oslo: NUPI. Also: O'Halloran 1995.

as policy tools. Regardless of intent, it was pernicious and offensive to many of us.’<sup>11</sup> Engelstad’s view is supported by many other humanitarian aid experts, and by voices from the Somali side.

In the next part of the paper an account is given of how the early findings of the research project just mentioned engendered intellectual puzzlement about the nature of humiliation. In the subsequent part three elements of humiliation are identified and it is argued that they appeared sequentially, producing successive transformations of this concept and of the social and social-psychological processes to which it refers. In the final section of the paper, the analysis developed in the previous section is used to identify important similarities between the ways humiliation has occurred and been experienced in three cases: Germany, Rwanda and Somalia.

### **The puzzling nature of humiliation**

To return to the issue already raised, what is humiliation? In this part of the paper, it is necessary to bring the researcher herself into the foreground since the methodology of the research itself required passage around a hermeneutic circle of enquiry, reflection, reorientation and further enquiry.<sup>12</sup> As is well known, hermeneutic analysis as a research technique in the social sciences involves a systematic search for the broader significance of the particular meanings implicit in specific socio-cultural situations. This search entails a process during which the investigator samples contrasting situations, questioning and conversing with respondents drawn from those situations and, at the same time, considers and evaluates competing general explanations for, or accounts of, the socio-cultural phenomena that are being examined.<sup>13</sup>

The object is to arrive at an explanatory account of the type of socio-cultural phenomena being investigated (in this case humiliation in its various forms). This account should make sense of the range of meanings encountered in terms of the rationales perceived by the groups being studied, mainly by locating the particular situations examined (in this case Somalia, Rwanda and Germany) within a broader conceptual or theoretical framework.

Such an account is provided in this paper. However, before giving this account it is necessary to show why the idea of humiliation presented itself to the researcher in the guise of a puzzle. When I discussed these issues with Jan Smedslund<sup>14</sup> in 1997, he commented: ‘Is not humiliation primarily the violation of human rights, the violation of my profoundest personal dignity as a human being?’ However, on the other side, Lee D. Ross was advising me to look at Dov Cohen’s and Richard E. Nisbett’s honour-based notion of humiliation.<sup>15</sup> The honour to which Cohen and Nisbett refer is the kind that operates in the more traditional branches of the Mafia or, more

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<sup>11</sup> Personal communication from Sam Engelstad (28.9.1999), quoted with his permission.

<sup>12</sup> This research has both required and drawn upon the researcher’s self-observation as Michel Quinn Patton writes, ‘In qualitative inquiry the researcher is the instrument. Validity in qualitative methods, therefore, hinges to a great extent on the skill, competence, and rigor of the person doing fieldwork’ (Patton 1990, 14; italics in original).

<sup>13</sup> See, for example, Bauman 1978; Scheff 1997; Rabinow and Sullivan 1979; Ricoeur 1981; Gadamer 1989.

<sup>14</sup> See also Smedslund 1988, 1993, 1997.

<sup>15</sup> See Cohen and Nisbett 1994 and 1997; Cohen et al 1996; Nisbett and Cohen 1994.

generally, in blood feuds, a scenario with which I was already very familiar as a result of working for seven years as a psychological counsellor in Egypt.

Humiliation as a violation of one's dignity; humiliation as a blemish upon one's honour: the question that quickly arose was whether humiliation meant the same thing in these two cases. The suspicion arose that the word humiliation might cover a number of different concepts. If it does, how do these concepts differ? The first task confronted in my research project was to unravel these conceptual complexities as the basis for further analysis.

In 1998 I started my fieldwork in Somalia where I carried out fifty interviews. I met with survivors of the quasi-genocidal onslaughts that had occurred in that society, reaching a peak in 1988. I was very moved by the survivors' accounts. I put myself into their shoes, as far as I could, and tried to empathise with their perspective. At the end of each interview I asked what forms of healing might be envisaged. I thought, for example, of truth commissions like in South Africa. I imagined victims and perpetrators talking to each other, the perpetrators asking for forgiveness after having listened to the victims' accounts, and the victims reaching a kind of 'catharsis' by opening up, speaking about their feelings, and being able to forgive.

I imagined that such a process would conclude in a mutually satisfactory way to be followed by peaceful co-existence between opponents. This way of thinking and feeling was in line with Smedslund's definition of humiliation as being a violation of the deepest core of personal dignity.

However, in the interviews another answer to the question about strategies for healing was given, repeatedly. It was as follows (1997, 1998, and 1999): 'The elders of the opposing groups (clans, sub-clans, or so-called diya-paying groups<sup>16</sup>) must sit together and talk. They should decide on the amount of compensation to be paid. Finally, in order to stabilise the situation in the long term, women should be exchanged between the groups for marriage. These women will embody the bridges between opposing groups, since they have their original family in one group and their children in the other.'

Whenever I got this response I was sharply reminded of my Western individualistic background as opposed to the much more collectivistic and group-oriented Somali view. Paying compensation and exchanging women was not at all what I had thought of. It would certainly have been the last thing I, as a European woman, would be willing to participate in myself. If I were one of the victims concerned, knowing that my clan had received compensation and that women were being exchanged would hardly satisfy me. I would certainly feel that my personal dignity required another kind of healing.

When I first heard these replies, I thought that the Somali concept of humiliation could be placed within the framework provided by Cohen and Nisbett. However, this was not an easy matter. In Somalia the clans seemed to define their situation as one of suffering from 'wrongs' and 'grievances' rather than from humiliation.

I continued my fieldwork in Rwanda and Burundi, conducting eighty-eight interviews there. In this case I found that yet another notion of humiliation seemed to prevail. In Somalia I had been

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<sup>16</sup> 'diya' means compensation for injuries.

among ‘proud’ and ‘free’ nomads who were not prepared to bow their heads before anyone. By contrast, Rwanda and Burundi are deeply hierarchical societies in which bowing down before those in authority is a longstanding practice. In fact, the degree of subservience reminded me irresistibly of Hitler’s Germany in some respects.

During 1999 I met many humanitarian aid workers who had worked both in Somalia and Rwanda. The prevailing view among them was that Somalia is the most difficult place in the world to work in ‘because Somalis are aggressively honest and tell you right in your face if they don’t like you.’ However, they added, ‘but at least you know where you stand.’ By contrast, in Rwanda, ‘people are much more polite, but you never know where you stand. People in Rwanda and Burundi are masters in manipulating information.’<sup>17</sup>

My uneasiness with the existing models of humiliation in the literature increased as I got deeper into the fieldwork. I discussed my puzzlement in all its various phases with my interviewees. My object was not only to examine the differences between diverging notions of humiliation but also to place them in larger anthropological contexts. The books and papers that I read and the conversations I conducted in Africa gradually ‘constructed’ this paper. As Steinar Kvale writes, ‘The conversation ... is not only a specific empirical method: it also involves a basic mode of constituting knowledge; and the human world is a conversational reality’ (Kvale 1996, 37).

## **Humbling nature, humbling human beings, dignifying humankind**

If we improve the clarity and sophistication of our perception of humiliation this will enhance our capacity to grasp and, hopefully, modify its effects. The capacity to humiliate and be humiliated are aspects of a dense web of ‘hot’ filaments wired into the tissue of culture, giving it a potentially explosive character that is too little recognised. This paper probes this dense web and explores how it acquired its present character. As I will suggest, our conceptualisation of humiliation has changed as our sense of human dignity has grown. A new characterisation of humiliation is presented, showing that it can be understood as not simply an extreme or marginal condition but a central feature of the social order. Viewed within this broader context, the elements that constitute humiliation may be recognised as fundamental mechanisms in the formation of modern society.

The term ‘humiliation’ has roots in the Latin word *humus*, or earth. Spatially, it entails a downward orientation, literally a ‘de-gradation.’ ‘Ned-verdigelse’ (Norwegian), ‘Er-niedrig-ung’ (German), ‘a-baisse-ment’ (French), all mean ‘de-gradation.’ All these words are built on the same spatial, *orientational* metaphor.<sup>18</sup> To humiliate is, clearly, to strike *down*, put *down* or take *down*.

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<sup>17</sup> It is relevant that Rwanda/Burundi is divided mainly between a traditional Tutsi elite forming a minority of approximately fourteen per cent of the population, and the historically subordinate Hutu comprising about eighty five per cent of the population. It should be added that the categories of ‘Hutu’ and ‘Tutsi’ were socially constructed, enforced and given a hard-and-fast character by the Belgian colonists.

<sup>18</sup> Lakoff and Johnson, 1980, describe orientational metaphors as up-down, in-out, front-back, on-off, deep-shallow, and central-peripheral.

Culturally embedded metaphors of this kind express the everyday working ‘logic’ immanent in a society’s habitus. As Scheff puts it, ‘In every society there is an “attitude of everyday life,” a life world, which most of its members assume, indeed, take for granted, most of the time. This world goes without saying to the point that it is invisible under most conditions. Elias and Bourdieu referred to it when they spoke of the habitus, our second nature, the mass of conventions, beliefs and attitudes, which each member of a society shares with every other member. The habitus is not the whole culture, but that part which is so taken for granted as to be virtually invisible to its members. As Geertz suggested, . . . , for the members of a society, the habitus is just “commonsense” (Scheff 1997, 219).

The habitus found in a particular society represents a particular realisation of the range of possibilities embedded in the available cultural repertoire. The point of this article is that the range of possibilities available for embodiment in the common-sense understandings of specific societies has changed over time.

The common sense, everyday meaning of humiliation which many of us accept at the start of the twenty-first century is the experience of a painful or punishing exposure to the negative judgement of other people in circumstances that are forced upon the victims concerned. This definition carries the implication that a very painful lesson is being imposed at the cost of the victims’ dignity and even their sense of identity. The idea of humiliation covers a wide range of experiences from being the object of genocide to being the victim of gossip. However, all behaviour that is designed to humiliate contravenes the normative expectations built into modern notions of human rights. Today it is regarded as being fundamentally wrong to humiliate people.

In this paper it will be argued that humiliation is not just a matter of feeling an emotion. It is a social process or, perhaps, a social mechanism. To be properly understood, humiliation should be seen within a wider context as a central aspect of the interaction between human beings and their social and natural environment. As will be explained, this interaction or ‘dialogue’ has passed through three distinctive phases whose effects have accumulated and interacted with each other to produce a complex and multi-layered cultural repertoire. This repertoire is one upon which human beings draw and by which they are guided, driven or constrained in their dealings with each other.

It will be argued here that at the very core of humiliation is the process by which human beings subject aspects of their environment to control. This has the effect of subordinating that part of the natural or human environment to the judgements and wishes of the subjugator. This process of subjugation leads to the instrumentalisation of the subjugated ‘piece of nature’ (e.g. cutting down a forest, tilling a plot of land) or the subjugated individuals or groups (e.g. reducing them to slavery). In extreme cases, subjugation may extend to destruction if the object of control is deemed useless or harmful.

This approach has some affinities with Zygmunt Bauman’s perception that nature was the victim of a ‘declaration of hostilities that made the unprocessed, pristine world into the enemy. As is the case with all genocide, the world of nature . . . had to be beheaded and thus deprived of autonomous will and power of resistance . . . The world was an object of willed action: a raw material in the work guided and given form by human designs . . . Left to itself, the world had no meaning. It was solely the human design that injected it with a sense of purpose. So the earth



became a repository of ores and other “natural resources,” wood turned into timber and water – depending on circumstances – into an energy source, waterway or the solvent of waste’ (Bauman 1992, x-xi).<sup>19</sup>

In this passage Bauman makes us see nature in a different way by according it the same dignity that the notion of human rights is designed to protect in the case of men and women. He imaginatively restores to nature its pristine autonomy and intrinsic meaning in a deliberately provocative or shocking way. This rhetorical device throws a switch that opens our eyes and enables us to recapture the process of assertion, resistance and subjugation that resulted in human domination over nature. The subjugation of nature has been a central feature of the programme of modern science, accepted as ‘normal,’ as Adorno and Horkheimer, among others, have argued.

This paper requires another effort of the imagination, one that also goes against the grain of conventional wisdom. It is necessary to imagine a situation in which the protection provided by the idea of human rights is absent because the very idea of human rights is absent from the cultural repertoire of humankind. In the case of hunting and gathering societies living close to subsistence their way of life was conducive to a situation of practical equality in everyday existence. This equality was not guaranteed by, and did not depend upon, the idea of human rights.

This state of approximate equality between individuals came to an end when some human beings asserted stable domination over other human beings, a condition that came to appear ‘normal.’ Feudalism, chiefdoms, absolutist states and empires all developed under these conditions of ‘normal’ inequality from which the ideal of equal human rights was absent.

However, at a still later stage it became ‘normal’ to assume that all human beings should enjoy equality of rights. All men and women came to be seen as deserving the human rights asserted in such documents as the American Declaration of Independence, the revolutionary French Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen and the United Nations’ Universal Declaration of Human Rights. In fact, the dominant culture within international organisations asserts that all forms of ‘tyranny’ and ‘dictatorship’ are a dire infringement of those rights.

It is possible to represent the three stages schematically with reference to key turning points in human development: the humbling of nature by humankind, the humbling of some human beings by others, and the dignifying of all humankind (see table one).

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<sup>19</sup> I owe this reference to Dennis Smith. See also Smith, 1999, on Bauman. As Smith points out, Bauman’s analysis overlaps with the approaches of critical theory (e.g. Adorno and Habermas) and post-structuralism (e.g. Foucault and Lyotard) but cannot be fully aligned with either.

TABLE ONE

THREE TURNING POINTS

I	II	III
THE HUMBLING OF NATURE BY HUMANKIND	THE HUMBLING OF SOME HUMAN BEINGS BY OTHERS	THE DIGNIFYING OF ALL HUMANKIND

To put it another way, the idea of humiliation contains three elements, which entered the cultural repertoire in three phases that coincided, approximately, with advances in technological and organisational capacity and shifts in the balance of power between humankind and nature and between human groups. During the first phase, the idea of subjugating nature entered the repertoire. In the next phase, the idea of subjugation (or ‘putting/keeping/striking down’) was extended to human beings. During the third phase, the idea became widespread that subjugating human beings was illegitimate, morally wrong.<sup>20</sup>

TABLE TWO

THE THREE ELEMENTS OF HUMILIATION

	Subjugation	of human beings	defined as illegitimate
Phase 1. Nature	X		
Phase 2. Human Beings	X	X	
Phase 3. Human Beings	X	X	X

The argument of this section has developed the insight that over the long term important developments occur within societies in respect of their ‘cultural repertoire’ (or ‘cultural scripts,’ ‘cultural myths,’ ‘cultural mindscapes,’ or ‘culture-logic’<sup>21</sup>). New reference points become established, new cultural landmarks that may be criticised and challenged but whose existence cannot easily be ignored: for example, the idea that it is acceptable to subjugate nature, the idea that unequal socio-political hierarchies are legitimate, and the notion of human rights. All cultures react to these reference points, self-reflexively or not, by adopting, modifying, or rejecting them.<sup>22</sup> Before the idea of human rights existed, nobody could make use of it. As soon

<sup>20</sup> In exploring further the cultural repertoire in which our contemporary idea of humiliation is embedded, it would be possible to draw upon the work of Smedslund (1988), where he attempts to formulate in explicit terms the implicit common-sense psychology embedded in everyday language and taken for granted by its users. He calls his system of definitions ‘Psycho-Logic.’

<sup>21</sup> C.f. Tomkins 1962-92; Tajfel 1984; Zerubavel 1997; Smedslund 1988.

<sup>22</sup> ‘Our views of what is good or bad, what is right and wrong, what is moral and immoral are, as George Kelly (1955) pointed out, largely personal-social *constructions*. The identification of universal truths is an

as this idea entered the repertoire, the situation changed radically. After that point, nobody who was informed was able to act without taking that notion into account, even if they ignored or overrode it.

## **Patterns of subjugation and dignification: Germany, Rwanda, Somalia**

On the basis of the framework developed in the previous part of the paper and my research in Africa the following four sets of propositions may be stated:

A) The humbling of some human beings by others was/is necessary for the establishment and maintenance of hierarchical systems of structured inequality. Before the idea of human rights entered the cultural repertoire, the reduction of human beings to servile status within such hierarchical systems was regarded as normal and acceptable, as was the imposition of suffering upon subordinates. The humbling process produced an attitude of humility mixed with latent resentment among the ‘conquered’ subordinates. This humility is typically mixed with other responses. One may be an acceptance that an unequal socio-political order is normal. This is likely to be the case in well-established long-standing hierarchical societies. Another is a desire, either in the form of fantasy or as a practical aim, to reverse the relationship and humble the dominant group. A third, likely to occur in cases where the hierarchical system is relatively new, the humility of the ‘underdogs’ may barely conceal their resentment and this is likely to be mixed with a desire to restore an earlier condition of social equality between groups.

B) Once the idea of human rights has entered the cultural repertoire, the reduction of human beings to servile status within hierarchical systems of structured inequality and the imposition of suffering upon them is delegitimised from the perspective of those societies, groups and agencies that accept the human rights principle. Also, the experience of being humbled is much more painful, being perceived as a humiliating attack upon the human dignity of the victims. Under a human rights regime, humiliation of this kind is regarded as unacceptable and far from ‘normal.’

C) The potential for genocide is particularly great in societies (a) which are in transition between a condition where humiliation is normal and acceptable and a condition where it is regarded as an infringement of human rights, and (b) in which an existing hierarchy is weakening or breaking down. This is because (i) high levels of fear and resentment are released by the weakening of a previously effective system of harsh domination (ii) this fear and resentment is felt between whole groups rather than simply between individuals, (iii) in such a society there are many people who are accustomed to the process of imposing and receiving intense suffering, and (iv) the existence of human rights criteria means that those who accept those criteria treat acts of humiliation not as the imposition of a hierarchical order but as the destruction of the essence of the victims’ humanity.

D) External forces, including neighbouring countries, world powers and international agencies, may play an important part in the dynamics of humiliation and genocide. The experience of daily humiliation within an unequal socio-political order may be compensated for by a strong sense of

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impossible task and all ethical beliefs have a constructive nature’ (Ellis and MacLaren 1998, 14, italics in original).

pride that the nation as a whole commands the respect of other nations. However, if the nation loses this respect and is humiliated by those other nations, this additional penalty increases the level of resentment, frustration, fear and anger within the society, making these energies available to be directed at plausible targets that come within reach.

How do these propositions illuminate the cases of Rwanda, Somalia and Germany? The three cases are not clones of each other but they each illustrate many of the above stated propositions as the following brief accounts will show.

*Rwanda:* Rwanda became a German colony in 1899 but was taken over by the Belgians in 1919 as a mandate territory of the League of Nations. Before European colonisation the region of Rwanda and Burundi had a recorded history of over two thousand years during which it had developed complex kingdoms with multiple hierarchies of competing officials who administered people, cattle, pasturage, and agricultural land. The people had developed a highly sophisticated language, and a common set of religious and philosophical beliefs.<sup>23</sup>

During the 1920s the European colonists created a mythical early history of ‘Tutsi’ and ‘Hutu.’ According to the fashionable but spurious ‘Hamitic hypothesis,’ a superior, ‘Caucasoid’ race from north-eastern Africa was responsible for all signs of true civilization in ‘Black’ Africa.<sup>24</sup> This distorted version of the past was disseminated through the schools and seminaries. As a result, ‘this faulty history was accepted by the Hutu, who stood to suffer from it, as well as by the Tutsi who helped to create it and were bound to profit from it. People of both groups learned to think of the Tutsi as the winners and the Hutu as the losers in every great contest in Rwandan history’ (Des Forges 1999<sup>25</sup>).

In other words, during the early and mid twentieth century European colonists simplified and intensified the system of structured inequality within Rwandan society. They reinforced the identification of the Tutsi, representing about fourteen percent of the total population, as the dominant Rwandan group. In fact, the ‘Tutsi’ were, in large part, a socially constructed category whose membership was determined by what was written in official papers rather than by any particular distinguishing ethnic characteristics.

A few years before the Belgians left Rwanda, some of the colonists began to favour Hutu, putting members of this group into senior administrative positions. In other words, they helped to create conditions under which the latent resentment of the humiliated underdog could, increasingly, find expression in acts of counter-humiliation against the old ruling group, the Tutsi.

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<sup>23</sup> See Des Forges 1999, also on <http://www.hrw.org/reports/1999/rwanda/>.

<sup>24</sup> ‘Tutsi have longer faces, their ladies are beautiful, they have long nails, they come from Arab countries, they are a mixture of Arab and white blood, therefore nearer to the whites than other Africans, they are almost relatives of the whites.’ For colonial perspectives, see, for example, Logiest 1982. Logiest was the last Belgian Belgian colonel before independence and he helped implement Hutu power in Rwanda during 1959.

<sup>25</sup> Quoted from <http://www.hrw.org/reports/1999/rwanda/>, Des Forges 1999.

Rwanda became independent in 1962.<sup>26</sup> Already in 1961 a Hutu-led government had proclaimed a republic and ended the former Tutsi-monarchy. In 1967, after a seven-year civil war some 20,000 Tutsi had been killed and more than 300,000 had been forced to flee abroad. Second-generation exiles formed the Rwandese Patriotic Front (RPF) and invaded Rwanda from Uganda in 1990. The Hutu, fearing the return of Tutsi rule, began the systematic wholesale massacre of those Tutsi who had remained inside Rwanda. The invasion from Uganda increased levels of anger and fear, especially fear of future domination by the Tutsi. The genocidal attack upon the Tutsi was not, in general, an outburst of popular fury but a bureaucratically organised campaign directed by the Hutu government.

*Somalia:* Somalia is a very proud society, as has already been noticed. This is the pride of a population which has, in large part, avoided the humbling processes associated with enduring and stable political centralisation. Ethnic Somalis are united by language, culture, devotion to Islam, and to a common ancestor, the Samaal.<sup>27</sup> Seventy five percent of the Somali population are traditionally pastoral nomadic clans (Dir, Daarood, Isaaq, and Hawiye). The agricultural Digil and Rahanwayn constitute only about 20 percent of the population.<sup>28</sup> During colonial times the North of Somalia was the 'British Protectorate of Somaliland,' while the rest of the country was 'Italian Trust Territory of Somalia.'<sup>29</sup>

An Australian humanitarian aid worker confirmed in an interview (29.11.1998) that he even today feels the effects of a very equal colonial relationship: 'The North of Somalia was a British protectorate: There was respect for the Somalis, there was a kind of equal relationship. When England gave away the Ogaden [or Haud, a semi-desert which England gave to Ethiopia against the promises they had given the Somalis], the Somalis were very angry: "You are our friends (!) how can you betray us!" And also the British officers were annoyed with London, who just gave

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<sup>26</sup> See the account of the Rwandan Embassy in Washington, <http://www.rwandemb.org/info/geninfo.htm>: 'In 1935 the Belgian colonial administration introduced a discriminatory national identification on the basis of ethnicity. Banyarwanda who possessed ten or more cows were registered as Batutsi whereas those with less were registered as Bahutu. At first, the Belgian authorities, for political and practical reasons, favoured the king and his chiefs, who were mostly a Batutsi ruling elite. When the demand for independence began, mainly by a political party - Union Nationale Rwandaise (UNAR) - formed by people from the mentioned ruling elite, the Belgian authorities hastily nurtured another party called PARMEHUTU that was founded on a sectarian ethnic ideology. Under the Belgian supervision, the first massacres of Batutsi at the hands of PARMEHUTU occurred in 1959. With Belgian connivance, PARMEHUTU abolished the monarchy amidst widespread violence. On July 1st, 1962 Belgium granted formal political independence to Rwanda' (capitalisation in original).

<sup>27</sup> See for example Ioan M. Lewis 1957, 1961, 1965, 1994.

<sup>28</sup> A minority exists which is not included in the six clan-families, among them occupationally specialised caste-like groups (whose daughters are not considered as being eligible for marriage by the six clan-families).

<sup>29</sup> This overview over the case of Somalia is based on the author's fieldwork in Somalia (1998, 50 interviews) and Kenya (1999, 62 interviews), and on Ameen Jan's briefing (1996) *Peacebuilding in Somalia*, <http://www.ipacademy.inter.net/somalia2.htm>, which was initiated by the International Peace Academy in New York. This briefing was based on a field visit to Nairobi and Mogadishu from 11 to 25 March 1996, an IPA Policy Forum entitled 'Peacebuilding Efforts in Somalia: Legacies of the International Intervention' held in New York on 23 April 1996, and on over 60 interviews conducted in the U.S., Kenya and Somalia between November 1995 and April 1996.

the Haud away as a kind of normal bargaining chip. So, there was a kind of partnership [between the Somalis and British].<sup>30</sup>

After independence in 1960, Somalia operated for a few years as a political democracy (1960-1969). This system was increasingly perceived as anarchic, a perception that allowed a dictatorial 'saviour' to seize power. President Mohammed Siad Barre assumed power and tried to create a more centralised political order. He fell from power in 1991. His position had been fundamentally weakened by his failed attempt to recapture the Ogaden from Ethiopia in 1978.<sup>31</sup> Somalia's defeat was a considerable humiliation that undermined Barre's political position. He attempted to preserve his power by finding scapegoats for the country's ills. In particular, he put the blame upon the Isaaq people in northern Somalia. The military were unleashed against the Isaaq population with the quasi-genocidal results that were described at the beginning of this paper.

When the Barre regime collapsed in 1991, Somalia became stateless. As a result, the Somali clans reclaimed their traditional independence. Faction fighting between the clans during the 1990s resulted in a great deal of bloodshed with many atrocities being carried out on all sides.

From the perspective adopted by international agencies such as the UN and by many Somali intellectuals, the excesses of the Barre regime were gross infringements of human rights as are many acts committed in the course of clan warfare after Barre fell.

However, it should be recognised that for many ordinary Somalis (as distinct from the intellectuals) the fall of Barre and the end of his dictatorial regime did not signify the acquisition of a new form of dignity associated with the recognition of human rights. Rather, it meant the recovery of an old form of pride based upon a relatively free and independent way of life unconstrained by hierarchical pressures. This was the traditional way of the Somali nomads, one that predated and resisted the attempted humbling of the Somali clans by the Barre regime.

*Comparing Germany with Somalia and Rwanda:* Unlike Somalia, Germany between the two world wars was a society in which both the humbling of human beings and their dignification had taken place, generating a sharp conflict between two social and psychological tendencies. Norbert

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<sup>30</sup> Concerning the historic facts, see for example Mazrui 1986. Many people I talked to in the North of Somalia, namely self-proclaimed Somaliland (1998), were proud of the 'equal' colonial relationship with the British, see for an intense illustration Hanley 1971.

<sup>31</sup> The colonial powers split the Somali people five ways. There was during the colonial period a British Somaliland, an Italian Somaliland and a French Somaliland. A section of the Somali people was also absorbed separately into Kenya under British colonial rule. The fifth component became the Ogaden, a section of Ethiopia. The dream of independence for the Somali was in part a dream of reunification. Two of the components were indeed reunited at independence - former Italian Somaliland and former British Somaliland coalesced into the new Republic of Somalia. But neither Kenya nor Ethiopia were prepared to relinquish those areas of their colonial boundaries which were inhabited by ethnic Somali. As for French Somaliland, this became the separate independent Republic of Djibouti. 'Most other African countries are colonially created states in search of a sense of nationhood. The Somali, by contrast, are a pre-colonial nation in search of a unified post-colonial state. Most other African countries are diverse peoples in search of a shared national identity. The Somali are already a people with a national identity in search of territorial unification' (Mazrui, 1986, 69-71).

Elias has written eloquently about the desire for externally imposed discipline inherent in the German psyche during the early twentieth century. As he puts it, ‘the drive control of the individual [was]...highly dependent on strong external state power.’ In his view, ‘The emotional balance, the self-control of the individual was endangered if this external power was lacking’ (Elias 1994, 512).<sup>32</sup>

Germany was a society in which humiliation was a daily experience for social inferiors. Since at least the eighteenth century, ‘Particularly at the smaller and relatively poorer courts of the German empire it was customary to make social inferiors emphatically aware of their subordinate position’ (Elias 1993, 95). During 1918 and 1919 Germany suffered a humiliating defeat in war. In this respect there are parallels with both the Somalian failure to retake Ogaden and the Rwandan government’s failure to protect its borders against the Rwandan Patriotic Front. Germany’s military defeat was accompanied by the loss of its old political class, the *Junker* aristocracy, most of whom retired to their estates. Again there are parallels with events in Rwanda (the end of Tutsi rule) and Somalia (the failing power of Barre).

It is obvious that the particular timing and sequencing differs between the three cases. However, the main point is that in Germany, Rwanda and Somalia national humiliation was confronted within a polity in which an unequal socio-political structure had become weakened. In all three cases, the intense fear and anger released was directed by the state against a group (the Jews, the Tutsi, the Isaaq) who were defined as a threat to the rest of the population.

## **Concluding remarks**

Three concluding remarks will be made. The first is that international agencies, if they wish to be effective, need to understand the dynamics of the cultural repertoire within the societies with which they are concerned. If it is desired to influence the thought and behaviour of members of a society, it is helpful to know where that society stands in respect of the three ‘key turning points’ identified in table one.

An appeal to the principle of human rights will have little direct effect upon a regime whose members regard systematic oppression within an unequal socio-political hierarchy as perfectly normal and proper. Nor will it exercise much influence in a society in which such hierarchies have only existed in an intermittent and transient fashion. Rwanda is an example of the former type of society, Somalia of the latter.

Despite Barre’s efforts, the people of Somalia have not been the victim of a sustained humbling process. Nor has its population at large undergone the process of dignification that was elsewhere promoted as an antidote or remedy for the subservience produced within political orders built upon inequality and the principle of hierarchy. This should not be misunderstood. Somalis are amongst the proudest people on the planet and have a high degree of personal dignity. However, it did not require a process of dignification to produce these characteristics. A people that has not been systematically humbled (like the Rwandans or the Germans) does not require a process of dignification to compensate for this.

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<sup>32</sup> See also Elias 1996.

Interwar Germany was a society in which the everyday experience of humiliation within a strict hierarchical order had been normalised but in which an idea of citizenship grounded in human rights (irrespective of ethnicity and religion) had also made significant headway. However, the latter tendency was decisively reversed under Hitler with tragic results for the Jews.

More generally, the ideal of human rights was available, to educated urbanites at least, in all three of the societies discussed. However, in Germany during the late 1930s and early 1940s, in Somalia during the late 1970s and in Rwanda during the early 1990s, the central tendency was elsewhere (see table three).

TABLE THREE  
PATTERNS OF SUBJUGATION AND DIGNIFICATION

	SUBJUGATION	DIGNIFICATION
+	Germany 1918-45 Rwanda	(Germany 1918-45) ((Rwanda)) ((Somalia))
-	Somalia	Somalia Rwanda

( ) = indicates a weak tendency (( )) = indicates a very weak tendency

+ = process has occurred      - = process has not occurred

The second set of conclusions relates to the need for international agencies to be aware of the tendency for their interventions to be perceived as humiliating by the recipients. The dominant model in terms of which the poor ‘South’ regards the rich ‘North’ is shaped by the experience of colonialism. This was a very significant example of the humbling process whereby some human beings subjugated others, a process which normalised humiliation on a very large scale. In this case the aggressors were the Europeans (with the Americans being regarded as, in many respects, their successors) while the humiliated victims were the colonised peoples.

The liberation of the ex-colonies, including Rwanda and Somalia, has been a process of dignification, one in which the newly-independent nations have asserted their right to be respected within the international order. Paradoxically, this process whereby new nations are released from colonial subjection and acquire new dignity often goes hand in hand with strict hierarchical subordination within those societies, even to the extent of either denying basic human rights to the population or refusing to give them in reality despite the existence of constitutions that supposedly guarantee them.



If international agencies, or powerful 'Northern' states acting on behalf of those agencies criticise the newly-independent nations or try to intervene in their affairs, this is likely to be interpreted as an attempt to impose the will of the 'imperialist' powers and take away the national dignity so recently acquired. For example, a human rights campaign that is described by the international community as an attempt to recognise and respect the human *dignity* of people in the society concerned may be opposed on the grounds that it is an attempt to reimpose *subjugation* upon that society.

The depth of this suspicion is very great. It stems from the profound humiliation that has, historically, been imposed by the rich upon the poor globally in the course of European and, later, American expansionism. As the global political economy becomes steadily more complex and interdependent, the elites of Europe and the United States will increasingly find themselves dealing with and, in many instances, relying upon the good will of, educated professionals and businesspeople from nations they have humiliated in the past. Such people can be valuable friends or dangerous enemies. Globally, the breakdown of the old imperial order has released deep emotions of anger, frustration and resentment. The dead American soldier dragged through Mogadishu should serve as a warning of the need to be serious in promoting human rights and the human dignity that accompany them.

Finally, it is clear that much more research is needed on this theme. Mapping the minefield of humiliation is an urgent task.

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