Regaining Dignity:

Social and Cultural Dimension of Sustainable Development in Europe[1]

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Abstract:

In order for the transitions in Europe to be sustainable developments the ongoing social and cultural changes need to be taken into consideration. The most urgent challenges arguably involve two inter-connected psycho-social processes, *identity crisis* on social and individual level and a *crisis in values*. In my research I am focusing on *dignity* and the cultural and social aspects of *regaining dignity*. Cognitive restructuring via dignity helps establish the paradigms of a human rights framework, the conundrum of which is the identification and interpretation of shared value systems.

Keywords

dignity, sustainable development, human rights, identity crises, value crises, humiliation

Introduction

In order to attain sustainable development in Europe aspects of currently ongoing social and cultural processes need to be studied on various trans-disciplinary levels. Europe is undergoing transitions due to its expansion, the concurrent effects of rapid global changes and extensive mobility amongst others. These transitions bring along complex cultural and social changes, which require adjustment to. However, many attempts of assimilation have not been successful, for various reasons. In order to encourage successful adjustment - to achieve integration – as opposed to the failing assimilation in a "new" Europe, the social and cultural exchanges need to be assessed in view of the need for *unity in diversity* in our increasingly interdependent world. The basis

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[1] This text is part of a working project of my PhD, and is a summary/ part of my other research papers and presentations as well as comments, findings, and notes from attended conferences and discussions with academics, professionals, and friends, including Evelin Lindner, Elena Mustakova – Possardt, Berto Jongman, Thomas Pick and Reuven Paz.

for a sustainable future is a stable economic, political and social order and peace in which dignity plays a significant part. The role of dignity in achieving sustainable development is not merely rhetorical but rather practical as I will try to prove in the following.

In my PhD I study the process of regaining dignity and I apply my findings to the scrutiny of the manifestations of this process in post-apartheid South African literature. The South African is a transitional society, which after many years of an oppressive system, which grossly violated human rights, is in the process of becoming a tolerant and democratic society. However it is a long and challenging transition. The problems in South Africa, where I have lived for years, are much greater than in Europe (poverty, HIV/AIDS epidemic, inequality, unemployment, crime… just to mention the most pressing ones). In my PhD I intend to construct a working inter-disciplinary theory of the process of regaining and maintenance of dignity. I study the process in view of its growing global relevance in connection with human rights, identity issues, transitional justices (acknowledgment, reconciliation – as a form of restorative justice, apology and forgiveness) mainly I study dignity as a personal and social occurrence.[2] This paper, however, is about the theoretical concept of the *maintenance* of dignity and its importance in transitional societies.

The concept of dignity

Whether a quality or state of being worthy of esteem or respect, dignity is a very complicated and sensitive issue for various reasons. Still, a sense of worth is of utmost importance to all of us[3]. The deliberate degradation of the worth of others has been a recurrent power-tool throughout history.

In the past few decades the role of dignity has changed significantly worldwide especially in countries, which underwent or are undergoing radical political changes. Despite its equivocal nature, dignity is not outdated but instead recognized as of vital significance. There are references to human dignity in various resolutions and

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[2] For abstract on longer papers on these please see
http://www.humiliationstudies.org/research/teamlong.php#luckay
[3] Even if some people deliberately downplay it – martyr, victim syndrome.

declarations by international bodies[4] and it is a human right protected by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union and the constitution of many countries including South Africa and Slovakia.

The concept of dignity is a matter of concern to various disciplines because of its philosophical, social, psychological, ethical, moral, political, historical, human rights, aesthetic and cultural aspects. The fact that various disciplines do concern themselves with the notion suggests that it is an underlying matter. Each field of study adds to the understanding of the term and they are simultaneously valid, illuminating different aspects of dignity, therefore an inter-disciplinary approach is the most helpful in scrutinising the concept since the various definitions are not mutually exclusive rather they are reciprocally complementing.

Dignity as a normative vs. qualitative concept

Probably the most prevalent use of the 'dignity' in political, social and legal fields is in light of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (based on the Kantian definition), which declares 'the inherent and equal dignity of all human beings'. The obvious question rises however. If we all have dignity because we are human, why is it than that some people behave in ways like if they did not have dignity or deliberately treat others as such. The declaration that we have dignity does not render the sense of having it neither does it necessarily motivate behaviour accordingly, suggesting that dignity is not necessarily static. 'Dignity' therefore, apart form being a normative concept, is also a quality. As opposed to human dignity, as an absolute underlying normative value, 'dignity' as a quality is flexible and varies with circumstances. Without knowing more about how dignity is part of our life, our behaviour, if at all, it will remain a mere declaration. Earlier understandings of 'dignity of man' have to be revisited in the light of new discoveries and knowledges while 'dignity' has to be studied also as a social not merely a philosophical phenomena.

The different perceptions of what constitutes dignity motivate various behaviours, therefore the pronouncement of norms, principles as rights of/to dignity will neither help

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[4] For a longer list see Oscar Schachter. 'Human Dignity as a Normative Concept' in *The American Journal of International Law*, Vol. 77, No. 4, (Oct., 1983), pp. 848-854. p. 848.

understand dignity as part of human nature nor lead to creating and maintaining sustainable circumstances for a tolerant and peaceful life. Studying how dignity is perceived as opposed to how it should be perceived is therefore a key starting point. It is productive to differentiate between described and prescribed approaches to the concept.

It is profoundly different to talk about how dignity is perceived by people, what it means or what it entails for us, than to talk about what it should be and how we should hold and keep it. The ethical and moral comprehension of dignity is not separate from the social, quite the contrary. The prescribed mode of characterising dignity and the behaviour it ought to entail is a guiding principle. However, in order to enforce the normative we have to arrive at a better understanding of the qualitative notion, which involves studying how dignity works. It involves studying – to put it bluntly - the attribution of worth to others (culturally, socially specific as such dependent on history, economy etc.) and the expectation of appreciation of worth, that is the degree of self-worth and how it is affected by the environment and changes in social circumstances.

Keeping dignity

Dignity cannot be granted or given – however much we treat someone with dignity, respect or consideration, it does not mean that they have or feel it. This is due to the 'self' aspects of dignity (self-esteem, self- respect etc.). If one does not consider one worthy than it is difficult, if possible at all, to make them value themselves, which motivates servitude-like behaviour, deliberate self-degradation, victimisation, martyrdom, depression etc. False self-evaluation can work the other way around too, when one considers oneself superior etc. Hence dignity cannot as such been given, nor taken away for the same psychological reasons. A legal protection of it – even on an international level- will also not make it appear.

Dignity cannot be enforced by law. The obvious question is 'How does one force people to value others.' However, the circumstances, which allow it to be upheld can be created and maintained. In unjust political systems (like apartheid or communism) the circumstances for maintaining dignity are rather difficult or lacking altogether. Nonetheless, the end of an oppressive system does not entail the consequential appearance of dignity. These political transitions, albeit positive require new frames of

references and the adjustments of value systems. Discarding old values is neither an easy nor a speedy process, it involves coming to terms with the past and present injustices and often overcoming real or perceived humiliations. Another pressing issue as far as circumstances of the maintenance of dignity are concerned is poverty and inequality, which are global problems. Only whence the basic necessities for survival are meat (housing, sustenance, medical care and education) can we talk of possibilities for the maintenance of dignity.

European Union: Dignity and Human Rights

Within the European Union the relevance of dignity – apart form the obvious human need - lies in the Union's aspiration to a Human Rights framework. However, there is a precipice between the rights set forth in the UDHR and the practices of people – not juts in the EU – but worldwide. The latest Amnesty International Report from 27 May 2008 paints a dire picture of the state of human rights around the world. Europe did not receive compliments in terms of human rights protection conduct either. Secretary General of Amnesty International Irene Khan in the report on 'The State of the Human Rights'' in connection with Europe says: "It is also sadly true that this region, which regards itself as a beacon of human rights, still embraces a yawning gap between rhetoric and reality, standards and application, principles and performance."[5]

Sustainable development is not only the aim of South Africa or Europe but a global aim, consequently it cannot be tackled in isolation but requires a global scale intervention, which however has to start on local levels. In the state of the world we are in with growing inequality, energy and food crises and security dilemmas the tasks ahead are so numerous that they seem overwhelming. Still most of us in the European Union live under circumstances, which are much better than most of the rest of the world. If we want to live up to and remain the 'beacon of human rights' we need to lead by example, we need to walk the talk. And we need to do so in a dignified and dignifying manner.

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[5] http://thereport.amnesty.org/eng/regions/europe-and-central-asia

Dignity and humiliation

Why and how is dignity such a pressing issue. Dignity is not only about inner well-being, being in peace with our situation. It is more, because our sense of worth and it being recognised or not by others motivates us, it affects our action or inaction. If our sense of worth is not recognised or we feel that it is not respected we can feel humiliated and than estranged, alienated, which can lead to feelings of resentment, anger and aggression and ultimately violence. Founding Director of the *Human Dignity and Humiliation Studies Global network*, social scientist Evelin Lindner, in her book titled *Making Enemies*[6] describes this rarely studied emotion. She maintains that "human beings yearn for connection, recognition and respect, and that its withdrawal or denial, experienced as humiliation, maybe the strongest force that creates rifts between people and breaks down relationships"[7]. In the introduction to her book she says: "the power of humiliation to destroy everyone and everything in its path makes it a 'nuclear bomb of emotions". Seen from this perspective humiliation, as one of the experiences, that potentially undermine ours sense of dignity gains more immediate and urgent relevance.

Dignity and Integration

The concept of dignity is socially and culturally embedded and as such it is useful to view it not only as a stable (the Kantian human dignity) but also a flexible construct, as a quality. As a quality it involves constant revisiting and renegotiation in relation to our place in the world and the changing circumstances around us. As a human right it is more wholesome when it is not decontexualised from the whole declaration (UDHR) but read together with the 29th article. It is not only our right to dignity, which needs to be upheld but our responsibilities also, as article 29 states: "Everyone has duties to the community in which alone the free and full development of his personality is possible."

Dignity has psychological aspects but it is also a social phenomena, it is not maintained in isolation but within and via the community we live in. The recognition of our worth happens by the immediate surroundings hence it is not a matter of importance but a matter of essence. Worth can only exist in relation to the others. Recognition is

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[6] Evelin G. Lindner. *Making Enemies*. Westport, CT, London: Greenwood Press and Praeger Publishers, 2006.
[7] http://www.humiliationstudies.org/whoweare/evelin.php

hence the first step toward the acceptance in the community. Therefore the role of dignity is crucial for 'integration' - or if integration is too ambitious – 'peaceful coexistence' between individuals and communities, which in turn is prerequisite to sustainable development.

Integration – or assimilation - is often resisted. The resistance manifests itself differently but the underlying core motivation is the same: the urge for ones worth to be recognised and respected. As diverse people, all carrying their cultures and their values ingrained in them, meet the values relativise each others'. This can be perceived as a potential loss, threat of the loss or betrayal of values, which is quite naturally resisted. Humans are willing to go into great lengths in order to preserve values and defend them against real or perceived assaults even at the expense of self and others. This can manifest itself in deliberate self-devaluing and victimization or in violent forms against others such as racism, xenophobia, nationalism, and ultimately radicalisation such as terrorism etc.. Whether the values being defended and preserved are based on religion or tradition is (as far as dignity is concerned) irrelevant because their aim is the same, recognition and respect. There is nothing wrong with yearning for recognition as long as it does not disrupt the social balance that is as long as the values are not forced on others and a peaceful coexistence is maintained, which is often not the case.

In order to achieve peaceful coexistence, which involves circumstance that allow one to maintain dignity there is a need for establishing an underlying value system, which all people accept and which also allows space for the respect of diverse values rooted in culture and tradition. In a sense morals and ethics have been striving for this since time in memoriam and that is what human rights have always been about. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights established them once again after the horrifying brutalities of the second world war. The underlying guiding principle of the human rights is indeed dignity. Dignity is not a value but a recognition of the importance of worth and values. Human dignity in the human rights framework is hence exactly that underlying value the need of which I was describing above.

However, despite the rhetoric of human rights, dignity and multiculturalism, in practice we see hatred of various kind, nationalism, xenophobia, racism etc. flare up very easily. (If we think of the recent xenophobic violence in South Africa or closer to home

the racist violence in southern Italy). These sad events make us reconsider whether the underlying human dignity Cicero, Mirandola, Pufendorf, Kant and others have declared exists at all and even if it does whether it is distributed equally to all humans. Maybe the inherent dignity also requires faith, maybe it requires our belief in it.

Radicalisation is also a growing problem (part of the security dilemma) in Europe. It is however superficial, short-sighted and indeed potentially dangerous to deem perpetrators of radical acts as mere deviants. Instead the root causes of these problems have to be tackled. In-depth investigation often seems to lead to lack of recognition or violations of perceived worth. Whether the bases for the perceived worth are real or imaginary is irrelevant because the actions, which result from them are very real. Therefore a dismissal of those who do not act in line with the Human rights and do not follow the set norms and principles will not help in creating circumstances, which would prevent acts like this in the future and aid sustainable development.

It is dignity as a quality, which has to be studied. It is important to know and how people, communities, societies *perceive* worth, what dignity is for *them* and not merely what it should be. In order for that sociological, psychological, philosophical, legal, historical, economic, moral, cultural, ethical etc. aspects all need to be considered. In-depth study of psychology is prerequisite because of the earlier mentioned strong 'self' aspects, like self-esteem, self- respect. The social and cultural relevance of dignity however resides in the reality that dignity exists through the contact with others. In the following I will briefly explore some of the psycho-social factors of dignity.

Identity and Value Crises

Two interconnected problems can be identified, which are clearly causing circumstances, which make the maintenance of dignity difficult. The one is identity crises, due to identities being perceived in binary oppositions and the other is that of value crises, which is connected to the hierarchical vertical evaluation of worth.

Without getting into much detail about the psychology of identities allow me to pose some basic concepts. We all have various social roles. The identities, some of which are arbitrary while some are inherent, they overarch the social roles and we negotiate them constantly. However the interchangeable use of 'self' and 'identity' is misleading.

The person as a system of identities is the broadest concept, which encompasses various identities that are not necessarily equal.

Political -and religious- ideologies force us into identity traps, presenting identities in binary opposition – 'you are either with us or against us'. Applied ethics and political psychology professor of the University of Cape Town, Peter Du Preez explains that "locutions such as 'the role of a woman' or 'the role of the Basque' are usually attempts to pre-empt the implications of womanhood or 'Basqueness' for a particular purpose."[8] Du Preez explains that, "[T]hey are, when they are not specific, attempts to absorb categories of persons to particular roles; to make these roles of such importance that anyone of the designated category who fails to perform them can be made to feel guilty or ashamed"[9]. The guilt or shame springs form the proposed failure the conform. They can be enforced because they are based on our natural need to group and belong. The guilt is a psychological aspect, which occurs because the non-conformation is deemed wrong, manifesting itself through shame, which come form the surroundings. In some circumstances one can be shamed and made to feel guilty *or* conform. But the choices are limited, and these are exactly circumstances, which do not allow one to maitain dignity. (This certainly leads to debates on authority and connected issues.)

This artificially induced dilemma, which has an underlying, political religious or national etc. aim leads to the second problem, that of value crises. Since the social roles have values attached to them, which are 'made important', they pre-empt implications of what constitutes that particular category. What makes a woman, (or a Basque) are proclamations, which attribute values to these categories, within a frame of which behaviour has to be excused or justified. This means passing value judgement on the whole person –by assigning her an identity - based on one of the components of the self. Most importantly it is not an identity that has been *chosen* but one, which has been *assigned* to that person. This deliberate assignment of identities could spring form a fear of allowing individuals and groups to define their own identity. While another aspect of the crises is based on the mis/abuse of the emotional intolerance - or fear- of accepting the different identities within our selves.

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[8] Du Preez, Peter. *The Politics of Identity: Ideology and the Human Image*. (Oxford: Blackwell, 1980) p 6.
[9] Ibid.

The maintenance, insurance of spaces for negotiating our own identities within the self and via the other is of crucial importance. To be able to choose, or decide our identity is a circumstance necessary for upholding dignity. Therefore a constant deconstructive approach is needed in order to bear in mind –despite the traps – that identities and roles are neither mutually exclusive nor constant categories.

Conclusion

As a conclusion, I urge for attention to studying the perceptions of dignity and to finding ways of creating circumstances, which allow it to be upheld. I firmly believe that it is of crucial importance. We have to move away from potentially humiliating practices – which can undermine our sense of dignity. Instead in the spirit of unity and diversity, we should aim for building coexistence[10] based on mutual trust, recognition and acceptance of differences as the underlying framework. That is the only way to sustainable development in these periods of transition and global interdependence.

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[10] (http://www.brandeis.edu/coexistence/)