

Invading the Mind and Controlling Population Groups: The Power of Systemic Humiliation

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Abstract

Humiliation is an emotion of social disgrace, a feeling of being mortified, self-abased and degraded, typically experienced in one-on-one encounters. But another context for humiliation centers on the routine operations of social systems with its instruments used to distort the self-image of a population group, undermine their sense of self-worth, and foster a feeling of inferiority. These are instruments of systemic humiliation, which is the primary topic of this dignilogue. Residing beneath the surface of an administrator's "reasonable decisions," "essential directives", and "common sense policies," such instruments reveal subterranean forces of population control that are designed to weaken the will of marginalized people, rendering them compliant to, and possibly complicit in, the norms of a society of rank-ordering. These are instruments that target society's marginalized groups—Africans Americans, the poor and people with mental disabilities. Four kinds of instruments can be identified, each of which is deployed by the system's officials, agents, operators and bureaucrats who are simply doing their job. No one person is solely responsible, so culpability cannot be localized to a single person.

Personal Introduction

Daniel Rothbart is Professor of Conflict Analysis and Resolution at George Mason University. He currently chairs the Sudan Task Group—an organization that seeks to build long-term peace in this East African country—and he co-chairs the Program for the Prevention of Mass Violence at his home institution.