

We Are All Humiliated

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University College Dublin

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Sociologist Richard Sennett has written:

“Lack of respect, though less aggressive than an outright insult, can take an equally wounding form. No insult is offered another person, but neither is recognition extended; he or she is not seen—as a full human being whose presence matters.

When a society treats the mass of people in this way, singling out only a few for recognition, it creates a scarcity of respect, as though there were not enough of this precious substance to go around. Like many famines, this scarcity is man-made; unlike food, respect costs nothing. Why, then, should it be in short supply?”

- 2003. *Respect: The Formation of Character in a World of Inequality*. London: Allen Lane.

I wish to explore the scarcity of respect in modern society from the point of view of agentless or *systemic humiliation*. Systemic humiliation is when although none was intended the insult is received, the slight acknowledged, the put-down is felt, the rejection absorbed and the body/mind mobilises its destructive and devious response in cavernous interiors. There is an epidemic in western societies from which people are literally suffering and dying the ‘death of a thousand cuts’. Many of our ‘social problems’ have their roots here.

I hope to examine two main sources of systemic humiliation in contemporary western societies: firstly, exclusion due to the privileging of certain key identities through the selection process of institutionalisation, and secondly through relative social inequality.