

Applying the Concepts of 'Stigma' and 'Dehumanization' to the Study of Inequalities

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Abstract:

Inequalities are complex and multifaceted social phenomena that must be scrutinised and tackled with all the theoretical (and practical) resources at our disposal. This piece departs from the assumption that it is important to broaden the scope of research about inequalities and go beyond the most common approaches to the topic, such as studies which focus on the structures that produce and perpetuate inequalities. In the contemporary world there are a variety of types of inequalities based on identities related not only to social class, but also to gender, religion, race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, and so on. I will argue that, by focusing on the individual, the concept of "stigma", as introduced by Erving Goffman, alongside the mechanisms of "dehumanization" and "infrahumanization", as currently studied in the fields of neurosciences and social psychology, may contribute to a better understanding of patterns of reproduction and reinforcement of inequalities in contemporary societies. They are also useful for devising strategies to rehumanize those that live at the margins of society. In fact, it is part of the research agenda of social psychologists and neuroscientists that have been studying processes of dehumanization and infrahumanization to conceive measures that could contribute to abolish (or at least reduce) the proclivity of certain perpetrators to dehumanize other human beings. I will finally argue that the branches of social sciences that most commonly study inequalities at a macro level (economics and sociology) or a microlevel (anthropology) would greatly benefit from coming into closer contact with the research on dehumanization and infrahumanization being undertaken in the fields of social psychology and neurosciences, and vice-versa.

INTRODUCTION

Inequality/inequalities is/are the most salient feature of contemporary societies, one that structures nearly all social life and its different spheres as defined in the work of Weber (2003). It is true that it has always been an attribute of humanity. Former nomadic groups of hunters and gatherers adopted sedentary habits and the first human settlements were founded concomitantly to the start of domestication of animals and the cultivation of plants for consumption around 12,000 years ago. Subsequently, more complex forms of organizing communities evolved in which different functions were attributed to individuals, and hierarchy and inequality among them developed into a permanent component of human societies (Harari, 2011). More recently, much has been said and written about how the (shocking and ever-increasing) levels of economic and social inequality have been destroying the very fabric of community life and generating huge distances (of economic, social, and cultural

natures³) among citizens within national societies and across nations. In highly unequal places, such as Latin America, the poorest are deprived of the most basic needs that make life liveable. On the other hand, the very rich consume in excess, including superfluous and luxury items that are outside the reach of the poor. Inequality has been the subject of study from different theoretical perspectives and all branches of social sciences and beyond. Prominent economists (e.g., Sen, 1997 and Stiglitz, 2015), sociologists (e.g. Medeiros, 2005), anthropologists (e.g. Holston, 2008), philosophers (e.g. Zizek, 2019), and psychologists (e.g. Keith Payne, 2017) have been illuminating various aspects of the issue (and proposing concrete solutions). Thomas Piketty, arguably the most important contemporary economist specializing in inequality, takes a historical approach to explain how the rich foster ideologies to hinder wealth distribution⁴. In his view, it is important to scrutinize not only income disparities, as is usually done by economists, but the wealth accumulated and inherited by the very rich⁵ (Piketty, 2017 [2013]).

Before the Enlightenment, inequality was seen as part of the natural (divine) order of the universe. In the eighteenth century, as the *philosophes*, drawing on rational thought and the new episteme of modern science, began to challenge deep-seated truths and the sacred view of the world espoused by established religions, inequality came to be gradually de-naturalized⁶. Subsequently, economic and social inequality progressively acquired negative connotations. It was increasingly denounced, and political strategies were devised to reduce or overcome it.

In the realm of literature, for example, Victor Hugo offered a critical depiction, in his novel *Les Misérables*, first published in 1862, of the intrinsic injustice embedded in the unequal social relations in France at that time. On the other hand, around the mid-nineteenth century, Karl Marx related the deepening of the processes of inequality to capitalism and modernity. His politically engaged study of capitalism and the exploitation of the working classes by the owners of the means of production during the Industrial Revolution in Europe had a long-lasting influence in western philosophy and political thought.

Marxism has since proved to be one of the most fecund philosophical traditions in the history of ideas. It has been appropriated and re-elaborated by different posthumous philosophical and sociological intellectual heirs. Antonio Gramsci and the philosophers and social scientists affiliated to the Frankfurt School made particularly important contributions to the *aggiornamento* of Marxism to turn it into a theoretical tradition useful for understanding our contemporary societies, especially by giving preponderance to the cultural sphere (the superstructure). This was mostly neglected by Marx as a mere by-product or mirror of the underlying economic structures. None of the main thinkers affiliated to the Frankfurt School (Theodor Adorno, Walter Benjamin, Herbert Marcuse, Erich

³ We learned from Pierre Bourdieu the importance of the role of the educational and cultural systems in the reproduction of shared values and aesthetic preferences (tastes) among elite groups and, therefore, in the reinforcement and perpetuation of class positions and social inequalities.

⁴ See the article "How McKinsey Destroyed the Middle Class", by Daniel Markovits, published in 2020, in *The Atlantic*, for a convincing explanation of the making of the most powerful (and resilient) of these ideologies. It shapes an influential worldview across nations and social classes that basically sells a system of ever-increasing inequality and concentration of wealth as necessary for the health of the economy and the whole society.

⁵ Marcelo Medeiros and Antonio Cattani argue in similar terms.

⁶ Rousseau's *Discourse on the Origin and Basis of Inequality Among Men* is an important precursor in this endeavour. It is pioneering in its consistent attack on private property.

Fromm, Max Horkheimer, Jurgen Habermas and so on) studied inequality as such in a specific way. However, by sophisticating the understanding of the individual, society and the place of the individual in society, those thinkers paved the way for other social scientists and philosophers to broaden the scope of research about inequality.

It is important to notice that, more recently, the notion of inequality has been, so to speak, “fragmented”, with reference being made to various and interconnected forms of inequalities. To the same extent that class identity weakened in post-industrial societies, new various types of identities (based on race, ethnicity, gender, religion, birthplace, age, and so on) emerged or acquired greater importance. As a result, we inhabit today a world of multiple social positions where identities are at the forefront of contemporary societies (Bauman, 2001).

In this article, I propose an alternative, highly important as they are, to the most common approaches to inequality taken by social scientists who usually focus their studies at the macro socio-economic level and its connections to issues such as economic development (e.g. Kenneth, 2014; Birdsall et al., 2014), social mobility (e.g., Torche, 2005; Cattani, 2012), knowledge building in slums and decoloniality (e.g., Imas and Weston, 2012), urban design (e.g., Caldeira, 1996), social policy proposals (e.g., Lépore and Lapp, 2018), and so on. Instead, I will concentrate my attention on the consequences of *inequalities* to the deep inner self of the poor/underprivileged/marginalised/destitute/invisible individuals that strive to earn a living in the countryside, in informal settlements and poor neighbourhoods, and on the streets and sidewalks of the cities around the world, particularly in the Global South (and more specifically in Latin America).

To fulfil this objective, I will draw on two main sources: (i) the concept of “Stigma” as introduced by Erving Goffman (1990 [1963]) in his influential book *Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity*; and (ii) on the scholarship in the field of social psychology and neurosciences about “dehumanisation” and “infrahumanisation”.

“CONSTRUÇÃO” (“CONSTRUCTION”) BY CHICO BUARQUE

To illustrate the topic of this article, I will begin by quoting the lyrics of a famous song (“Construção”) made by Chico Buarque (1971) —a Brazilian musical genius -- during one of the hardest times in Brazilian recent history, the latest military dictatorship (1964-1985). In “Construção”, he offers a piece of what one may refer to as engaged art/music (a label usually associated with clichéd, platitudinal artwork). Chico Buarque’s song, however, is touching and beautiful, while, at the same time, conveying a powerful social critique. One that touches the deeper layers of the soul, so to speak, rather than the intellectual mind—as only artistic language can do. It depicts a situation in which a mechanism of dehumanization is in action.

The song recounts the story of a construction worker that kisses his wife and children for the last time, before leaving home one sunny regular working day. Shortly thereafter, he ends up dying by falling from a scaffolding in the building under construction. The passers-by seem not to care. They are primarily disturbed by the fact that the corpse remains lying on the sidewalk/street hampering the transit. I reproduce below the second half of the lyrics in its English translation:

...He made love that time as if he was the last one
He kissed his wife as if she was the only one
And each of his children as if they were the prodigal son
And he crossed the street in his drunken gait
He climbed the construction as if he was solid
He built in the plateau four magic walls
Brick after brick in a logical design
His eyes were blunted with cement and traffic
He sat to take a rest as if he was a prince
He ate rice and beans as if it was the greatest meal
He drank and hiccupped as if he was a machine
He danced and laughed out loud as if he was the next one
And tripped towards the sky as if he was listening to music
And he floated on air as if it was Saturday
And he ended up on the ground like a shy package
He agonized in the middle of the shipwrecked sideways
He died on the wrong direction disturbing the public

He made love that time as if he was a machine
He kissed his wife as if it was a logical thing
He built in the plateau four flaccid walls
He sat to take a rest as if he was a bird
And he floated on air as if he was a prince
And he ended up on the ground like a drunk package
He died on the wrong direction disturbing the Saturday

For this bread to eat, for this floor to sleep on
The certificate to be born and the concession to smile
For letting me breathe, for letting me exist
May God pay you back
For the free cachaça we have to swallow
For the smoke, the disgrace we have to cough from
For the swinging scaffoldings we have to fall from
May God pay you back
For the paid mourning woman to pray and spit upon us
And for the flies kissing and covering us
And for the ultimate peace that will finally redeem us
May God pay you back. (Buarque, 1971)

The dehumanization of a blue-collar construction worker in a society where some important humanitarian values, such as solidarity and empathy, ceased to exist, is the main theme. Here is a place where some individuals are stigmatized or seen as less than fully human. At the same time, Chico Buarque attempts to rehumanize the worker by portraying him as a devoted and caring husband and father. The proletarian also conveys the impression he believes in God and has a conformist attitude

towards his life conditions. At the end, he seems to thank the State and his employer. But if we pay careful attention, the worker (or his “spectre”) is being sarcastic: “For this bread to eat, for this floor to sleep on/ The certificate to be born and the concession to smile/ For letting me breathe, for letting me exist/ May God pay you back”

THE CONCEPT OF “STIGMA”

In terms of sociological methodology, Erving Goffman was a pioneer in his studies of society from the perspective of social interactions among individuals taking place in different settings and circumstances. He saw these interactions in terms of dramaturgical metaphors, in which individuals could be seen as actors playing different roles depending on the given context. In these interactions, there are explicit (but more often implicit) norms that individuals are expected to comply with. Noncompliance entails negative moral judgement, reprobation and, in extreme cases, ostracism (Goffman, 1986; 1990).

The Stigma emerges as a result of social interactions between individuals that are seen as “normal” and other actors who are “disqualified from full social acceptance” (Goffman, 1986: 2). To be stigmatized is like ‘living a life that can be collapsed at any moment’ (ibid: 108). Goffman seemed to be mainly concerned with devising strategies for the stigmatized to be accepted (or at least avoid major prejudicial attitudes by the “normal” individuals in a social interaction). He implies that the stigmatized should, first and foremost, attempt to conform to the norms that regulate the expected behaviour of different social contexts. Although it did not seem to be Goffman’s primary purpose, other researchers subsequently elaborated on his notion of Stigma to relate it to the dynamics of power in terms of dominance and oppression over underprivileged individuals (e.g., Reutter et al., 2009). Accordingly, several groups of people would fall into the category of the stigmatized, including disabled individuals, people with drug addictions, immigrants, the LGBTQ+ community, sex workers, Black people, Indigenous peoples, the poor, and Muslims in Western societies.

Reutter et al. (2009) undertake a qualitative study on the mechanisms of poverty stigmatization in two cities in Canada. From the viewpoint of the stigmatized, they demonstrate how the individuals that are situated in the lowest social strata, many of whom receive welfare assistance from the government, internalize negative perceptions of themselves that shape their actions. This, in turn, contributes to the perpetuation of their social condition and the poverty cycle. The study departs from the assumption that Stigma is intrinsically related to the notion of identity. It has come to be understood as a fundamental “discrepancy between virtual (social) and actual (personal) identity where virtual identity is the “you” that other people believe you to be, and actual identity is who you perceive yourself to be” (Reutter et al., 2009: 297). Stigma emerges in situations in which one’s identity is devalued by social actors, creating a disconnect between one’s social identity and self-worth: “Stigmatization, therefore, refers to specified characteristics of social identities that are devalued in specific societal contexts by virtue of the nature of existent macrolevel relations of power and discrepancies between social identities and actual identities that arise as a consequence.” (ibid: 298).

The character from Chico Buarque's song could be included as part of this group of stigmatized underprivileged/destitute/invisible human beings that live a fragile and precarious life in segregated urban spaces, at the margins of society. We can imagine him as a black or mixed-race Brazilian, a migrant coming from a poor region of Brazil (just like Lula da Silva, a former metallurgical worker who against all odds became president of the country), striving to earn a living in São Paulo, the richest city of Brazil. In São Paulo, the many migrants from Northeast Brazil constitute specific targets of stigmatization and dehumanization.

“DEHUMANIZATION” AND “INFRAHUMANIZATION”

The topic of dehumanization and infrahumanization has been studied for some time now in the fields of social psychology and neurosciences. There is a growing scholarship on the causes and motives of these phenomena from the perspective of the perpetrators and their effects on the targets or victims (inter alia, Haslam and Loughnan, 2014; Kteley and Landry, 2022; Loughnan et al., 2014; Kteily and Bruneau, 2017). Seen as a spectrum (or a continuum), the extreme form of dehumanization constitutes a failure to acknowledge or deny nearly all of the features that make us human (our common humanness) to individuals and groups of individuals, which may lead to various forms of extreme violence and discrimination⁷.

Essentially, dehumanization amounts to treating other human beings as not human beings or as less than fully human beings. Within the spectrum, infrahumanization is studied in the fields of social psychology and neurosciences as a more moderate form of dehumanization, in which individuals or groups of individuals are seen (usually by those in a position of power, either economic or symbolic) as somewhat less than fully human, or as lacking some features that are considered a part of what constitutes human beings (Haslam and Loughnan, 2014). The studies are based on surveys and neuroimaging, in which certain areas of the brain related to emotions are activated when images of potential targets of dehumanization are shown to the individuals undergoing the experiments (Haslam and Loughnan, 2014; Kteily et al., 2022).

The mechanisms of dehumanization (and infrahumanization) may be conscious or unconscious. They very often include the association of the targets to animals (such as apes, rats, dogs, and snakes) or machines that do not have feelings (Haslam and Loughnan, 2014). These are all forms of seeing (and treating) people as less than fully human, which may result in violence, sometimes extreme violence, and different levels of discrimination, according to the degree of humanness the perpetrator is willing to acknowledge in his target. Dehumanization and infrahumanization may play out between members of rival societies or among members of the same national society—divided, for example, across racial, class or even political lines, as is most noticeable today in a country like the United States (Cassese, 2019), but also in many parts of Latin America and elsewhere.

⁷ The scholarship has its origins in the studies of genocides (its causes and motivations). Primo Levi's poignant memoir of his years in Auschwitz, *If This Is A Man*, and other survival's accounts of the Holocaust opened new avenues for research on the mechanisms of dehumanization of individuals and groups of individuals that, in the most extreme cases, justify the annihilation of whole ethnic or religious groups.

When there is a war between two countries, it is often common for the enemy to be dehumanized. In the ongoing war on Ukraine, for example, there is, since the beginning, an obvious effort by President Vladimir Putin and the Russian military establishment to dehumanize the Ukrainian elites. They are depicted as a thin layer of cosmopolitan and westernized (and also fascists/nazis) individuals that do not represent the Ukrainian culture (Troinovski, 2022). Had these elites been removed from power, the Kremlin reasoning went, the Ukrainian people would have welcomed the invading Russians as part of their “expanded family” (as we can judge by now that was a colossal miscalculation by Putin and his associates)⁸ (*AP*, 2019). On the other hand, we can observe the dehumanization or infrahumanization of non-European, non-white refugees from the war in Ukraine that are hindered from embarking on the trains or crossing borders because of their race, colour or ethnicity (Ray, 2022).

In the case of the construction worker portrayed in Chico Buarque’s song, he speaks the same language and shares the same national culture of the passers-by that show little empathy when confronted with the tragic death of a co-citizen, above all another human being, considered as less than fully human solely because he pertains to a lower social class. The hurried pedestrians and car drivers whose only concern is to arrive on time to their destinies see the corpse lying on the sidewalk/street as just a nuisance, an inconvenience in their daily routine.

CONCLUSIONS

I have argued that it is important to broaden the scope of research about inequalities in a way that goes beyond common approaches, most of which focus on the structures that produce and perpetuate inequalities, such as studies about income distribution, urban design, or social stratification. Additionally, I call for a focus on individuals and on the ways in which they are directly affected by a variety of types of inequalities based on identities related not only to social class, but also to gender, religion, race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, and so on. The branches of social sciences that most commonly study social inequalities at a macrolevel (economics and sociology) or a microlevel (anthropology) would greatly benefit from coming into closer contact with the research on dehumanization and infrahumanization being undertaken in the fields of social psychology and neurosciences, and vice-versa. Inequalities are complex and multifaceted social phenomena that must be scrutinised and tackled with all the theoretical (and practical) resources at our disposal.

⁸ At the same time, the concept of dehumanization leads us to the identification of some singularities in the Ukrainian war, especially when seen in the broader context of the recent history of armed conflicts. It could be assumed that wars are usually waged against rival groups, tribes or nations that are previously subject to a dehumanization process by the aggressors (one can argue this was the case, for example, of all the wars led by the US against Muslim countries after 9/11 – Iraq, Afghanistan, and Libya). In the case of the current war on Ukraine, the Russians consider the Ukrainians as part of their family. The Freudian concept of “narcissism of small differences” is useful to understand intra-family conflicts, all sorts of palace intrigues that took place mainly before the end of the Ancien Regime (involving fratricides and parricides, for example) and even more ancient armed conflicts among neighboring groups or nations. However, in the context of the most recent history of warfare, the invasion of Ukraine by the Russians seems quite odd and unique from the perspective of the established patterns of dehumanization of war targets in armed conflicts. After all, it is not only the Ukrainian elites, but primarily the common people that are suffering and being killed.

The concept of Stigma, as introduced by Erving Goffman, alongside the mechanisms of dehumanization and inhumanization, are useful to understanding the patterns that reproduce and reinforce inequalities in contemporary societies. Both have the advantage of focusing on the individual that suffers in a very direct and personal way from being situated in an underprivileged position in society, rather than only on the structures that produce and underpin inequalities. Stigmatization and dehumanization processes that occur at the level of the individual are relevant for a more comprehensive understanding of the mechanisms that perpetuate inequalities and the nature of the phenomena. When such studies reach a broader public, outside the academic world, they also have the potential to generate compassion, solidarity, and ethical disapproval.

In practical terms, an approach such as the one taken, for example, by Frantz Fanon in his book *Black Skin, White Masks* (2021 [1952])—in which a very sophisticated reflection is made on the effects of stigmatization and dehumanization (without necessarily using the same expressions) on the deepest layers of the psyche of the victims—may be more effective in leading people to rethink their ideas and values. By instigating a change at the level of mindsets, such kind of work (in the case of Fanon, a mix of historical, social, psychological analysis and philosophy) has the potential to produce a degree of moral indignation that fosters the collective mobilization required to (i) substantially reduce the levels of social exclusion; (ii) expand the frontiers of citizenship; and (iii) accelerate the achievement of social justice in a meaningful way.

By means of shifting the focus (at a psychological level) to vulnerable individuals and groups of individuals, they may also be useful for devising strategies to rehumanize those that live at the margins of society or are located at the very bottom of the social scale. In fact, it is part of the research agenda of social psychologists and neuroscientists that have been studying processes of dehumanization and inhumanization to conceive measures that could contribute to eliminate (or at least reduce) the proclivity of certain perpetrators to dehumanize other human beings. One of the proposed actions by social psychologists, for example, is to create more opportunities for different social groups (differentiated by class or other identities) to mingle and fraternize.

In this vein, one may consider, for example, among some possible appropriate policies, the establishment of a sizeable number of quotas for poorer students in private schools in the developing world (generally, where the most unequal societies are located), usually attended by the children of middle and upper middle classes. The tuition would inevitably increase, but this should be seen as a redistributive measure when combined with a governmental subsidy to reduce costs. This is a relatively implementable measure. It is much easier, for example, than the task of building a robust public school system, an objective that would take some generations to achieve. It could have the potential to forge situations in which the rich and the poor would be educated and grow up together, potentially creating long-lasting friendships. Those relationships could, in theory, solidify a sense of inter-class solidarity. In the long term, this could produce positive effects in terms of re-humanization of the poor in the eyes of the rich, creating a social consciousness among the upper classes and, thus, greater support for redistributive policies and social justice. Simultaneously, a parallel social consciousness would be strengthened among the underprivileged groups around the injustice they are subject to and, hence, promote collective mobilization for struggles against inequalities.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

No conflict listed.

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