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Social Order and the Destruction of Resonance: Towards a Theory of Humiliation

The concept of resonance (Rosa 2016) articulates a specifically modern ideal – the idea of a society of individuals who feel at home in their world and share a sense of agency that is sustained by the recognition of others as well as by the affordances of material objects that furnish this world. This phenomenology of resonance also has critical purpose: It can help identify constellations where the ideal is not fulfilled. But this critique is mostly tied to the assumption that social processes which frustrate the realisation of this ideal also damage the viability of modern social structures. This PhD project will show how social structures can *stabilise* themselves by continually destroying the possibility of ‘resonating’ experiences. It uses the phenomenology of resonance to identify processes of humiliation that ruin the sense of agency and even the sense of self, and that can be mediated by rituals of non-recognition and by ‘repulsive’ material objects. Such processes make protest unlikely; they constitute one possible path to social stability based on fatalism (Pettenkofer 2017).

In the current literature, practices of humiliation are often seen as premodern remnants without real impact – e.g. Frevert (2020), where this is facilitated by a narrow focus on *intentional* and *highly visible* instances of humiliation – or as a ‘dark side’ of social structures that are primarily sustained by recognition (Schützeichel 2018). To go beyond this, the project starts by reconstructing three bodies of social theory that generalise from different experiences of humiliation: (1) *Theories focusing on experiences of educated middle-class Jews in Europe and North America in the 20th century*: Starting points are Arendt (e.g. 2007 [1948]) on fear of humiliation as a reason for avoiding politics; Garfinkel (1956) on degradation ceremonies; and Goffman (1963) on humiliations within unspectacular everyday ‘interaction rituals’ that can sustain social constellations where everybody works hard at displaying conformity. (2) *Theories focusing on experiences of Dalits after the legal abolition of untouchability*: The Indian debate shows how, after its traditional religious justification has lost its strength, a ‘caste’-based division of labour is being restabilised through acts of humiliation (e.g. Guru 2009). In this debate, practices of humiliation are explained as reactions to a *modern* coordination problem: How can social structures remain stable without a cultural consensus that legitimates them? This debate emphasises the role of bodily experiences and of material objects; e.g., hierarchy-maintaining humiliations can also be based on recurring situations where agents have to deal with ‘dirty’ objects and acquire their smell (Lee 2017). (3) *Theories focusing on experiences of humiliation resulting from intersecting inequalities in ‘Western’ democracies*: The writings of Bourdieu (e.g., 1984) are full of descriptions of humiliating experiences. He also shows why these situations do not depend on *intentions* of humiliation. However, he cannot fully use the explanatory possibilities offered by these descriptions, because he presupposes that social order is already maintained through internalised norms (‘habitus’). Focusing on the explanatory

role of repeated humiliations also makes possible a new reconstruction of Bourdieu's sociology of inequalities. Here, the project will also make use of autofictional writings by authors like Annie Ernaux and Édouard Louis who are inspired by Bourdieu's sociology (see contributions in Louis 2013) but pay more attention to *gendered* humiliations. Generally, the planned phenomenology of humiliation experiences should also rely on 'fictional' sources: In literary texts, aspects of everyday life that we usually chose not to pay attention to because focusing on them would make social coordination difficult, are made explicit (Adorno 2019). Based on these reconstructions, the project will develop a typology of humiliation experiences, and a systematic account showing how social entities can be stabilised by mechanisms that, through humiliation, change self–world relations.

References

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