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**The Dynamics of Political Humiliation and Resistance as Psychosocial Well-Being**

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It is the American Republic—repeat, the American Republic—which created something which they called a “nigger.” They created it out of necessities of their own. The nature of the crisis is that I am not a “nigger”—I never was. I am a man. (James Baldwin, 2010, p.49)

I speak with the rage of angels. (Amiri Baraka, 2014, p.452)

In every generation, ever since Negroes have been here, every Negro mother and father has had to face that child and try to create in that child some way of surviving this particular world, some way to make the child who will be despised not despise himself. (James Baldwin, 2010, p.60).

Philosopher Avishai Margalit (1996) argues that a decent society does not humiliate its members. Yet a cursory examination of good-enough or stable societies often reveals that one or more groups are the targets of political humiliation, whether by the state or non-state actors (e.g., individuals, organizations, and communities). One can point to the Turks in Germany, Muslims in France, Palestinians in Israel, African Americans in the United States, LBGTQ folks in Russia, Uyghurs in China, and untouchables in India as illustrations of the seeming pervasiveness of political humiliation. In each of these cases, political humiliation involves systemic misrecognition that is coupled with the attenuation of resources and services vis-à-vis the humiliated group, all of which undermines their psychosocial and material well-being. Even decent enough societies, then, seem to have some segments of the population who are dishonored, marginalized, and oppressed for the sake, more often than not, of securing economic, social, and political power, privilege, and prestige for other citizens.

In this article I am interested in understanding - reliant on psychoanalytic conceptual tools - the dynamics of political humiliation and its psychosocial consequences, as well as the types of resistance to political humiliation. I depict political humiliation in terms of a modified notion of Winnicott’s notion of potential space, the dynamics of identification-disidentification, and the concept of internalization. In addition, I identify and depict four types of resistance, relying on these concepts to illustrate each type. I begin the discussion with a definition and description of political humiliation and its impact on psychosocial well-being. This lays the foundation for framing political humiliation in terms of psychoanalytic concepts. Following this, I identify, explain, and illustrate types of resistance to humiliation.

It is necessary to offer a comment and clarification before beginning. My interest in this topic stems largely from listening to members of marginalized groups (e.g., LGBTQI, poor-working class, African Americans), whether that is in therapy or some other venue. Their experiences of systemic humiliation and their resiliency and resistance heighten my motivation to understand political humiliation and the benefits of psychosocial resistance to it. In addition, increasing political polarization in the United States (Hetherington & Weiler, 2009; McCarty, Poole, & Rosenthal, 2008) and the election of a president who takes delight in demeaning real and imaginary opponents beg for greater analysis of humiliation in the body politic and the systems that give rise to and legitimate his and other individuals’ demeaning behaviors. The clarification I wish to make concerns the use of psychoanalytic theory and concepts to understand cultural-political realities. Freud (1930) recognized the challenges of using concepts that are derived “from the sphere in which they have originated and evolved” (Freud, 1930, p.144). Of course, this did not stop Freud and others (e.g., Coles, 1975; Meissner, 1992) from using psychoanalytic concepts to understand cultural artifacts.

More recently, Samuels (1993) identifies two pitfalls of using psychoanalytical concepts in this way. Employing analytic conceptual tools vis-à-vis cultural-political phenomena can lead analysts to “discover” that their hypotheses are true. The other hazard is to treat an entire culture “*as if it were an individual or even as if it were a baby*” (p.9). I would add a third pitfall, which is the tendency to pathologize the object of study. My use of concepts derived from the psychoanalytic tradition is not meant to pathologize or infantilize, but rather to grasp the complex psychosocial dynamics of political humiliation. I also make no claim of “discovery,” but do intend to portray and understand the socio-political phenomenon of humiliation. Also, while why I believe that the realities of the consulting room and the concepts derived from it are distinct from social-political realities, this does not mean that distinction is equivalent to disconnection or non-identity. As Samuels (1993, 2001, 2004) and others (Layton, Hollander, & Gutwill, 2006) have consistently demonstrated, political realities are present in the consulting room and political phenomena can be understood using psychoanalytic tools.

**Political Humiliation and It Political Consequences**

Margalit (1996) argues that political humiliation entails “(1) treating human beings as if they were not human—as beasts, machines, or subhumans; (2) performing actions that manifest or lead to loss of basic control; and (3) rejecting a human being from the ‘Family of Man’” (p.144). From a positive perspective, the first feature of political humiliation suggests that human beings as social creatures need personal recognition—recognizing the Other as a person—a unique, valued, inviolable, and responsive/agentic subject (Macmurray, 1991/1961). Philosopher Alex Honneth (1995) adds to this, arguing that personal recognition in the political realm provides individuals with self-confidence, self-respect, and self-esteem (p.129), all of which are needed to participate in a common life together. To treat human beings as if they were not persons involves misrecognition/knowledge,[[1]](#footnote-2) which is derived from and depends on collectively held narratives, rituals, and customs that enshrine the Other as less than human, less than a person—undermining self-confidence, self-respect, and self-esteem. These semiotic systems and accompanying practices are inextricably linked to and dependent on state and non-state institutions and organizations that enforce and legitimate systemic misrecognitions. An obvious example is the long history of racism in the United States, where whites share stories, participate in practices, and erect institutions or disciplinary regimes that produce, reproduce, and enforce misrecognition of African Americans as less than human (see Alexander, 2010; Baptist, 2016; McGuire, 2011).[[2]](#footnote-3)

The second criterion of Margalit’s (1996) definition, loss of control, needs further explanation. He believes that human beings derive a sense of self-respect, in part, by having a sense of self-control or what he calls autarky—self-sufficiency (p.116). Relying on Jean Paul Sartre, Margalit contends that there is, in humiliation, a connection between lack of control or lack of freedom and “the rejection of human beings as humans” (p.117). “Treating someone,” he writes, “in a way that denies her capacity to be free is rejecting her as a human being” (p.118), which leads to a loss of self-respect and self-confidence. What is clear is that Margalit is addressing not simply control, but agency—the capacity to choose an action that is undermined by the loss of self-respect. From this perspective, political humiliation necessarily involves restricting the misrecognized Other’s agency—the capacity to act in the public-political sphere. Put another way, political humiliation entails restrictions or denial of an individual’s civic self—restricting or denying their capacity to act as citizens. This can only be accomplished by employing disciplinary regimes that, through coercion, intimidation, and terror, restrict or deny the agency of Othered peoples.

Nancy Fraser’s (2003) term “parity of participation” and Hannah Arendt’s (1958) notion of power as speaking and acting together are helpful here. Positively stated, personal recognition in the public-political realm leads to self-respect, a sense of agency, and thus parity of participation. Parity of participation means that individuals exercise their agency in speaking and acting together, which, for Arendt, is the expression of political power. By contrast, misrecognitions that involve viewing Others as less than persons lead to the restriction of agency (lack of parity of participation) and, correspondingly, the loss of self-esteem, self-respect, and self-confidence. Political agency vis-à-vis speaking and acting together is diminished though disciplinary regimes that enforce misrecognition, while restricting participation in the political realm. To return to racism, slavery in the United States is the paradigmatic example of the denial of black agency and thus an illustration of profound and systemic political humiliation (see Anderson, 2016; Baptist, 2016). Of course, abolishing slavery did not stop whites from denying the exercise of social-political agency to African Americans. Jim Crow laws, and what Alexander (2011) calls the new Jim Crow laws, enforce misrecognition of African Americans and this results in the restriction of African Americans’ agency, which, in turn, accompanies an attenuation of speaking and acting together in the social-political realm. Other past (and present) examples include political humiliation of women (suffrage), various immigrant groups, LGBTQI persons, poor persons, etc.

It is important to point out the political humiliation, with its misrecognition and loss of political control/agency, is inextricably linked to the distribution of resources. That is, “second-class citizenship involves not only depriving people of essential resources and being unwilling to share authority but also the idea that second-class citizens are not in essence whole human beings” (Margalit, 1996, p.152). When people in a society are denied essential goods to survive and thrive, this is seen “not only as an injustice, but also as humiliation” (p.153). An illustration of this is taken from Malcolm X’s autobiography (Haley, 1964). After his father was murdered, Malcolm’s mother struggled to care for her children. Malcolm remembered the social humiliation of being on “relief” and getting food labelled “Not To Be Sold.” The imbricated sources of his and his family’s humiliation were state-sanctioned racism, sexism, and classism, and even the effort to distribute food to poor families was imbued with humiliation—Not To Be Sold.

The third feature of this definition, rejection from the commonwealth or family of human beings, also needs a bit more clarification. Margalit (1996) uses the term “encompassing group” to refer to a community that possesses a common culture, shared life, mutual personal recognition, and shared identity (pp.138-140). A decent society, he argues, “does not reject morally legitimate encompassing groups” (p.141). First of all, a society that rejects an encompassing group does not necessarily include expulsion from the society. A humiliated group can be relegated to the social-political fringes of society, which can also take the form of territorial restrictions.

The murder of six million Jews represents a radical form of political humiliation because it was an absolute expulsion of Jews from the social-political realm. The ethnic cleansing of Native Americans, the forced assignment of them to reservations, and attempts to deprive them of their language and cultural practices are examples of political humiliation, wherein peoples are not completely annihilated, yet they are relegated to the geographical and political fringe of society where there are fewer resources. Ghettoes where people of color predominate are a kind of social-economic apartheid, where they are deemed to be a part of society and can vote (civic selves), but are restricted through economic and political policies to an area that lacks resources to meet their needs (see Wacquant, 2009; Soss, Fording, & Schram, 20002). For Margalit, this is a type of political humiliation that denies essential goods to thrive.

In Margalit’s (1996) view, a decent society can deter or reject immoral groups. Immoral groups are “Forms of life,” he writes, “that lack value are those in which humiliation is a constitutive element. Racist groups such as the Ku Klux Klan or skinheads might constitute encompassing groups for their members, but they lack value because their form of life is based essentially on humiliating others” (p.174). Margalit does not mean that the state should be involved in humiliating the KKK, but rather find ways to observe and restrict the organization. The danger here is that the dominant group of a society can determine what encompassing group is morally legitimate or illegitimate. For example, the anxiety and fear of Christians resulting from terrorist attacks can lead some leaders to suggest that Islam is not a morally legitimate religion because it gives rise to terrorists. Since some political leaders cannot sequester or expel Muslims, they find ways to increase surveillance or restrict entry, fostering public humiliation. There is an irony in Margalit’s view: those who consider Islam to be morally illegitimate are advocating a form of political humiliation, thereby calling into question their own legitimacy.

**Potential Space and the Dynamics of Political Humiliation**

Since the notion of political humiliation entails the social-psychology of citizens, I turn to a modified version of Winnicott’s potential space, along with the concepts of identification/disidentification and internalization, to further our understanding of this concept. Potential space, Thomas Ogden (1985) noted, is “the most important and at the same time most elusive of the ideas introduced by Donald Winnicott” (p.129). This elusiveness opens a space to reimagine potential space from the perspective of the political realm and the troubling realities of political humiliation. To do this, I first briefly explain Winnicott’s view of potential space.

For Winnicott (1971), potential space became a way of depicting an “area that exists (but cannot exist) between the baby and the object (mother or part mother) during the phase of the repudiation of the object as not-me, that is, at the end of being merged with the object” (p.107). This space, which is not space, “is not *inside* by any use of the word.…Nor is it *outside*, that is to say, it is not part of the repudiated world, the not-me that which the individual has decided to recognize as truly external” (p.41). Fond of paradox, which we are challenged to accept, Winnicott also referred to potential space as “an intermediate area of experiencing that lies between” the inner psychic world and external reality, “between a baby’s inability and his growing ability to recognize and accept reality” (p.3). That is, potential space emerges during development as the child is moving from merger with the environmental parent and to object use (independent reality), which requires the “baby’s separating-out of the world of objects from the self” (p.108).

Ideally, this separating out or differentiation is a form of play or creative work that takes place in this intermediate area of experience or potential space. The baby’s play involves the creative use of objects and self-other representations in his/her construction of experience—experiences of feeling alive and real (p.56). “We experience life,” Winnicott wrote, “in an area that is intermediate between the inner reality of the individual and the shared reality of the world that is external to individuals” (p.64). Potential space, then, “can be looked upon as sacred to the individual in that it is here that the individual experiences creative living” (p.103)—creative living that is not simply individual, but also social.

Potential space is a way to conceptualize not only the movement from merger to shared social reality, but also the child’s burgeoning capacities to: a) join creatively his/her inner experiences of being alive and real with external or independent objects/representations (p.109), b) eventually share these subjective experiences with significant people, and c), in time, jointly use, construct, and share meaning with others. In brief, this intermediate area of experience is a place and time for the emergence of self-differentiation and the agentic construction of meaning—individual and shared—through the use of external objects—objects that include collective narratives, rituals, etc. All of this suggests that the child’s engagement in this space necessarily means that s/he is internalizing[[3]](#footnote-4) the family’s (and culture’s) system of meanings or semiotic system, which s/he eventually uses to construct and share experiences.

Another way to conceptualize potential space’s cooperative interaction between parent and baby is through what Trevarthan (1993; Levin & Trevarthen, 2000) called proto conversations. Proto conversations involve the attuning parent’s pretending to engage the baby in a conversation, acting as if the baby can understand the parent’s communications. This conversation is imaginary to the extent that the parent acts *as if* the baby is a partner, possessing agency, able to recognize the parent as a person, and able to engage in symbolic speech.

The baby obviously does not have the capacity to use symbols to communicate or recognize the parent as a person; nevertheless, s/he still organizes experience (presymbolically) and communicates. The parent, then, recognizes that his/her baby’s utterance is “speaking” and uses verbal language to make interpretations of the baby’s nonverbal and physical significations. A baby cries and his mother responds, saying, “Oh honey, are you wet? You want me to clean you up? Ah yes you do.” Both are engaged in cooperative speech and action, though it is clear that proto conversations take place between one human being who has the capacities for symbolic speech and action and the other who organizes experience and expresses him/herself pre-symbolically.

The parent’s proto conversations, which accompany his/her attunements, point to another important factor of potential space, namely, the cooperative repair of relational disruptions. Winnicott (1967) recognized that maternally preoccupied parents are not completely adapted to the infant. There are always disruptions in care, which impact potential space and are crucial in psychosocial development. “Babies,” Winnicott observed, “are constantly being cured by the mother's *localized spoiling* that mends the ego structure. This mending of the ego structure re-establishes the baby's capacity to use a symbol of union; the baby then comes once more to allow and to benefit from separation” (p.369; emphasis mine). Localized spoiling emerges as a result of a disruption in the parent’s ministrations, which means that the baby’s assertion vis-à-vis his/her need (physical and psychological) had not been recognized and met. Disruptions diminish potential space and the good enough parent repairs the breech through localized spoiling, which is accompanied by the child’s joining the action. Repair restores the baby’s confidence in the environment (basic trust) and in his/her asserting (agency) him/herself in this space and organizing experience.

Potential space’s proto conversations and repair are contingent on the parent’s accurate and reliable attunement to the infant’s assertions—rudimentary or presymbolic *speech and action*. The fundamental ground of attunement is the parent’s recognition of the child as a person—a unique, valued, inviolable, and agentic—and this recognition communicates, verbally and non-verbally, respect, confidence, and esteem to the infant. To understand personal recognition vis-à-vis potential space further, I turn to the notion of identification/disidentification. For Schafer (1990), “identification refers to another kind of internalization” (p.16), which involves “modifying the subjective self or behavior, or both, in order to increase one’s resemblance to an object taken as a model” (p.16).

The parent’s personal recognition, then, necessarily involves identifying with the child—the child is like me, which indicates shared representations. But I wish to argue that the parent’s personal recognition includes disidentification and that the dialectical tension between identification and disidentification is necessary for maintaining potential space, which means that potential space remains open enough for the child to have sufficient trust to assert him/herself in relation to the significant object-parent, as well as for the child to experience self-esteem, self-respect, and self-confidence.

Let me explain this further. A good-enough parent naturally identifies with the child. The child *is like* the parent *qua* person and this identification entails specific parental self-representations. Ideally, this identification is positive, linked to the parent’s self-respect, self-confidence, and self-esteem. On the other hand, there must also be at the same time disidentification—the child is not me. This disidentification, again ideally, is devoid of negative attributions. Positively stated, disidentification is simply the recognition that the infant is uniquely different. In personal recognition, both identification and disidentification must occur at the same time. If there is a collapse of this dialectical tension toward one pole or the other, potential space collapses, disrupting agency, self-worth, and speaking and acting together. For example, if the parent over-identifies with the infant, recognition will take the form of projecting onto the infant the parent’s self-representation, which accompanies coercive behaviors that are aimed at having the child adopt and identify with the representation.

The result is that the child’s sense of agency is diminished, because his/her assertions, which include his/her self-representations, are not recognized and confirmed in this space. This, in turn, accompanies the loss or diminishment of self-worth and self-confidence. Moreover, in these moments, parent and child are not co-creating the space, which means that speaking and acting together or cooperation are attenuated or absent as a result of the parent’s over-identification/misrecognition.

All of this can be framed in terms of humiliation in that the child’s unique sense of self (personhood) and agency are denied or minimized when there is parental over-identification. If recognition moves toward the other pole of disidentification, there is little in the way of connection—the baby is absolutely not me. This can be seen in situations where parents use their children as objects or discard them. Here as well, the child’s uniqueness and agency are disconfirmed, leading to humiliation. In either case, the loss of paradoxical tension between identification and disidentification means there is a collapse of potential space, which, in turn, means losses of a shared construction of meaning, shared speech and action, agency, self-confidence, self-esteem, and self-respect.

While Winnicott considers potential space from the perspective of the developing infant vis-à-vis the good-enough parent, he also viewed it, like transitional objects, in terms of play and cultural experience (p.109). Cultural experience, broadly understood, is inseparable from the political, and this leads me to consider the notion of potential space in light of the political[[4]](#footnote-5) and, in particular, political humiliation and resistance. I (2014) have in a previous work compared Winnicott’s notion of potential space with Hannah Arendt’s notion of space of appearances vis-à-vis the political realm. Potential space among adults living a life in common, while not about moving from merger, does involve conversations and repairs of relational disruptions as individuals construct and share experience. The potential space of the public-political sphere, in other words, entails the construction and interaction of civic selves. This can be further understood in the following way: if citizens are to speak and act together, while living a life in common, there must be interpersonal recognition (Honneth, 1996)—citizen as person. In terms of Arendt’s notion “space of appearances,” individuals appear and act in the public-political space by virtue of having been recognized as persons, which makes possible shared self-respect, self-esteem, and self-confidence. While the civic self is a unique individual agent possessing particular self-representations, s/he shares an identity with fellow citizens—collective representations dependent on shared narratives, rituals, and cultural practices.

Interpersonal recognition of potential space is also understood in terms of the dialectical tension between identification and disidentification. To recognize my fellow citizens as persons means that I must identify with them. There must be some shared self-other representations, even if they may be illusory. For instance, I participate in a protest about single payer healthcare for all citizens. I assume that my fellow protestors are Americans who share similar values. Identification, though, must be accompanied by disidentification if the Other civic self is to appear as unique and valued human beings—not-me (Benjamin, 1995). The loss of dialectical tension signals an attenuation or loss of potential space.

Over-identification in the political realm means that one segment of the population is privileged, while others are not. In other words, over-identification in the political realm often accompanies disidentification vis-à-vis Others—who are often deemed lesser. This disidentification is to be understood as split off and not in tension with identification. For example, white individuals who believe in white superiority (and black inferiority) over-identify with whites—identifying personhood (and citizenship) with white-inflected representations. Over-identification accompanies strong disidentification vis-à-vis black citizens.

Representations associated with “black” become split off from personal recognition and identification. There is, then, no dialectical tension between identification and disidentification, because they are split off. To use Benjamin’s (1995) idea of likeness in difference and difference in likeness, in racism likeness is split off from difference, which means there is a collapse of potential space between white and black persons. I add here that over-identification, and the resulting collapse of potential space between white and black citizens, means that white individuals’ self-esteem, self-confidence, and self-respect are dependent on the beliefs (more accurately, illusions) in white superiority and black inferiority.

Put differently, white social-political privilege and cooperation are contingent on the social-political disidentification with and humiliation of blacks—denial of self-esteem, self-confidence, and self-respect. The over-identification and collapse or attenuation of potential space also means that speaking and acting together are segregated. By this, I mean that, in the public-political realm, whites are expected to speak and act together and this means that with regard to white civic selves, there is parity of participation in the public-political realm. On the other hand, blacks are not recognized or invited in the public-political space, which undermines black agency and confidence vis-à-vis the public-political realm. This said, while potential space is absent or attenuated between whites and blacks, it can exist within their respective groups. This suggests that mutual personal recognitions and interpersonal cooperation within African American communities contribute to self-confidence, self-esteem, and self-respect, over and against the misrecognition and disidentification of whites in the public sphere.

It is important to point out that potential space vis-à-vis the political realm is inextricably tied to and dependent on political, social, and cultural institutions, collectively held narratives, and shared practices or rituals. These social-cultural institutions can be said to facilitate the internalization of and identification (and disidentification) with dominant beliefs, expectations, and values. This sounds benign and sometimes it is, but it is better to make use of Foucault’s (2004) notion of disciplinary (and justificatory) mechanisms and regimes to point to how citizens internalize dominant social-cultural systems of meaning. Moreover, disciplinary and justificatory regimes (governmental and non-governmental institutions) enforce, sometimes violently, identifications and disidentifications. To return to the example of racism, the myriad of justificatory and disciplinary regimes or institutions, which are and were contingent on shared narratives and practices, enforce the internalization of the illusions of white superiority and black inferiority and, at the same time, facilitate over-identification and disidentification. Potential space or the attenuation of potential space in the public-political realm, then, is inseparable from the narratives and institutions that support and legitimate it.

To complicate this a bit further, there are degrees or levels of attenuation of potential space in society. If we continue with the example of racism, slavery represents a complete absence of potential space between whites and blacks. Slavery involves not only the denial of black personhood, it also obliterates even the idea or possibility of a black civic self. While the Emancipation Proclamation (1862) took steps toward recognizing black personhood and civic selves, the long-held narratives and political, economic, and cultural institutions in both the North and the South did not follow suit.

Indeed, the South established justificatory and disciplinary regimes (e.g., Jim Crow laws), as well as extrajudicial terror that functioned to deny black public-political parity of participation. The Civil Rights Movement went a long way toward changing this, but systemic racism continues (Alexander, 2011; Anderson, 2016), which indicates both the presence of political humiliation and the attenuation of potential space vis-à-vis persons of color. Similarly, women’s suffrage, in the United States, led to women’s participation in the political realm in 1920 after some 72 years of advocacy. If we fast forward to today, there is no parity of participation even though women are deemed to be persons and equal civic selves. This suggests that, while laws may be in place, cultural practices and institutions may work to attenuate the potential space.

Positively stated, potential space in the public-political realm involves interpersonal recognition and correspondingly the dialectical tension between identification and disidentification. Public-political mutual personal recognition leads to the emergence and interaction of civic selves who, possessing self-esteem, self-confidence, and self-respect, act and speak together in living a life in common, which includes repairing relational disruptions or restoring potential space. This public-political interpersonal recognition is supported by shared cultural narratives and practices and maintained by public and political institutions. Negatively, the attenuation or eclipse of potential space, wherein one group of citizens misrecognizes other individuals and groups as not fully persons and thus not civic selves, entails a collapse of the dialectical tension between identification and disidentification, which results in splitting of identification and disidentification.

Put another way, the attenuation of potential space attends over-identification with the in-group and disidentification vis-à-vis those constructed as less than persons, resulting in the loss of sociopolitical self-respect, self-esteem, and self-confidence vis-à-vis marginalized individuals and groups. Both misrecognition and over-identification (and disidentification) are maintained by justificatory and disciplinary regimes of the society. In brief, the collapse or attenuation of potential in the public-political realm, which depends on disciplinary and justificatory regimes, attends diverse forms of political humiliation.

Before turning to a discussion regarding the types of resistance to political humiliation, I turn to two brief individual illustrations, one dealing with political humiliation associated with classism[[5]](#footnote-6) and the other with racism. The first is taken from a clinical setting and the second is taken from a public venue. Some years ago, Fiona (27-year-old white woman) came to therapy suffering from what she said was depression. She loved her two children (3, 5) and her husband, who encouraged her to seek help. During the first few sessions, Fiona told me that her father was an alcoholic, but that he stopped drinking when she graduated from high school. Because she was never encouraged to go to college, either at school or at home,

Fiona went immediately to work at a factory. This lasted several years until the factory closed, and moved to another country. Fiona found another job within a few months, though it paid less and offered fewer benefits. The positive side of getting this job was meeting her future husband. After they married, they bought a dilapidated home in a poor, working-class section of the city. Both work full-time and their parents help take care of the kids. Despite working 50 hours a week, both find it challenging to make ends meet, especially since they do not qualify for Medicaid and cannot afford health insurance. Fiona certainly did show signs of depression and we addressed this, both in terms of medication and exploration of her family of origin.

While these are important, they are not the only interpretive perspectives that accounts for her depression.[[6]](#footnote-7) Another way to understand her struggle is through the notion of political humiliation. Low wages and lack of benefits are factors that contribute to political humiliation in that they make it extremely difficult for poor, working-class persons to do more than survive. Margalit’s view that political humiliation is associated with depriving one group of the resources needed for surviving and thriving fits here. Moreover, humiliation stems from the widely held neoliberal belief that one is solely responsible for one’s economic success or failure (Brown, 2015; Silva, 2013).

Fiona and her husband worked hard with little hope of improving their situation for themselves and their children. She felt it was her fault for not achieving greater financial security and was angry that she had not gone to college. Her depression, in part, was connected to experiences of helplessness and powerlessness. Her low self-esteem and lack of self-confidence, which had roots in her family of origin, were connected to these experiences, which accompanied a sense of diminished agency. Fiona fretted about her children and whether they would be stuck like she was.

Fiona interpreted her suffering in terms of depression, which she associated with juggling numerous demands and growing up in the shadows of her father’s alcoholism and her mother’s anxiety. Yet, for a number of complex reasons, Fiona did not interpret her suffering in terms of political humiliation, stemming from the prevalence of classism, which restricted her (and her husband’s) access to the resources needed for their family to thrive. Put another way, Fiona’s depression can be understood as related to an attenuation of potential space in the public-political realm. Potential space was attenuated because of political and economic factors that restricted her agency by distributing needed resources toward the wealthy.

Malcolm X’s (Haley, 1964) autobiography illustrates political humiliation vis-à-vis the intersection of racism and classism.[[7]](#footnote-8) I have selected two brief excerpts to illustrate my points. After Malcolm’s father had been murdered, his mother was the sole person responsible for ensuring the family survived during the Depression. While black men suffered disproportionately during the Depression, life for black women was worse because of the double blow of racism and sexism. Malcolm recalled that his mother struggled mightily to try to keep her family afloat, eventually turning for relief from the state. Malcolm X later wrote of that time:

Then about in late 1934, I would guess, something began to happen. Some kind of psychological deterioration hit our family circle and began to eat away our pride. Perhaps it was the constant tangible evidence that we were destitute. We had known other families that had gone on relief. We had known without anyone in our home ever expressing it that we felt prouder not to be at the depot where free food was passed out. And, now, we were among them. (p.14)

Yet this humiliation was surpassed when shortly thereafter Malcolm’s mother, because of stress and burdens, had a psychological breakdown, which precipitated the state’s interventions. A judge in Lansing, Michigan, “had authority over me and all my brothers and sisters” (p.21), Malcolm later recalled. The judge ordered Malcolm to be removed and placed in a white family’s home. The humiliation and rage rises from the page: “I truly believe that if ever a state social agency destroyed a family, it destroyed ours….And knowing my mother was a statistic that didn’t have to be, that existed because of society’s failure, hypocrisy, greed, and lack of mercy and compassion. Hence I have no mercy or compassion in me for a society that will crush people, and then penalize them for not being able to stand up under the weight. I have rarely talked to anyone about my mother, for I believe that I am capable of killing a person, without hesitation, who happened to make the wrong kind of remark about my mother” (p.22).

These painful experiences, which were fueled by racism and classism, were followed by yet another occasion of humiliation. While living with another family, Malcolm attended a white school. From his account, he was well liked and did well academically. But all this would change after a meeting with his eighth grade teacher. Malcolm X’s teacher, Mr. Ostrowski, asked Malcolm if he had considered a career. “The truth is I hadn’t. I never have figured out why I told him, ‘Well, yes sir, I’ve been thinking I’d like to be a lawyer.’” (p.38). Here we see a young boy aspiring to reach for a socially esteemed profession against the background of constant messages regarding black inferiority. His teacher replied, “Malcolm, one of life’s first needs is for us to be realistic. Don’t misunderstand me, now. We all here like you, you know that. But you’ve got to be realistic about being a nigger. A lawyer—that’s no realistic goal for a nigger. You need to think about something you can be. You’re good with your hands—making things. Everyone admires your carpentry shop work. Why don’t you plan on carpentry?” (p.38). From this point, Malcolm drew away from white people and no longer would let the term “nigger” slide off his back.

These incidences reveal political-economic humiliation wherein Malcolm (and other African Americans) was not recognized as a person. The contexts of misrecognition and humiliation were classism—being excluded from the resources needed to thrive—and racism—being treated as if he was incapable of achieving his dreams of being a lawyer. These contexts of political humiliation represent an attenuation of potential space and, correspondingly, a denial of his civic self/agency vis-à-vis participating equally with whites. As noted above, the attenuation or collapse of potential space in the political-public realm indicates the presence of over-identification/disidentification, which in this case is seen in adherence to the illusions of white supremacy and black inferiority.

**Types of Resistance to Political Humiliation and Psychosocial Well-Being**

When depicting public-political humiliation, it can appear that the attenuation of potential space and lack of a civic self is simply associated with victimhood. In other words, the humiliated Other can seem to be a victim who is powerless and helpless against the hegemonic forces that are arrayed against him/her. To be sure, there are people who are victims. James Baldwin (1990), for instance, said this of his father: “He was defeated long before he died because, at the bottom of his heart, he really believed what white people said about him” (p.4). Yet, when we consider those who have suffered political humiliation, we begin to see the varied ways they resist being constructed as objects, lacking purpose, value, and agency.

Positively, persons’ resistance to political humiliation reflects attempts toward psychosocial well-being, which I understand as establishing agency in the political realm—a civic self engaged in the public potential space of society; a space where they garner a sense of self-respect, self-confidence, and self-worth. I briefly identify and illustrate four types of resistance, namely resistance as 1) witness/lamentation, 2) reversal, 3) separation, and 4) inclusive, cooperative protest. Before proceeding, let me add that two or more of these types of resistance may be seen in a person’s life journey, like Malcolm X. Moreover, one or more may be part of the same action. For instance, in the Civil Rights Movement, Martin Luther King Jr. and other peaceful protestors sought to give witness to and lament the violence of racism, as well as resist through inclusive, cooperative protests.

The first step in resisting political humiliation is becoming conscious of it, naming it, and locating its source(s) (Fanon, 2008/1952, p.80; Ellison, 1995/1953, p.302; Mignolo, 2011, pp.86-87). Once awakened, persons may choose an action in relation to the sources of political humiliation, signifying his/her resistance. One type of response is for politically humiliated individuals and groups to witness and lament publicly their suffering. To act as a witness and to lament political humiliation serves not only as public critiques of oppression, but also as the exercise of one’s civic self—a self that is denied or restricted by the attenuation of potential space. In terms of the political humiliation associated with racism,

Frederick Douglass, W. E. B. Dubois, Zola Neale Hurston, Richard Wright, James Baldwin, Ralph Ellison, bell hooks, Alice Walker, and Te-Nehisi Coates are some black writers who gave witness to and lamented the suffering resulting from racism. This form of resistance is not limited to writers. Singers like Paul Robeson, Nina Simone, Harry Belafonte, Ella Baker, and gospel music singers in African American churches (Hendricks, 2011) have likewise used their art to give witness to and lament political humiliation. To give witness and to lament is a form of resistance that confidently affirms and reclaims positive agency, self-respect, and a civic self in spite of a society that continues to use disciplinary regimes to enforce and maintain political humiliation and the attenuation of public potential space.

This type of resistance is not always public, at least initially, and can emerge in the potential space of the consulting room. Very briefly, as noted above, Fiona sought therapy for depression, which she believed was the result of biological deficiency and experiences within her family of origin. While her hypotheses regarding the sources of her depression were certainly likely, she did not consider other sources. Over many months, Fiona gradually became aware that her depression was linked to her family’s economic situation. As a poor, working-class woman, she struggled to make enough money (with her husband) to feed and house her children. Lacking medical benefits and being paid just above minimum wage, she worried about medical bills sinking their chances of getting out of the cycle of living paycheck to paycheck. She often felt humiliated for being unable to give her kids what they need to flourish, to escape from the grind. When Fiona became more aware of this, at times she would cry with tears of helplessness, and, other times, anger at a system seemed bent on keeping her trapped. I consider Fiona’s tears, anger, and stories as lamentation and witnessing. The therapeutic space provided a place for her to lament and to begin to consider how to act socially (civic self) once she recognized the real source of her suffering.

A second type of resistance to political humiliation is reversal. By this, I mean that humiliated persons resist by seeking to return the favor of humiliation. For instance, colonized people, humiliated by the colonial system that demeans the colonized Others while exploiting their resources, internalize the imperial system. Nandy (1983) notes that colonization “creates a culture in which the ruled are constantly tempted to fight their rulers within the psychological limits set by the latter” (p.3). Resistance, then, may take the form of humiliating or desiring to humiliate the oppressors. Two examples will tease out different features of this form of resistance to political humiliation.

Martin Luther King Jr.’s first memory of the pain of political humiliation occurred when, as a child, he discovered that his white friend was no longer allowed to play with him because Martin was black. Like many African American parents, his mother struggled to explain discrimination and segregation. King (1998) wrote,

She taught me that I should feel a sense of “somebodiness” but that on the other hand I had to go out and face a system that stared me in the face every day saying you are “less than,” you are “not equal to.” She told me about slavery and how it ended with the Civil War. She tried to explain the divided system of the South—the segregated schools, restaurants, theaters, housing; the white and colored sign on drinking fountains, waiting rooms, lavatories—as a social condition rather than a natural order. She made it clear that she opposed this system and that I must never allow it to make me feel inferior. (pp. 3-4)

King’s mother was telling her son not to believe what white people said—that he was inferior. Both his Christian parents also told him that opposing racist humiliations could be done while loving white people, something King struggled against for years. “I never will forget,” King wrote, “what a great shock this was to me…and from that moment on I was determined to hate every white person” (p.7). King’s hatred and rage, while understandable aspects of the experience of public-political humiliation, were exactly what Nandy refers to when he said that colonizers are “tempted to fight their rulers within the psychological limits set by the latter” (p.3). Put another way, King’s hatred and rage can be understood as inextricably a part of the rage and hatred of whites toward blacks. The humiliator and the humiliated are interlocked, and to resist is to reverse the relationship. Unfortunately, the attempt to claim a civic self remains caught in the web of political humiliation, and this means there is little hope in the inclusive expansion of the space of appearances.

Another illustration of this type of resistance can be seen in the autobiography of Malcolm X. As I mentioned previously, when Malcolm was in the eighth grade, his teacher pulled him aside and asked Malcolm what he wanted to do with his life. Malcolm had not been asked the question before and replied that he wanted to be a lawyer. Mr. Ostrowski told Malcom to be “realistic about being a nigger” (Haley, 1964, p.38). Malcolm, Ostrowski advised, should not aspire to being a lawyer or doctor and instead consider work suited to people of his color. Once the shock receded, Malcolm, like King, was enraged and determined to reject white people and their culture, just as he felt rejected.

To jump forward in his story, years later Malcolm was arrested for burglary and sent to prison. While in prison, his brother Reginald visited, telling Malcolm about the beliefs of the Nation of Islam. Not long after this visit, Malcolm X began his tutelage with Elijah Muhammad, the leader of the Nation of Islam. From Elijah Muhammad, Malcolm X learned a new history, which is important to quote at length because of the dynamics it reveals:

The black man, original man, built great empires and civilizations and cultures while the white man was still living on all fours in caves….Among this black race were twenty-four wise scientists. One of the scientists, at odds with the rest….Mr. Yacub began preaching in the streets of Mecca, making such a host of converts that the authorities, increasingly concerned, finally exiled him with 59,999 followers to the island of Patmos….Though he was a black man, Mr. Yacub, embittered toward Allah now, decided, as revenge, to create upon the earth a devil’s race—a bleached out, white race of people….The humans resulting, he knew, would be, as they became lighter, and weaker, progressively also more susceptible to wickedness and evil. (pp.165-168)

This is a story of resistance, but it is a type of resistance that reverses the story of white oppressors. In Malcolm’s myth, black people are superior beings who were betrayed and later defeated by a weaker and inferior white race. While the story is different from white racist stories, the grammar of superiority-inferiority is the same. The humiliated are actually superior and will one day place the current superior class in their rightful place, which means they must be humiliated. The logic of humiliation remains, which means Malcolm’s civic self, at the time he believed this myth, was chained to racist humiliation, which also meant potential space remained segregated and this meant the absence of a dialectical tension between identification and disidentification. This is noted in Malcolm’s initial refusal to accept white people working with him.

Closely associated with reversal, as resistance, is separation.[[8]](#footnote-9) The story of the Israelites escaping the humiliation of Egyptian slavery is an illustration of this. By separating themselves from Egypt, they could establish a Jewish society with its potential space and civic selves. This kind of separation is different from the separation that takes place within a society. To return to Malcolm X, his father, who followed the teachings of Marcus Garvey, advocated blacks separating from whites—establishing their own homeland. Malcolm X, following the teachings of Elijah Muhammad and the Nation of Islam, argued that blacks should separate from whites, establishing a shared potential space between African Americans within the boundaries of the United States.

One of the aims of the Nation of Islam was to secure a positive civic self for African Americans, which could not, they argued, happen without separating from white racist culture. Again, this type of resistance is understandable and establishes a sense of civic agency, yet, in societies where the group cannot leave, separation leaves in place aspects of political humiliation. What I mean by this is that separation, in Malcolm’s case, perpetuates the attenuation of potential space and the absence of a dialectical tension between identification and disidentification. In separating, whites and blacks operate within their own groups, affirming and operating out of their civic selves, while disidentifying with those outside the group.[[9]](#footnote-10)

I add here that both reversal and separation, as types of resistance, can include violence. For people who have suffered political humiliation and its material and psychological consequences, there may be good reasons to use violence to free themselves from their oppressors. While the cultural context can provide greater understanding for taking up violence, I simply say, without arguing for or against violence, that it forecloses potential space vis-à-vis the enemy and keeps in place the lack of tension or split between identification and disidentification. Of course, there are situations when colonies, having freed themselves from the imperial power, may eventually engage as equals, thus establishing potential space between previously opposing sides.

The last type of resistance is inclusive, cooperative protest. This kind of protest includes witness and lament, but it aims at forming coalitions to overturn political, economic, and social practices of humiliation and, thus, restore potential space for all societal members—parity of participation of civic selves (Fraser & Honneth, 2003). Martin Luther King Jr., for instance, collaborated with whites and white organizations that held similar visions of racial justice. Malcolm X, toward the end of his life, was more open to working with whites. In South Africa, Desmond Tutu and Nelson Mandela worked with any South African who sought to do away with apartheid and reclaim civil rights for all South Africans. This kind of resistance seeks to establish a decent society where ideally no group of people has to suffer from and resist political humiliation. Put differently, inclusive cooperative protest maintains the dialectical tension between interpersonal identification and disidentification, thus creating an inclusive potential space.

Let me briefly return to the consulting room. Fiona’s resistance of witness and lamentation eventually included cooperative protest. In time, Fiona searched out local groups that sought to agitate for economic-social justice. The group she joined worked with other groups to effect change in the city, sometimes successfully. In my view, Fiona’s joining the group was a form of resistance, whereby she asserted her civic agency and claimed her rightful place to participate in the potential space of the local community and state. She not only supported others within the group (and vice-versa), but she wanted to have an effect on reducing the sources of political humiliation that poor and working-class people experience.

Political humiliation, more often than not, evokes some form of resistance, because it is inimical to existential realities of being persons living a life in common. The discussion of the four types of resistance may lead readers to conclude that separation and reversal are less than optimal forms of resistance because potential space remains attenuated or lacking and the tension between identification and disidentification is absent. I would point out that all forms of resistance depend on their context to determine whether one is more optimal than others. For instance, Malcolm X’s advocating separation may be considered a realistic and good choice at the time given the terror and violence directed against African Americans.

**Conclusion**

Political humiliation seems to be present even in decent, stable societies. A society’s disciplinary and justificatory regimes enforce political humiliation, which negatively impacts the material and psychological well-being of those who are the targets. A political-psychological understanding of humiliation is that it restricts or attenuates potential space in the public sphere, which also means that humiliated persons are denied a civic self—a self that is positively recognized and engaged in the public-political realm—which accompanies the attenuation of self-confidence, self-respect, and self-esteem. More often than not, political humiliation evokes types of resistance, which are aimed at securing one’s participation in potential space and establishing a civil self.

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1. Recognition and misrecognition are tied to forms of knowledge regarding self and other. For instance, racism, in part, entails the belief that individuals of color are inferior. This belief is ensconced in an array of narratives and practices that comprise knowledge, albeit distorted, about individuals of color. This knowledge is distorted because it is based on the illusions of white superiority and black inferiority—illusions masquerading as fact or truth. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. Since I am focused on the humiliated, it is easy to overlook that misrecognition goes both ways, but with differing consequences. Political humiliation vis-à-vis African Americans also includes whites’ misrecognition of themselves. That is, whites believe that because they are white they are superior, which is a collectively held illusion. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
3. Roy Schafer (1990) argues that the concept of internalization is particularly useful not simply in understanding psychosocial development, but for explicating the process of accepting an ideology (p.xi). Indeed, Schafer believed the concept used in social theory can account for how the “oppressed and exploited [come] to accept and even idealize the socioeconomic and ideological system in which they and their oppressors are serving as participant-victims” (pp. xi-xii). For Schafer, internalization refers to “all those processes by which the subject transforms real or imagined regulatory interactions with his environment, and real or imagined characteristics of his environment, into inner regulations and characteristics” (p.15). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
4. By political, I mean socially held and publicly expressed symbols, narratives, and rituals that are embodied in a polis’ institutions and social-symbolic spaces that function to: a) organize a person’s experiences and legitimate an individual’s actions in the public realm; b) facilitate collective discourse and action in the public realm; c) distribute power and resources; d) legitimate authority and governance; e) adjudicate claims and discipline and repair breeches of both social order and the laws governing social arrangements and the distribution of resources; f) provide an overarching social-political identity that supports collective action and discourse, as well as provides for a shared sense of continuity and cohesion; g) facilitate mutual care of citizens (and non-citizens) for the sake of survival and flourishing. The notion of politics, then, refers to groups of people, not necessarily or always citizens, who are engaged in public action and discourse pertaining to the common good and decisions being made with regard to a) who is allowed to participate in public-political discourse (citizenship and identity), b) who should govern, c) what type of institution(s) should be the instrument of governing, d) the kinds of policies and programs that administer and regulate economic and social affairs, e) care of citizens and strangers, and f) the enactment and adjudication of laws that order the society and repair social disruptions. Ideally, then, the political points to the shared participation in the construction and use of shared social imaginaries for the sake of living a life in common. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
5. Classism is a complex term. Briefly, classism and class conflict emerge in relation to the inequitable distribution of surplus value with the propertied classes obtaining greater resources, while poorer classes receive fewer. People from the upper classes “feel obliged to justify their differences,” though, as Sayer argues, class (and classism) lacks moral justification (Sayers, 2005, p.4), Individuals—capitalists (and political elites who support them)—who obtain the surplus value can begin to hold the illusion that because they hold the value (and greater political-economic power), they are more socially valuable and superior to those who do not (lower classes) (p.vii). The poor and unemployed, classism holds, are of lesser value—a drain on the economy because they do not contribute to the creation of surplus value. Classism, then, comprises a valuation of inferiority and superiority based on one’s position in a class hierarchy. Upper classes, in classism, deem themselves to be superior, while considering the lower classes to be inferior. This inferiority is a form of political humiliation that is supported and maintained by disciplinary and justificatory regimes. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
6. See Cvetkovich (2012) and Rogers-Vaughn (2016) for a discussion regarding the relation between capitalism and depression. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
7. The primary focus here is on classism and class. That said, classism, from Sayer’s (2005) perspective, cannot be separated from racism and sexism (see also Goldberg, 2009; Johnson, 2016). [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
8. Separation can be initiated by the powerful as yet another type of political humiliation that denies the separated from potential space and thus denying any semblance of civic selves (removal of Native peoples from their lands to reservations). This is not resistance, but a drastic type of political humiliation. Separation as resistance must be initiated by the humiliated—affirming their agency. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
9. Reversal and separation as forms of resistance are not options in Fiona’s case. As a white working-class mother, it would have been nearly impossible to separate herself from the realities of capitalism that were the source of her political humiliation. Moreover, it would be difficult to conceive that she, as an individual, could reverse the humiliation by humiliating wealthy elites. Yet, this does not mean that wealthy capitalists do not fear political humiliation at the hands of the mob. This is seen in the cover of the conservative magazine, *The American Spectator* (June 2014). The cover illustration depicts a bespectacled and paunchy, white rich man being led to the guillotine. An official of the angry mob is raising a bloody copy of Thomas Piketty’s book Capital in the Twenty-First Century. Near him is a guillotine with a bloody blade, suggesting that many other wealthy people had already been guillotined. The clear reference is to the violence of the French Revolution, which was, in part, an attempt to abase the ruling elite who had deprived many citizens not only of a voice, but of material goods. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)