Poverty, Institutional Shaming, Humiliation.

Do Social Policies Violate Human Dignity?

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1. A political approach to social shaming and to social humiliation

Shame can be investigated from multiple perspectives, as an object for psychology, anthropology, or the social and political sciences. Currently, the most common approach is a merely psychological one, but to discuss the different types of shaming connected to social policies, we need to move away from this towards a political one. Therefore, we must first shift from the concept of shame as a feeling provoked by a certain practice to the practice of shaming itself. Second, we have to consider a specific type of shaming, which we call 'social shaming.' We do this because it happens both within the context of specific social interactions (i.e. interactions in which people are involved as members of social groups, specifically as citizens of a political community) and is performed by representatives of social institutions, while its deeper cause is to be found in social structures, as we will see.[1] Furthermore, we establish a connection between social shaming and social humiliation that should allow for the discussion and criticism of social policies.[2]

Recent psychological research on poverty no longer deals with shame by taking it to be a mere emotional reaction of embarrassment by individuals who are faced with the painful consciousness of their dire situation; it rather treats it as a much more complex feeling connected to forms of self-evaluation[3] – a feeling that has an inter-subjective nature and is essentially dependent on the external (social) environment. The impact of shame on personal identity is so strong that it heavily influences processes of self-assessment and the building up of self-respect. A pervasive experience of shame erodes our sense of agency and might give rise to depression, anxiety, eating disorders, and even to suicidal ideas (Walker 2014, 40).[4]

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[1] The distinction between *shame* and *social shame* is borrowed from Honneth (1996), but we use it in a different way.

[2] For simplicity's sake, we will refer to social shaming, social shame and social humiliation simply as shaming, shame and humiliation. When the term is opposed to forms of shaming that have no social nature, we will use the adjective "social."

[3] 'Shame entails a negative assessment of the core self, made with reference to one's own aspirations and the perceived expectations of others, that manifests itself in a sense of powerlessness and inadequacy, and the feeling of "being small"' (Walker 2014, 33).

[4] On shame from the perspective of social psychology see among others Smith et al. 2002, Tangney and Dearing 2003 and Hsin Yang et al. 2007.

From an anthropological and sociological point of view, 'shame' is connected to empirical investigations of social practices that single out groups and individuals and expose them to vexatious situations. It is also sometimes considered a useful tool for eliciting a specific behaviour. As Nussbaum (2004, 3f.) remarks, shaming was a legitimate instrument of control and punishment in societies characterized by a more homogeneous sense of what is ethically acceptable or by some form of common morality. However, in contemporary democratic societies, which are grounded on the grammar of rights and human dignity, shaming penalties are morally questionable, particularly on the institutional level, and tend to assume an arbitrary character. That being said, the practice of social shaming should not necessarily be considered negatively.[5] On the contrary, it can still be a powerful instrument for ethical criticism when used to make clear that some legitimate expectation has been confounded or that some socially accepted ethical norm has been violated. In this sense, shaming is a social practice that aims at making publicly visible a behaviour that is socially deemed unacceptable; for example, when one makes a comment to someone who is trying to jump a queue. It can easily become an instrument of oppression, though, either when it is not effectively justified by some unacceptable behaviour, by the breaking of socially valid ethical norms, or when the norms or expectations are unjust themselves and only serve to keep specific groups or individuals in a state of submission. This is, for instance, the case when shame is used to exert 'social power by more privileged individuals and groups' (Walker 2014, 47).

One should distinguish, therefore, between normatively justified and unjustified shaming, with the latter being that which has no normative basis in a shared morality or sense of ethical properness. Furthermore, one should distinguish between, on the one hand, unjustified social shaming as an expression of a widespread but normatively unsustainable attitude of disapproval within society, and on the other, unjustified *institutional* shaming that is carried out specifically by social and political institutions either directly or through their representatives. An example of unjustified social shaming is fat-shaming: overweight or obese people are openly blamed by others for their situation, which is connected to their alleged gluttony or to supposedly unwise personal choices concerning nutrition and lifestyle. Unjustified institutional shaming occurs, for instance, when social policies have the effect of blaming their recipients for

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[5] Bernard Williams (1993) had already highlighted the relevance of shaming as a tool for social and *ethical* control.

their situation, such as when policies establishing unemployment benefits end up testing unemployed people's willingness to find a job. It is this unjustified institutional shaming that we want to focus on in this context. We prefer to use the term institutional humiliation, though, since it represents a violation of the shamed persons' dignity and an attack on their self-respect.

We are using the concept of dignity not to refer to some intrinsic value of persons, but as a relational concept connected to one's status as a citizen, that is, as a member of a political community (cf. Zylberman 2018). We mean this not only in the restricted sense of the citizen being a bearer of rights and duties, of legal and moral claims that can be used to trump her co-citizens and community (Feinberg 1970), but also and foremost as a political subject who participates in the political life of her community and can demand justification for decisions affecting her (Rawls 1999, Forst 2011).We do not need, then, to presuppose some metaphysical or normatively thick conception of human dignity and can refer instead to a *thin* one. In doing so, we adopt the distinction between respect and esteem that considers the former to be a form of recognition of the public status of a citizen and the latter to be a form of recognition that refers to the private spheres of work and family (Walzer 1983 249ff.; Ci 2013, 146). From this point of view, respect is a normatively stronger concept in the sense that a person may lack social esteem (if others think she is bad in her social roles: as a daughter, a wife, a mother, a professional, etc.) but still enjoy respect as a political subject and a rights bearer.[6] Lack of social esteem might lead to lack of self-esteem, but it is always possible that people are not, in fact, disheartened by their failure to be acknowledged for their social role. Lack of respect, however, unavoidably leads individuals to consider themselves as citizens of a lesser class, and therefore it severely affects self-respect.

This thin conception of dignity is enough for our purposes since we want to evaluate the effects of social policies aimed at poor people, that is, of public measures that governments take in order to help citizens who are struggling to make ends meet or even to survive. This conception is not necessarily connected to that of a decent life, which refers rather to the minimal material conditions under which individuals might live, either in general terms or relatively to a specific society. Social policies should guarantee such conditions, but we are not interested in discussing this point. We will not

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[6] An extreme, but helpful case is that of a criminal who evidently does not enjoy social esteem for what he did, but still enjoys his basic rights, including that of justification (Forst 2011).

evaluate policies according to their capacity to deliver such conditions, but according to the way they treat their beneficiaries. We claim that in designing and implementing social policies aimed at poor people, social and political institutions can violate the respect which is due to these persons for their status as citizens (and not, e.g., because of their moral status or because of their intrinsic value). In doing so they undermine poor citizens' capacity to develop self-respect and humiliate them (Piroli 2017).

From this point of view, institutional humiliation comes close to stigma. As Goffman has notably observed (1063, 2ff.), we attach stigma to some attribute that makes individuals different from us – an attribute that is 'deeply discrediting' and that makes its bearer appear 'not quite human' to our eyes. Among the attributes that lead to stigma Goffman mentions 1) physical or psychological 'abominations,' 2) traits of character we deem ethically or socially unacceptable, and 3) belonging to specific social groups defined along race, religion, or class lines. Stigma then serves as a justification for operating discriminations that affect its bearer's life chances. Further, we do not simply stigmatize such an individual, but 'we construct a stigma-theory, an ideology to explain his inferiority and account for the danger he represents, sometimes rationalizing an animosity based on other differences, such as those of social class' (Goffman 1963, 5). Stigma is easily internalized by those who suffer it, and this affects their self-esteem and their behaviour, often "confirming" the low opinion others have of them, reinforcing the stigma. The difference between shaming and stigmatizing is well summarized by Walker: 'Shame purports to ensure social cohesion and inclusivity and, while explicit shame is best avoided because its effects are unpredictable, the hope would be that shaming could still cause the offender to change, to repent, and to be readmitted into the group. Stigma, in contrast, serves to differentiate between groups, the "us" and "them," the acceptable and the unacceptable, rather than ensure cohesion between them' (Walker 2014, 52). Stigma has a divisive nature that irremediably separates the stigmatized from the stigmatizers. Likewise, humiliation aims at making clear (to its victims and to all those who witness it) that the humiliator and the humiliated do not belong to the same group or do not exist in a condition of parity; that there is a rigid hierarchy between the former and the latter as between a superior and an inferior; and that they are divided by a line that cannot be transposed, by a gap that cannot be overcome. However, while stigma indicates a mark that groups or individuals bear no matter what they do and independently from the fact that others actively demean them, humiliation occurs only as the result of an act of shaming or of a specific social

condition. In some societies, for instance, homosexuals bear a stigma even when their homosexuality is not known – and this leads them generally to recur to strategies like covering (Yoshino 2006). This is different from a situation in which their homosexuality is exposed, and they are publicly shamed and humiliated.

Although in our investigation the concepts of 'social shaming' and of 'humiliation' are correlated, it is important analytically to distinguish them. As Nussbaum (2004, 203) says, humiliation is 'the active, public face of shame' and concerns the practice of actively exposing in individuals what is collectively considered to be a vulnerability that should be hidden (i.e. a stigma). For this reason, Nussbaum argues, it is important first to discover what is considered shame (to understand its grammar), and then to uncover the dynamics of public exposition, that is, the dynamics of humiliation proper. To go back to the examples mentioned above, by shaming someone who is trying to jump a queue, I am not humiliating him, since I am not assessing his alleged inferiority, nor am I implying that he somehow does not belong to the community. This might well be the case in exposing someone's homosexuality, however, particularly within a society in which being homosexual represents an unacceptable mark, a stigma that differentiates and isolates homosexual persons from their community. By referring to someone's homosexuality, I might be claiming that she does not belong, that she is not like "us," that is, like the majority of "normal," heterosexual individuals. In doing so I am actively demeaning her and violating her status as an equal member of our community.

Other authors, for example, Margalit (1994 and 1996) whose studies on humiliation have been path-breaking, decidedly separate these concepts. According to Margalit, shame violates the inner sense of honour and represents, therefore, a matter of self-esteem; while humiliation affects self-respect, generally understood as the sense of oneself as a human being (not simply as a citizen). Humiliation, then, attacks directly the dignity of a person, treating her "as if" she were not a human being, but merely a thing or a non-human animal. In other words, a being that does not belong to the 'Family of Man.' Robert Walker (2014) also assumes that humiliation is close to shame with regard to intensity (both are strong emotions that can provoke anger and violence as responses), but nevertheless differs significantly from it. Shame is essentially a moral issue (it points to a moral failure), while humiliation is a general feeling of being debased for being the person one is. We argue for a similar distinction between 'shame' and 'humiliation,' considering the former as referring to a (real or alleged) moral failure

and the latter as referring to the very way of being of the humiliated person or group. One can be socially shamed for trying to jump a queue without being humiliated, but when one is socially shamed for being homosexual or poor, this kind of shaming is better considered as a form of humiliation and as an attack on one's social status, that is, as a lack of respect. This respect, though, is not measured on the level of humanity, as Margalit does, but only on the level of citizenship within a specific society.

As mentioned above, we adopt a political approach, taking both institutional shaming and humiliation as the core objects of our investigation. Such an approach presents clear advantages.[7] First, since it explicitly refers to the institutional dimension, shame is not seen here as a merely subjective, internal feeling; rather, it is connected to a social practice of shaming or humiliation that is imposed by society and its institutions on some of its members (Walker 2014).[8] This perspective allows us to typify institutional shaming or humiliation not only as specific processes of so-called *social exclusion* (e.g. when individuals and groups are socially marked as undesirable, unproductive or useless, and thus "excluded" from society),[9] but also some *unjustified unequal relations of power* (e.g. when institutions promote differences in social status among their citizens, subduing one or more social groups) and certain *dynamics of perpetuation of injustice* (e.g. when ideological institutional discourses promote the idea that the victims should be blamed for their own suffering). In other words, shaming and humiliation are possible not only as the result of a practice of normatively unjustified social shaming, but also as the result of social conditions that establish an undue disparity among social actors. We will see that poor people face shaming and humiliating behaviour from institutions and their representatives as well as shaming and humiliating conditions that result from the way society is structured and reproduces itself.

Second, given the fact that the impact of institutions on individuals' lives can be decisive, institutional shaming and humiliation are the more urgent issues to deal with. The political approach, by focusing on the institutional aspect, gives priority to this urgency. Third, the fact that individuals effectively feel ashamed or humiliated is not relevant in itself. This does not imply that this subjective dimension does not matter at

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[7] We base the description of the political approach on Margalit's normative conception of humiliation (1996).
[8] See also Nussbaum 2004, Margalit 1996 and Rawls 1999.
[9] We consider the term "social exclusion" to be misleading, since nobody can really be excluded by and from society. One may face forms of partial inclusion or of marginalization, but only rarely be fully expelled by society, particularly in contemporary societies. On this see Martins 1997.

all; only that it is not the central question for social criticism. The political approach, then, neglects particular cases in order to uncover the dynamics of social shaming and humiliation. Accordingly, when there are *sound reasons* for individuals to feel ashamed and humiliated by social actors and institutions, one can also find criteria normatively to condemn social shaming in general and institutional humiliation in particular (Margalit, 1994).[10]

To summarize, one should first distinguish between normatively justified and unjustified social shaming. As for the former, shaming aims to highlight some behaviour that breaks socially accepted rules and is therefore a legitimate instrument of social and ethical control (like in the example of shaming someone who is trying to jump the queue); as for the latter, shaming is also directed against a behaviour that is allegedly socially unacceptable, but in this case there is no good reason for it, either because the behaviour does not violate any social norm or expectation (the person was not trying to jump the queue, but belongs to a category of persons who might go in front, e.g., she is pregnant or elderly.), or because the norm or expectation is not unequivocally socially valid (trying to jump the queue is socially acceptable within that specific society). One should second distinguish between ordinary social shaming and institutional shaming. In the first case, individuals shame other individuals in public (e.g. in the post office); in the second, it is institutions or their representatives who do the shaming (e.g. a public official sending a person back to the end of the queue). We distinguish third between unjustified shaming and humiliation. In a very general way, while the former is a social practice that aims at exposing to shame behaviours that are wrongly deemed unacceptable according to the shared morality or a sense of ethical properness, the latter disqualifies and debases individuals as if they were inferior, not for what they do, but for who they are. Insofar as it does this, it comes close to stigma, which however is not directly connected to public shaming in the same way as humiliation. All these categories can combine with one another. When social shaming and social humiliation are caused by institutions and not by individuals, we can speak of institutional shaming and humiliation. They can further be normatively unjustified

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[10] We take also this point from Margalit (1996), who insists that, from a normative point of view, it is irrelevant whether the person actually feels humiliated; what really matters are rather 'external circumstances', such as concrete acts, behaviors and even omissions. Furthermore, we are dealing with institutional responsibility, without considering misfortunes or practices of self-humiliation. Our issue is what has been called also 'avoidable injustice' (Shklar 1990) or 'socially avoidable suffering' (Moore 1978).

forms of institutional shaming and humiliation. These will be the object of the next section of this paper.

2. Making institutional shaming visible

In this section, we discuss three possible types of institutional shaming and the possibility of institutional humiliation that might occur in the context of the elaboration and implementation of social policies addressing poverty. The first, and most visible, could be called "official shaming." This consists in being an object of shaming by public officials. It occurs when the recipients of social benefits are shamed or humiliated and disrespected by public officials or by other representatives of institutions while they are implementing social measures (e.g. when they register the recipients or distribute benefits). This is a process of institutional shaming insofar as it is performed by individuals in their role as representatives of social institutions. It entails practices and behaviours that directly expose recipients of social programs to shame and possibly to humiliation. The second type, which is less visible, can be called "bureaucratic shaming." This takes place when public policies label people as poor in a way that represents a veritable stigma. This entails a bureaucratization process that institutionally and officially marks socioeconomically vulnerable individuals as being morally weak or as undesirable and unworthy members of society. The third kind, which we call "political shaming," is more difficult to detect and could therefore be deemed invisible shaming. It consists in being silenced by politicians and bureaucrats when it comes to taking decisions about social policies. It entails a specific process of social shaming, which is also a practice of silencing that routinely excludes the voice of vulnerable people, who are implicitly deemed to be too stupid or ignorant to participate in the decision making process concerning policies that directly affect them. Furthermore, it can express itself in the institutions' indifference to the humiliating conditions in which the poor have to live.

(a) Official shaming

According to Margalit (1996) it is possible to look at social institutions from two perspectives. *First*, in an abstract way, one can see them as a set of laws and rules that organize public life. *Second*, more concretely, one can focus on the effective way in which they work through the action of their representatives. In both cases one can discern patterns of institutional humiliation. For instance, the Nuremberg Laws in Nazi

Germany and the apartheid rules in South Africa were examples of institutional humiliation on the more abstract level of legislation, although their effects were very real. On the other side, the violent and racist treatment of Rodney King by L.A. policemen in March 1991 could be seen as an example of a more concrete form of institutional humiliation. In this subsection, we focus on the latter aspect, that is, on the effective actions and behaviours of institutional representatives, of 'clerks, police, soldiers, prison wardens, teachers, social workers, judges and all the other agents of authority' (Margalit 1996, 128). We focus specially on the implementation of social policies, which has great potential to humiliate the intended recipients of said policies. However, it is important to note that our investigation does not aim to blame individuals, that is, the officials who perform humiliating acts. We consider their actions to be the consequence of the very way in which the institutions they represent are constructed and work. From this point of view, we are facing a kind of *structural* humiliation that manifests itself in the behaviour of individual representatives of institutions. In a sense, despite the name we give to this form of shaming, what counts is less that individual public officials humiliate the recipients of social benefits, and rather that they do this while speaking and acting in the name of institutions. In the eyes of the humiliated person, it is the institution itself that is shaming them. As Margalit remarks, in cases of institutional humiliation 'it is less important to find out who the humiliators are than to ascertain whether there is a justification for feeling humiliated.' In this case, 'we can ignore the subjective intentions of the humiliators in examining whether their actions are degrading.' This is especially true 'when we are discussing systematic humiliation that is not the whim of a particular individual in authority.' For this reason, Margalit suggests a shift in the discussion from the humiliating agents to the humiliating situation, but not in order to 'absolve those actually doing the humiliating on behalf of the institutions from their individual moral responsibility,' of course. Rather, as Margalit remarks, this shift 'is important because institutional humiliation is independent of the peculiarities of' the humiliating agent, depending only on the nature of the humiliation. It thus contrasts with the sort of 'humiliation that takes place in personal relations.' Margalit concludes that one does not have 'to value the official humiliating you in order to value the institution she is serving' (Margalit, 1996, 128f.).

It is not just the actions of *the institutional workers* that are here under review, but also the *institutional situations*, that is, the conditions under which officials are allowed by institutions to act in a humiliating way as their representatives. We call this kind of

social shaming process *official shame*, as we are specifically looking for patterns of humiliation by institutional agents. These are often those who directly supervise the grantees, such as 'nurses, social workers, and the like' (Margalit 1996, 118). Through their demeaning attitude and humiliating actions they actively corrode the social bases for self-respect of the grantees as defined by Rawls (1999) and particularly by Fraser.[11] With respect to this circumstance, Margalit (1997) speaks of the 'subjugation of the will' of the needy. He refers to all kinds of humiliating treatments and situations that public officials impose on grantees in order to make it clear that, as long as they are enjoying a specific welfare program, they will be under constant surveillance and scrutiny.

What is at stake here is not the inequality of power between the public officials and the grantees, but its humiliating character, especially in issues concerning the control and supervision of the grantees' life and actions. The conditions of supervision imposed on the needy easily give way to a process of subjugation of the will in which public officials use their power of institutional supervision to threaten, coerce, manipulate, and make sure the grantees understand how their autonomy is severely limited just because they are enrolled in a social welfare program. When this happens, the unequal relation of power between public officials and grantees very easily turns into a *humiliating* relation of power, in which control of the conditionality attached to the program (which is *prima facie* a legitimate institutional tool to guarantee that the grantees uphold the agreement) becomes an instrumental practice to subjugate the will of the grantees and to put them in an inferior position because they are enrolled in a social program. In a sense, in such cases, humiliation as a form of shaming becomes a tool of social control and even of social management.

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[11]In *Social Justice in the Age of Identity Politics: Redistribution, Recognition, and Participation* (Fraser and Honneth 2003), Fraser performs a deontological turn on the theory of recognition and its mainly concepts, such as self-confidence, self-respect and self-esteem. She does not want this theory to merely concern personal identity; instead, she endorses an approach defending that all kinds of recognition issues aiming to become issues of social justice should shift from the 'identity grammar' to the 'status grammar,' which demands for an institutional equality of status, or at least for not demeaning individuals. It becomes then fundamental to look for the basic institutional conditions that support individuals' status equality. Fraser proposes three social conditions to achieve such a 'parity of status.' The first one is the 'objective condition' represented by the material resources that are necessary to supply the individuals' independence. The second is the 'intersubjective condition' represented by cultural values such as respect. The third is the 'political condition' of access to representation in order to influence the public agenda. Together, all the three conditions, when supported by the State, could normatively provide the social bases necessary for individuals' parity of status.

In order to make visible this type of social shaming process, we examine the following examples. Consider a program of conditional cash transfer aiming to reduce the number of people who suffer from severe poverty – like the Brazilian *Bolsa Família*. The program directly distributes a monthly monetary income to its grantees, so that they can freely use the money according to their familiar necessities, such as food, clothes, medicines, and so on. In exchange, the institutions demand from grantees that they fulfil specific conditions in order not to lose their benefits. For example, in the case of *Bolsa Família*, children of school age have to regularly attend school (with a minimum attendance rate of 85%), and children younger than seven years old must be vaccinated and attend regular medical appointments in order to measure their development.[12] All these measures allowed a large number of very poor individuals to access public health, education and social assurance services that previously were not able to reach them. In terms of real access to social rights, we can say that the program has been very successful. Data show that children are healthier than before and stay in school for longer. These factors should help to break the vicious circle of poverty which has caused entire generations to suffer throughout Brazilian history. Alongside these positive statistics, however, there has been an unwanted and unexpected consequence: potential exposure to institutional shaming. In this subsection we focus on the concrete process of shaming, which is directly performed by institutional representatives such as social workers, teachers and health visitors. All of these have institutional permission to supervise the grantees and control their compliance with the conditions. This creates a power relation which the public officials could potentially overstate, becoming a process of social shaming. To illustrate this, we recur to the voices of the grantees, and quote some empirical research (Marins2017; see also Lavinas 2014 and Leão Rego and Pinzani 2018). One of the grantees tells the following story:

> The health visitor came into my house and asked: "How do you spend the Bolsa Família money?[13] Does your husband buy alcohol?" And I kept thinking to myself: "No need to ask how we spend the money!" She knows we are in dire straits, that sometimes there is no milk for the children, doesn't she? And she asks whether my husband drinks, this is offensive, isn't it? They are very aggressive. They treat people badly. But

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[12] See: http://nutricao.saude.gov.br/docs/geral/apresentacaoEventosSaude.pdf
[13] It is worth noting that such questions are not allowed. The health officer was clearly overstepping her powers.

I had to control myself because otherwise I might lose my Bolsa Família.

(Marins 2017, 196 [our translation])

Or consider the words of another grantee concerning the control exerted on her two children by a teacher, who publicly shames them in front of other non-grantee children, supposedly to encourage them to improve their academic performance (in other words, she claimed to be using shaming as a pedagogical tool):

At school the teacher always says to my boys: "If you continue to do badly, you will lose the Bolsa Família." My son comes home crying because of this. The teacher says: "If your homework doesn't get better, I'll have them cancel the Bolsa Família." Bruno comes home in tears. She says: "I'll make you go to the guardianship council, get it?"[14] My son became afraid. She says: "I'll have it canceled, get it?" What should I do? My son does not want to go to that school any longer, because, even when she does not say anything, he fears that she might scold him.

(Marins 2017, 194 [our translation])

Such reports are quite common, unfortunately, and can be considered forms of institutional shaming, since the health visitor and the teacher are talking from their institutional position and using their institutional power (they can cancel the benefit) in order to submit the grantees to unjustified accusations and to threaten them. For their part, the grantees must silently endure the scolding and strictly follow the rules. The problem is not the inequality of power *per se,* nor the existence of conditions in itself, but their use as instrument of humiliating disciplinary control. This is a worldwide phenomenon, as shown by empirical research.[15]

(b) Bureaucratic social shaming

Less visible, but equally damaging, is the second type of social shaming process, which could be labelled an abstract institutional humiliation as Margalit (1996) observes. However, we follow Robert Walker (2014, 49) who calls it a bureaucratized shame. Following Walker, we are referring to public bureaucracy, that is, to the institutional system that organizes and guarantees public services. At the same time, the

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[14] The guardianship council is called when children are mistreated by parents or are living in familiar circumstances that require their custody.

[15] 'Social assistance recipients across diverse countries talk about being treated as numbers, feeling dehumanized, being in a vacuum, needing to negotiate endless checks and limitless forms, and battling against a system that seems to be against them.' (Walker 2014, 60). See also the series "Automating Poverty" run in October 2019 by *The Guardian* (2019).

term refers to all the officials who work in this system and are responsible for its functioning. In the case of welfare systems more specifically, we are referring to the public institutions and to the officials whose task it is to design social benefits following a specific set of rules and practices.

Differently from the previous case, that is, from official shaming, in the case of bureaucratic shaming the process is less direct and violent. It plays out in the way social programs are designed and implemented, and it expresses itself (a) in the very way the welfare provisions are framed (e.g. in the attached conditions), (b) in the means to access the program (e.g. how to register), (c) in the elaboration of means testing to check the "legitimacy" of the grantees (e.g. their actual level of poverty), (d) in the institutional discourse that sustains the program, and so on.[16] This type of institutional shaming has the capacity to create strong symbolic boundaries between grantees and non-grantees, and even between different categories of grantees (Marins 2017). Public shaming occurs principally at the registration level, because at this moment almost all the above mentioned faces of bureaucratic shaming (conditionality, registering, testing and institutional discourse) are present and may contribute to the creation of conditions under which the social bases of self-respect are undermined.

Public bureaucracy is a central feature in the way society relates to its poor. As Serge Paugam observes, every society defines its poor differently and gives them a distinct social status. It might decide to help them or not. It might resolve to offer public assistance or to rely on private charity. It is for this reason that, he claims, the real object of sociological studies on the topic is not poverty itself, not the poor, but the way specific societies cope with these issues: the mechanisms for defining the poor and for imagining tools of assistance; the relation they establish between their institutions and their poor; and the social representations they create around poverty and legitimate ways of dealing with it (Paugam and Duvoux 2008, 25). Thus, there is nothing normatively neutral or purely technical in the way social institutions define who is going to receive public assistance and how. Rather, in every bureaucratic formulation of social policies there is always an implicit evaluative moment, which we would like to make explicit.

First, let us consider the very way social programs frame welfare provision (a). According to our criterion, if the framing of welfare provision places the grantees in a degrading social position, harming the social conditions for acquiring self-respect, we

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[16]Such features are listed both by Margalit (1996) and Walker (2014).

have a just reason to consider it humiliating and unacceptable. Consider a case in which the normative orientations that decide the way social benefits are distributed hold that giving money directly to the poor should be avoided because there is an assumption that the grantee will use it in a non-rational way (for example, an assumption that they will buy useless things instead of food and clothes for the children or buy alcohol or drugs). In order to avoid these possible problems that could undermine the political ends of the social program, threatening the grantees' well-being, it could be institutionally decided that the provision should be not given directly to the poor, but to institutional representatives such as social workers or health visitors. Thus, the representatives could manage the way in which the money is used, in order to ensure that the physical and psychological health of the grantees improves. This could be a very efficient institutional strategy to increase the poor's wellbeing, but it would be unjust and would represent a humiliation by treating the poor as non-autonomous persons or as individuals who cannot make reasonable decisions with regard to their life and to their well-being.[17] Positively, a just framing of the welfare provision should normatively consider the grantees' social status as free and equal citizens supposedly able to act following rational and reasonable patterns, as Rawls (1999) suggests. We should at least negatively demand that the design of the welfare provision does not humiliate its beneficiaries by treating them *as if they were a group of non-rational persons*, incapable of freely deciding their primary interests. This would represent a violation of their dignity as citizens, and as such it would impair the social conditions under which they can acquire and maintain self-respect.

Let us consider further the ways of accessing social programs (b). Once again, according to our previous criterion, if the conditions to receive the welfare provision put the grantees in a degrading social position, we have a legitimate reason to say it is humiliating because it violates the social bases of self-respect. Let us consider the above mentioned empirical research on social programs in Brazil that shows the often great

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[17]Following Rawls (1999), we defend that institutional framing – in Rawls' case, of the 'basic structure of society,' and in our case of the social welfare programs – could be very efficient, ethically well-meant and empirically successful, but nevertheless not just at all. This means that issues of distributive efficiency do not necessarily cover questions of justice, for many reasons. *First*, following a Rawlsian approach, an efficient institutional distribution does not necessarily assume as a priority the equality of status of individuals as free and equal citizens (i.e. as citizens who participate in society as a system of social cooperation, being both able to rationally deal with their self-interest issues and reasonable enough to effectively guide their actions by a sense of justice). *Second*, following the capabilities approach, Sen and Nussbaum (1993) support that to provide the institutional conditions for human development it is not sufficient to merely look to empirical data from an economic point of view. Rather, following the idea of human development we should ask what individuals are capable of doing and being in their lives.

discrepancy between the bureaucratic language of letters, announcements and notifications directed to the grantees, and the fact that the latter are mostly illiterate who cannot understand that kind of language (Leão Rego and Pinzani 2018, 103f.). Thus, when they try to understand which benefits they might receive and which conditions they have to fulfil, the grantees need to look for help from somebody literate. This affects their access to the social program and at the same time violates the social conditions for self-respect: it makes the grantees feel ashamed of their illiteracy. Furthermore, there are other legal and political consequences. When bureaucrats choose to ignore the illiteracy problem (sometimes this is even a strategy to prevent the poor from enrolling on certain programs or to discourage them from protesting if their allowance is cut) they deny the grantees' rights and condemn them to remain in a condition of suffering. By making communication almost impossible, bureaucrats make themselves deaf to the voice of the poor or – to put it more precisely – they silence this voice, they deny the poor their 'right to a voice' (Leão Rego and Pinzani, 2018, 104).[18]

The elaboration of means testing that checks the legitimacy of the grantees' inclusion in the program and their fulfilment of its conditions (c) could also be humiliating according to our criterion. When means testing affects the social position of the grantees, harming their parity of status compared to non-grantees, it affects the social bases of self-respect. Let us imagine a case in which to be enrolled into a social program the poor have to accept labels formulated by bureaucrats such as "severe poverty," "indigent" or "poor." If individuals decline to be labelled in such ways, they cannot apply for the program. This is already humiliating, because it means that in order to get social benefits (which might be the object of social *rights*), individuals have to accept a label imposed on them from the outside and to declare themselves officially unable to care for themselves and their family. Means testing introduces a further humiliation, since it is supposed that the grantees might be cheating or might be spending the allowance in irrational ways (this is the case when the tests aim not only to prove formal conditions such as the real level of income, but also include house inspections by officials to ascertain whether the grantee is wasting the allowance on, e.g., luxury goods).[19] Means tests label a whole category of persons as possible cheaters or even as unreasonable individuals. Although some kind of criterion is necessary to

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[18] The perverse effects of bureaucratic shaming in this respect are effectively showed in the movie *I, Daniel Blake* by Ken Loach (2016).

[19] In Germany such house inspections are foreseen e.g. in the context of the social programs granted within the so-called Harz IV system.

establish who should receive social benefits as well as to ascertain whether grantees still fulfil the conditions for participating in social programs, it should be possible to design tests that do not question the spending morality of the grantees and that simply take into account objective data such as income per capita without using labels such as "severe poverty," "indigence," and so on.

Finally, one more issue deserves our attention. It concerns the institutional discourse and grammar that sustain the program (d): on the one side the institutional explanation of poverty, and on the other, the grammar and the terminology used by institutions to refer to social programs, for example, the names of the programs themselves and the name given to the group of individuals who receives the allowance (Leão Rego and Pinzani 2018, xiv). According to our criterion, if the institutional discourse and the grammar that frame the program diminish the social status of the grantees, we can say that they are humiliating because they undermine the social bases of self-respect. What should individuals receiving a monetary allowance like *Bolsa Família* be called? It is common to refer to them as "beneficiaries," which literally means someone who passively receives a benefit (without a reciprocal exchange). In the case of *Bolsa Família* there is a sort of exchange, though. The state gives money, while the beneficiaries keep the children vaccinated and send them at school. Nevertheless, Brazilian institutions use the term "beneficiaries," making it appear to be a unilateral relationship in which the state gives something (money) and receives nothing in exchange. In cases like this, the language used in official documents, government TV advertisements, etc., is systematically constructed so that individuals participating in social programs seem to be purely passive recipients, making them mere objects of a policy, never active subjects of politics (Pinzani 2012). Furthermore, if we compare the denominations that are applied to different groups of individuals who receive monthly payments from the State, we can note how different terms hint at different statuses. For example, in the Brazilian case, students and professors, who receive payments for study and for academic research, are not called beneficiaries, but grantees – *bolsistas* in Portuguese. In this case the grant – nobody uses the word "benefit" – is seen as an investment that in the future will bring social gains. In other words, grantees are seen as active participants in the system of social cooperation that constitutes society. On the contrary, the term "benefit" seems to refer to a gift that the current government gives to socio-economically vulnerable individuals, implying that they do not actively contribute to society. This identity label comes together with stigma, socially marking the grantees

as morally weak and unproductive individuals who are not capable of fully taking care of themselves and their families and who are parasites feeding on society.[20] They are excluded from the group of cooperative and contributing members of society. This view does not consider their role as parents who care for their children notwithstanding all the difficulties they face. Academic grant recipients are paid for their contribution to the advancement of science and knowledge; social grant recipients are paid for their contribution to social reproduction despite their dire conditions. Both deserve the name "grantees." This lack of acknowledgment of the social contribution of the poor brings us to consider the last form of shaming: political shaming.

(c) Political shaming

In his classic essay "The Poor" Georg Simmel observed that the poor are not only made invisible in our society, but they are also silenced, since no one gives voice to their interests and demands (Simmel 1965). In general, poor people are not politically organized, with the partial exception of local communities, whose demands tend to focus on local issues, not on general policies aiming to fight poverty. We do not deny the relevance of such experiences, particularly in countries where the number of poor people is extremely high both in absolute and in relative terms like Brazil or India (Kowarick 2000; Holston 2008; Chatterjee 2004), but we doubt that they allow reference to the political organization of the poor as a common phenomenon. As we said above, the poor tend mostly to be seen as objects of policies rather than as subjects of politics. They are almost never consulted when it comes to establishing social policies on a national level and only sometimes with regard to local policies – differently from what happens with entrepreneurs, workers, the unemployed or even retired people. Contrarily to those categories, which are often organized into associations or unions, the poor do not seem to form a cohesive social group with common interests and demands. They rarely organize nationwide protests, although

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[20] It also is important to consider the discourse that is dominant in the public sphere. Often it blames the poor for their own misery, condemning their supposedly irrational use of money (for example, accusing them of wasting money and drinking alcohol) or their unreasonable sexual life (which allegedly leads them to have more children than they can support). Meanwhile, the irrationality and immorality of the lifestyle of the elite that contributes to the phenomenon of poverty and to the suffering of so many people is ignored or even praised as examples of rationality and ethical correctness. In the case of the upper classes, sexual promiscuity is seen as a form of freedom, while an exaggeratedly ostentatious and consumerist lifestyle is presented as a model to be followed (Leão Rego and Pinzani 2018, 15).

popular revolts have always happened and still take place in many countries.[21] More relevant, however, is the fact that they are often denied the hermeneutic competence which is deemed necessary to judge their own situation (Pinzani 2020). When they are asked to report on their situation, their alleged ignorance of economics and lack of education are often seen as elements that unavoidably spoil the research, leading even social scientists to not fully trust in the poor's own testimony (Bourdieu 1999). This hermeneutic injustice (Fricker 2007) goes together with centuries of policies whose main aim was not to eradicate poverty, but to manage it and to 'regulate' the poor (Piven and Cloward 1993). That is, to force them to submit their lives to public control and accept unskilled, undignified and badly paid jobs (either in the form of forced work in workhouse-similar institutions or in the form of cheap service and menial jobs for the middle-class). Since the late Middle-Ages, the poor have been seen as a surplus population that may only be useful to carry out unskilled menial tasks or to put pressure on workers as a 'reserve army of labour,' to use Engels' famous term (Engels 2005). The whole debate on the so-called Poor Laws in England and elsewhere provides evidence that the goal of European governments when legislating on the issue was not to help the poor to escape poverty, but to minimize the risk of social conflict and to control their activities (Dean 1991; Stedman Jones 2004; Somers and Block 2005).[22] This explains what we called bureaucratic shaming and justifies official shaming in the eyes of its perpetrators. Many governments act as if the poor, not poverty were the problem.[23]

This represents a form of humiliation also insofar as political institutions and their representatives seem not to care about the plight of their poorer citizens and not be very keen to do anything in their power to put an end to it. Their (relative) lack of interest in the suffering of the poor is humiliating in that it does not take seriously their status as citizens. Poverty is much more than a mere lack of material resources; it has many non-material facets, as various authors have already highlighted (Townsend 1987, Alcock

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[21] While we are writing, people have taken the streets in many countries, from Lebanon to Chile, from Hong Kong to Ecuador. Although there is a strong popular element in these protests, they are not organized and carried out by the poor.

[22] On how the dominant vision of the poor changed in European societies from the Middle-Age to modernity see Himmelfarb 1984 and 1991 as well as Geremek 1994,

[23] This might also help in understanding why so many governments around the world do so little to fight poverty, even when they have the economic means to do more. They prefer to use their resources for other goals, and even when they use some of them in the fight against poverty, they do so often instrumentally, such as when industrial countries use foreign aid as an excuse to channel public money into private enterprises, so that most of the "foreign" aid remains in the country - it should rather be seen as a way of granting hidden subsidies to domestic companies (Chang 2007).

1993, Lister 2004, Leão Rego and Pinzani 2018). Poor people are not able to participate fully in their society because of their condition, which exposes them to situations in which they might feel ashamed. This is also no original remark: Adam Smith made a similar point in claiming that the average European worker or day-labourer would feel ashamed if he were not able to wear the clothing his society deemed necessary to be minimally acknowledged as a worthy person (Smith 1976, II 870). But this extends to other situations of social and public life in which poor people lack the conditions not to feel ashamed (not only are they not adequately clothed; they do not have the necessary level of literacy; they feel impeded from freely expressing themselves, etc.). Social policies are generally not designed to address these kinds of shameful situations. They focus rather on guaranteeing the material conditions for survival or – in more advanced welfare states – to live a decent life, which, however, is defined only in material terms as the absence of duress. More often than not, such policies are connected to means testing and to punishing mechanisms that scarcely take into account the immaterial aspects of shame that can motivate people not to fulfil the conditions attached to the "benefits." When policies are written by bureaucrats who are insensitive to such immaterial dimensions of poverty, the result is unavoidably that of paradoxically increasing the suffering of the poor while at the same time trying to reduce it. One could object that social policies aimed at fighting poverty obviously have to face limits of money and scope and cannot focus on immaterial aspects such as shame. They offer just affirmative, not transformative remedies (Fraser and Honneth 2003: 72ff.). That is, they acknowledge and try to remedy situations of poverty, but do not tackle their structural causes, since this would often imply deep changes in the economic and social structures of society. These changes would require a modification of not only patterns of distribution of income and wealth, but also property relationships and often racial or gender inequalities that are the results of long-term injustice. Even when they acknowledge the existence of social injustice, social policies tend to address its most evident symptoms, not its deepest roots. Mostly, however, they treat poverty as though it were a natural phenomenon that cannot ever be fully eradicated or as a personal destiny that befalls some individuals. This is particularly evident in the case of the so-called "new poverty" provoked by structural mass unemployment in economically developed countries. In the dominant political discourse of these countries, unemployment is not explained by phenomena such as globalization, delocalization, automation, and so on, but is described as being the result of individuals' inability to

find or to keep a job, to invest in their 'human capital' (Becker 1993), to qualify themselves for the new challenges presented by the labour market, etc. In cases of historical, long-term poverty in countries like Brazil, it is considered to be a feature of society that will never disappear, no matter how hard one tries. In both circumstances, society (both its political institutions and its public sphere) does not acknowledge that poverty is the result of structural injustice (Young 2011, 45ff.). In doing so, the poor are not seen as victims of injustice and are often blamed for their situation. Their individual efforts to escape poverty are mostly useless against structural causes. This provokes frustration and is often the cause of psychological suffering. On the other side, society tends to consider such efforts to be too feeble and blame this on the poor's alleged weakness of character, lack of qualifications or even asocial tendencies. Social policies are then seen as questionable ways of caring for the weak, unqualified or asocial members of society. Becoming the object of such policies is humiliating because it goes together with a specific stigma.

Politics should change things both by addressing the structural causes of poverty and by modifying the dominant discourses on poverty. It should treat the poor as equal citizens, whose subjective experience should be taken seriously when it comes to designing social policies. It should hear their voice instead of deciding for them because they are considered to be unreliable when it comes to formulating their demands. It should avoid directly or indirectly blaming them for their situation and acknowledge the objective difficulties they face instead of trying to "educate" them to become responsible individuals – which they already are. All these are ways to avoid humiliating them.

3. Conclusions

We discussed how social policies might end up humiliating the poor, and we identified different forms of institutional humiliation: the official, the bureaucratic and the political. We also showed how they all violate the poor's dignity as citizens and undermine their self-respect. In doing so, we advocated some changes in the way social policies are designed and implemented. Most relevantly, though, we insisted on the need to treat the poor as subjects of politics and not as mere objects of policies. We understand our paper not as a plea against social policies, of course, but as a contribution to the discussion of how to make them better instruments for fighting

poverty by taking seriously its immaterial aspects and the suffering connected to living in humiliating conditions.

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