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Dignity Denial and Social Conflicts

Sam Friedman, Diana Rossi, and Gonzalo Ralón

Struggles over dignity and dignity denial are a central facet of class struggles and other struggles under capitalism. Marxist theory, however, has not developed an adequate understanding of dignity denial or of struggles against it as a crucial part of capitalism and its dialectic. This paper discusses dignity denial as inherent both in a society based on commodity production for profit and also in the political, ideational, and social implications of capitalist production. It shows how struggles against such dignity denial are also inherent in capitalism. Finally, the paper suggests that an enhanced appreciation for and theorization of dignity denial and the struggles around it can help when framing issues for concrete conflict situations and can also help the development of firmer and better visions of a future socialism.

Key Words: Capitalism, Dignity Denial, Labor, Marxism, Scapegoating

Struggles over human dignity and dignity denial are an underappreciated part of the socialist and Marxist dialectic. Their importance is indicated by their ubiquity and salience, as seen more recently in slogans and statements from uprisings in Tunisia and Egypt but also in the past in the U.S. civil rights movement and in stories in which workers describe how they came to be activists and radicals (see Friedman 1991; Jacobson 2012).

What is the basis for dignity denial and dignity struggles? Many of the (overlapping) essences of capitalism seem to attack dignity, from exploitation to the oppression of subordinated nations, races, and women to the process of divide and rule, which especially scapegoats sex workers and drug users. Yet Marxist theory has lagged behind the practice of Marxists in regard to dignity.

Marxist activists often raise the issue of attacks on the dignity of workers, of oppressed racial/ethnic categories, of women, and of those without jobs. In doing so they sometimes tap into deep emotions that can contribute to struggles. But the lack of adequate theorization on why capital attacks dignity and on the roots of dignity denial in the basic structures of capitalist production may weaken our ability to think about and discuss both the reasons why dignity denial is inherent in capitalism and also what dignity denial implies about how we should reorganize social relationships as we destroy capitalism and replace it with a new society.

This paper is an attempt to begin to theorize dignity denial and the struggles against it. Before turning to this attempt, it may seem useful to give a provisional definition of “dignity.” We can start with Hodson’s (2001) discussion in his book

Dignity at Work.¹ He sees dignity as the ability to establish a sense of self-worth and self-respect. It includes both inherent human rights and earned aspects of dignity based on taking valued actions. Dignity can be usefully contrasted with the common image of the child as dependent and having few rights. Jacobson (2012, 12), in her ethnographic study of dignity and health, “learned from the interviews that the idea [of dignity] is neither clear nor simple.” She suggests that dignity is sometimes viewed as inherent in being human, but on other occasions it is also seen as social, whether in terms of dignity-of-self or self-respect or in terms of dignity-in-relation as expressed and bestowed by others (17). Many of Jacobson’s respondents used the example of being treated like a child as a way to describe how their dignity was attacked or denied in their daily lives (26, 87). Implicit in our discussion of dignity struggles, however, is the impossibility of agreeing on a definition of dignity because different social positions will tend to have different interests and experiences, and this is reflected in the many and varied definitions that Jacobson reports.

Hodson (2001, 264) sees attacks on worker agency and on workplace norms as central elements of dignity denial. This suggests that attacks on human agency and on the culturally defined norms of human groups might form one way of thinking about dignity denial, and it is compatible with Jacobson’s finding that dignity is often contrasted with being treated like a child. Since the entirety of this paper is in many ways a concretization and theorization of dignity and dignity denial, we rely on this preliminary definition only as a way to begin our discussion.

As theories of ideology and of the sociology of knowledge would predict (see Berger and Luckmann 1966; Bergeron 2012; Gramsci 1957; Harris 1968; Kayatekin 2012; Mannheim 1971), conflicting sides in struggles over dignity denial—as well as different social groupings, such as English barons, female American professors, Indian peasants, or the successive waves of rebels in Cairo’s Tahrir Square—develop different definitions and ideologies around the concept of dignity. Our focus in this paper, then, is on struggles over dignity and on its denial.

As a final prefatory issue, we should discuss how we view the relationship of dignity denial and stigma. Much of the recent discussion of stigma is based on Goffman’s (1963) *Stigma*, which focuses on individual stigma as a mark of shame as well as on its internalization. Others have extended this to consider the social production of stigma (see Link and Phelan 2001; Simić and Rhodes 2009). We suggest that it is useful to think of stigma as *produced* by macro-level politics of dignity denial and by micro-level patterns and scripts of stigmatizing interaction. At the macro level, dignity denial is sometimes part of a politics of divide and rule that seeks to weaken challenges to the wealthy and powerful. It is also embodied in production relationships and in community institutions, such as with institutional racism and NIMBY (Not In My Back Yard) localism against HIV and drug-treatment programs. Challenges to the power of elites may or may not focus on stigmatized identities but almost always

1. There are of course many definitions of “dignity” based on different philosophies, disciplines, and politics. A useful review is Jacobson (2007). Merriam Webster defines dignity as “the quality or state of being worthy, honored, or esteemed.”

include challenges to processes of dignity denial. When stigmatized groups take part in such struggles, their participation is itself usually a dignity-enhancing endeavor.

The value of this focus on dignity denial and on struggles around issues of dignity—as opposed to focusing on stigma-related processes—will become clear in the rest of the paper. For now we would summarize that a focus on dignity denial and dignity struggles lets us understand a broader dialectics of dignity that may help us develop more effective ways to promote social change.

Let us now turn to an analysis of the roots of dignity denial in the basic structures and processes of capitalism.

Key Moments in Marx's Analysis of Commodities

For Marx, commodities are use values that are produced in order to be sold. One of Marx's key theoretical contributions was to see that human labor power is a commodity that has a tendency to be sold—like all commodities—at its value. Marx emphasized the unique nature of labor power as the creator of value. What he did not discuss, insofar as we are aware, is a particular difficulty involved in the analysis of labor power as a commodity. The issue is that, whereas labor power may be created in order to be sold to some degree—as is the case when people seek training in order to get jobs (or better jobs)—the human being whose actions conduct that labor power is not created to be sold. This forms the basis for dignity denial and struggles around it in the capitalist era.

It will be useful to state these ideas in different words. We would frame this in terms of *two key moments* in Marx's discussion on commodities: (1) the notion that commodities tend to sell at their values, with well-known forces leading to deviations from this tendency; and (2) the notion that labor power is treated as a commodity—that is, as something created in order to be sold—by employers and the labor market.

Based on the above, there are two potential assaults on workers, both of which are experienced as assaults on dignity. First, if workers cannot sell their labor time as a use value for an employer (i.e., if no employer validates and pays to exploit our use value) or if an employer de-skills their work as Braverman (1974) described or underpays us, this assaults workers' "professional dignity." Being employed, the kinds of work performed, and the pay received for doing this work are all criteria that affect the degree to which other people respect a person in a capitalist society and thus can affect a worker's self-respect. For example, when university graduates in India, Egypt, or the United States cannot get jobs that use their skills, they often experience this as an attack on their dignity, and this can lead to their enthusiastic participation in social movement activities. Another example is a case in which skilled machinists saw an advertisement for numerically controlled machinery in which monkeys were shown running the machines. The ad was taken to mean that the employers saw the machinists' work as something that could be done by animals (Tulin 1984, 6). A third example, discussed further below, is seen when racial/ethnic and gender oppression typically create situations in which few if any of the members of the oppressed group can get jobs commensurate with their training and ability;

they usually get underpaid for the work they perform when they do get hired, and this is widely seen as an attack on their dignity.

A more controversial second point is to ask whether Marx's analyses of human species-being suggest that providing labor power by working for others (that is, commodifying one's labor) contradicts fundamental human needs.² Our prehistoric roots are in local bands and tribes of kin and friends who worked cooperatively to survive in often hostile environments (Saxton 2006). Even after noncapitalist ruling classes came into being, many peasant communities lived comparatively communal and collaborative lives at the village level despite the existence of some differences of hierarchy among community members (Anderson 2010). The question—which we tentatively answer with a “yes” even though we are aware that some postmodernists and Althusserians would see this as *essentialism* (see Bergeron 2012; Wolff 1996)—is whether this history has created sociocultural or biological needs that one's labor becoming commodified have negated.

The rest of this paper is thus structured to take the general concept of dignity, as based in the moments of the commodity described above (i.e., commodities tend to sell at their value, and labor is treated as a commodity), and to show how its

2. Marx (1964, 112) expresses it thus:

Man is a species-being, not only because in practice and in theory he adopts the species (his own as well as those of other things) as his object, but—and this is only another way of expressing it—also because he treats himself as the actual, living species; because he treats himself as a *universal* and therefore a free being.

The life of the species, both in man and in animals, consists physically in the fact that man (like the animal) lives on organic nature; and the more universal man (or the animal) is, the more universal is the sphere of inorganic nature on which he lives. Just as plants, animals, stones, air, light, etc., constitute theoretically a part of human consciousness, partly as objects of natural science, partly as objects of art—his spiritual inorganic nature, spiritual nourishment which he must first prepare to make palatable and digestible—so also in the realm of practice they constitute a part of human life and human activity. Physically man lives only on these products of nature, whether they appear in the form of food, heating, clothes, a dwelling, etc. The universality of man appears in practice precisely in the universality which makes all nature his *inorganic* body—both inasmuch as nature is (1) his direct means of life, and (2) the material, the object, and the instrument of his life activity. Nature is man's *inorganic* body—nature, that is, insofar as it is not itself human body. Man *lives* on nature—means that nature is his body, with which he must remain in continuous interchange if he is not to die. That man's physical and spiritual life is linked to nature means simply that nature is linked to itself, for man is a part of nature.

In estranging from man (1) nature, and (2) himself, his own active functions, his life activity, estranged labor estranges the species from man [emphasis added to this sentence]. It changes for him the life of the species into a means of individual life. First it estranges the life of the species and individual life, and secondly it makes individual life in its abstract form the purpose of the life of the species, likewise in its abstract and estranged form.

While describing this issue in relationship to capitalism, Hudis (2012, 60) says, “Private interest prevails over the general interest in the form of private ownership of the production-process. As noted earlier, Marx views the predominance of the former over the latter as a violation of the communal or social nature of humanity.”

concretizations through the historical/social process help us understand existing struggles and problems in a new light. We do this by discussing several categories of people and aspects of social life in which dignity is attacked and through which people sometimes struggle against these attacks. These include: the worker-to-be at school and the worker at work; workers, economic conditions, and politics; people without jobs; racial/ethnic and gender oppression and scapegoating; and oppression and scapegoating as they affect drug users and sex workers.

Preparing the Worker to Be a Worker

Analyses that see school as training workers often discuss capitalism and dignity denial. This has been described at length by others, including Willis (1977) most notably. Here, we will mention only two instances, based on Sam Friedman's interviews with radical workers in the early 1980s. These radical workers-to-be resisted school policies that were aimed at preparing them for life as a worker but that they felt attacked their dignity.

In these unpublished interviews, we learn that Joan,³ a female union steward at a cosmetics plant, was kicked out of school for wearing a short skirt. Likewise, Gary, who later became an auto-workers union activist, describes his experience fighting a school's efforts to impose what he saw as meaningless restrictions: "I took school on about several issues. The dress code there was a 'no dungarees' policy. My parents had bought me several pairs of new dress jeans. The school pulled me out of class, got physical with me and suspended me. My mother stood by me, and they dropped the issue. I won, it felt good."

As discussed in the next section, people are also confronted with dignity denial at work.

The Worker at Work

Consider the worker at work. A worker's essence there—from the perspective of capital—is that of labor power: that is, the essence of a "hand" or a disembodied value rather than a human being. (As we will discuss in a later section, however, the working-class person without a job receives even more dignity denial.)

In an interview conducted in New Jersey in the early 1980s, a factory worker described this to Friedman in the following words: "They have a rotten attitude. They have a good front, but they treat you so ... they let you know who's boss. And you have no rights."

A truck driver put it in different terms: "The dehumanization—people may not be shot, but they are killed on the inside ... A couple of years ago my dad said: 'My life is spent, I was cheated out of it.'"

Capitalism as a system makes decisions on the basis of making profits, and its metric is that of exchange value. Culturally, this means that objects or people are

3. The names of those who took part in the interviews referenced throughout the paper have been changed to protect their confidentiality.

compared in terms of what they cost and what “value” they are considered—in the topsy-turvy belief system of capitalism—to be able to produce. In these terms, workers are often less valuable than the machines they work with. Their need for leave to take care of personal or family problems is then judged in terms of the cost of machines left idle by their absence, and their need for safety if a machine wears out to the point where it becomes dangerous is judged in terms of the cost of replacing or repairing the machine (and in terms of the value of the lost output). As such, workers are often less valuable than machines, and their battles for rights are often framed in terms of human dignity (Hodson 2001; Friedman 1991).

Workers in one of the subcultures of capitalism (see Thompson 1963; Sennett and Cobb 1972) appear dependent on the employer for livelihood, and dependency leads to less respect. This is particularly true since the culture of capitalism is based on a model of market equality in a competitive society. Becoming dependent thus implies that one was unable to be independent, which in capitalist cultures opens one to disrespect and dignity denial.⁴ Marx (1967, 176), at the end of chapter 6 of volume 1 of *Capital*, puts it in the following terms, contrasting the situation of a worker before being hired with that upon becoming an employee:

This sphere that we are deserting, within whose boundaries the sale and purchase of labour-power goes on, is in fact a very Eden of the innate rights of man. There alone rule Freedom, Equality, Property and Bentham. Freedom, because both buyer and seller of a commodity, say of labour-power, are constrained only by their own free will. They contract as free agents, and the agreement they come to, is but the form in which they give legal expression to their common will. Equality, because each enters into relation with the other, as with a simple owner of commodities, and they exchange equivalent for equivalent. Property, because each disposes only of what is his own. And Bentham, because each looks only to himself. The only force that brings them together and puts them in relation with each other, is the selfishness, the gain and the private interests of each. Each looks to himself only, and no one troubles himself about the rest, and just because they do so, do they all, in accordance with the pre-established harmony of things, or under the auspices of an all-shrewd providence, work together to their mutual advantage, for the common weal and in the interest of all.

On leaving this sphere of simple circulation or of exchange of commodities, which furnishes the “Free-trader Vulgaris” with his views and ideas, and with the standard by which he judges a society based on capital and wages, we think we can perceive a change in the physiognomy of our dramatis personae. He, who before was the money-owner, now strides in front as capitalist; the possessor of labour-power follows as his labourer. The one with an air of importance, smirking, intent on business; the other, timid

4. There are ideologies of the dignity of labor. These have three roots: (1) employed workers are contrasted with unemployed “idlers,” as is discussed later in the paper; (2) workers and unions, as part of their struggles against dignity denial, have made claims about the dignity of work (see Thompson 1963; Montgomery 1979); and (3) some employers and their representatives make claims that they respect their workers, perhaps evoking images of happy families.

and holding back, like one who is bringing his own hide to market and has nothing to expect but—a hiding.

Furthermore, in abstract terms, the worker's labor power is a commodity, a *thing*, and thus less than human. Although this is usually hidden as part of the fetishism process, the worker's role as a commodity is to produce surplus value that the employer appropriates. In Marxist terms, workers are paid for the time in which their value is paid for—including what is needed for the reproduction of labor power, although this can be reduced during times of crisis—and then they work a number of unpaid hours for no pay. As Marx (1967, chap. 5, sec. 2) points out in terms of the logic of capital, this is an exchange of equivalents in terms of exchange value, yet it is also exploitation and thus a result of the worker's dependency on the employer and on capital in general. This is also alienation, in the Marxist framework, but being the victim of such alienation, even if the mystifications of the fetishization process tend to hide it, reduces a worker's dignity in relation to those who live off of profits (which become socially more esteemed than wages).

So far, this discussion of work and dignity denial has been conducted at a fairly high level of abstraction. Workplaces, however, are not abstractions but are concrete places where people labor under social relationships that vary from place to place and time to time. We will now discuss how some of these differences are related to dignity denial and how workers interpret them. Workplaces vary, but perceptions of dignity attacks may vary less.

The process by which capital extracts surplus value is organized differently at different times of history and in different kinds of workplaces at a given time in history (Banaji 2011; Braverman 1974; Marx 1864). Edwards (1979) describes three forms of control: simple control, in which owners or supervisors order workers around directly; bureaucratic control, in which personnel policies and hierarchies are regularized to reduce personalistic favors or the bullying of subordinates by their direct bosses; and technical control, in which machinery regulates the activity of the worker on the job (and which has been greatly enhanced by improved computer surveillance and control of equipment). Each form of control ensures that workers produce surplus value and that workers do not use workplace equipment or supplies for their personal or collective use (McNally 2011, 48–50). Each form of control also attacks workers' dignity.

The following quotations from Friedman's (1991, 84) interviews with radical workers in the United States (circa 1977–83) show—though Friedman did not note it at the time—that *workers under each kind of control perceived dignity attacks as being performed by supervisors*.

Simple control: I went to work at a truck repair outfit, a small place. I did the wiring on the trucks. I loved it. The owner took me home to dinner, he loved me. But one day he wanted me to get a truck running, I said we couldn't. He harassed me from then on, so I quit. The foreman, who was easy-going and nice, said, "Stay." I said, "He asked my opinion. I'm honest and don't kiss ass." And I quit.

Bureaucratic control at a university: I saw long-time women workers [where she worked as a clerical worker] being humiliated and treated as morons. Sometimes they were treated so bad they cried. Being able to change that seemed incredible to me. It was wrong, denying them their dignity and humanity. That was the first step towards my getting involved in labor.

Technical control at a plant that used chemical processes that controlled what workers did and how they used their time: A woman activist reported on her first night at this plant: I hated it, it reminded me of the history of labor, the way people were treated. I had no idea what a factory was like. People weren't treated like people, no names were used, just "You do this"—or they don't tell you what to do, and yell at you if you do it wrong. They treat you like animals, only worse. Animals have names.

Thus, although each of these workers underwent and/or observed attacks on workers' dignity, in each case they discuss it in terms of superiors treating others badly. Seeing the attack as the action of an individual manager would be expected under regimes of simple control. Based on Friedman's (1991) discussions of bureaucratic and technical control, however, we might have expected to see quotes about domination or humiliation due to red tape or domination by machinery. Instead, these workers seem to personalize attacks under each kind of control. Whether this is generally the case or not requires further research. We also need to know more about *why* workers personalize attacks upon their dignity. We do not know the extent to which seeing attacks on dignity as actions by individual managers indicates a reluctance to perceive ways in which larger entities—the direct employer or capital per se—attack workers' dignity. It may also involve a desire to impose personal responsibility on those who act as agents of supervision. It is also unclear whether such personalization of depersonalized attacks on their dignity might be reduced in workplaces or countries where socialist ideas are more widespread.

Workers, Economic Conditions, and Politics

The extent and kinds of dignity denial often change when economic conditions change. In times of relative prosperity, workers can win job rights and rules through union and political struggles (Moody 1998; Friedman 1982). This becomes incorporated into cultural norms and becomes defined as a mark of respectability and decency.⁵

Such decency pay levels and workplace rights may differ for different sections of the working class, but they become important aspects of the culture. When these job rights or pay levels get attacked in times of prosperity, this is seen as an attack on human dignity. Resistance to such attacks is strengthened because it interacts with resentment at the dignity denial of being considered mere labor power or to the dignity denial of oppression or scapegoating. As an example of such dignity denial and workers' struggles against it, consider the following description based on Friedman's (1982) fieldwork on Teamsters activism:

5. This is an aspect of the social component of wages as Marx discussed it and as Lebowitz (2003) has discussed at some length.

A large freight barn in Los Angeles was a scene of intense competition among workers during the early 1960s—which was a period of economic prosperity in the United States. Older drivers looked down on younger drivers, and management looked down on all drivers. This process led to a situation in which the barn was viewed as being a “fortress of brutality” in which contractual rights were violated frequently by management and the union did nothing. The drivers at this workplace were seen as having no pride. Thus, their dignity was attacked both by other truck drivers in the city and by the managers at their workplace. After a while, the younger workers there led a rebellious wildcat strike that forced many concessions—including getting rid of the terminal manager—and established a lasting spirit of unity among most of the workers. (The exceptions were a few older workers who crossed the picket lines.) Ten years later, the unity and militancy remained very high in that barn.

During economic downturns, capital systematically attacks the decency wages and the working conditions and work rules that workers have established as normative. Furthermore, the media and other cultural voices of capital frame workers as not deserving these *privileges*. Attacks in recent years on workers at General Motors and on teachers in New Jersey are but extreme examples of this pattern. Workers under these attacks feel that their human dignity is being stripped away. As we write this, Greek workers and many other Greeks have been engaging in mass strikes and demonstrations in efforts to resist such attacks.

People without Jobs or with Poorly Paying Jobs: The Effects of the Capital Relation and Its Manifestations in Dignity, Dignity Denial, and Struggles that Spread beyond the Workplace

Capitalism and the domination of the value relationship over society and culture affect the entire society and not just the workplace. Working-class people who are unable to find jobs are one clear example of this—including those who are members of families in which joblessness has been a constant condition. Some of these people survive through small-scale retail activity and manufacturing, others through government social service payments, others through charity, and others through illegal hustles like shoplifting, selling drugs, or selling sex (Castel 2002; Anderson 1999). In many cases, people survive through a time-varied mixture of these activities by different family members. Mike Davis (2006) has provided a detailed and graphic description of these people and their lives.

Marx (1967) analyzed the unemployed as a reserve army of the jobless that served to hold down the wages and working conditions of those workers who had jobs by being their potential replacements. Friedman (1984) has discussed ways in which workers in the United States with less-favorable jobs act similarly as a reserve labor force (a threat) that makes it harder for those with better jobs to improve those jobs by collective or individual action. Unemployment and labor market segmentation is persistent in many other countries, including Argentina (Infante 1999; Lindenboim 2000; Monza 1993), where important sectors of the working class can only access

secondary and informal jobs. Workers in these jobs, without registration as workers, do not enjoy social rights, and they too function as a reserve labor force in the sense Friedman discussed.

Workers in the reserve labor force or with secondary/informal jobs are often stigmatized by other workers. This analysis has implications for attacks on the dignity of the unemployed and of those with relatively poorer jobs—and for their children. Sometimes workers in better situations criticize those *below* them in conversations with their children as a way to warn their children about the need to have a good job in order to have a decent and respectable life. Other times such stigmatization directly affects those being criticized. For example, Joan, a union steward mentioned earlier in this paper, reported that at the age of four or five she was living with her sister and her mother. Since her mother was working, Joan and her sister would often scrounge meals from their neighbors. “One neighbor fed us pancakes. She complained one day to another neighbor that my mother never fed us. I never took pancakes from her again, I had too much pride.”

Such stratification within the working class can weaken solidarity, and this is particularly likely depending on the degree to which those in different parts of the working class see each other as having less dignity or as attacking each other’s dignity. The unemployed are particularly vulnerable to having their dignity attacked by other workers, and this is to some extent institutionalized in the ways the welfare state bureaucracy treats the jobless. Piven and Cloward (1971, 1977) have described this occurrence in the United States in detail. As they see it, employers’ desire (and need) for a reserve labor force to put downward pressures on wages and working conditions (as well as the racism of many employers and workers) leads to social welfare programs being run in ways that attack recipients’ dignity. Piven and Cloward (1971, 165) title one subsection of their book *Regulating the Poor* as follows: “Socializing the Able-Bodied Poor by Degrading Relief Recipients.” They describe how social welfare staff treat recipients with contempt and how regulations mean, for example, that recipients have to put up with invasive home visits in which welfare staff (or police) go through their belongings looking for evidence that they are living with someone who could support them. Both of their books on this topic describe how, in the absence of social struggles by the poor, political pressures to cut budgets lead to cuts in relief payments and welfare staff and to changes in regulations that degrade recipients by treating them as less deserving of rights than other people.

Lo Vuolo et al. (1999) describe the situation in Argentina in the 1990s in parallel terms. There, access to social assistance payments was made contingent on stringent means testing; beneficiaries had to perform community service (what Americans call workfare), and increasing stigmatization of the poor took place in mass media, in government reports, and in the way those seeking benefits were treated by welfare program staff. This policy served to increase social differentiation within the population and to reproduce not only poverty but all manner of social marginality.⁶

6. The works of Piven and Cloward (1971 and 1977) and of Sartelli (2013) and Lo Vuolo et al. (1999) also show how the poor in the USA and Latin America have sometimes reacted to degrading treatment by demanding higher welfare payments, asserting their dignity, and engaging in various forms of direct social action.

Joblessness is thus accompanied by widespread attacks on dignity, some of which get internalized by individuals and communities as a stigma (mark of shame). This is because the culture of capitalism defines people's worth by what they have or earn—their exchange value—and by what they do for capital or for the capitalist state and related institutions. If one is jobless, then one has no worth or dignity, and if one has a poor job, then one has less dignity. The effect of such dignity devaluation can take the form of stigmatization by community members.

After the neoliberal-facilitated economic crises in Argentina during the 1990s had devastated their lives and dignity for many years, unemployed workers and other poor people began a wave of highway blockages—the *piquetero* or “picketers” movement. Some workers seized factories or other workplaces that had been abandoned by their owners—which meant the workers had become unemployed—and middle-class workers and other middle-class people eventually joined these movements through large-scale disruptive demonstrations (Friedman et al. 2011). The impact of the crises in Argentina has been studied as scars left not only in the body but also in the emotions of women who experienced the crises. These scars “conveyed neoliberal globalization's assaults on human dignity, as many women grappled with declining standards of living, made health and nutrition compromises, dealt with the disruption of taken-for-granted body rituals, and coped with the shame and humiliation associated with the rags of poverty” (Sutton 2010, 36). The poverty thus led to visible signs that these women failed to maintain their exchange value, and these visible signs led to their dignity being diminished, internalized as a stigma, and to additional bodily infirmity. “The crisis produced bodies that were more fatigued, stressed, overworked, malnourished, and sick” (62).

In the context of these Argentinean crises, women's bodies became embattled sites but also *points of support* for certain social movements that tried to generate new actions with the aim of overcoming the crisis based on a different political sense. Sutton (2007) analyzes how women constructed embodied subjectivities in their activist practices—*poniendo el cuerpo*, a common expression in Argentina that means to participate fully, engaging emotionally, spiritually, ideologically, and physically in action—in terms of collective protest, daily activist work over local problems, embodied sacrifice, risk taking, and struggle. Women's bodies, as a material surface on which the struggle for dignity developed, represented not only suffering but also resistance, increasing their “participation in political organizing and protest, particularly in connection with survival strategies, such as communal kitchens and other neighborhood-based projects” (134). During the crisis, “Women marched in women-only groups and in the front lines of mixed-gender groups, carrying organization flags and showing their status as leaders” (151). As another example, a middle-aged worker talked about her “newly discovered power while working in one of the factories that workers occupied and then recovered during the economic collapse. She explained how, through her embodied struggle to keep the factory operating, she learned things about herself she previously had not suspected” (152).

Dignity-Related Processes Involved in Defending and Implementing Capital as a Worldwide Universal Dominant Social Relationship: Racial/Ethnic and Gender Oppression and Scapegoating

Capitalism is a system in which workers and other categories of people often resist the conditions under which they live and sometimes seek to challenge capitalism itself. The structures of the state (the governmental system) and the law, the nature of discourse in mass media and in electoral campaigning, and the use of force have helped prevent, limit, or destroy both partial resistance and opposition to capitalism itself. Marxists and others have long debated the extent to which the maintenance of capitalist power and social relationships is systemic versus consciously organized (see Domhoff 1967; Fraser 1990; Miliband 1977), but we have no need to resolve this issue here.⁷

It is not always easy to maintain political control of such a system. It is, however, easier to maintain control over both the work process and the political system if potential challengers are divided. We have analyzed this process in terms of scapegoating in relation to HIV and, in more depth, in relation to drug policy (see also Friedman 1998a, 1998b). Here we discuss how the nature of the capitalist value relationship and relationships of oppression—and in particular the subordination and oppression of women, gender minorities, racial/ethnic categories, and nations—interact to create attacks on dignity, stigma, and also struggles against these. The discussion in the next few paragraphs will merely sketch out the argument. Many generations of scholars and activists have written books that discuss each aspect of these relationships in depth, and we do not here attempt to replicate their insights and wisdom.⁸ We do hope, however, that our framing these aspects in terms of capital's value relationships and attacks on dignity will offer new and useful understandings for both analysis and action.

Oppression typically includes restricting the access of the oppressed categories, whether women, gender minorities, blacks, and Latinos/as in the United States or whole nations or whole categories of occupations and educational experiences. This results in their having substandard pay, less prestigious occupations, higher rates of joblessness, and either substandard education or education that channels them into undervalued fields of study and work. Given the prevailing ideology of capitalism as being a system that rewards ability and hard work, those who have poor pay or less prestigious jobs will be stigmatized for this—and if they do get a *good job*, they will have to put in more effort and do a better job just to show that they *deserve* it. Those who receive substandard education will be stigmatized as ignorant. The lived experience of the population—both among oppressed categories and other

7. In addition, both the logic of capital as a value relationship that has to expand and the logic of the capitalist state system have led to wars of conquest to subordinate the resources and labor of conquered or conquerable countries to the needs of capitalist value production and competition. See Smith (1991), Harvey (2003), and Callinicos (2009).

8. See Anderson (2010), Draper (1978), Dunayevskaya (1981), Fanon (1963, 1965, 1967), Farber (2000), Galeano (1971), James (1960), Marable (1983), Memmi (1991), Myrdal (1944), Shalom (1983), and Wolf (2009).

categories—will be that the nonoppressed groups have higher pay, more prestigious jobs, and better educations. This will tend to generalize to ideologies that perceive heterosexual men and non-Latino/a whites (and the residents of imperially dominant countries like the United States) as being more competent, harder working, less likely to be unemployed “idlers” or “social deviants” (like drug users), and smarter than the oppressed groups. This in turn helps to justify higher rates of arrest, incarceration, and police brutality toward oppressed races/ethnicities and, in situations of colonial occupation, toward those whose land has been invaded.⁹

In the case of women, one aspect of oppression is the systematic stigmatization of housework and childcare (Friedan 1963; Wolf 2009.) This also contributes to the systematic devaluation of occupations that become defined as *women’s work*—including housecleaning, teaching, and nursing—with accompanying negative tendencies on pay levels as well as a decrease in the dignity of such work in popular culture. Interestingly, this is a case where an aspect of human species-being becomes directly stigmatized as such. It also ties into a related issue: due to the downgrading of women’s dignity, a higher degree of dignity is accorded to working for pay (that is, being a worker) than to taking care of household- and child-related human needs.

The processes in the previous paragraphs then feed back into racist, sexist and imperialist ideologies that define the oppressed as inferior human beings. This content then justifies further efforts to restrict access to good jobs and good education and also to increase the bias of policing, educational, health, and social welfare systems against the oppressed.

As Memmi (1991) and Fanon (1963) have classically discussed in relationship to colonization—as have Friedan (1963) relating to sexism and Du Bois (1903) relating to racism, these experiences often lead to self-stigmatization among the oppressed. Struggles against oppression are held back by such self-stigmatization, but at the same time, when oppressed people enter into struggle, this self-stigmatization is weakened and the discovery of one’s worth—and one’s anger at having been weakened for years by what comes to be perceived as self-hatred—lends considerable energy to the struggle for change.

Let us now try to summarize how these processes are related to capital’s value relationships. Oppressed groups’ members within the working class typically have more trouble selling their labor power. When they succeed, it tends to be at pay levels lower than those received by members of nonoppressed groups who work at similar jobs.¹⁰ That is, oppression, in a capitalist world, leads to the oppressed having

9. A study on imprisonment for drug crimes in Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Colombia, Ecuador, Mexico, Peru, and Uruguay showed that those who are incarcerated tend to occupy the lowest links in the chain of production, distribution, exchange, and consumption of drugs, such as users caught with small amounts of drugs and small dealers. In seven of these countries for which it was possible to obtain data for the fifteen years from 1992 to 2007, the incarceration rate has increased, on average, more than 100 percent (TNI and WOLA 2011). These data show a strong relationship to neoliberal policies, particularly those aimed at combating drug trafficking through repression of drug consumption.

10. One advantage of trade unionism is that it usually tries to reduce or eliminate such underpayment for the same kind of work, and it also (although probably less often) tries to insist on equal access to employment at each job (Hill and Jones 1993; Moody 1998).

their labor power systematically undervalued. This, in turn, helps to generate a “vicious circle” in which racist and sexist ideologies are generated and are seemingly supported by life experiences, to which the various institutions of government and society then react by treating the oppressed as less valuable human beings (Myrdal 1944; Lipset 1963.) Encounters between the oppressed and institutions that treat them as subhuman and ideologies that hold nonoppressed groups to be normal and the oppressed to be members of an abnormal and undervalued group of substandard humans can be very painful and can lead to self-stigmatization. In simple terms, institutions and individuals routinely attack the dignity of the oppressed in ways that are *defined* as normal but that amount to deeply painful and stigmatizing forms of structural violence (see Jacobson 2009; Jacobson, Oliver, and Koch 2009; Simić and Rhodes 2009; Friedman 1991).

When the oppressed fight back, capital and the state may use the racist and sexist beliefs of a section of the population to help suppress the struggle. Such divide-and-rule strategies take the form of scapegoating the oppressed. In terms of class struggle and efforts to replace a social order based on self-expanding value, this divides the working class and makes unity difficult or impossible. In terms of struggles to end oppression, class divisions among the oppressed can lead to similar weaknesses.

Oppression and Scapegoating as They Affect Drug Users and Sex Workers

The preceding section discussed some major and enduring forms of oppression and their relationships to struggles around power and dignity. In this section, we discuss two additional forms of oppression: the dignity of sex workers and drug users is broadly and savagely attacked by government and private “public education” campaigns, by police harassment, and by scapegoating (Simić and Rhodes 2009; Friedman 1998a, 1998b). Moreover, at the microsocial level, families and neighbors often attack and demean drug users and sex workers both verbally and physically.

Here, for example, is a transcript of an interview by a staff member of one of Friedman’s projects with “UD,” a person in New York who uses drugs:

INTERVIEWER: Did she know you was injecting?

UD: Yeah. My mother knew.

INTERVIEWER: What’d she ... What’d she say?

UD: What could she say? I mean she use to tell me I was a junkie like my father, that she didn’t want me in her house because I was getting high I wasn’t listening. I wouldn’t listen to anything she had to say anyway—in one ear and out the other.

INTERVIEWER: What about your brothers?

UD: My brothers, they don’t want anything to do me with, I was scum to them.

And an interview with “J”:

J: I was back in my sister’s house, I was nodding in the middle of the floor standing up ... She called me every name in the book.

INTERVIEWER: Was your sister mad at you? What did she call you?

J: Yea she was mad. She said I was a low life, loser, junkie, drug addicted and other things. She didn’t tell me to leave right away. But then I picked up the crack habit again on top of injecting.

INTERVIEWER: And?

J: She had had it with me and my drug habit ... She threw me the fuck out—then an order of protection in my face. Told the police that he’s not even supposed to be here anyway ... She ain’t speaking to me no more.

Being treated in these ways by others often leads to deeply internalized stigma, which in itself can hinder the ability of those attacked to resist further attacks. Nonetheless, organizations of sex workers and drug users have resisted both macropolitical and microsocial attacks in many ways. Since these struggles will be the subject of a paper we are writing on dignity denial and harm reduction, we will not discuss them further here.¹¹

Struggle

When their individual or collective dignity is attacked, members of the working class (and members of other classes, such as non-working-class women, blacks, drug users, and members of sexual minorities) can and sometimes do fight back against some or all of these attacks. When working-class persons’ tactical and strategic conditions are poor, actions to defend their dignity can take the form of micropolitics and the “weapons of the weak” (Scott 1985, 1990). These experiences show working-class persons their capabilities to get things done as well as the importance of their work and struggles to other human beings. That is, such movements are (among other things) processes by which they reclaim their dignity and embody it concretely in actions, slogans, organizations, and self-concepts. If conditions are right, their improved self-conceptions and organizations can lead to broadened struggle. On some occasions, micropolitical struggles may themselves begin the process that opens up new possibilities for struggle, as happened with Rosa Parks and the Montgomery, Alabama, bus boycott in 1956 and with the Greensboro sit-in of 1960.

As the struggle expands, such movements may grow in strength and radicalism as workers and others come to see ever-new aspects of their dignity, ever-new ways in which the existing social order denies it, and thus ever-deeper changes they need to make in order to live lives of dignity. On other occasions, as in the Memphis garbage workers’ strike or the *Solidarność* struggles in Poland (see Bloom 2013), the presence of a strong dignity theme in a struggle can unite the struggles of minorities, labor, and

11. See Dziuban and Friedman (forthcoming). These struggles have also been touched on in Friedman (1998b); Friedman et al. (2007); Friedman and Rossi (2011); Friedman, Schneider, and Latkin (2012); Rossi (2012); and Simic and Rhodes (2009).

other groups—and, indeed, broad sections of the population—behind what starts out as a local struggle.

The implication of this paper is that attacks on dignity grow from roots deep in the nature of capitalism. As we have shown, one of these roots is capital's drive to deepen exploitation by reducing its labor costs and increasing the intensity of labor. In the process of doing this, it creates a mass of unemployed people whose potential competition holds labor costs down. Furthermore, as Piven and Cloward (1971, 1977) and Lo Vuolo et al. (1999) have described and as subsequent events seem to confirm, the mass media and politicians attack those without jobs as shiftless, welfare benefits are cut, and welfare agency staff often act in ways that use welfare regulations to degrade the dignity of those who need income support.

Furthermore, since historical processes created women, certain races/ethnicities, gender minorities, and conquered or conquerable countries as groups treated worse than any white men in powerful countries (even within the same class), a majority of working-class people, as members of such groups, have their dignity attacked. Many of them thus have to struggle *even to get access* to being able to sell their labor power, and if they do get access, they still must struggle to obtain jobs, pay, and working conditions that approximate the exchange value of their labor power. When capitalism enters periods of economic or political crisis, the fact that workers see others as having less dignity makes it easier to use divide-and-rule strategies to maintain the power of capital and the state. But as is clear from the struggles of recent years in North Africa, western Asia, southern Europe, and Latin America, such control strategies can become less effective under crisis conditions, and revolt can become contagious and spread from country to country.

The roots of attacks on dignity may go much deeper than this, however, as we discussed above, if the very nature of the employment relationship that is the heart of capitalism is in contradiction with human species-being. Unlike a commodity, human beings are not made in order to be sold, and they often struggle against being forced into this mold. Historically, in establishing a proletarianized workforce, capitalism has had to deprive people of other means of support, to force them into the rigors of farming for wages or into migrating to urban environments. Similarly, within capitalist environments, socializing children to get jobs and to acquire desirable behavioral habits for workers (subordination to the time schedules of the working day, obedience to bosses) often meets with resistance (Montgomery 1979; Thompson 1963; Willis 1977). As we have shown, employers attack workers' needs at work in order to get them to comply with the demands of profitable production, and such attacks necessarily involve attacks on workers' deep-rooted desires for safety, social interaction with other workers, engagement in cooperative planning and activity, and self-respect. To put it in simple terms: capital treats workers like a commodity, and workers try to live human lives in spite of this, which in turn leads to efforts by employers to retool the worker into a compliant cog in the machine while workers try to maintain their humanity and dignity.

Thus, dignity denial is as fundamental an aspect of capitalism as alienation or exploitation. Its roots are the nature of labor power as a commodity and the *free* labor market in which working-class people, both employed and unemployed, seek jobs. This means that dignity struggles can win partial victories under capitalism but

that, so long as most of humanity lives under conditions where it is necessary to sell labor power to employers in order to survive, attacks on dignity will continue. Struggles for human dignity thus have implicit in them the need to eliminate capitalism and the labor-value relations that are at its core. Furthermore, people in different but often overlapping social categories—such as workers, women, oppressed minorities, and drug users—can, to some extent, see commonalities in their struggles against dignity denial. This forms a potential basis for unity, which may be one reason why struggles for dignity play a prominent role in many social and revolutionary movements.

Marxism and our understanding of the dialectics of struggle can be strengthened by developing a theoretical and practical understanding of the centrality of the dialectics of dignity to that struggle. On this basis, we can do a better job in framing issues for daily struggles, and we can also develop firmer and better visions of a future socialism.

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