

## Social Reproduction and Critical Subjectification Processes. The Two Faces of Shame

Reproducción Social y Procesos de Subjetivación Crítica. Las Dos Caras de la Vergüenza

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### Abstract

The aim of this paper is to mark an original sociological way of access to the study of shame. The main theoretical hypothesis is about the distinction between two forms of shame: the first is called Me's shame, the latter I's shame. Once the author have shortly discussed the distinction between Me's shame and I's shame, he will focus on a form of I's shame called critical I's Shame. After a theoretical definition, the author will propose a case study dedicated to this form. In this case study the author will try to emphasize the emancipative role of shame along with the social introduction of this emotion in the participation to social movements in an eviction experience occurred in Rome.

**Keywords:** Shame; recognition; Mead.

### Resumen

El objetivo de este artículo es el de marcar una llave de lectura sociológica original al estudio de la vergüenza. La principal hipótesis teórica se basa en la distinción entre dos formas de vergüenza: la primera es denominada la Vergüenza del Mí, la segunda es denominada la Vergüenza del Yo. El autor, luego de haber discutido brevemente la distinción entre la Vergüenza del Mí y del yo, se centrará en una forma de vergüenza llamada Vergüenza crítica del yo. Después de una definición teórica, el autor propondrá un estudio de caso dedicado a esta forma. En este estudio de caso, el autor intentará enfatizar el papel emancipador de la vergüenza junto a la introducción social de esta emoción en la participación a movimientos sociales en una experiencia de desalojo ocurrida en la ciudad de Roma.

**Palabras clave:** Vergüenza; reconocimiento; Mead.

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## Social Reproduction and Critical Subjectification Processes. The Two Faces of Shame

### 1. Introduction

Shame, in a better and clearer way than other kind of emotions, shows the connection between emotional subject, who feels shame, and the emotional object, the thing or person shame is directed to. Trying to give a sociological look at these two components of shame, in this paper I will try to develop an original reflection about shame.

As is known, shame interests a really wide scientific production, which crosses different disciplines (psychology, aesthetical studies, philosophy, etc.). About philosophy, for instance, is necessary to mention the latest works of Martha Nussbaum and Slavoj Žižek (Nussbaum 2004, Žižek 2009). In the sociological field, shame could be placed inside sociology of emotions (Hochschild 1975, 1979; Shott 1979; Illouz 2007; Turnaturi 1995; Flam and King 2005; Scribano 2018; Cerulo 2009, 2018) and this kind of emotion has been studied mainly by Thomas Scheff and Gabriella Turnaturi (Scheff 1991, 1994, 1995, 1996, 2000, 2003, 2004; Turnaturi 2012). Other sociologists such as Jack Barbalet, Johnatan Turner and Jack Katz (Barbalet 2001 Turner 2007, 2011; Katz, 1999) analyzed shame in their research projects, including it inside a wider reflection about emotions considered in general terms. These authors, differently from Scheff and Turnaturi, didn't focus on shame such as an exclusive research field. Jack Katz, in particular, studied shame in his work "How emotions work", suggesting a clear definition. I quote Katz "Shame is a disturbing revelation of the self to itself and isolates person who feels it from a sacred community. Shame reveals a sense of moral inferiority and vulnerability" (Katz, 1999: 147).

The main theoretical hypothesis I would like to suggest is about the open dialectical relation between two forms of shame. The former will be named *Me's shame*, the latter will be named *I's shame*. Referring to a classical thinker's – George Herbert Mead (Mead [1934] 2015) – distinction between two components of the *Self*, *Me* and *I*, I will show that *Me's shame*

describes a kind of shame sociologically considerable, objectified and socialized, referred to the violation of an existing social significance, while *I's shame* refers to the subjective dimension of shame and it will be defined, according to Mead, such as the block of the inter-subjective possibilities of re-significance of what is already socially effective. The *I* may actually wholly adhere to the *Me* as given and coded, and not become the indication of some social compression of hypotheses of re-subjectification, but it may well surface and become the expression of a perspective of change, social and subjective at the same time.

First paragraph will host the discussion about the distinction between *Me's shame* and *I's shame*. The second paragraph will be focused on the emancipative value that shame could have in subjectification processes and in criticizing dominant social norms. I will refer to a particular form of *I's shame*, defined *I's critical shame*, to introduce a kind of shame that emancipate itself meeting and crossing improved recognitive social sources. In this case, if shame could find place inside recognitive social relations, it could lead shamed and humiliated subjects to social and political participation. Even if the paper is necessarily in a symbolic debt with many aspects purposed by the authors mentioned above, it seems to show an original theoretical feature. I won't illustrate in details sociological theories about shame, but I will be focusing on the theoretical hypothesis I would like to propose, without discussing them any further in this forum.

### 2. A double matrix of significance. The social reproductive side of shame

The theoretical hypothesis on shame is shaped by the idea that it is linked to a double matrix of significance: socially objectified and subjective. Yet the distinction is illustrative, because the subjective significance itself is always immersed – nonetheless without coinciding with it – within a social significance proving to be at the same time a sort of original

home and a condition of possible change for it. I would also like to state explicitly that I have totally adopted sociologist Thomas Scheff's thesis regarding the semantic range of shame, that is to say, defining it as an extended family including the phenomenon of humiliation in a broad sense (Scheff 2000; 2003).

I would like to argue that, in my opinion, Mead's social theory, better than others, is the most effective point of reference in drawing a sociological translation of the relationship between subjective significance and social objectivity of values and meanings, meant as an open relationship between subjectification and sociality. In my opinion, actually, in Mead's work the role of intersubjectivity meant as concrete social cooperation, as concrete interaction between co-defining selves, is clear enough. Mead's approach marks a discontinuity not only as far as solipsistic approaches are concerned, but also as regards other approaches of sociological theory proving typically oriented to the thematization of the subject-world relationship, such as, for example, Alfred Schutz's phenomenology (Schutz 1967), which in the end seems to reassert a sort of methodological pre-eminence of transcendental subjectivity. With respect to the classics of sociology, it could be said that the theory of Mead, concentrating as it does on the centrality of intersubjective relations in the emergence of self-consciousness and subjectivity, is somewhat of an exception (Habermas, 1987; 1994, Blumer 1986). For a variety of reasons, which we cannot fully examine here, the classics of sociology did not fully capture or deeply analyze the fundamentally constitutive character of intersubjective recognition in the emergence of individual consciousness (Habermas 1987; Honneth 1996; Crespi 2004). In Mead, intersubjectivity is in fact a central process in the understanding of the mechanisms of the constitution, on the one hand, of society and, on the other, of the subjective personality. The formation of subjectivity is a social act, tied to the well-known dynamic of *taking the attitude of the other*. Intersubjectivity, therefore, is not so much a relation between already constituted subjects as it is a dimension that cannot be reduced to the priority of the individual consciousness over other consciousnesses. *The recognition of the other as self* is antecedent to the emergence of the subject's own self-consciousness. Self-consciousness would not be such "if the individual did not place himself inside the same field of experience of the individual selves in close connection with which he acts in any given social situation" (Mead, 2015 [1934]: 137). The individual does not experience the self and the world in an object immediate way but only insofar as he becomes an object to himself just as other individuals are for

him, or for his experience, objects; and he becomes an object for himself only by assuming the attitudes that other individuals who live together with him in the same social environment have towards him.

Mead's well-known distinction between the two components of the *Self*, the *Me* and the *I* (Mead 2015 [1934]), between the socially objectified and the ever-open perspectives of re-subjectification, is thus background to the distinction between what I define as the *Me's shame* and what I define as the *I's shame*. For instance, envy or jealousy do not permit me to feel envious or jealous of myself, because these emotions share the feature that they are conceptually related to objects the range of which excludes the subject of emotion. By contrast, the subject can be included among the objects of emotions such as shame or pride (Harré 1986). Referring to Mead's social theory, the *Self*, in order to be such, must become object to itself, but the subject of such an object is still an unavoidable element of the relationship: the subject is not defined until it turns into object to itself, but to the end of the subject's objectification it is always necessary for it to cross the social relations as its constituent and re-constituent premise. The *Me* is then objectified objectification, while the *I* is the subject of the not yet objectified *Me*, which needs the social relationship with the other in order to reach a new self-objectification. The *Me* is the taking over oneself of the objectified social process and allows the individual to address oneself in the same way he/she does as regards the other social objects (Doyle McCarthy 1984). The self-objectification of the *Self* occurring through the social relation is not of an ultimate and unchangeable kind: the individual acting, socially shaped, is not wholly defined by the compelling character that the social exerts in the process of constitution of the *Self*. The self-objectification always involves a component which is still not objectified, creative and productive, which can be intended as subjective re-appropriation of objectified factors. In order to account for the two dimensions, possibilities of social self-objectification of the *Self* and shared meanings, and ever-open possibilities of re-subjectification and changing of shared meanings, Mead makes reference to the components of the *Me* and the *I*. The *I* is the subject of the action, but as such it cannot ever appear as a defined objectification, otherwise it would amount to an object rather than to a subject. The *I* is necessarily correlated to the *Me*, because – as Mead argues – the social organization given to our attitudes by the community requires an answer: "The *Me* requires a certain kind of *I* in relation to the obligations that the conduit itself sets out, but the *I* is always something different from what the situation requires" (Mead, 2015 [1934]: 177).

In summary, *The Me's shame* can thus be defined as a sociologically relevant shame, both objectified and socialized, linked to the violation of a core, already effective, of social significance (for instance, a policeman exerting violence on a defenseless citizen; a candidate for a doctor's degree in Sociology who does not know who Max Weber is; a Psychology student who does not know who Freud is; etc.). In a schematic way, it is a sort of shame that goes from society to individuals. We could say that this kind of shame is felt by society itself. Yet, in my opinion, what is already socially objectified does not exhaust the social dimension of shame in itself. The *I's shame* actually represents the subjective dimension of shame, which has anyway full sociological relevance, because the subject is social considering it as both incoming—it is constituted socially— and outgoing: re-subjectification is an intersubjective process itself (Mead 2015, Habermas 1994).

Thus, in brief, the *I's shame* defines the block of the intersubjective possibilities of re-significance of what is already socially effective. An example may be useful in order to facilitate understanding. If we consider the social objectification of the meaning of the expression “to be gay”, the *I's shame* will consist not in the shame of being discriminated as a gay, as in the case a typical discrimination on the jobplace, for instance, – which instead would be a *Me's shame*, that is to say, a shame related to the stabilization of a core of given significance – but in not being able to gain access inter-subjectively to those recognition social resources necessary for a re-significance of the current objectification in a way proving closer to whom we want to be. Suffice it to think, for instance, of the queer issue and how it thematizes this process of re-significance in a very clear way, through re-subjectification perspectives and change of identity (Stets and Serpe 2016). Unlike the *Me's shame* which is objectified and exteriorized, the *I's shame* does not always surface, only coming to the surface as a block of hypotheses of re-subjectification. It may well surface and become the expression of a perspective of change. Rather than prolonging the discussion about the distinction between *Me's Shame* and *I's Shame*, I will now try to develop briefly the hypothesis concerning the emergency of that form defined *Critical I's shame*.

### 3. Shame as a critical subjectification process

Once *I's shame* surface as a block of social sources of re-subjectification, it could lead to an ever open exit: a regressive one or an emancipative one. In the first case, the *Me* of the widespread social expectations expands to the point of choking the

expression of potentiality represented by the *I* and the perspectives that it spreads. That is to say, in this form we can find an erosion of the re-subjectification recognition resources radically resulting in a compression of self-conscious subjectivity. On the other hand, the form that I would call *critical I's shame*, shows the emancipative side of shame. I will focus now on this particular form of *I's shame*.

The *critical I's shame* – unlike a regressive form of shame, which could lead to self-destruction – is a form of the *I's shame* relocating successfully within the social process, within dynamics of change of the social fabric and subjectivity. The regressive character of a self-destructive shame could be linked to a radical form of suffering: the *I* has no longer the social opportunities of meeting a *Me* proving non-identical to the previous *Me* and which, at the same time, guarantees the existential continuity of identity. For instance, the suffering that could accompany a humiliated form of shame compresses, chokes, blinds. In the suffering accompanying the *shame of one's being ashamed*, the *I* cannot find a social relationship within which what the subject deems to be significant as regards his/her self-realization may flourish and grow within a new *Me*, within a new socially and recognisedly constituted definition of identity.

In dialectical terms the *critical I's shame* could testify an overcoming of the contradiction between perspective of the *I* and objectified social conditions of its fulfilment. The *critical I's shame* gives back the character of both the process and the dialectics of the relationship between the *Me's shame* and the *I's shame*: it is the social, never ultimate, overcoming of the contradictions between objectified conditions of subjectification and open opportunities of re-subjectification. Thus, there is no shame to be definitely overcome in essentialist terms: there is no ideal condition of immunity from shame disengaged from the actual social process. Shame, as seen above, is unavoidable and necessary. The *critical I's shame* does not aim at identifying an ultimate and strong criterion allowing to overcome it, as if there were a shame proving amendable, at last. Shame is matched here with critical, an adjective referring to social situations in which a double process takes place: a block in the process of re-subjectification and, at the same time, a subsequent reconnection with concrete inter-subjective resources for overcoming it, resources accompanied by a successful re-definition of identity and by a concomitant change in social meanings (for example, disengaging from the “loser” label).

As far as this form is concerned, the hypothesis is that this form can be traced in a case of eviction due to guiltless non-payment of rent, that

is to say, because of an inability to pay the rent. As find on many newspaper articles and on a filmed interview appeared on Youtube I refer to a singular experience, that has not a generalizable value but shows a qualitative strong significance.<sup>1</sup>

Silvio is an Italian 53 years-old music teacher who has received notice to quit his house four years ago due to guiltless non-payment of rent, caused by the loss of his job. Silvio had been working for seventeen years with term employment contracts for specific projects, teaching guitar at elementary schools. Once he lost his job, he tried - but unsuccessfully - to find another job in every way, sending applications to public and private schools. While waiting for the eviction to be enforced, walking in the streets of his neighbourhood, Silvio came across a leaflet of "Blocchi Precari Metropolitan", one of the many house movements operating in Rome, in which he read about guiltless non-payment of rents. Reading the leaflet was a sort of epiphany, to him. He realised that he was not the only one involved in that particular situation: the condition he was living in did not affect only the individual tragedy of his personal story, but was part of a shared experience. His degradation, frustration, and humiliation began to make room for new emotional configurations just as Silvio began to reconnect his particular experience to a broader relational perspective, both symbolically and in terms of living embodied relationships. Silvio began to participate in the activities of "Blocchi Precari Metropolitan", and "Blocchi Precari Metropolitan" mobilised in order to block his eviction. In this renewed social mutuality, Silvio has found the inter-subjective and relational resources that he needed to overcome his own condition of isolation and humiliation.

Losing one's house – not having one or not being able to afford it – makes one lonely, weak, vulnerable. Or better yet, it is loneliness, precisely, in which one is plunged, that results in making one feel weak and vulnerable. Loneliness and vulnerability are not to be intended here as the inevitable living conditions in which everybody finds himself/herself in the most difficult and dramatic moments of their lives. Loneliness means not being any longer able to reconnect one's negative experience with something socially transcending it; not having the social resources necessary to locate it within a common, shared horizon. In this sense, loneliness and the *I's shame* come temporarily to the surface in

a concomitant way: the draining of inter-subjective resources of subjectification coincides with a form of progressive isolation. The suffering accompanying such condition of isolation–humiliation, vulnerability, grief–is amendable only socially, by entering again in the recognition dynamics of the social process. Cooperation, as well finding out the strength of solidarity, access to shared experiences – with some other *I* of violated *Me*–triggers the process of subjectification, a new start of the flourishing of a *Self* accompanying both the exit from the negative emotional state in which one is entangled, and a further dimension, which we may define as political. That is to say, a dimension of progressive rise of reflexivity as regards one's rights and the possibility to defend them, claim them and have them enforced.

As we can see in reference to Silvio's case, three different levels affect the *critical I's shame*: a *social*, an *ethical* and a *political* one. A committed renewed sociality, a relational nature implying solidarity, allows a resumption of the re-subjectification process in a dimension which may be defined as social, or socio-descriptive; the resumption of the social and recognition process nonetheless has also an ethical implication, because it is what only allows to gain access to what we desire to be (Butler 2005). According to Mead, the socio-descriptive process is related to the social possibilities to gain and re-gain access to an ever-new *Me*; yet, this same process also shows its inevitably ethical implication, given that the *Me* to which one can socially gain access to is conveyed by an *I* in which subjective expectations, projects and desires are kept in order to be evaluated. Finally, the social dimension and the ethical one may be accompanied by a political dimension, the collective perspective of conscious action oriented to given ends.

In Silvio's narration, we thus trace a manifestation of the *critical I's shame* inasmuch as shame itself finds a form of social emancipation, crossing, first of all, a new and unprecedented recognition relational sphere allowing Silvio to overcome humiliation, subsequently taking a place, in a broader sense, within the public sphere. Here, shame is an emotion orienting towards objects in the world, but all these objects are loaded with an extremely strong subjective value and meaning: home, job, physical objects such as Silvio's musical instrument of which Silvio must get rid in order to gain some cash, professional projects, etc. His home becomes the place where he has lived for eighteen years; his job becomes a source of self-realization on which personal passion and energies have been invested; an object such as a musical instrument becomes a symbolic

1 *Contro gli sfratti cambiamo spartito: #21G Silvio non esce!*, Youtube, 16 gennaio 2014, in [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=po6qsk8\\_Z1s](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=po6qsk8_Z1s); R. Ciccarelli, *A Roma, città degli sfratti, Silvio difende la sua casa*, in Il Manifesto, 18 gennaio 2015, <http://ilmanifesto.info/a-roma-citta-degli-sfratti-silviodifende-la-sua-casa/>. Last vist on june 2018.

source of sense of his professional and existential experience. Losing his job and his inability to find another one, the need to sell his musical instrument, the loss of his home, no answer or so on the part of institutions, are all moments to which we can associate a hypothesis of surfacing of the *I's shame*, a block of inter-subjective possibilities to pursue one's subjectivity, from time to time interpreted as the opportunity of achieving one's life projects and desires. Silvio begins to participate in the activities of "Blocchi Precari Metropolitani", acquiring further awareness, a political one, exceeding participatory –relational and affecting solidarity– social dynamics. Thus, in this case, social participation is both an end in itself, inasmuch as it guarantees the inter-subjective recognition resources of re-subjectification, and a means for further ends.

The suffering accompanying such condition of humiliation and vulnerability is amendable only socially, by entering again in the recognition dynamics of the social process. Cooperation, as well finding out the strength of solidarity, access to shared experiences – with some other *I* of violated *Me* – triggers the process of subjectification, a new start of the flourishing of a *Self* accompanying both the exit from the negative emotional state in which one is entangled, and a further dimension, which we may define as political. That is to say, a dimension of progressive rise of reflexivity as regards one's rights and the possibility to defend them, claim them and have them enforced.

### Conclusions

As far as the analyzed case is concerned, it would appear that the concepts proposed here seem useful in interpreting the social phenomena taken into consideration. Of course, this is only an early empirical test and the hypotheses here postulated need broader empirical research. As every intellectual work, this is an inconclusive, ongoing work: I have only intended to discuss and account for a provisional outcome of provisional results achieved by means of these early considerations carried out on the themes dealt with.

Shame surfaces inside a social context made of relations and meanings that start to be in contradiction with subjective expectations, desires and projects. Overcoming these contradictions is a social process itself, not a psychological or a merely individual one. It doesn't totally depend on individual will, but it is about the performative dimension of a complex of cognitive social relations (Honneth 1996, 2007). These cognitive relations help the humiliated subject to access to new self-definition, taking

distance from dominant and oppressive labels and meanings. In the re-appropriation of social relations and the self, the humiliated subject produces at the same time a new relation with himself and with the world. In this case, recognition plays a performative role and doesn't only play a part in confirmation of existing social norms. It is a critical process because emancipates from a negative condition and contributes to the creation of that which is reappropriated by the subject, in complete harmony with what we have seen referring to the dialectical character of the relation between *Me* and *I*. The humiliated subject intercepts renewed recognitional resources that allow him to creatively re-appropriate his social pre-conditions, succeeding in the end in socially realizing the interrupted perspectives transmitted by the *I*. Shame emerges socially as a deficit of recognition and, at the same time, it encounters a disalienating recognitional process. The evicted for unintentional late payment, labelled as a culpable failure, by participating in renewed relations of solidarity in a movement for the right to housing, manages to accede to an original and satisfying re-definition of himself through the critical re-definition of the social meaning of failure and guilt mediated by a renewed form of recognition.

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Citado. BRUNI, Lorenzo (2019) "Social Reproduction and Critical Subjectification Processes. The Two Faces of Shame" en Revista Latinoamericana de Estudios sobre Cuerpos, Emociones y Sociedad - RELACES, N°29. Año 11. Abril 2019-Julio 2019. Córdoba. ISSN 18528759. pp. 82-88. Disponible en: <http://www.relaces.com.ar/index.php/relaces/article/view/606>.

**Plazos.** Recibido: 01/08/2018. Aceptado: 18/03/2019.