

## The scandalised self<sup>1</sup>

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It is the shocking event, the *skandalon*, which arouses the most political of feelings, indignation. It is indignation which drives human beings to turn to their neighbours and makes the creation of a public space possible. No other feeling needs an *audience* more than indignation: it wants to be heard and seen; it could even be said that indignation without a witness is in actual fact quite pointless. The scandalised self is not just trying to work off its indignation on others (who may well be the source of the scandalising experience) in order to calm down (although these phenomena can certainly play a part in it). For indignation is not a primarily „vegetative“ condition, but rather a („moral“) reaction to the *intolerable*, to a fact or an action which cannot be borne, because the knowledge of it puts in question the very honesty and coherence of the moral self. The scandal challenges the self to (publicly) take a stance, an act which in turns defines the self. The scandalised self thus actually challenges itself: it has to prove to itself that it is *real* and not just a creature determined by its environment, a merely contemplative, **privatistic** being which does not know what it wants or where it stands.

What causes the scandal or rather the experience of a scandal? In reference to Honneth (1994), it is possible to formulate that its origin lies in the experiencing of contempt for the contextually required form of recognition<sup>2</sup>; in other words, it can be traced back to the damaging or attacking of the self-relationship<sup>3</sup>. In accordance with Oser (1998), the corresponding experiences may be gathered under the term „negative morality“. Though the experience of scandal has an inter-subjective base which is expressed in the connection to a moral hypergood, its character is in fact subjective. It is also substantially influenced by the difference which exists between the *ego* seeing itself as the victim or as the perpetrator of the scandalous event, and the difference between the *ego* actually being a participant or „merely“ an observer. The experience of scandal can have many motivating origins, from an embarrassing blunder over an irksome nuisance to obvious injustice. Only in the last case does the experience of the intolerable become connected in an undeniable way to the ethical imperative of taking a stance. To take a stance means to reveal one's own self; it means to

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<sup>2</sup> The following are meant by this: **primary relationships** (*Primärbeziehungen*), the **legal position** (*Rechtsverhältnisse*), a community of values (*Wertgemeinschaft*) (see Honneth *ibid.*, S.211)

<sup>3</sup> This means self-confidence, self-respect, self-appreciation (*ibid.*)

draw the line at „what in our world we are willing to accept, reject and change, in ourselves as well as in our circumstances“ (Foucault, cit. Schmid 1992, S. 236).

In order to aspire to „**political practice**“, the scandalised self does not necessarily have to cherish the illusion of being able to change or help to change the world effectively. However important self efficacy beliefs may be in order to put into practice political, moral and civic desiderata, the self seeks to join the „public sphere“ or rather the discourse in order to confirm its own *coherence* and validate itself in its own eyes. It is difficult to shield this approach from the criticism of aesthetics. However, in the context of the **ethics of the self**, the aesthetic pervasion of the political dimension must be candidly accepted. It is more than merely the expression of politics as an end in itself (see Cascardi 1997; Curtis 1997; Disch 1997; Fraser 1997): occasionally, people become „politically active“ (the term is always taken in its broadest sense) even when they are convinced that their actions will remain without consequences with regard to the issue at hand. This is fortunate, because human beings only prove themselves to be political subjects when they express themselves „against the world“, not when they can actually change the world or think they can do so<sup>4</sup>.

Empirical research into self efficacy in the political sphere (Krampen, 1991; Fend, 1991) and into political maturity (see e.g. Klöti & Risi, 1991) appears to indicate that there are correlative connections between variables such as interests, knowledge and motivation to act in the political sphere on the one hand, and feelings of (political) self efficacy on the other hand. These research projects seem to suggest that subjects can feel particularly self-efficacious in those areas which are of special interest to them and which they know something of. In other words, individuals only become „active“ when they have acquired the feeling of their own efficacy. This data and its interpretations (which are not to be called into question here) have apparently been gathered and analysed within the context of a „highly modern“ **interpretative reference framework** (see Touraine 1997); this framework presumes that the political subject as shaper of the world is present in the single individual. But it *cannot be* the central aim of late-modern *democratic* education to enhance feelings of political self efficacy. This goal, which is often mentioned nowadays, corresponds to a nostalgic denial of the precarious situation in which the late-modern subject finds itself. The illusion of self efficacy lasts in any case only a short while, or fulfills a rather impenetrable function as a long-term illusion of potential but unfulfilled „efficacy“.

The political dimension in the life of human beings is not strengthened, and the democratic dimension not promoted by teaching young people the American pathos of „You can make a

difference“. In a late-modern context, the cultivation of the political and democratic dimension of life depends above all on whether the subject can still feel indignation about its own situation or the situation of others, and whether the subject can still find an adequate language to express its indignation. This also means that this cultivation of the political and democratic dimension depends on whether the subject experiences the destruction of the political sphere itself as a *scandal*, and whether it learns in a „school of the subject“ (Touraine 1997) to tend to its freedom in an ironic way, even if it perhaps does so with „cheerful pessimism“. As is apparent especially in Foucault, the political dimension of life consists in the desire „to be a subject“, and the social dimension consists in „finding forms of society which are both founded on the **self-constituting processes** of the subject and at the same time facilitate it“ (Schmid *ibid.*, p. 375). The „**government of oneself**“ requires a *liberal* society and at the same time makes such a liberal society possible, because only the **self-constituting** of the subject leads to the **power issue** not being forgotten and the consolidation of power not being tolerated. This makes it quite clear that democratic *Bildung* is closely connected to the **ethics of the self**. As mentioned before, the **ethics of the self** is not opposed to the validity and binding force of legal norms, but it is „more fundamental“ precisely because every claim for validity is ultimately dependent on the agreement of the individual (Schmid *ibid.*, p. 377).

In pedagogical terms, the formula of the *skandalon* is easily misconstrued. But there cannot be any useful shock gymnastics<sup>5</sup> or an effective didactics of indignation which could give guidance to the self as to what should constitute a nuisance and what it should take exception to, since a scandal cannot be objective and is at most only official. Whether actions, omissions and events are scandalous is decided exclusively by the bond which ties the self to a corresponding hypergood (Taylor 1996); it is this hypergood which has been put in question, ignored or ridiculed by the scandalous occurrence. By manifesting indignation in the face of scandal the self shows itself and its fellow human beings what it considers important. Indignation is the first element of the „**proof of fidelity**“, with which the self not only publicly establishes its bond to a hypergood, but possibly also re-defines, differentiates and strengthens this bond. The scandal forces the individual to take a stance. In the short-term, it may be a relief to be able to escape from having to take a stance, but in the longer-term, excessively frequent **escapist reactions** become equivalent to the self suffering a more or less extensive **loss of reality or worldliness**. Without the courage and the determination to take a stance – which is in a certain sense the result of the **exercise of freedom** - the self stagnates and is

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<sup>4</sup> This is why composure or the ability to be stoically calm cannot be counted among the political virtues, however desirable or socially valued they may be.

<sup>5</sup> Regarding the term „ethical gymnastics“ (ethische Gymnastik) see Kant (1990, S. 383)

reduced to the perspective of an observer, behind which it finally disappears. The conflict between the hypergoods with which human beings define themselves is pre-programmed, since in a concrete situation, the definition of overarching neutral and generally recognised hypergoods and even the definition of the good of impartiality remain a matter for debate. This is equivalent to saying that in the first instance, a world without scandal appears to be an apolitical utopia, and that secondly, neutrality in politics seems to constitute an illusion. Conversely, it is the case that the scandal triggers both political activity and a process of self-transformation, and that indignation is its communicative bonding agent.

The self which is not or never indignant is an improbability. However, it is probable under plural conditions that **the capacity for indignation** of the self is limited, because it cannot identify itself with, or define, all of the hypergoods which are relevant for a particular **culture**; because of this, the self can only experience scandal in a limited way, i.e. selectively and in connection with a hypergood or depending on self-interpretation. This does not exclude the fact that occasionally and in certain areas, the individual experiences a rather mediated, esthetically **over-formed**, superficial and comfortable thrill of fear; in other words, it indulges in a bit of pseudo-scandal. These are stylisations of socially desirable gestures of indignation which are caused by a culture of political correctness – which by the way is by no means *only* a bad thing and can indeed result in welcome behavioural restraints. But to strive to make human beings feel indignation in areas where they lack the necessary sensitivity may well as a rule be a rather fruitless endeavour. This failure is also fortunate, because where the didactics of indignation functions with a guarantee of high efficacy the modern democratic ethos is being undermined, and it would become possible to misuse the didactics of indignation as an instrument of propaganda and *kitsch* ideologisation.

However, it must be said that the scandalised self is itself always in danger of surrendering to this almost inevitable element of kitsch, because it „knows“ in its indignation „all too well“ what is right and what is wrong, who is good and who is bad. Indignation leads – at least at the beginning – always to a primitivisation of **differentiation categories**. Only in discourse and argument with others does the individual have the possibility to escape the threat of de-differentiation, especially when it recognises that its arguments do not possess their presumed power of persuasion and that it is itself being criticised for its dilettantism. In short: discourses correct. The experience of scandal makes individuals self-righteous and blind: while it increases the frequency with which moral terms are used, it simultaneously makes individuals morally insensitive or fanatical, unless the self does not (or cannot) take the scandal as an opportunity to submit to the plurality of a discourse. The scandal introduces **emotion** and

movement into the self and between human beings. A self could be termed „democratically educated“ when it can use this movement *also* as the starting-point of its own transformation.

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