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BEYOND PREJUDICE: DEHUMANIZATION AS AN IDEOLOGICAL EPISTEMOLOGY OF INEQUALITY

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ABSTRACT

Beyond Prejudice: Dehumanization as an Ideological Epistemology of Inequality

This article reconceptualizes dehumanization as an ideological epistemology of inequality, a modular grammar through which social hierarchies appear moral, natural, and inevitable. It argues that structural inequality produces the dehumanizing ideologies required for its own legitimation: these belief systems transform domination into moral order. By tracing how such ideologies become institutionalized, the article shifts the analysis from individual prejudice to the structural organization of belief. It concludes that overcoming inequality requires dismantling the epistemological frameworks that make dehumanization intelligible and justifiable.

KEYWORDS: dehumanization, structural inequality, ideological epistemology, stigma and hierarchy, diversity regimes

IZVLEČEK

Onkraj predsodkov: dehumanizacija kot ideološka epistemologija neenakosti

Avtorica v prispevku na novo opredeli razčlovečenje kot ideološko epistemologijo neenakosti – modularno slovnico, prek katere družbene hierarhije delujejo kot moralne, naravne in neizogibne. Zagovarja tezo, da strukturna neenakost sama proizvaja razčlovečevalne ideologije, potrebne za lastno legitimizacijo: ti miselni sistemi spreminjajo prevlado v moralni red. Sledenje institucionalizaciji teh ideologij premakne analizo z individualnih predsodkov na strukturno organizacijo prepričanja. Sklene, da je za odpravo neenakosti potrebna razgradnja epistemoloških okvirov, ki razčlovečenje delajo razumljivo in upravičeno.

KLJUČNE BESEDE: dehumanizacija, strukturna neenakost, ideološka epistemologija, stigma in hierarhija, režimi raznolikosti

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INTRODUCTION

In hierarchical human societies, the social world is organized through continual acts of classification: who belongs and who deviates, who deserves protection and who does not. These are not neutral distinctions but mechanisms through which inequality is produced and sustained—governing access to dignity, legitimacy, and power. Across the social sciences, from sociology and anthropology to law and political philosophy, scholars have long examined how such hierarchies of difference shape social life. In contemporary debates on ethnicity, nationalism, migration, and even genocide, inequality remains the central analytical concern.

Within this crowded field, however, conceptual fragmentation prevails. Academic and policy discourses multiply typologies: biological versus cultural racism, overt versus covert sexism, individual versus institutional discrimination, often obscuring the structural logic that links them. This proliferation of terms also dilutes moral clarity: when every form of inequality has its own vocabulary, the common grammar of domination becomes harder to see. Instead of revealing a common ideological core, these distinctions risk treating inequality as a collection of isolated social pathologies.

This article takes that fragmentation as its point of departure. It argues that discrimination, prejudice, and oppression are not discrete phenomena but expressions of a single ideological grammar: dehumanization. As a mode of meaning-making, dehumanization provides the syntax through which power differentiates, hierarchizes, and marginalizes. It is not an episodic or psychological aberration but a modular and durable structure of belief that legitimizes social hierarchy by defining particular Others as less human: less worthy, less moral, less knowable, or less safe.

By reframing dehumanization as an ideological epistemology of inequality, the article exposes the shared architecture of belief that sustains racism, sexism, antisemitism, classism, xenophobia, homophobia, and other exclusionary systems. One further consideration supports this broader conceptualization. A paradoxical capacity for ideological reversal shapes the human world of meaning: the transformation of what is empirically verifiable into its symbolic opposite. This systemic paradox is embedded in every social act and communicative practice: it enacts, affirms, and sustains hegemonic power by converting domination into moral order. Such reversals are not trivial errors but constitutive mechanisms of culture-making. Behind them stands an interested ideological hegemony supported by coercive force. As Žižek (1989) argues, ideology often functions precisely through such inversions, translating power into virtue and subordination into moral necessity. Bourdieu (1990) similarly describes this process as *misrecognition*: the acceptance of domination as legitimacy, sustained by everyday practice and symbolic order. From an anthropological perspective, this mechanism echoes Douglas's (1966) insight that moral systems stabilize themselves by turning pragmatic distinctions into symbolic ones, and Geertz's (1973) observation that cultural meaning achieves coherence

not through consistency but through ritualized contradiction. To briefly illustrate, in the modern West, women were long prohibited from wearing trousers—a norm justified by "nature" but serving social control. The feminist struggle to normalize women's trousers exposed this inversion: how biological difference is turned into a hierarchical norm, against every consideration of practical or anatomical logic. Such cultural reversals are not marginal curiosities but key mechanisms through which dehumanizing ideologies reproduce themselves under the guise of morality. The aim of this article is therefore to restore conceptual coherence by situating these reversals within a single, integrated framework rather than a collection of fragmented vocabularies.

This article asks: how does dehumanization function as an ideological epistemology that enables and normalizes structural inequality across different social domains? It advances three claims:

- First, dehumanization is not an episodic moral failure or cognitive bias but a foundational ideological grammar that rationalizes social hierarchy.
- Second, structural inequality itself generates the dehumanizing ideologies required for its own legitimation.
- Third, the modular architecture of dehumanizing beliefs, ranging from demonization to idealization, explains their persistence and adaptability across categories such as race, class, gender, and migration.

The article proceeds in four steps. The first section situates the concept of dehumanization within existing scholarship and reframes it as an ideological, rather than merely psychological, process. The following section connects dehumanization to discrimination and class, exposing how structural hierarchies translate belief into institutional practice. The third section elaborates on the modularity of dehumanizing ideologies, both horizontal and vertical, showing how they sustain inequality through flexible gradations of value and stigma. The conclusion considers the implications for contemporary debates on multiculturalism, interculturalism, and the politics of diversity.

DEHUMANIZATION: FROM CONCEPT TO IDEOLOGICAL STRUCTURE

For over a decade, dehumanization has circulated widely across academic and popular discourse, generally understood as stripping a person or group of their humanity. However, despite its moral salience, the term has long escaped sustained theoretical scrutiny. As philosopher David Livingstone Smith (2011) observes, the concept was often treated as self-evident: a label of moral condemnation rather than an analytical category. His work remains pivotal for showing that, beyond sporadic moral and journalistic use, systematic research has been scarce, particularly outside social psychology. Smith's later writings (Smith, 2021) distinguish dehumanization

from related phenomena such as animalization or objectification, and he suggests that violence need not depend on dehumanization. I take the opposite view: that dehumanization is constitutive of the ideological framework that renders violence permissible and intelligible.

Within psychology, as shown by Nick Haslam and Steve Loughnan (Haslam & Loughnan, 2014),[1] dehumanization is typically reduced to a cognitive operation, an attitude that correlates with entrenched hierarchies of race, gender, class, or disability. While such approaches illuminate mental processes, they risk narrowing what is ultimately a structural and ideological mechanism into a matter of individual bias. The term itself carries strong moral overtones, but these should not obscure its epistemological role in legitimizing inequality.

Rather than viewing dehumanization as a discrete act or exceptional moral lapse, I propose understanding it as modular: a continuum ranging from idealization to derogation. This broader conception allows us to see how societies continually draw thresholds of meaning: the "fully human" versus the "lesser/less than human." The human social world, I argue, is structured by such binaries and their inversions, in which domination is recast as normativity. This reconceptualization matters not only terminologically but methodologically. By shifting focus from individual cognition to collective systems of meaning, it reorients analysis toward how social orders maintain moral coherence while producing inequality. In this sense, studying dehumanization becomes a diagnostic of the moral grammar of society itself.

Anthropological evidence further supports this: many societies have defined themselves as "the real" or "true" humans, implicitly positioning outsiders as less so. This universality points to a deeper epistemological issue: our inability to define humanness without simultaneously creating its opposite. Such self-definitions reveal that dehumanization is not an occasional moral lapse but a universal mechanism of boundary-making that grounds collective identity. For a species convinced of its uniqueness, nothing is more elusive than the meaning of being human.

A major recent contribution to the field, *The Routledge Handbook of Dehumanization* (Kronfeldner, 2021), surveys the term's intellectual history and the shifting boundaries of who counts as human. The volume traces how criteria for "humanness" have long been unstable, moving from religion to race, nation, and culture. It shows that, despite historical change, the symbolic reduction of certain groups to less-than-human status persists. As Kronfeldner notes, the imagined universality of "humanity" has always depended on drawing lines of exclusion, even in today's interdependent world.

1 In their review article, the authors summarize five main directions in psychological research on dehumanization. As the earliest professional treatments of the topic, they cite the work of Herbert Kelman (1927–2022), who published a seminal work on dehumanization in 1976, and Ervin Staub (1938–), a psychologist who primarily studies the psychological aspects of genocide, in 1989.

The handbook also illustrates the proliferation of related terminology: infrahumanization, subhumanization, dyshumanization, superhumanization, and forms such as animalization, objectification, and demonization. Each variant reflects a specific understanding of what "being human" entails, whether as moral essence, social personhood, or cultural capacity. Despite this semantic diversity, all converge on the same mechanism: dehumanization creates distance and hierarchy among people, establishing what Kronfeldner (2021, p. 9) calls a "stratified organization of humanity."

While Kronfeldner suggests that dehumanization enables social stratification, I reverse the direction: it is stratification that generates the ideological need for dehumanization. Hierarchical systems must continually justify unequal distributions of rights, worth, and life itself; dehumanizing belief systems supply that justification by rendering inequality intelligible and legitimate. Dehumanization thus functions as an ideological rationalization rather than a mere act of hostility. Its consequences appear socially as discrimination, where individuals or groups are denied equality, dignity, and protection. To paraphrase Christopher Hitchens's (2005) wry remark, racists are not guilty of "discrimination" but of its opposite: of failing to distinguish among people at all. The point is that dehumanization precedes and structures discrimination: it provides the conceptual grammar through which unequal treatment becomes thinkable and permissible.

Discrimination, by its very etymology, means being unjustly *set apart* from the social whole. It marks those whose perceived difference falls outside the boundaries of what is considered normal or human, relegating them to exclusion and vulnerability. In legal and political terms, it denotes the denial of rights and protections guaranteed to others. Seen through the lens of dehumanization, however, discrimination is not merely a behavioral or legal deviation but the practical expression of ideological belief. It is the mechanism through which dehumanizing ideas become socially operative, shaping not only how people are perceived, but how they are treated, governed, and excluded.

DISCRIMINATION: PROCESSES OF RATIONALIZATION OF IDEOLOGICAL PRACTICES

Social-scientific typologies of discrimination, especially in psychology and behavioral research, typically classify it according to observable processes rather than structural origins. Most locate its source in "human diversity," avoiding explicit reference to the hierarchies that organize that diversity into inequality. This reluctance to name hierarchy obscures the systemic roots of discrimination and the interdependence among its forms. As Andrew Sayer (2005) observes, class reproduces itself even without explicit antagonism or awareness; symbolic domination may vary, but material stratification persists through the very organization of economic life. This highlights a key theme: the political invisibility of class within contemporary anti-discrimination discourse.

While modern policies celebrate progress through equal-opportunity measures, they rarely acknowledge class divisions. The term middle class conveniently absorbs most of the population that is not considered elite. As a result, classism often disappears from academic and policy discourse altogether.

Drawing on Pincus (1996), we can distinguish among interpersonal, institutional, and structural forms of discrimination. Interpersonal acts are episodic and opportunistic; institutional discrimination is embedded in organizations and routines; and structural discrimination is systemic, produced by the foundational orientations of the social and economic order itself. I treat structural discrimination as constitutive, the source from which institutional and interpersonal forms derive. It reflects what the New Zealand Human Rights Commission calls "a system of allocating and maintaining social privilege," disadvantaging some while consolidating advantage for others (Human Rights Commission, 2012).

Official frameworks, such as those of the Council of Europe or the European Commission, tend to reduce these dynamics to individual moral failings—to individuals and groups presumed to "hold prejudice and stereotypes." In this linear model, bias leads to hate, which leads to violence: a moral narrative that condemns personal attitudes but obscures systemic causation. However, prejudice and stereotyping are not extraordinary lapses of conscience; they are ordinary cognitive shortcuts that help people navigate social complexity. They become socially destructive only when institutional and political structures convert these mental habits into rules of governance—when what begins as categorization hardens into justification for unequal treatment. The persistence of this linear, moralistic model in the EU and broader Western policy has practical consequences. By locating discrimination in attitudes rather than institutions, anti-bias strategies often result in awareness campaigns rather than structural reform. This moral individualization of inequality has also shaped educational practice, where tolerance replaces critique and moral correction substitutes for analysis. What is measured and corrected, therefore, is language and sensitivity—not the conditions that make inequality durable.

Educational and policy discourses built on this model teach individuals to censor their own bias rather than to try to comprehend the systems that generate it. To illustrate, as Andrew Shorten (2022) notes, multiculturalism's moral relativism prevents genuine critique: by insisting that all cultures are self-contained and beyond judgment, it forecloses the very dialogue it claims to promote. The result is a politics of "tolerance" that often manifests as performative correctness or "wokeness," a vigilant policing of speech that substitutes surface civility for structural change. This moral individualization of inequality has also shaped educational practice, where tolerance replaces critique.

What such reductionism conceals is the ideological labor that normalizes inequality. Societies sustain hierarchy not only through prejudice alone but also through belief systems that justify it. Structural discrimination is, in effect, the practical machinery of privilege, requiring and reproducing dehumanizing ideologies

that rationalize inequality as natural or deserved. Mere bias could not sustain such a system; only conviction and ideological commitment can. Understanding discrimination through this lens reveals how moral correction replaces structural critique—a shift that conceals rather than resolves inequality.

THE ARCHITECTURE OF DEHUMANIZING IDEOLOGIES AND THEIR MODALITY

I propose that dehumanizing ideologies (racism, chauvinism, sexism, ageism, classism, aporophobia, antisemitism, antigypsyism, homophobia, xenophobia, Islamophobia, Russophobia, and others) rest on a universal structure of beliefs about the Other. These beliefs, though expressed in diverse historical and cultural vocabularies, form a coherent ideological schema that defines who counts as fully human and who does not:

- Radical, unchangeable difference—often framed as biological or essential, this belief establishes the boundary between "us" and "them" as absolute and irreversible.
- Danger or contagion—the Other is portrayed as a threat to the health, morality, or purity of the dominant group.
- Aberrant sexuality—difference is moralized through the body, depicted as deviant, excessive, or perverse.
- Hidden malice—the Other is imagined as deceitful, harboring secret intentions to infiltrate or corrupt.
- Self-blame—the Other is held responsible for their own suffering, marginalization, or poverty.

These beliefs do not appear in isolation, nor do they operate uniformly: they adapt, combine, and shift depending on context, enabling ideologies of dehumanization to be both durable and contextually flexible. Among these five beliefs, aberrant sexuality often functions as the central organizing axis, suggesting that radical and irredeemable difference is frequently conceptualized in pseudo-biological terms. This sexualized axis of dehumanization plays a critical role in producing both the horizontal modularity of these ideologies and their inherent intersectionality.[2] Each

2 This is also recognized by the *EU Strategy on combating antisemitism and fostering Jewish life* (2021–2030), which notes that "racism can also be combined with discrimination and hatred on other grounds, including religion and belief," and that this "requires an intersectional approach" (European Commission, 2021, p. 4). In doing so, it references an OSCE study by David Graham and Jonathan Boyd (Graham & Boyd, 2017) titled *Understanding Antisemitic Hate Crime: Do the Experiences, Perceptions and Behaviors of Jews Vary by Gender, Age and Religiosity*?. The reduction in understanding lies in the implication that some ideologies of dehumanization might exceptionally combine with others, whereas in fact, each of them is inherently intersectional.

one tends to contain, at a minimum, internal differentiations along the axes of male/female and old/young.

Across cultures, difference becomes most tangible and most threatening when expressed through the body. Ideological systems translate social or economic hierarchies into symbolic hierarchies of purity and pollution. Sexuality, reproduction, and gender boundaries thus provide the moral vocabulary through which social inequality is naturalized. In Nazi Germany, for instance, young Jewish women were depicted as hypersexual seductresses, while young Jewish men were feminized and predatory: an inversion that simultaneously eroticized and degraded the group as a whole (Steinweis, 2006). Such imagery fuses biological, moral, and political difference into a single logic of justification.

Dehumanizing ideologies are modular, in that they function through variable combinations and degrees of intensity rather than through fixed or uniform representations. This modularity operates in two dimensions:

- Vertical modularity refers to the emotional gradient of attitudes, ranging from open hostility and demonization to ambivalence and benevolent idealization. Societies may outlaw or morally condemn explicit hatred while tolerating more subtle expressions, such as paternalism, romanticization, or exoticization that preserve distance while denying animus.
- Horizontal modularity captures differentiation within the same stigmatized group. Dehumanizing ideologies rarely treat their targets as homogeneous. Instead, they produce internal distinctions: male and female, young and old, obedient and rebellious, that render the system flexible and enduring.

Such patterned contrasts show that the modular grammar of dehumanization adapts to social change while preserving the legitimacy of inequality. The term modularity is borrowed from cognitive science (cf. Fodor, 1983; Barrett & Kurzban, 2006) but re-purposed here to describe an ideological rather than psychological mechanism. Whereas typologies classify discrete forms, modularity captures *adaptability*: the way ideologies reassemble familiar elements to fit new contexts. This quality of recombination allows hatred and idealization, hostility and benevolence, to coexist within the same cultural repertoire without producing cognitive dissonance. In this sense, modularity resembles what Bauman (2000**)** described as the *liquidity* of modern social forms: their capacity to retain structure while continually changing shape. Ideological modularity thus performs for belief systems what liquidity performs for late modernity: it preserves hierarchy through flexibility, moral variation, and the continual reinvention of difference. Together, vertical modularity (intensity of attitudes) and horizontal modularity (internal differentiation) explain why dehumanization is both durable and adaptive. These two dimensions of ideological modularity allow societies to calibrate moral distance without challenging the hierarchy that produces it. Apparent tolerance or admiration can coexist with exploitation and exclusion.

So-called ambivalent positions (those that appear to balance empathy with unease) are better understood as ideological accommodations. They accept the basic premise of radical difference (Belief 1), selectively mute others (Beliefs 2–4), and condition acceptance on conformity to dominant norms (modifying Belief 5). This ambivalence underpins much of the contemporary "tolerance-based" approach to diversity: it manages conflict through civility and inclusionary language but leaves the structure of hierarchy untouched.

Hostile and benevolent forms of dehumanization are thus two faces of the same ideological coin. The former degrades the Other as subhuman; the latter idealizes the Other as exotic or morally superior. Both maintain the unequal distance required for domination. The example of philosemitism, the glorification of Jews as inherently intelligent, spiritually chosen, or economically gifted, illustrates this paradox. What appears as positive recognition merely reproduces essentialism and mirrors antisemitic logic as its inverted twin.

In this sense, dehumanization does not simply erase the humanity of the perceived Other; it organizes its distribution. It divides the human into degrees of worthiness, morality, and purity, thereby sustaining systems of privilege through flexible, moralized distinctions. Modularity is therefore not an anomaly of ideology but its structural principle, allowing inequality to appear both emotionally variable and conceptually stable across time and place.

It is important to note that extensive surveys on racism, antisemitism, homophobia, and related attitudes are often taken as indicators of public belief, yet their reliability is limited. What such instruments primarily register is the discursive environment in which respondents live: the language, moral cues, and dominant narratives circulating in media and policy discourse. When people agree or disagree with pre-formulated statements, they are not necessarily revealing deeply held convictions but rather are summarizing the boundaries of what can be said. Apparent patterns by gender, age, education, or class, therefore, reflect differences in exposure and adaptation to prevailing norms rather than genuine ideological divergence. In this sense, they measure the *echo* of dominant discourse more than the internal architecture of belief. Stereotypes revealed through them are less private attitudes than public performances of compliance with what is socially defined as acceptable inequality. This distinction between discourse and conviction helps explain why ideological structures of dehumanization remain stable even as measured prejudice appears to decline: public attitudes may liberalize, yet the moral grammar of hierarchy endures.

Once embedded, dehumanizing logics become naturalized. What began as an ideological conviction hardens into the appearance of systemic necessity. Political and economic truisms such as "low unemployment slows growth" or "competition ensures efficiency" are presented as neutral descriptions of reality. In this way, inequality is rendered technical, and power ceases to appear as domination. Prejudice and stereotyping, condemned as the root causes of exclusion, obscure the fact that the

true engine of discrimination is not personal animus but institutionalized belief, which transforms moral assumptions into "facts" of governance. When these assumptions are embedded in law, economics, and professional practice, they acquire the aura of objectivity, effectively shielding structural discrimination from critique.

This transformation can be observed in how societies classify and manage difference. Following Goffman (1963), stigma can be understood as a relational marking that redefines a person's social value: downgrading them as tainted or, I would add, elevating them as exceptional. Stigma is thus the social face of institutionalized belief: it translates abstract hierarchies into everyday recognition. I extend Goffman's notion by treating stigma as modular: it operates along a continuum from negative taint to positive distinction. Both poles reinforce hierarchy. In unequal social orders, negative stigma predominates because it externalizes vulnerability, making suffering appear self-inflicted or deserved. The stigmatized subject becomes a moral lesson, a boundary marker of who belongs and who does not.

At the same time, positive stigma, the celebration of the "gifted," "talented," or "heroic" individual, serves a complementary function. By elevating a few, the system reaffirms its meritocratic veneer and conceals its structural exclusions. Whether negative or positive, stigmatization authorizes the institutional management of the Other: the expert, the bureaucrat, or the humanitarian enters to deal with difference "objectively" and "professionally." In doing so, these institutions reproduce the very hierarchies they claim to mitigate. Stigma, then, is not a by-product of inequality but one of its most efficient instruments, an everyday technology through which dehumanization is enacted, rationalized, and perpetuated. The professionalization of empathy, the expectation that experts can manage suffering impartially, illustrates how moral distance becomes institutional virtue. In humanitarian, social-work, or policy settings, detachment is perceived as evidence of fairness. Nevertheless, this very detachment transforms inequality into a technical problem, obscuring its moral and political roots. Confronted with this institutionalized distance, individuals reproduce it in everyday life, negotiating their own complicity with inequality through a range of cognitive and moral strategies. Thus, when confronted with stigmatized Others, social actors tend to: protest structural conditions yet resign themselves to impotence (Belief 5 subtly internalized); adopt Beliefs 1 and/or 5 to protect their status and justify indifference; personalize systemic problems, embracing Beliefs 1–5 wholesale; or, mobilize politically around personalized guilt, making dehumanization explicit.

Frameworks such as multiculturalism and interculturalism, which are simultaneously theoretical, normative, and policy-oriented, prioritize managing diversity through cohesion, contact, and inclusion, rather than questioning the ideological foundations of inequality.[3] Valued as governance tools, they often reify cultural difference and leave the ideological production of hierarchy intact. Even pedagogical

3 I am drawing primarily on these works: Hajisoteriou & Angelides, 2024; Modood, 2007; Zapata-Barrero, 2016; Zapata-Barrero, 2017.

variants that stress empathy and dialogue can drift into ambivalent tolerance: surface corrections that stabilize rather than unmask the deeper structures of inequality. As critics (e.g., Anthias, 2013; Headley, 2006) note, exclusion has shifted registers from biology to culture while retaining its logic. To move beyond management, inquiry must begin not with "diversity" but with dehumanization as the ideological grammar that legitimates inequality.

Beginning with the observation that all forms of dehumanization rely on a shared structure of belief (difference, danger, deviance, deceit, and self-blame), the analysis shows that these convictions are not scattered prejudices but components of a unified ideological system. Through them, social hierarchies present inequality as natural and moral. The emphasis on the Other's "aberrant" sexuality reveals the mechanism by which difference becomes biologized and moralized: domination is legitimized through appeals to purity, contamination, and reproductive threat.

NOT A GLITCH, A FEATURE: DEHUMANIZATION

The modular structure of dehumanizing ideologies reveals them not as malfunctions of civilization, nor as individuals' moral failures, but as intrinsic features of hierarchical social systems. Power discourse misrepresents them as neutral conflicts between legitimate interests (public versus private, secular versus religious, generational or cultural divides) when, in fact, they are expressions of the same ideological architecture. Public debates that circle endlessly around symbolic issues such as abortion, birth rates, or euthanasia exemplify this displacement: they dramatize contradiction while leaving the system's structure untouched. Even activist slogans like "rights must be fought for again and again" unwittingly affirm the permanence of inequality by accepting the system's logic as inevitable.

It is, therefore, naïve to imagine that "prejudices and stereotypes" could spontaneously escalate into hatred or violence. Such escalation is never spontaneous; it presupposes the emergence of a center of power, political, ideological, or religious, that claims to oppose the dominant order while in fact reproducing it. These actors perform opposition, presenting themselves as defenders of "ordinary people" or "true values," yet their rhetoric translates structural tensions into moral drama. They identify culprits instead of causes, locating responsibility for systemic contradictions in a dehumanized group or individual. The personalization of guilt performs several crucial functions: it simplifies complexity, transforms social anxiety into moral clarity, and furnishes power with emotional legitimacy. Hatred acquires the texture of virtue, and aggression the feel of duty. In this way, the personalization of guilt becomes the mechanism through which ideology turns into conviction, and violence becomes a moral act.

The ideological mechanisms described above are not unique to modern democracies but recur across history whenever hierarchical societies seek to reconcile proclaimed equality with enduring inequality. This continuity reveals

that dehumanization is not an anomaly of failed modernization but a recurrent instrument of order. As David Livingstone Smith (2021) notes, dehumanization is neither modern nor uniquely European: it is a cultural form embedded in the very process of meaning-making that defines humanity itself. The Enlightenment may have universalized "humanity" as a moral ideal, yet it also produced new rationales for exclusion. Dehumanization, therefore, is not a deviation from universalism but one of its enabling conditions. This historical depth reinforces the need to analyze not when dehumanization occurs, but how it is continually organized and renewed within social systems.

From this perspective, the crucial question is not whether dehumanization is innate to human nature but how it becomes systemically organized. The modular model proposed here explains this organization. Ideologies of dehumanization arise within societies marked by vertical immobility and structural discrimination, where inequality must appear both necessary and moral. They are sustained through ideological labor, education, media, bureaucratic practice, and economic dependence, which persuades ordinary actors to see hierarchy as the natural order of things.

Empirically, people are not born with dehumanizing beliefs; they acquire them through prolonged exposure to systemic narratives that rationalize fear, scarcity, and competition. Propaganda, moral panic, and scapegoating transform these conditions into conviction. Violence, in turn, is not an eruption of irrationality but the culmination of organized belief: the moment when ideology completes its circuit through affect, justification, and action.

The aftermath of such violent episodes is never confined to history. Dehumanization leaves a residue of trauma that transmits across generations, embedded in institutions, symbols, and everyday discourse. Recognizing this continuity requires a shift from treating prejudice as individual pathology to analyzing the epistemological structures that make it coherent. To confront inequality, we must first unmake the moral grammar that renders it reasonable. Dehumanization, understood as an ideological epistemology of difference, is not a glitch in the human system: it is its design. Only by dismantling this grammar can social science move from describing domination to transforming it.

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POVZETEK

ONKRAJ PREDSODKOV: DEHUMANIZACIJA KOT IDEOLOŠKA EPISTEMOLOGIJA NEENAKOSTI

Irena Šumi

Avtorica v prispevku na novo opredeli dehumanizacijo kot ideološko epistemologijo neenakosti, kot modularno slovnico, v okviru katere so družbene hierarhije prikazane kot naravne, moralne in neizogibne. Pokaže, da dehumanizacija ni posameznikov moralni zdrs ali kognitivna napaka, temveč sistemski mehanizem, s katerim družbe legitimirajo in vzdržujejo neenakost. Strukturna neenakost sama proizvaja ideologije dehumanizacije, potrebne za lastno reprodukcijo, te pa v zameno ustvarjajo prepričanja, da so razmerja moči smiselna in pravična.

Analitični model temelji na petih univerzalnih prepričanjih o Drugem: da je ta radikalno drugačen, nevaren, spolno devianten in skrivno zlonameren ter da si je sam kriv za svoj položaj. Na teh predpostavkah slonijo vse oblike izključevanja, od rasizma in seksizma do razredne in kulturne stigmatizacije. Ideologije dehumanizacije so obenem vertikalno modularne, saj nihajo med sovražnostjo, ambivalenco in idealizacijo, ter horizontalno modularne, ker razlikujejo med podskupinami znotraj iste stigmatizirane kategorije. Takšna modularnost pojasni njihovo prilagodljivost in trajnost: tudi navidezno pozitivne predstave o Drugem (npr. romantizacija »eksotičnih« skupin) reproducirajo hierarhično razdaljo in utrjujejo sistem privilegijev.

Dehumanizacija deluje kot povezava med ideologijo in prakso. Ko so institucionalizirana prepričanja ponotranjena, postanejo družbene »nuje«, kot da bi bile objektivne zakonitosti sistema. Diskriminacija tako ni odklon, temveč emanacija ideoloških vzorcev, skozi katere neenakost postane racionalna in moralno sprejemljiva. V tem okviru predsodki in stereotipi niso vzrok, temveč površinski simptom globljih prepričanj, ki urejajo in utrjujejo družbeni red.

Avtorica razširi tudi pojem stigme (Goffman) in pokaže, da ta ne označuje le negativnega zaničevanja, temveč vsako družbeno »označitev«, ki bodisi z razvrednotenjem bodisi z idealizacijo postavi posameznika ali skupino zunaj polja normale. Stigmatizacija je zato vsakdanji način, na katerega se dehumanizacija vtke v družbeno zaznavo, politiko in strokovne prakse.

V zaključku avtorica trdi, da dehumanizacija ni napaka v sistemu, temveč njegov temeljni mehanizem: epistemologija, s katero hierarhične družbe prevedejo oblast v moralo in neenakost v red. Namesto upravljanja raznolikosti avtorica predlaga preusmeritev analize k ideološkim pogojem, ki omogočajo, da se neenakost sploh zdi razumljiva in upravičena. Odprava družbene neenakosti zato ni vprašanje popravljanja predsodkov, temveč razgradnje miselnih in moralnih okvirov, ki dehumanizacijo omogočajo.

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