



Invisibilization of Suffering

The Moral Grammar of Disrespect

Benno Herzog

palgrave
macmillan

Invisibilization of Suffering

Benno Herzog

Invisibilization of Suffering

The Moral Grammar of Disrespect

palgrave
macmillan

Benno Herzog
University of Valencia
Valencia, Spain

ISBN 978-3-030-28447-3 ISBN 978-3-030-28448-0 (eBook)
<https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-28448-0>

© The Editor(s) (if applicable) and The Author(s) 2020

This work is subject to copyright. All rights are solely and exclusively licensed by the Publisher, whether the whole or part of the material is concerned, specifically the rights of translation, reprinting, reuse of illustrations, recitation, broadcasting, reproduction on microfilms or in any other physical way, and transmission or information storage and retrieval, electronic adaptation, computer software, or by similar or dissimilar methodology now known or hereafter developed.

The use of general descriptive names, registered names, trademarks, service marks, etc. in this publication does not imply, even in the absence of a specific statement, that such names are exempt from the relevant protective laws and regulations and therefore free for general use.

The publisher, the authors and the editors are safe to assume that the advice and information in this book are believed to be true and accurate at the date of publication. Neither the publisher nor the authors or the editors give a warranty, express or implied, with respect to the material contained herein or for any errors or omissions that may have been made. The publisher remains neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.

Cover illustration: © Susana Parra Beneyto

This Palgrave Macmillan imprint is published by the registered company Springer Nature Switzerland AG.

The registered company address is: Gewerbestrasse 11, 6330 Cham, Switzerland

To all debased, enslaved, abandoned, despicable beings.

Preface

Recently, references to invisibility seem to be omnipresent in the cultural, political and academic fields. Those who frequent museums of modern art will have noticed a growing number of expositions that treat the topic of invisibility; this month, I found in my hometown a whole art festival, including dancing, architecture and several workshops, pertaining to the umbrella topic of invisibility. Additionally, at my university this month, an event took place on the invisibility of the LGBT collective, and another event took place on the invisibility of lesbian love. A few days ago, a colleague bestowed upon me a book, the cover of which was a painting from a series called "Door to the Invisible." The book was about design and lamented the invisibility of design in the field of aesthetics. In addition, while reading the newspaper this weekend, I came across an interview with a journalist who noted the problem of the invisibilization of female and lower-class experts in the media.

Many more examples could be provided in which invisibility is used as a new key term for describing situations of all types of social problems related to inequality, marginalization and exclusion. What all these usages have in common is that they are concerned, on a descriptive or analytical level, not only with epistemological questions of what can and what cannot be perceived. Almost all those who currently use the terms invisibility and invisibilization to describe social phenomena do so with

the conviction that invisibility is a social problem. They share the common understanding that invisibility should not exist and that the mere fact that something is invisibilized must motivate action to overcome this circumstance. Invisibility is, thus, used as a descriptive as well as a normative concept, a concept that represents a negative phenomenon that should be abolished or alleviated in some way. Therefore, we could say that invisibility as a problem—in contrast to a mere physical description of the invisible and not (yet) perceivable—points towards some sort of discomfort or suffering. Moreover, this invisibilized discomfort and suffering, as well as the suffering produced through invisibilization, turn invisibility into a normative concept that points ultimately to the abolition of suffering.

However, given the sheer number of political, artistic, scientific and journalistic treatments of invisibility, we have to wonder whether there is perhaps nothing as currently visible as invisibility. Is there perhaps a hyper-visibility of invisibility? Is invisibility merely the new buzz word, helping only us—academics, artists and journalists—to be heard in the struggle for academic and public recognition and—why not—to gain visibility ourselves? If invisibility is truly intended to be more than a mere trendy term, then its value as a key term must be proven. It must be proven that the term helps us to expand our understanding of social problems and to develop a disclosing critique of situations of social suffering.

To facilitate the development of a critical theory of invisibility, this term must be conceptualized as a critical, normative concept: a concept related to suffering and to the overcoming of suffering. At the same time, we must analyse the conditions of its growing popularity as a sociological concept and its prominent usage. And finally, we must be critical of visibility as an automatic response to the invisibility of suffering or the suffering from invisibility.

Thus, the main objective of this proposal is to offer a comprehensive theory of invisibility as a critical sociological concept.

To address this objective, I will develop my argument throughout the book. In the first chapter, I start with social suffering, that is, a normative phenomenon that points towards its own abolition or alleviation. It is this phenomenon that renders invisibilization highly problematic, as the

invisibilization of suffering seems to oppose our ability to overcome this suffering. In the second chapter, I explore several ways in which invisibilization works and how it can even produce more suffering. At the same time, I take a critical stance towards visibilization. This chapter will show that certain types of visibilization can also produce or reinforce social suffering. The last chapter is perhaps less systematic and more mosaic and fragmented in nature. It treats the question of how we can conduct practical research on the invisible, the silent and the absent. Given that invisibility has many faces, the relevant research must also be diverse and flexible.

Despite the connections among the arguments of the three chapters, the chapters of this book can also stand alone. As a central phenomenon in modern societies, suffering relates to almost all critical sociological work. Additionally, as a general and powerful process that impedes access to our objects of inquiry, invisibilization is of interest not only to those working on suffering. Finally, methodological advice for research on the invisible or hidden is helpful to all empirical social researchers in bringing forward new and unexpected findings.

Acknowledgements

No intellectual project is developed by only one person. As a sociologist, I am fully aware of how deeply indebted I am to so many people, and it is impossible to enumerate them all. However, I would like to mention some individuals who had an outstanding impact on the completion of this book.

First, I have to mention my friend, colleague and mentor Francesc Hernández, who, for more than 15 years now, has been unselfishly giving me all kinds of personal, academic and intellectual support.

Several of the ideas and arguments developed in this book have been presented, tested, contested and modified in previous presentations. I extend many thanks to the participants in the PhD seminar on concepts and figures of critical thinking at the University of Valencia for their critical comments. I also want to express sincere thanks for the encouragement and critiques of the participants in the conference of the Spanish Society of Critical Theory, Madrid, and the participants in the Social Theory Research Network of the European Sociological Association. I am furthermore indebted to the participants in the project of the UNESCO chair “Memory and peace: Building pacific and inclusive societies through memory,” organized by Francesc Hernández and Sabine Heiss. I am especially grateful for Sabine Heiss’ insistence on the inclusion of decolonial perspectives and on not invisibilizing the global South.

xii Acknowledgements

I also appreciate the intriguing debate at the workshop on invisibility at the University of Tübingen, and I am grateful for the invitation from Markus Rieger-Ladich and Eva Klinkisch. I also send a big hug to Eva Klinkisch for her consoling, encouraging, critical and desperate comments, accompanied by good wine and loud music, from the beginning to the end of this project.

I want to thank Davide Tisiato for his indications on French and critical literature and my doctoral students Onur Yamaner and José Miguel Pallás for their supportive reactions and empirical examples of invisibilization.

I also extend a special thanks to Johannes Beetz and Veit Schwab, who critically followed my earlier writings and insisted on the need to further develop the concept of social suffering. I am especially grateful to Johannes Beetz, who, despite difficult circumstances, was able to provide very helpful comments on an earlier draft of this book.

The research for this book received generous financial support from the following research projects: “Validity, Productivity and Challenges of Immanent Critique in Contemporary Social Philosophy,” led by José Manuel Romero and financed by the Spanish Ministry of Economy and Competitiveness (FFI2013-47230-P); “Contemporary Representations of Mass Violence Perpetrators: Concepts, Narratives, and Images,” led by Vicente Sánchez-Biosca and Anacleto Ferrer Mas and equally financed by the Spanish Ministry of Science, Innovation and Competitiveness (HAR2017-83519-P); and “Figures of Perpetrators of Mass Violence: Narratives and Images,” led by Brigitte Jirku and financed by the Valencian Council of Education, Research, Culture and Sports (AICO/2018/136). This work also benefited from a research stay at the Institute for Advanced Social Studies in Cordoba, which was generously financed by the University of Valencia. I am especially thankful to Jorge Ruiz for the invitation and the debates on the possibilities and limits of discourse studies.

I finally have to thank Susana, Clara and Tiana for their patience and for bringing me and my work back down to earth.

Contents

1	Understanding Suffering	1
2	Invisibilization	71
3	Towards Critical Research on Invisibility	151
	Bibliography	203
	Index	215