



While dignity was traditionally positioned as a concept to bring civilization across the globe (e.g., through its inclusion in Declaration of Human Rights and the constitutions of Germany or South Africa), it always acted as an aspirational signifier, if not at all devoid of a self-realizing potential. Nonetheless, it acted as an appealing concept, a promise for individuals to be treated with respect and dignity, to be regarded as an individual with an inherent, inviolable worth simply for being human. This would and should apply to legal frameworks, immigration, wars, and workplaces: the dignity of the individual human being should be central in policy design and actual practice. Nonetheless, these words have lost their meaning in the vulgar age we have entered, where leaders can openly claim to be misogynist, racist, xenophobic, Islamophobic and so on.

An analysis of our contemporary time reveals that any claim for dignity has to counter the two main forces of current society: shamelessness and impunity. On the one hand, the age of shamelessness reveals how any notion of noble dignity has lost its meaning, and people can now openly enjoy their transgression. The election of Trump was one of the main signals of the victory of shamelessness, whereby it is no longer needed to keep up any pretence, but where its rise (as a symptom) signified the lack of interest in pretending any higher order need, decency, decorum, or civilized attitude.

Instead, one could enjoy one's own downfall into vulgarity, into holding bigoted views, disavowing any scientific evidence or argumentation, and enjoying simplified views of the world dividing any social issue into black or white, us or them, pro or con.

On the other hand, jointly with shamelessness, leaders, countries and organizations can act with impunity. Whereas international conventions would condemn and necessitate counterreactions, it is still a powerful community of world leaders that allow a genocide on the Palestinian people to take place.

It is countries that can act with impunity, simply because there is no higher authority that they fear. Because there is no leadership anymore after the disintegration of leadership itself into shameless emptiness, more and more wannabe authoritarian leaders see themselves freed to act with total impunity, unconstrained by any notion of dignity. [Sewage companies](#) in the United Kingdom can just dump raw sewage into the rivers, polluting the rivers with the faeces of the people.

In the summer, children swimming in the rivers do so surrounded by excrement. These companies do so, because they *can*, because there is no internal/external mechanism that would prevent such actions. It is not about the loss of dignity; it is about the total disintegration of dignity itself. There is no meaning left in the void left behind after the disappearance of dignity.

So, what is left for the concept of dignity? Philosopher Ajari ([2023](#)) argues for a fundamentally different perspective on dignity in comparison to the traditional Kantian notion of dignity as universal value. While the latter has in practice translated dignity into a concept that is approached as a luxury, available for those whose basic human needs are already met, the former confronts another aspect of dignity. This is present in the title of his book: 'Dignity or Death', which refers to the very present existing reality for so many people across the world, which is a very struggle for the fulfilment of the dignity of basic human needs.

Set in a decolonial/decolonizing context, the struggle for dignity pertains especially for all people who have not been able to enjoy the notion of dignity as luxury, a nice layer on an already fulfilling life. Hence, if dignity has any future as a guiding concept, it is in the meaning of the struggle for dignity, a continuous and never-ending daily struggle for human rights, for decent lives, decent work, protection from precarity and so on. This struggle will not be welcomed by the current dominant forces in society, and therefore, the only way will be radical change within and of society.