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Title:

Sharon Crozier-De Rosa, 'The Place of Human Dignity in an Emotional World: Shame and Honour, Humility and Humiliation', in Sharon Crozier-De Rosa, Ute Frevert, Lucy Noakes, and David Nash, 'Forum: The Politics of Humiliation: A Modern History by Ute Frevert (OUP, 2020)'.

Article:

Shame is an uncomfortable topic. German sociologist Norbert Elias defined it as fear of social degradation or, more generally, of other people's gestures of superiority.¹ In more recent times, sociologist Thomas Scheff has extended this understanding of the relationship between the personal and the social by arguing that the 'large family of emotions' included under the term *shame*, a family that includes cognates and variants such as embarrassment, humiliation, feelings of rejection and failure, all have in common 'the feeling of a *threat to the social bond*'.² Shame is ever present, Scheff asserts, because people always anticipate failing themselves and their group. They fear an erosion of the bonds that tie them to their community.³ In *The Politics of Humiliation*, German historian Ute Frevert takes on this uncomfortable social and moral emotion. Her masterful history of developing approaches to humiliation in modern societies affirms that shame is indeed ever present, whatever the waxing and waning of attitudes to public acts of shaming. More than this, through a deft weaving of illuminating anecdotes and intellectual analysis, Frevert amply demonstrates that shame is 'a frighteningly powerful emotion' whose effects stretch from being 'deadly' to having 'a lasting effect on the living' (p. 3).

This is a history of the changing relationship between the individual, community and state, on the one hand, and shame and power, on the other. It focuses mainly on Europe from the eighteenth century to today, although it draws on examples from places like the United States, China and Japan to illustrate wider continuities and discontinuities. These countries are fitting extensions of the study given that European imperialism facilitated the exchange of ideas and practices among these sites, wherever those ideas and practices originated. The diverging or intersecting paths they took after colonialism is one of the fascinating aspects of the book. In many ways, *The Politics of Humiliation* could be more accurately titled 'The Politics of Shame and Honour, Humility and Humiliation', for the study centres on this constellation of emotions

rather than on humiliation itself. (Nonetheless, it can hardly be doubted that the pithiness of the original title is much more attractive than my clunky alternative.)

Shaming and humiliation, Frevert points out clearly, are not to be conflated. Both are seen as profound acts of disrespect in full sight of an audience. However, shame is complex and multidimensional. A person dishonours the values or norms of a group and is shamed. At this point they are either excluded for their transgression or reformed and invited back into that community. This is reintegrative shaming. Humiliation, in contrast, is not about correcting or drawing attention to a wrongdoing. Rather, it is 'distinguishing radically between those who are in and those who are out: we are us, you are different and count for less' (p. 13). Exclusions based on race, religion and ethnicity are proffered as examples of this. Anti-Semites forcing Jews to scrub the pavement on their knees in Vienna in 1938 is provided as a painfully apt example of this (p. 13). Stigmatizing humiliation has no reformatory capabilities, whatever we think of the potential of reintegrative shaming. As the antithesis of shame, honour is at the heart of this text, whether that be in the form of the reputation of the nation or personal dignity and respect. Indeed, it is the ongoing centrality of honour, in whatever guise, throughout all of modernity that makes shame such a continually ubiquitous, if not uncontested, feature of social life.

The book is divided into three substantial chapters on state punishments such as pillorying and beating, shaming in social settings, and then humility and humiliation in the international political arena. Although this is a modern history, it provides a longer overview of the place of shame in society to demonstrate that shame and shaming have adapted to reflect the concerns and priorities, as well as the technologies, of modern societies. Chapter 1 convincingly refutes common claims that, prior to modernity, honour was solely a concern of the elites. Frevert provides abundant evidence of lower-class men and women seeking satisfaction when offended to demonstrate that, in many societies, people of all classes were sensitive about their honour. This chapter also introduces one of the central tenets of the book, namely that from the Enlightenment onwards, human dignity came to be enshrined in life and law and that this had significant consequences for how shaming and humiliation were seen. In the face of such a shift, the state lessened its reliance on punishments like pillorying and public beatings. Public shaming had never been uncontested, but it came to be disputed more. However, as Frevert makes us painfully aware, as the state withdrew from shaming, non-state actors increasingly filled the void, taking it upon themselves to inflict

humiliating punishments for perceived transgressions. Stories and accompanying photographs of Jews being subjected to acts of public degradation amply demonstrate this. Examples of women who had undesirable sexual relations in wartime bring home the distasteful gendered nature of shame and shaming.

Chapter 2 elaborates further on non-state shaming through its focus on how members of families, schools and the military found reasons for and means of degrading, ridiculing and embarrassing fellow members. More than any other section of the book, it is here that technology becomes an important component of the shaming story. Frevert reminds us that for shaming and humiliation to be effective, there must be a complicit audience. The more this audience participates in or approvingly witnesses acts of shaming, the more shamers enjoy their displays of power. But here technology begins to play a more ominous role. Perhaps inevitably, given recent media exposure, the chapter takes us to acts of public degradation that are unfortunately all too familiar, to young people and online or social media bullying. Here Frevert identifies something of a switch in thinking about the relationship between communities and shame. Whereas the state had used shaming to police and correct aberrant behaviour, online shaming was (and is) much more geared towards stigmatizing than reforming and reintegrating. A vast body of anonymous witnesses, connected by the internet rather than by values and a shared sense of belonging, all with the power to participate via the comments box, demean, it seems, without purpose.

The final chapter of the book focuses on an area of historical inquiry for which Frevert is world renowned: national honour and international relations. As she has argued elsewhere, too, by the onset of the modern era, the masculinized concept of honour had come to be integrated with the masculinized notion of the nation state. Honour, shame and humiliation, then, were well-known concepts within international relations.⁴ To encroach on one nation's sense of honour could be to invite war. And the nationalization of honour, implicating all male citizens in the defence of the nation's reputation, could have dire consequences (as evidenced by the First World War). One of the most thought-provoking sections of this chapter elucidates the emergence of national apologies and the connection between humility and humiliation. This can best be seen through the captivating story of Willy Brandt kneeling. In 1970 Brandt became the first West German chancellor to visit Warsaw. The trip was organized to sign a treaty 'normalizing' German-Polish relations. Brandt stopped at the 1948 memorial to the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising and astonished the onlooking press by kneeling. This was an act of humility that no one had foreseen, perhaps not even Brandt himself. Whereas

some reacted indignantly, claiming this portrayed German weakness, others applauded the act of humility as a show of empathetic diplomacy. Frevert expertly unpacks the complexities of this trailblazing event and its aftermath.

In an era when national apologies are variously embraced, avoided, disdained or applauded, it is crucial to understand what is at stake when national leaders ‘kowtow’ or display unrelenting ‘pride’ – and this book is a valuable stimulus for thinking about this. However, *The Politics of Humiliation* also demonstrates that we need to dig even deeper and wider before we can grasp the sheer wealth of the complexities characterizing this issue. Frevert argues that apologies to foreign governments, including those of former colonies, are generally more difficult and complicated than apologies in relation to domestic conflicts. She cites US, South African, Australian and Canadian apologies in support of this. Yet these are not simply domestic conflicts. As settler-colonial societies, these are arguably nations within nations. Territories remain unceded, and First Nations peoples continue to agitate, not only for recognition but, more practically, for power-sharing. In my current country of residence, Australia, the 13th of February marks the anniversary of when the prime minister, Kevin Rudd (2008), apologized for ‘the Stolen Generations’, the Indigenous children who were forcibly removed from their families as a result of government policies. Indigenous commentator Celeste Liddle questioned the significance of this anniversary. Sorry means ensuring that ‘these atrocities will never happen again’, she stated. Therefore, the apology would be genuine only when Australia learnt from past wrongs. Yet, rather than learning, authorities were perpetuating past wrongs. Aboriginal children continued to be disproportionately represented among the children removed from their families by government authorities and taken into ‘care’. While the initial apology was moving – inducing tears in Liddle not only for her family but also for all the intergenerational trauma caused by such orchestrated cruelty, even attempted genocide – subsequent commemorations were not. They were hollow and irrelevant. ‘Most Australians still seem to possess not even the remotest clue regarding what the Apology was for, much less why it was necessary’, she wrote.⁵ Given the disconnect caused by remembering national apologies, I would be very interested in Frevert’s opinion about the afterlife of these apologies. Where could historians – for example of empire, settler colonialism and/or race, as well as of international relations more broadly – take the study of humility and humiliation? What do national apologies signify

about our approach to the past, as well as to politics in the present, when the wrongdoings they apologize for are perpetuated time and again?

For me, the power of this book lies in the fact that this is a rare direct study of the developing history of the social and moral emotions which colour our existence as individuals, groups, nations and an increasingly globalized community. Whereas sociologists and social anthropologists have been keen to understand the inner workings of shame and humiliation, historians have been less interested. Or, perhaps more accurately, given the difficulties of accessing past interiorities, historians have been at somewhat of a disadvantage when it comes to plotting the historical development of these emotions. Yet emotions are not ahistorical. They form in reaction to time and place. Surely, then, to contextualize sociological thought about feelings like shame and practices like shaming, this historical work is crucial. Frevert argues that European modernity is ‘an epoch that has elevated individual freedom and human dignity to its highest values and defended them against all kinds of attacks’ (p. 206). The more societies are beholden to the protection of human dignity, Frevert writes, ‘the more they tend to increase their members’ sensitivity to social degradation and defamation’ (p. 219). In other words, the more sensitive they will be to a loss of reputation – to shame and humiliation. This is also an era, she argues, that has showcased ‘new forms of unfreedom and degradation’ (p. 206). There are also new technological platforms and unprecedented access to ‘being heard’, not just within our immediate communities but globally. The worry is, and Frevert makes this clear throughout her book, that with less connection to community – more internet but less human connection – the aimlessness of humiliation may overtake even the most naive faith in the reformative power of shame. The repercussions of this are as yet uncertain but surely ominous.

The Politics of Humiliation is an exemplary study of the historical relationship between power and social and moral emotions written by the consummate historian in the field. It is a provocative study that challenges us to think about changing attitudes about where power lies and how it is exercised in local, national and international settings. However, it is the beginning of a conversation, not the end. There is so much yet to be unearthed and understood about the historical development of the emotions used to police individual and community actions. One way to continue this conversation might be to consider further the thoughts and attitudes of the perpetrators of shaming. Frevert is adamant that public shaming is an assertion of power. I agree that whether it realizes its aim or not, an attempt to shame is an attempt to assert power.

But I also acknowledge that, historically, shaming has been a tool of the disaffected and disenfranchised, those seeking some form of power. Some individuals and groups used shaming, among a range of strategies, in the attempt to impel others to share their vision for a better world. Activists in a variety of campaigns – from feminism to anti-colonialism – have used shaming to urge outsiders to see the appropriateness of their calls for freedom and equality, dignity and respect. They have also used it to remind insiders to not deviate from the cause. Often they were reluctant ‘shamers’, seeing this tactic as a last resort. For example, feminists involved in Ireland’s early twentieth-century anti-colonial nationalist campaign tried to shame their brothers into supporting their demands for a vote in the enemy British parliament. They were not always comfortable with this strategy, but they resorted to it because they had faith in its efficacy. There is also little doubt that for many who witnessed such attempts at shaming, the effect was often distasteful. However, without more research, it is difficult to assess how shamers felt about resorting to this discomforting strategy. Frevert acknowledges that the disenfranchised have relied on shaming, but I would be keen to hear more from her about the fears, angers, hopes and aspirations that motivated a turn to shaming. Historically, what alternative methods could have been used by the disaffected and disenfranchised to achieve their goals? *The Politics of Humiliation* prompts us to reconsider the historical, as well as the contemporary, relationship between the political and the emotional. As such, it will be valuable not just to political historians and historians of emotions but also to non-historians who are trying to understand the place of human dignity and respect, shame and humiliation, in our world today. This is surely the sign of a fine and highly effective piece of historical scholarship.

¹ Norbert Elias, *The Civilizing Process: The History of Manners and State Formation and Civilization*, Edmund Jephcott (transl.) (1939; Oxford: Blackwell, 1994), p. 492.

² Thomas J. Scheff, ‘Shame and the Social Bond: A Sociological Theory’, *Sociological Theory*, 18:1 (2000), pp. 84–99 (97).

³ Thomas J. Scheff, ‘Shame in Self and Society’, *Symbolic Interaction*, 26:2 (2003), pp. 239–62 (256).

⁴ Ute Frevert, 'Wartime Emotions: Honour, Shame, and the Ecstasy of Sacrifice', in *1914–1918-Online: International Encyclopedia of the First World War*, last updated 8 October 2014, https://encyclopedia.1914-1918-online.net/article/wartime_emotions_honour_shame_and_the_ecstasy_of_sacrifice (accessed 4 February 2021).

⁵ Celeste Liddle, 'Opinion: Apology Anniversary is a Time to Recognise a Nation's Shame and Commit to Truth-Telling and Action Going Forward', *NITV News*, 14 February 2021, <https://www.sbs.com.au/nitv/article/2021/02/14/opinion-apology-anniversary-time-recognise-nations-shame-and-commit-truth-telling> (accessed 14 February 2021).