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## Humiliation and Modernity: Ongoing Practices, Changing Sensibilities

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First things first: I am immensely grateful to the three scholars who have read and commented on *The Politics of Humiliation*. They are not just generous colleagues who spent precious time engaging with the book's arguments; they are also experts in the field. In her recent monograph *Shame and the Anti-Feminist Backlash*, Sharon Crozier-De Rosa investigated the vocabulary of emotions used by women who opposed feminist suffrage campaigns in countries like Britain, Ireland and Australia between 1890 and 1920. As she demonstrated, shame and related feelings of embarrassment, humiliation and honour played a crucial role in pressuring female suffragists to abandon their claims. Shame here worked as a political tool, similar to during the white feather campaign in the First World War. In both instances (and in many others discussed in the book), shaming occurred when women or men transgressed the norms regulating feminine or masculine behaviour: men should not be cowardly; women should not speak up in public and certainly should not become militant. If they did, they were to be shamed into changing their improper conduct.<sup>1</sup>

Lucy Noakes likewise encountered many such cases of shame and shaming in her work on war and gender in twentieth-century Britain. Soldiers often experienced shame (if not outright humiliation) when taken prisoner by enemy forces.<sup>2</sup> So did women who, after serving the nation during the First World War in army auxiliary organizations, were sent back to domestic service, which they rightly considered far less respected and honourable work. Conservatives, men and women alike, were not amused by the alleged loss of shame and modesty that they observed among young women who had worn military uniforms, turned 'immoral' and adopted male manners like assertively 'thrusting their hands deep into their side pockets'. For their part, female workers who had actively supported the war effort might have felt a sense of humiliation when faced with the backlash against

working women and ‘superfluous girls’, who, they were told, stole jobs from returning soldiers.<sup>3</sup>

Shame and shaming are also at the core of David Nash’s historical research. Together with Anne-Marie Kilday, he has written extensively on social practices of shaming in early modern and modern Britain. Shame, they argue, is a ‘central part of modernity and was probably enhanced by it’. At the same time, contemporary citizens seem to find it easier to resist shaming (called *anti-shame*) and thus ‘transcend its power’.<sup>4</sup>

### **Shaming vs humiliation**

My own approach to shame and shaming, humility and humiliation, has clearly benefited from previous or concomitant research carried out by these esteemed colleagues. I used many examples from their work to build my own argument on shaming and humiliation as sites of power and powerlessness. This argument draws heavily on the role of the public audience, a vital part of the shaming process. Without audience approval, the process is bound to fail or proves far less effective. The presence of others – a peer group, neighbours or colleagues, family and friends – and their reaction to the shaming greatly enhance and sometimes even engender the feeling of shame. This testifies to the character of shaming as a social practice embedded in a web of social relations and hierarchies. It also emphasizes the social function of shaming: blame a person who violated group norms and, by exposing her or him, restore the validity and cohesive force of such norms. Ideally, shaming is supposed to morally improve the trespasser and, by triggering remorse, offer a chance for redemption and social reintegration.

This is exactly what the criminologist John Braithwaite has in mind and recommends as a viable tool to address and counter juvenile delinquency. It also resonates with current political strategies to shame people who act in what others perceive as harmful and irresponsible ways. Some green activists blame and shame those who travel by airplane, drive

big cars, eat meat and have children, because they consider that such behaviour damages the environment and heats up the planet. Shaming in this case is meant to induce a change of conduct and make the world a better place.

What distinguishes, then, shaming from humiliation? After all, the book bears the title 'politics of humiliation' rather than 'politics of shaming'. Both are, to be sure, social practices that smack of hierarchy and power. In everyday language the concepts are often used interchangeably, and even scholars hesitate to draw a distinct line between them. In fact, it is not always easy to see the difference, and in multiple instances shaming adopts humiliating features. Categorically, though, humiliation is about exclusion, while shaming is about reintegration. Even if shaming can be as painful and hurtful as humiliation, it offers the shamed person the chance of returning to the group whose rules they have infringed. With humiliation, the exclusion is bound to be permanent.

Furthermore, humiliation does not respond to something the humiliated person has herself or himself done. Rather, it responds to what and who the person is. Historically, humiliation often targets members of minorities deemed inferior and marginal. Jews are a classic case in point. Humiliating them signalled that they were not welcome, did not belong and were bereft of power. Humiliation has thus frequently preceded expulsion or extermination, as in Nazi Germany. Another case of deliberate and collectively orchestrated humiliation occurred when the German army attacked Soviet Russia in 1941. German soldiers who had been trained in the ideology of superior and inferior races treated Russians, both civilians and military personnel, as subhuman. They invented and practised all kinds of vicious policies to denigrate and debase them: slapping them in the face, shouting orders, forbidding them to use public toilets, stripping them naked or employing extremely disgraceful methods of execution.

## **Language and experience**

Interestingly, the Russians had a clear sense of what was done to them by the ‘master race’. Those who survived the brutal treatment reported that their sense of dignity had been violated, that they had felt like slaves, humiliated and dehumanized.<sup>5</sup> They thus spoke the modern language of assertive humanity and self-confident dignity – a language they had learnt during and after the Russian Revolution. Even if Bolshevik rule had done nothing to treat Soviet citizens kindly and respectfully, it had nevertheless encouraged them to conceive of themselves as human beings rather than cattle.

This new self-concept ties into a central question: how did historical actors actually experience instances of shaming and humiliation? Actors here include persons who were active in shaming and humiliating others, as well as their victims, plus those who stood by, watched and made comments (or not). As a historian of emotions, I am deeply interested in people’s experience of emotions, even though this is the most difficult part of the story. We usually need first-person accounts (like the ones collected by Soviet historians in the aftermath of the German occupation, or ego-documents such as letters and diaries, or testimonies in court cases), and these are relatively scarce. They get even scarcer the further we go back in time. Based on what I found in primary and secondary sources, I argued that the language of human dignity and civic honour was needed for people to experience cruel and debasing treatment as illegitimately shameful and humiliating. As long as this language was missing and related claims were out of the question, as for members of lower social strata before 1800, such treatment was accepted (though grudgingly) as a reflection of the social hierarchy and asymmetrical power relations. It was widely understood that people might be equals before God but not before worldly authorities.

### **Historical change**

This all started to change during the nineteenth century. Once liberal and democratic ideas of personal freedom and basic equality were enshrined in constitutions and official institutions,

the habit of treating citizens disrespectfully came under attack. In many European countries, legal experts successfully campaigned for more humane treatment of people who had committed crimes. Sentencing them to public shaming did not survive liberal reforms and revolutionary upheavals around and after 1800. The legal system thus spearheaded the systemic transformation of a shame-based society that was hierarchically structured into a respect-based society whose members learnt to speak the language of civic honour and human dignity.

This does not mean, of course, that civil societies as they developed in many parts of Europe knew nothing about shame. Shame continued to be a powerful emotion, and both shaming and humiliation maintained their place in private and public struggles over power. Shaming was used in many social institutions: in the family, at school and at church, in the military, at the workplace and, increasingly important, in the media. It targeted children, women and men and happened in all social strata, among workers and university students alike. Against the backdrop of stable norms of gendered behaviour, it was easy to shame girls and women who disregarded the rules of decency and modesty, and to shame men who did not live up to the ideal of manly courage and toughness. Strict and inflexible rules enhanced opportunities for shame and shaming in all cases of non-compliance.

Even when rules finally softened, shame was far from gone. There is no question that Western societies underwent a rapid and profound process of liberalization and informalization beginning in the 1960s. Pluralization likewise served to break the unquestioned hegemony of certain styles of conduct and allowed for a variety of different modes of speaking, dressing, dancing and leading one's life. People could try out multiple ways to express themselves instead of following rigid precepts at the risk of being shamed if they overstepped boundaries. In this vein, both the feminist and the gay liberation movements dismissed shame as a tool of repression and sought to convert shame (about the female body or same-sex love) into pride.

At the same time, subcultures developed their own codes of conduct and discovered shame and shaming as a means of securing cohesion and alignment. Labour unions, among others, used traditional methods of shaming against members or bosses who broke away from the established moral economy. New social movements likewise discovered shame's disciplining power and used it freely and frequently. Still, this power holds only as long as certain norms are widely shared. If you do not care about climate change or stoke doubts about global warming, you are not likely to be shamed into saving energy, riding a bike or reducing your meat consumption. The power of shame, in short, relies on common values and hegemonic norms. In their absence, shaming falls short of its goal.

This casts doubt on the assumption that modernity not only kept shame and shaming alive but actually intensified it. Structurally speaking, shame is more widely performed and carries more weight in societies with hegemonic norms (both religious and secular), in close-knit communities and in those with low individual mobility. People in such communities have little to no chance of escaping or resisting shame. Today's world is clearly different, even though (social) media seem to increase the power of shaming and outright humiliation, especially among adolescents and younger adults. Yet, as David Nash points out, people do have a choice. They can opt out and join others who do not partake in shaming. The individual's decision to do this depends, however, on their intellectual, moral and even economic resources. Socially vulnerable people show less resilience to peer pressure than those with more stable and financially buttressed identities. Nash is absolutely right in drawing attention to social and economic (and, I would add, cultural) factors that either strengthen or weaken people's exposure to shame and humiliation. Until this very day, women of better means find it far easier to dismiss shame than do poor and financially dependent women. The same holds true for homosexual men or transgender people, who enjoy greater acceptance among the educated and well-off classes. As a matter of fact, urban

and secular settings allow for more liberal and shame-free ways of being than rural and religious ones.

Shame and shaming are thus not evenly distributed and enacted. Instead, they are socially stratified and gendered. In this regard they follow the intersectional trajectories of social inequality. At the same time, shame usually works within social groups; juvenile peer groups are a clear example. They define their own norms and standards and decide who meets them and who does not. And they are often not reluctant to shame, or even humiliate, those who do not adjust or comply. In such groups, shame functions horizontally, among equals, so to speak.

How this affects the feeling of shame is a hugely complicated question. To pick up Lucy Noakes's remark, shame is – as all emotions are – historically contingent. Premodern and early modern shaming practices referred to different social targets than late-modern practices; they found different types of behaviour repulsive and blamed different sorts of people. Shaming and humiliation also entailed different consequences. Group exclusion mattered far more in earlier societies where alternatives were not easily at hand. All these factors are complicit in making shame more or less scathing and unbearable. People who (have to) take a keen interest in upholding their reputation usually suffer more than those who can afford to shrug shame off.

History also has a say on what counts as shameful and humiliating. When societies change their moral principles and guidelines, as many have done in relation to sexual mores, adultery loses its shameful stain. Once it becomes fashionable in certain age groups to wear torn clothes, the spell of shame that was formerly cast on girls and women, in particular, whose shirts and skirts showed a trace of wear is broken. Nowadays, young women proudly shave their heads and make a personal statement in doing so; seven decades ago, a shaved head clearly marked a person as someone who had been shamed and punished as a result of



her own wrongdoing (collaboration with the enemy in wartime) or wrong being (as in concentration camps).

This shows how shame can be deliberately undermined or playfully recoded. At the same time, shame still takes a heavy toll and at times even leads people to end their own lives. By and large, I argue, liberal societies' concern with human rights and dignity has increased both men's and women's sensitivity to instances of shaming and disrespect. Some current observers lament an overabundance of 'hurt feelings'; others have written books on the 'offended generation' or the 'aggrieved society' and recommend more resilient and detached attitudes. Interpreting any critical remark as personally humiliating evidently sets narrow limits to public discourse and controversy.

In this regard, intention matters. If a remark is meant to be degrading, it carries more weight and will be taken more to heart than if not. This compels the person concerned, as well as the historian, to go deeper into the context of a given situation and apply a new perspective. They have to put themselves in the shoes of the other and try to understand their motives, thoughts and attitudes. This is what Sharon Crozier-De Rosa recommends in her plea to take the discussion of shame and honour, humility and humiliation, further. As a historical method, multiperspectivity is crucial. But it is also quite demanding as the historian has to collect a wealth of information on all participants that is often not easy to attain. I fully agree with Crozier-De Rosa's invitation to focus more on the perpetrators of shaming and assess how they felt about their own behaviour, in addition to those who are targeted by debasement and those who witness such acts. This is especially relevant in the case of social activists who have tried to cast off the repressive power of shame while themselves shaming the shamers – the recent Me Too movement might serve as a telling example.

**No heroes or heroines**

Such examples also highlight that there are no undisputed heroes in the book who can be unanimously lauded for pushing back against shame. Liberalism clearly comes closest to playing the heroic role: starting with the liberal-minded legal scholars and practitioners who were eventually successful in abolishing official shame sanctions and ending with the liberal societies of our own era that cherish and protect individual freedom against demands for greater social conformity and homogeneity. But even liberals took a long time to live up to their principles, and not all of them believed in human dignity. Only very few initially favoured granting equal political and civic rights to all male citizens, which ultimately prohibited them from being treated in a dishonourable fashion. And many looked the other way when it came to criticizing institutions like schools or the military for regularly and intentionally applying shaming and physical abuse as means of disciplining ‘unruly’ children and soldiers. The common argument of ‘last resort’ lingered on deep into the second half of the twentieth century.

At the same time, we continually witness new forms of shaming popping up in everyday life. While public institutions have finally, after lengthy debates and tense struggles, dropped those practices, citizens use them frequently and voluntarily. The ubiquity and longevity of shaming and humiliation should not, however, invite us to assume that they are an anthropological given, independent of space, time and social context. Rather, it is necessary to look for both similarities and differences across highly varied spatial and temporal scales. My book has made a first step; I hope more will follow.

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<sup>1</sup> Sharon Crozier-De Rosa, *Shame and the Anti-Feminist Backlash: Britain, Ireland and Australia, 1890–1920* (London: Routledge, 2018).

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<sup>2</sup> Juliette Pattinson et al., ‘Incarcerated Masculinities: Male POWs and the Second World War’, *Journal of War and Culture Studies*, 7:3 (2014), pp. 179–90.

<sup>3</sup> Lucy Noakes, ‘Demobilising the Military Woman: Constructions of Class and Gender in Britain after the First World War’, *Gender and History*, 19:1 (2007), pp. 143–62 (148).

<sup>4</sup> Anne-Marie Kilday and David Nash, *Shame and Modernity in Britain: 1890 to the Present* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), pp. 284-5; see also David Nash and Anne-Marie Kilday, *Cultures of Shame: Exploring Crime and Morality in Britain, 1600–1900* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010).

<sup>5</sup> See Soviet Survivors of Nazi Occupation: The First Testimonies, n.d., <https://survivors.hypotheses.org/interviews> (accessed June 24, 2021). The website contains interviews with Russians who survived German occupation; the interviews were conducted by historians who trailed the Red Army on its path of reconquest between 1942 and 1945. See Jochen Hellbeck, ‘Witnessing and Fighting Nazi Violence during World War II’, in Louise Edwards et al. (eds), *The Cambridge World History of Violence*, pt 3 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), pp. 304–25; and Hellbeck, ‘The Antifascist Pact: Forging a First Experience of Nazi Occupation in the Wartime Soviet Union’, *Slavonic and East European Review*, 96:1 (2018), pp. 117–43.