Politics of Humiliation – How do We Save us from our Liberal Selves?

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The concept of the Enlightenment, its offer, its cohesiveness and its intentions have been fruitful areas of investigation and analysis almost since human history was conscious of it. Ute Frevert's *The Politics of Humiliation* sees this paradigm as a leading protagonist in a history of shame and humiliation stretching from the eighteenth century to the present day. The Enlightenment gave us the enduring concept of human dignity, and it is the task of historians like Frevert to produce an inventory, or balance sheet, of how successful the subsequent period of history was in living up to these ideals. Similarly, we are persuaded to consider how much our contemporary world measures up in its promotion of human dignity.

The answer we get is, at the very least, somewhat mixed. Throughout the book, Frevert shows the state in its various forms seeking to extricate itself from the use of shame and humiliation, which rationalist logic suggested to be unmodern, uncivilized or ineffective. Thus, we have a history where shame punishments and their tools disappear from punishment regimes and penal codes; libel laws appear to counteract accusations containing shame elements; and women are frequently deliberately removed from the reach of shame. All this looks like a humane, civilized victory over the barbarism of the past. Such a 'progressive' change had its famous philosophical supporters, such as Cesare Beccaria, who championed human dignity and the end of humiliation in his attempt to construct fair and rational punishment. This history we think we already know, but Frevert has been careful to look beneath the surface to note that something happened in the 'shadow of the Enlightenment.' This means that our previous picture of civilizing humane progress emerges as simplistic and one-dimensional. As Frevert argues, the end of ancien régime ways of thinking recast the possibilities for shame, and by giving every individual rights and human dignity, liberal

society also gave them a form of cultural capital. This was something which they could gain, lose or also covet in their observation of others. This equation is also put in a social analysis which argues that in creating class societies, the modern world was devolving honour in graduated forms to populations at large. Importantly, this did not remove shame but recast it potentially as the governing paradigm driving feelings of status loss and acquisition within these new societies. The loss or gain of honour thus became central to some necessary nineteenth-century institutions so that the new electoral franchises of the period and the benefits of office-holding demonstrate this new desirable status.

The loss of honour began to shape penal codes (as happened in Prussia) so that they could be carefully graduated to impinge on the status (honour) of individuals higher up the social scale, whose loss could be greater. That such challenges to honour were keenly felt and internalized is evident from the space that Frevert devotes to those anxious to repel accusations of fraud and debt alongside similar challenges to honour. Thus, we read that the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries witnessed the zenith of libel laws, which mushroomed to occupy an inordinate amount of court time and newspaper column inches. This humane liberal outlook, however, used this same logic to retain shame and corporal punishment for children, perceiving them as less than autonomous individuals who could not legitimately possess the honour bequeathed to adult citizens. As such, their resulting gradual socialization was seen as a price emphatically worth paying.

Frevert notes that the creation of citizen conscript armies was a by-product of expanding honour and civic dignity, leading us to consider whether subcultures have an important role in the creation of new forms of honour. But this statement/question perhaps needs qualification. The experience of being a conscript became sustained in countries that were victorious, projecting that honour onto populations who were frequently compelled to remember honour and sacrifice. Alongside this, it is worth pondering the rather different

experience of defeated countries, which is especially pertinent concerning the failure of remembrance in Germany, the country which provides so much of Frevert's evidence.

What is intended here by Frevert is the suggestion that the state, by becoming subject to the liberal trends of the nineteenth century, divested itself of what it saw as anachronistic and uncivilized. As such, the quest to establish human dignity took centre stage as regimes broke with the past wherever they could to replace arbitrariness with rationality. Shame and humiliation thus lay in an unclaimed space and survived for local agencies and individuals to take up and mould as they wished.

In some interesting ways, what Frevert is arguing places her at the confluence of the theories offered by Norbert Elias and Michel Foucault, and the dialogue with these is very interesting. Liberalism's nineteenth-century attempts to remove all types of physical and psychological violence from the scene and to police social interaction was a late episode in Elias's 'civilising process'.[1] Elias wrote his book to argue that the 'civilising process' had created an interdependent society that we should all relish, praise and enjoy. The critique offered by Frevert makes Elias' ideas look blindly and perhaps wilfully teleological. They also emerge as naively optimistic, even if they were written to try and explore his country's (Germany's) early twentieth-century rejection of civilized liberalism. Modernization and progress towards 'civilization', for Frevert, did not remove shame and humiliation – it recast and remoulded these, this time at the behest of individuals and agencies beyond government sovereignty.

Frevert's engagement with Foucault is also important. Foucault critiqued the Enlightenment for having introduced control by intellectuals, specialists and professionals through the institutions they invented, designed and policed. This appeared shaped towards an intrusive surveillance and negative categorization of social behavioural elements that did

not easily fit with a rigid definition of bourgeois and progressive society.[2] For Foucault, this was not civilization but a cynical land grab by privileged forms of knowledge cloaked in the language of progress. Frevert appears to note that increasing respect for others stands contrary to the need to humiliate others 'to gain power and attention and thereby improv[e] one's social, political, or cultural position' (pp. 232–3). Ultimately, she does not share the idea of a calculated Foucauldian project but is aware, as a historian, that the reality of liberalism in action fell significantly short of expectations. Yet it remains unclear whether (because of internal philosophical contradictions) it was always destined to suffer such failure. The state, seeking and working to remove shaming from its mechanisms, hoped to empower and create consensus but seemingly could not 'humanize' its human participants enough. Places like this are precisely where we also meet apparent contradictions, such as the enlightened educationist who believed firmly in beating children to make them more malleable to civilizing impulses (p. 85). Despite aspirations to promote rational instincts, the logic of honour retention in individual lives led people to be creative in finding ways for shame and humiliation to survive and even flourish. This is also the source of Frevert's thoughtful dismissal of Foucault as having ignored (avoided?) the opportunity to investigate emotions as they motivate people – as though somehow these would cloud the issue of power and its effects, which, for him, was the source of all interactions.

Social democracies were clearly at the centre of this project to offer human dignity, and special places existed where the writ of liberalism could be suspended to allow shame and humiliation to play a part in social ritual. This occurred in such places as military organizations and various fraternity cultures, but these exceptions were unofficial and covert (p. 112). This part of the analysis is strengthened by investigation of the twentieth-century societies that abandoned or failed to embrace the concept of a social democratic society, and

the way the state almost instinctively took back the power to shame and humiliate as a tool of effective governance.

Thus, the analysis notes how Communist China witnessed the re-emergence of shaming and the attendant brutality of its Red Guards. Similarly, National Socialism in the 1930s operated honour courts galvanizing almost recognizably premodern concepts of community as a dynamic of state and social cohesion (pp. 122, 130). During this same period, societies in the English-speaking world failed to have their social democratic societies overturned and thus did not endure these throwback responses – at least in the first two-thirds of the twentieth century.

But Frevert is also anxious to note that even the liberal state scarcely relinquished its ability to dispense shame and humiliation in appropriate circumstances. This in many respects is where Frevert's *The Politics of Humiliation* really breaks new ground in taking the study of incidents of shame and humiliation beyond the micro and well into the macro level. Within some of our academic disciplines we have become used to some underlying belief in negotiated consensus. Terms like *acculturation* (used in archaeology) and *soft power* (used in politics and international relations) have accustomed us to believe that conflict models have been an overused category produced by nineteenth-century approaches steeped in the language of colonialism. Frevert here offers something of a corrective to this model. Basic human behaviours otherwise considered as negative resurface as central to the conduct of diplomatic relations. Importantly, these do not diminish over time – even after the arrival of alleged supranational governors of conduct like the United Nations. Numerous examples are cited, such as British envoys trying to get the better of their Chinese counterparts in a status game around appropriate submissive ceremonial behaviour. We also hear that China itself after defeat also subsequently adopted a penance like use of humiliation as a part of the national identity. The basics of human interaction and power are demonstrated to be central

to many episodes of interaction between governments, rulers and nation states. As Frevert notes, the creation and ongoing development of diplomatic etiquette (something Elias would approve of) further heightened the capacity for mistakes, humiliation and loss of face.

There is clear pessimism in the argument that by 1945 the ideal of human dignity had failed across large swathes of the globe (p. 230). For Frevert, the persistence of shaming and its use of new technologies and practices still has significant appeal, as do the 'restorative punishment' regimes which resurfaced at the end of the twentieth century. Frevert therefore suggests that the continuing public display of humiliation persists into our modernity. This, she argues, is our current endgame, in which shame and humiliation have almost resumed the status of being entertainment for people of all classes in possession of human dignity. Frevert's concerns stretch to reality television's act of persuading people to actively consent to their own degradation. But perhaps the keyword is *consent* so that shame may now simply be a narrative that, in most cases, has only transitory and fragmentary power. In this self-same epoch, we are persuaded to note that the internet has a long memory, and this has not escaped the notice of governments who still want to preserve human dignity. As such, liberal respect for the individual has brought forth laws about the right to be forgotten, whereby embarrassing and catastrophic histories must be legally erased from the internet after a certain time. Likewise, private companies can be employed to create false internet histories to ensure that your transgressions disappear to the bottom of internet search results – effectively ensuring that you *are* forgotten.

In some respects, a focus on shame and humiliation as public phenomena can be questioned, since some of the best material that we have as historians is the introverted private experience of those shamed as they continually marshal their thoughts (often repeatedly replaying events) in retrospect. Those who received insults or slights from social betters or experienced shameful situations caused by their own poverty or mistaken behaviour

reflected on this in diaries and memoirs every bit as much. These incidents and the private reflection on them often become powerful didactic tools that have been utilized in different ways. They empowered individuals like the trade union leader Joseph Arch, who indulged in righteous anger in the face of his father's humbling in church at the hands of members of a superior social group. Incidents like this can indict hierarchies, class, religion, regimes of manners or moral codes. Thus, victims can use shame and humiliation to motivate and transcend such situations in the long run.

Beyond these issues with some of the detail, there are areas of this thesis and analysis that clearly deserve at least deeper thought and consideration, and in some cases might prove to be problematic. Whilst the arrival of liberalism is cited as central to the devolution of honour (in the creation of a wider array of social classes), there are those who would question the liberal social democratic state's ultimate role in this. Social and economic changes arguably did more to create social classes and to drive forward their norms and expectations. Some proponents of what remains of the linguistic turn might well also point to such norms emanating from language and locality rather than the democratization of honour. Given this, one wonders how much these latter factors served in the marginalization and poor treatment of people in the episodes described by Frevert.

When we reach the contemporary world, Frevert is concerned about how deeply set shame and humiliation are in our culture alongside a counter tendency to demand respect for each individual. Perhaps this divide is not so problematic for our understanding if we consider class and life opportunities as a measure of who humiliates and who is persuaded to humiliate themselves. Our sites of social interaction are so diverse and divided by (delete as applicable) gender, generation, nationality and ethnicity that the notion of shared overarching cultures can quickly disappear when examined. Moreover, people do not simply actively use social media as a form of status validation and self-fashioning; they also actively abstain from

it and express a wish to avoid what might be perceived as the shallow, transitory and illusory. Choice might therefore be the supreme arbiter in this.

Ultimately, Frevert's work offers a sensible and plausible 'middle way' between the polarized views that liberalism and its quest for human flourishing were wholly laudable and successful or that it instead hid an undercover malevolent project to enslave. Acceptance of this new paradigm will tell us pragmatically about liberalism's successes and failings in a profoundly historical way that will not involve constructing the artificial 'triumph' or 'defeat' of grand narratives. From this, our attempts to create progress emerge as pragmatic, flawed, episodic and piecemeal – even if they were potentially well intentioned. For a historian, this approach smacks of a reality grounded in sources and experiences and helps us to leave behind the worst aspects of monolithic monocausal explanations.

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[1] Norbert Elias, *The Civilising Process: Sociogenetic and Psychogenetic Investigations* Edmund Jephcott (transl.), Eric Dunning et al. (eds) (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000).

[2] Although this aspect is something of a constant in Foucault's thinking, see especially Foucault, *The Birth of the Clinic: An Archaeology of Medical Perception* (London: Vintage Books, 1994) and *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 2020).