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1

Introduction

SHAME IS A PAINFUL EMOTION—something we try to ward off and try not to feel. It's also something we generally try not to talk about. In fact, we are often ashamed of shame.[1] But today we need to talk about shame more urgently than ever.

In an increasingly bitter political arena, "Shame on you!" has become a kind of reflex for rival political groups, with the echo chamber of social media amplifying the accusations. Whether in the personal or the political sphere, a fever of electronic finger-pointing has been encouraged by the internet's peculiar combination of visibility and anonymity.

The lure of public condemnation has surely never been stronger—from body-shaming and celebrity-shaming to politician-shaming. Then along came Donald Trump, and you could do all three at once.

Whether in politics or beyond it, a habit of instant condemnation appears increasingly to be choking off curiosity and narrowing the space for an understanding of others even as such understanding seems more desperately needed than ever.

Responding to some hurtful posts from people she'd helped and trusted, the novelist Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie highlighted a wider problem of shaming and in-group conformity: "We have a generation of young people on social media so terrified of having the wrong opinions that they have robbed themselves of the opportunity to think and to learn and grow," she argued. "We are now angels jostling to out-angel one another."[2] While there are clearly positive sides to social media, the

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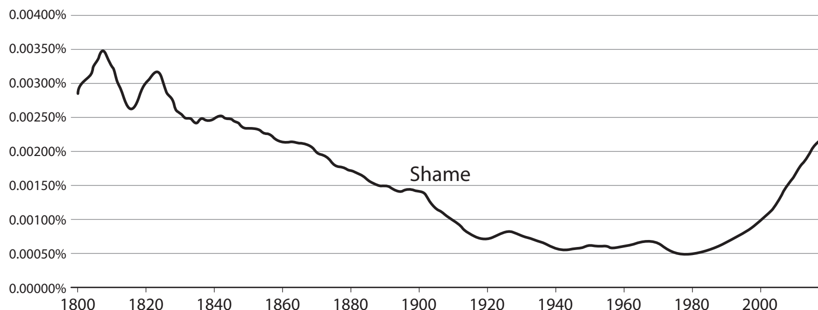

FIGURE 1. Trends in use of the word “shame.”

digital pile-on is pervasive with online communities sometimes defining themselves in part by whom they shame.

We know, too, that mutual shaming has accompanied political polarization, notably in the United States. A key danger is that we are becoming trapped in some kind of *spiral of shame*. Shame begins to resemble a hot potato: we just can’t wait to pass it on to someone else—or to pass it back the way it came.

According to Google Books’ Ngram viewer, the use of the word “shame” declined pretty steadily (in Google’s wide selection of English-language books) from the early 1800s to around 1940 and then stayed at a low level until around 1980. I remember shame as a pretty old-fashioned idea and the concept of a “shame society” even more so. But from the 1980s onward the use of the word “shame” rose pretty sharply.

Despite what appears to be a surge of both shaming itself and the use of the word “shame,” few people seem actually to be changing their views. Very often, the shamed have dug in deeper. So if shame is supposed to be productive or transformative, it’s not at all clear that this is working.

Why have shame and shaming become so much a part of the zeitgeist? What is it that lies behind our current surge of both shaming and talk of shaming? How can we guard against shame’s damaging effects? And can we find a way to break out of the dangerous spiral of mutual shaming?

One major aim in this book is to explore the harm that shame and shaming can do. If we are going to address this damage, I argue, we need

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a good understanding of the many ways in which shame is manipulated. As part of this, we need to stop regarding shame as a relic of a distant past or as something that only prevails in so-called "shame cultures." More than this, we need to recognize that shame is being made to serve important political and economic functions in the Western world as well as elsewhere. Shame is not just a personal matter—a family dynamic, a legacy from a troubled childhood, or the currency of two people slugging it out on the street or online; it is also deeply political.

In particular, I am interested in the way that shame is *instrumentalized*. I want to explore its functions and its role in relation to large-scale human suffering. In part, this interest came out of my long-standing work on conflicts and humanitarian disasters. Since the 1980s, I've been investigating famines and civil wars, and I've had a special interest in the functions of phenomena (including famines and wars) that might at first glance seem only negative and dysfunctional. This evolving interest arose out of research in Sudan, Sierra Leone, Iraq, Guatemala, Serbia, Sri Lanka, and the Turkey/Syria border, and I've also researched disasters closer to my home in the UK (like the so-called "jungle" camp in France that was part of a "hostile environment" designed to deter migrants). I've found that these catastrophes generally serve important purposes, sometimes political, sometimes economic. No matter how much suffering has occurred, it has always been instructive to ask, "Who benefits?" (or in the Latin version, "Cui bono?"). Such practical benefits, moreover, have often been facilitated by a profound manipulation of shame.

Whether at a personal or political level, it would be a mistake to suppose that shame itself—for all its negative effects—is *purely dysfunctional*. For many influential actors, shame may be not so much a problem as an opportunity. Like other emotions, shame is not simply an escape or a retreat from "rational" projects like the pursuit of power and money; rather, shame has been integrated into the political economies that produce it and are in turn reinforced by it. While it would surely be difficult to find a time when shame *did not* play a major role in politics, today it does seem that shame is playing an especially important role in some very disturbing political processes.

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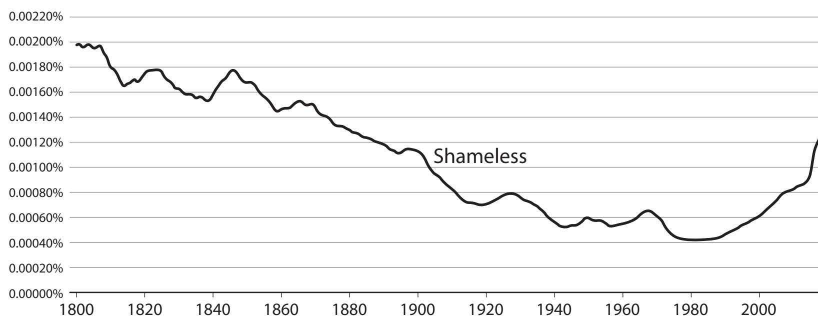

FIGURE 2. Trends in use of the word "shameless."

Even as we begin to realize the intimate connection between shame and major social and political problems, however, a contrasting—perhaps even an *opposite*—concern begins to loom into view. This is the problem of *shamelessness*. From Trump in the United States to Johnson in the UK, from Bolsonaro in Brazil to Duterte in the Philippines, from Modi in India to Salvini and Meloni in Italy, from Orbán in Hungary to Putin in Russia and many more, we have seen a series of leaders who seem to possess the quality of shamelessness in spades. Indeed, some of these leaders appear to be quite beyond shame or even embarrassment. The problem, from this perspective, is not that our politics exhibits too much shame but *too little*.

If we go back to Google Books, we find that the use of the word "shameless" follows a rather similar trajectory to the word "shame": it falls until around 1980 and then rises sharply.

What, then, is the relationship between these two apparently contradictory modern phenomena—on the one hand, what appears to be a destructive epidemic of shame and shaming and, on the other, a perhaps equally destructive epidemic of shamelessness? Why have these concepts become so salient and so prominent? How do shame and shamelessness relate to each other? And is it possible to move toward political habits that are more productive?

One factor that seems to be severely limiting our understanding of counterproductive and dangerous political processes (and the role of shame within them) is the so-called "rational actor" model—the

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assumption that people will rationally pursue their own interests. This assumption has been part of why many analysts have recoiled in horror and incomprehension when groups of people appear to act *against* their own interests: at times, it's as if a world of careful calculations has succumbed to "a world gone mad." A commonly cited puzzle here is support for Trump and for the UK's Brexit process from people who appear to have little to gain and much to lose.

But rather than concluding that people have "gone crazy," these phenomena should invite more careful attention to the emotions at play—and to the complex relationship between these emotions and the battle of interests that still lies at the heart of politics.

While there are plenty of important exceptions,[3] analysis of emotions has tended to be rather poorly integrated with analysis of interests. The division of academia into separate "disciplines" has often been unhelpful in this respect.

Of course, the picture is a complex one. The discipline of history lends itself to holistic approaches. And some subdisciplines—like political psychology—explicitly try to integrate politics and emotion. But while traditionally anthropologists have often sought to describe and explain the "strange" and "exotic" emotional and spiritual lives in societies far from their own, economists and political scientists have frequently focused on relatively wealthy societies (and often with a "rational actor" approach). Behavioral economists have added some useful complexity to the idea of a human being as a utility-maximizing organism but still routinely hold up emotion-free decision-making as a kind of ideal that is tainted in practice by errors and emotions. Part of the aim in this book is to contribute to the body of work that tries to integrate analysis of self-interest *and* emotion—and to do so by focusing on the interaction of self-interest and shame.

Crucially, understanding shame can help us greatly in comprehending the habit of buying—and selling—bogus or magical solutions for complex problems. Relatedly, it can help us understand how systems that yield rather substantial benefits for rather small numbers of people (and harm for a much larger number) are routinely considered somehow *acceptable*. Here, we need to investigate the process by which shame

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is loaded onto people as well as the varied strategies of those who offer to *relieve* this shame. Revealingly, the loading and the relieving have often come from the same source, so that we may discern here something of a *double game*.[4] At the extreme, this may even resemble a *mafia tactic* since mafias are specialists at relieving what they have also been threatening.

Importantly, a reservoir of underlying shame creates abundant opportunities for manipulation. In so many diverse areas of modern life (from populist politics to consumerism, from terrorism to the war on terror), one of the most important methods of advancing your own agenda has been to offer people some kind of plausible "escape" from shame—however bogus, magical, harmful, or self-interested the proposed remedy may be. Many of us seem to be perennially attracted to solutions that promise to "restore respect"—even when these "solutions" offer no tangible benefits and even when the "solutions" are likely, on any reasonable view of the evidence, to make our everyday lives significantly *worse*. As shame and shaming escalate, the opportunities to profit from offering a "remedy" may increase correspondingly, so that a range of hacks, quacks, fixers, wheelers, dealers, and charlatans are able to do better than ever. And significantly, in a world of shame, shamelessness itself can be sold as an attractive spectacle—a symbolic escape from shame, a taste of freedom, and a flight from the constraints, disparagements, insults, self-doubt, and self-admonishments to which mere mortals are regularly subjected and subjecting themselves.

In the long term, the magical nature of many of our favored "solutions" may begin to reveal itself—not least when the underlying problems that gave rise to shame in the first place remain largely unaddressed. Unfortunately, there is always the possibility that additional magical "solutions" can be offered—perhaps modified or disguised versions of the old ones. A key reference point for this process turns out to be consumerism, which flourishes precisely on the failure to satisfy underlying needs and perhaps constitutes something of a model for much of our contemporary politics.

Meanwhile, whether in the political or the economic sphere, we tend to find that there is a remarkably *perverse* distribution of shame—

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that is, one that has very little relationship to the distribution of responsibility. Sexual violence epitomizes this, since it frequently creates a profound shame in the victims and yet often prompts remarkably little in the perpetrators—an imbalance profoundly shaped by social and cultural factors.[5] Part of this is that the shame and silence of the victims shield the perpetrators.

Perverse distributions of shame can also be observed within profoundly unequal economic systems, with poorer people experiencing shame in relation to their own poverty while those who have actively shaped and benefited from these unequal economic systems frequently exhibit a remarkable shamelessness.

How can we challenge destructive ways of thinking and behaving, including extreme inequality, violent politics, and outright war? One obvious way is by denouncing these things, and I have myself spent much of my professional career trying to uncover and document human rights abuses in a variety of civil wars and repressive postwar situations in many parts of the world. Of course, it's crucial to call out abuse and to call a spade a spade. Such denunciations would seem to be especially needed at a time when a conspicuous shamelessness attaches to abusive and neglectful politicians. The role of academics, journalists, outspoken aid workers, and organizations like Amnesty and Human Rights Watch is hugely important.

At the same time, I have also become aware that certain kinds of condemnation can themselves become part of the problem, and at least three points here are worth emphasizing.

First, condemnation tends to choke off understanding. One thing I have learned is that when people do bad things—and at the extreme this may involve creating a famine—they generally have *reasons for doing so*, whether these are military, political, economic, psychological, or some combination of these. Recognizing the existence of these reasons does not mean we have to approve or excuse the behavior. But they are reasons nonetheless. Linked to the existence of these reasons is the fact that perpetrators of human rights abuses frequently display some sense of *self-righteousness*, attaching at least some degree of approval to their own actions. So here we may again be entering the territory of

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shamelessness. Crucially, we get more and better ideas about how to prevent abuses when we take seriously the complex and often very human reasons why they happen—and when we explore the means by which they are legitimized. By contrast, where condemnation becomes the overwhelming focus, attempts at explanation get squeezed out—and may even feel like *excusing*.

A second problem with condemnation is that there are plenty of circumstances in which the shaming and condemnation of abuses may actually *fuel* the abuses in question. Angry individuals who are dismissed as "fanatical," "racist," "mad," "irrational," or "greedy" may be further enraged by such labels and may even end up conforming more closely to them.[6] Of course, this does not mean that they are *not* racist or greedy or fanatical. Nor does it mean we should keep silent or somehow "excuse" such behavior or attitudes. But assuming that shaming will lead to a productive shame turns out to be a huge leap of faith. In fact, shaming is very often *provocative*. One of the perils of diagnosing "irrational behavior" is that labeling people as "irrational" can quickly become part of an underlying shaming and an ongoing provocation—a shaming, perhaps, of "backward" or "ignorant" peoples or people. The backlash against Hillary Clinton's notorious claim that half of Trump supporters were a "basket of deplorables" should remind us that derogatory labels can even be adopted as a "badge of honor." In international politics, meanwhile, abusive leaders have sometimes profited from the perceived hostility of "the international community" (including measures like economic sanctions)—for example, by proposing themselves as protectors of what they proclaim to be an oppressed and unjustly punished or derided population.

A third problem with condemnation is that the process of shaming often feeds into a high degree of blindness to *the abuses of those who are doing the shaming*. In the context of local or international conflict, the shamed party may be a rebel group, a terrorist organization, an authoritarian leader, or a vilified individual such as a "drug lord" or a "human smuggler." But in my experience, those who sign up to the shaming and weakening of a widely condemned entity tend to have their own agendas, which frequently depart significantly from this loudly declared

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endeavor. Indeed, those who denounce "evil" most vociferously are frequently pushing various kinds of violence and exploitation—and these self-interested agendas (including international agendas) tend to acquire valuable "cover" precisely from the existence of what is being denounced. This—to a very large extent—is how impunity is constructed. And there is a further problem that has been little recognized: in large part because of the way impunity is constructed, those who condemn a demonized group may actually have an interest in the persistence or growth of this "enemy" group and may even take actions that strengthen the demonized group, including forms of active collaboration and provocation. In this context, shaming "the bad guys" acquires new meaning and new functions.[7]

In such circumstances, there is likely to be both shaming and blaming. While both activities involve the criticism of particular parties, they are also analytically distinct. Notably, an act of shaming will usually involve an attempt to make someone feel shame (though, as we shall see, there may be other aims); blaming on the other hand involves attributing responsibility for some harmful (or allegedly harmful) action or process. We shall see how shaming frequently adds "something extra" for those who are pointing the finger—not least when they are looking for some kind of impunity. It may also be even more provocative than blaming.

In chapter 2, I try to illuminate shame with a very specific example, looking at the politics of shame-distribution in relation to wars that have been waged by the United States (with a focus on the war in Iraq). Here, we encounter the strange case of Captain Rick Duncan, which illuminates shame dynamics in unexpected ways. It's a story that helps us see how a flight from shame—whether at the individual or societal level—can sometimes be more damaging than shame itself.

The next two chapters explore some important literature on shame, highlighting both a positive and a negative side. Chapter 3 shows how damaging shame and shaming can be, with some types of shame being *especially* destructive. Bringing in perspectives from anthropology, psychology, sociology, theology, politics, and history, the chapter shows how those who have been shamed en masse may be ripe for

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manipulation by those who offer some kind of "exit"—an escape from shame that often turns out to be temporary, illusory, and damaging in its own right.

Chapter 4 shifts the focus and looks at some of the more *positive* aspects of shame and shaming—and conversely at the problem of *shamelessness*. Can it be that both shame *and* shamelessness are driving social problems, including war itself? How are they related? What types of shame are we talking about—and what difference does this make? How is shamelessness constructed and maintained? More specifically, when policies prolong or exacerbate social problems, how are these failings accommodated? While chapters 3 and 4 cover important ground for the subsequent case studies, some readers might prefer to skip them and come back to them later.

Chapter 5 discusses the insights of someone who has strongly influenced my own thinking about shame: the American psychiatrist and prison reformer James Gilligan. Gilligan has worked extensively with violent criminals in U.S. prisons. He found that while inmates exhibited an extreme shamelessness in relation to their violent behavior, a formidable underlying shame had almost always fueled their violence, while shame in the present was a further provocation. Gilligan's perspectives offer tools that are potentially useful for understanding violence in a variety of contexts *outside* the prison system.

In chapter 6, I look at the vicious civil war in Sierra Leone in the 1990s, relating this to Gilligan's insights in particular. Conducting research in Sierra Leone in 1995 and again in 2001, I was struck by the very strong role that shame was playing in driving and shaping the violence. Yet shamelessness was also a significant cause of violence, with shame and shamelessness interacting in ways that it's important to understand.

Chapter 7 looks at a famously shameless individual, Adolf Eichmann, a man who expressed almost no misgivings or regret in relation to his key role in transporting Jewish men, women, and children to their deaths during the Nazi Holocaust. Yet it turns out that Eichmann *did* have a certain sense of shame (particularly shame around weakness).

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Understanding the precise and peculiar nature of this shame can help us to understand Eichmann's behavior and, more generally, the complicated relationship between shame and shamelessness.

The next two chapters look at Donald Trump. Chapter 8 concentrates on Trump as an individual. It examines the relationship between his remarkable shamelessness and his personal ideas around what is—and isn't—shameful. As with Eichmann, Trump's extreme shamelessness in some respects has masked an acute (and peculiar) sense of shame; again, much of this is shame around weakness rather than shame around bad behavior. Chapter 9 broadens the discussion to look at the production of shame within American society and the way Trump was able to tap into this reservoir of shame. The chapter also examines the dangers of condemning and shaming Trump and his supporters while not paying significant attention to underlying socioeconomic processes or indeed to *the causes of Trump*.

Chapter 10 shifts the focus across the Atlantic, examining shame and shamelessness in relation to Boris Johnson and the UK's Brexit process. Again, the chapter looks at important underlying sources of shame and at the process of offering immediate (and largely magical) solutions such as Brexit itself and a more general *theater of shamelessness*. Chapter 11 brings empire and racism more explicitly into the frame, with a focus on the United States, France, and the UK in particular. The chapter suggests that a good deal of contemporary politics is constructed around warding off shame that centers on both empire and loss of empire, on harm done and loss of dominance.

Chapter 12 turns to the economy and examines shame, poverty, wealth, and consumerism. In particular, the chapter shows how consumerism has fed off shame and how highly inequitable and unforgiving economic systems have encouraged and distributed shame. It shows how shame keeps us working and buying. And it looks at how attempts to throw off shame have often fueled a concerted *re-shaming*.

The next two chapters focus on conflict. Chapter 13 looks at shame and mass violence, focusing on contexts outside Western democracies. The chapter highlights the perverse distributions of shame that

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have tended to accompany, fuel, and legitimize such disasters. Chapter 14 turns to the role of shame in wars directly involving Western countries and focuses on three contrasting cases: Germany after World War I; the Cold War; and the "war on terror" from 2001. Finally, the conclusion sums up and suggests ways of breaking out of our habit—and very frequently our vicious circle—of shaming.

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