

The Power of Humiliation

Rituals of degradation have been used throughout the ages as a means of exercising authority. Judges made a public show of people by having them placed in the pillory, teachers made unruly pupils the object of ridicule with dunce caps. Such practices have been consigned to the past, but modern society has developed new methods for publicly stigmatizing outsiders, as our author describes.

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The mention of public humiliation often conjures up images of pillories, flogging and branding, but one might wonder what such practices of public degradation and ridicule have to do with modern society. After all, these kinds of punishment began disappearing from European criminal codes in the mid-19th century, albeit only after lengthy disputes and bitter confrontations.

But just because European states have moved away from such humiliating practices certainly doesn't mean that they no longer exist. People are

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especially online**

still publicly demeaned, ridiculed, treated with contempt and put in a virtual pillory. Take, for example, an incident from November 2012 in Cleveland, Ohio (USA), when Shena Hardin stood at a busy intersection holding a sign that read: "Only an idiot would drive on the sidewalk to avoid a school bus." Hardin had done just that on numerous occasions. The judge ordered her to pay a fine and had her license tempo-

rarily suspended. And as if that weren't enough, she also imposed what Americans call a shame sanction: an act of public humiliation intended to publicly stigmatize Hardin as an idiot. Such sanctions are intended not only to punish and discipline people, but also to educate and improve them, very much in the style of the 18th and early 19th centuries.

The US was also the setting of the story of 13-year-old Izabel Laxamana. In May 2015, she jumped from a bridge in the state of Washington because she couldn't bear the public shaming inflicted upon her by her father. Incensed by a selfie showing his daughter in a sports bra and leggings that was circulating at Laxamana's school, he cut off her long hair and filmed her while doing so. When the video spread and became the subject of classroom gossip, Izabel took her own life.

Yet here in Germany, too, such public humiliation and shaming is omnipresent – not solely, but overwhelmingly, online. Until recently, there was a platform where drivers could make their negative feelings known about other commuters while clearly identifying who they meant, to boot. In 2017, a foundation

Exposed for all to see: With his sculpture "Martin Into the Corner, You Should Be Ashamed," artist Martin Kippenberger addresses humiliating rituals that were commonplace during his school years in the 1960s. The approving gaze of others only intensifies the victim's shame and embarrassment.



close to one of the major political parties published an online lexicon of anti-feminist networks, organizations and individuals; widely seen as a form of denunciation, it was ultimately taken down by its publishers. New shaming platforms where people are mocked for supposedly being too fat, too thin, too promiscuous and so on appear each and every day.

But where does this need to showcase and publicly attack other people – even one’s own children – originate? What is such humiliation and shaming supposed to achieve, and what effects does it have? Why are such practices widespread even in societies that place great emphasis on dignity and respect? Are

An emotion of immense force and potency that has deadly potential

the “dark Middle Ages” in fact alive and well? Or is the bright, enlightened, sophisticated modern era exercising its own particular will to humiliate and inventing new methods of shaming to go with it?

Public humiliation is always a demonstration of power: By forcing others to their knees in front of onlookers, social protagonists reinforce their claim to an elevated position of power. “Power,” argued sociologist Max Weber, “is the probability that one actor within a social relationship will be in a position to carry out his own will despite resistance, regardless of the basis on which this probability rests.”

It was in this sense that Izabel Laxamana’s father exercised power over his daughter. He had forbidden her to post selfies on the internet, and when she defied him, he punished her with a humiliating act that he documented for public viewing. Those who operate their own online pillories aspire to hold power over people who they view as morally or socially inferior to themselves, a feeling that the act of shaming serves to reinforce.

Shame, as the philosophers of antiquity already knew, is a feeling of immense force and potency. It can be deadly, and it leaves an indelible mark on those who survive it. Anyone who has ever experienced deep, intense shame will struggle to free them-

selves of the memory. The presence of others when acts of shaming and humiliation occur is extremely important. Of course, it is possible to be ashamed of oneself for a thought or action that runs counter to social mores or one’s idealized self-image. For example, I might feel ashamed for envying a colleague’s well-deserved promotion. The same feeling would creep over me if I looked on gleefully as my boss gave a colleague a public dressing-down. Today, public humiliation is usually considered an intolerable abuse or even a violation of human dignity; accordingly, if I take pleasure in such actions, I should be ashamed of myself.

But what is it that makes humiliation so repugnant? It’s the painful knowledge of the power and violence of the public gaze – a gaze that can’t be cast off, that burrows under the skin and clings to the very body of the shamed individual. When other people witness individual mistakes or violations of social norms, it churns up feelings of shame, and the more a person values others’ estimation of them, the greater the shame they feel.

A child who steals a piece of bubble gum despite knowing that this is forbidden may secretly feel ashamed. If you were to catch the child in the act and inform their parents, they wouldn’t even need to scold the child: “You should be ashamed!” to evoke that emotion. Being exposed for all to see is enough to make the child blush and leave him or her wanting only one thing: to escape the humiliating gaze of those present.

This is why psychologists refer to shame as a social or interpersonal emotion. In most cases, shame is felt in the presence of others. In fact, in one survey, only a sixth of interviewees said they experienced shame as a private emotion. The very social embeddedness of shame makes it powerful and dangerous, and some people are willing to risk life and limb for fear of being shamed. In Erich Kästner’s classic children’s novel *The Flying Classroom*, for instance, young Uli jumps from a tall ladder to prove that he isn’t a coward. His schoolmates had frequently teased him for his lack of courage, making him turn “bright red.” While his leap did land him in the hospital with serious injuries, it also silenced his taunters and tormentors.

First published in 1933, Kästner’s book is set in a world where cowardice was one of the worst viola-



tions of norms for young males. Boys had to be courageous and ready to prove it. If they didn't, they were subjected to contempt, rejection and even exclusion from the group. Uli had accepted and internalized this, and doing something daring was the only thing he could think of to bring an end to the teasing. This wasn't the case for Izabel Laxamana: she was presumably not ashamed of having ignored her father's ban by posting pictures of herself scantily clad online. His perceptions of morals and decency weren't necessarily the same as hers. It was the punishment exacted by her father that shamed her, and in particular the public dissemination of the film he made of it.

These and many other examples clearly demonstrate the effects of public humiliation. Beyond illustrating the perpetrator's power to document and rebuke what they consider to be a violation of a norm or expectation, the examples also demonstrate the power of witnesses, whether real or imagined. The drama of power and impotence, shame and disgrace, perpetrators and victims, is always played out on a public stage. The audience can approve of the humiliation and exacerbate it – but they can also refuse to do so. Power relationships can be reversed, and the shamers can be shamed. Modern history provides plentiful examples of such instances: from gradual distancing to widespread criticism, from individual protest to collective revolt.

It is often said that the experiences of the Second World War did much to promote resistance to humiliation and shaming and that they inspired a culture of respect and mutual recognition. In fact, the preamble to the United Nations Charter of 1945 professes a belief in "the dignity and worth of the human person." In 1948, Article 1 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights declared: "All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights." Germany's Basic Law, approved in 1949, proclaims human dignity as an inviolable, fundamental right and obligates the state to observe and protect it.

However, the notion of human dignity and the rights of individuals founded on it have been around for a long time. In the 18th century, human dignity was used as an argument by those who criticized degrading forms of punishment and demanded their removal from the legal system. From this perspective, the modern world appears as a place that confronts

the destructive power of social and political humiliations with equally strong instruments for protecting individual honor and dignity.

However, contemporary societies continue to use shame and humiliation as a means to exert social and political power – and some even view them as constructive methods. If, for instance, a person is lambasted in public for falling short of the normative expectations of their group, this does more than simply punish them. It also serves to reintegrate the individual into the group, provided, of course, that the individual regrets what he or she has done. Stigmatizing humiliation, on the other hand, serves to exclude an individual with no chance of return.

When German Wehrmacht soldiers cut off the beards of Jewish men in occupied Poland, or when Serbian soldiers and militiamen intentionally and systematically raped Muslim women in the Bosnian War of the 1990s, the point was neither punishment nor reintegration. Rather, the aim was to demonstrate the soldiers' power and denigrate members of another social group to such an extent as to permanently damage or even destroy their sense of dignity.

Both forms are planned and coordinated, and both take place in public. They are neither spontaneous nor random. Rather, they adhere to well-thought-out scripts and have a ritualistic structure. In this sense, one can speak of humiliation as a form of politics. It is a strategy that serves to reinforce power, that involves the participation of numerous actors, and that takes place in various settings and situations.

But targeted, deliberate acts of humiliation aren't the prerogative of institutions like the family, schools or the military, where they are primarily meted out from above. They also rear their ugly head among students or work colleagues. Such practices are even common in international politics, where the logic of power, honor and respect is played out even more unabashedly than in social relationships. If a country fails to give satisfaction and apologize after injuring the honor of another, war can be the end result, as happened between France and Prussia in 1870.

If the war ends in a peace agreement that humiliates the loser, as was the case with Germany, Austria and Hungary in 1919, renewed hostilities become more likely. In such instances, politicians and diplomats would be wise to tread lightly and avoid humiliating



their counterparts. On the other hand, they may choose to play with fire and inflict a dose of humiliation in order to secure an advantage in domestic or international power struggles.

An incident from 2010 illustrates this well. When a Turkish television channel aired a series that denounced Israeli soldiers as child murderers, Israel's Deputy Foreign Minister, Danny Ayalon, summoned the Turkish ambassador. Before the meeting, Ayalon told the reporters present that they would be witnesses to an act of symbolic humiliation: the ambassador would sit on a lower chair, the Turkish flag would fall,

A foreign diplomat is degraded by an ally in front of rolling cameras

and the Israelis wouldn't grant the diplomats so much as a smile. The deliberate staging wasn't lost on the Turkish government, which responded with a sharply worded protest and declared that the entire Turkish people had been humiliated. President Abdullah Gül demanded that Ayalon publicly apologize, which he refused to do. It was only following the intervention of Israeli President Shimon Peres – who feared for the then positive relationship with one of Israel's most important regional military allies – that Ayalon brought himself to declare that it was “not his way to insult foreign diplomats.”

Yet this wasn't enough for the Turkish government and, after another day of frantic diplomatic back and forth, Ankara's ambassador finally received a letter that read as follows: “I had no intention of humiliating you personally and apologize for the way the demarche was handled and perceived. Please convey this to the Turkish people, for whom we have great respect.”

Ayalon used diplomatic language, a lexicon that has been developing since the Early Modern Era. A relatively new addition to the repertoire, however, was the reference to “the (Turkish) people,” who were to be informed of the apology and for whom Ayalon expressed his respect. After the French Revolution, the affairs of the state became the affairs of

the entire nation, and the honor of the state – formerly held by its rulers – passed over to the nation. Consequently, violations of this honor affected each and every citizen.

This was why the Turkish government could declare that the humiliation of its representative had humiliated the nation itself, which in turn explains why the Israeli minister apologized to both the Turkish ambassador and the Turkish people. This isn't the only example of how modern international relationships often play out in front of a large, deeply interested public and are thus often highly dramatized. When diplomacy is conducted in front of cameras, humiliating gestures and words take on a force that was unthinkable in times when politics were shrouded in secrecy.

Processes of nationalization and democratization have been just as important for the international politics of humiliation as the media that disseminate and comment on it. Media outlets are increasingly becoming actors in their own right: they can identify violations of norms, sniff out and hype up alleged humiliations, and demand corresponding sanctions. They can also dish out humiliation themselves as they mock and caricature both foreign and domestic politicians, dragging them through the mud.

Current events continue to provide us with new examples of this. In 2016, for instance, German television personality Jan Böhmermann's poem of smears against Turkish president Recep Tayyip Erdoğan made waves internationally, causing Turkey's Deputy Prime Minister Numan Kurtulmuş to declare that the poem was a defamation of all 78 million Turkish citizens. Erdoğan not only brought a private libel suit against the satirist, but also wanted to see him prosecuted under Section 103 of the German Penal Code, which prohibits defaming organs and representatives of foreign states.

Unlike the laws on the books, which make a clear distinction between insult and slander (but contain no provisions on humiliation and shaming), our day-to-day language doesn't clearly differentiate between these practices of degradation and debasement. On the one hand, this is due to hybrid types of castigation that straddle the lines between the two, which are increasing in both form and frequency. When the forces that bind social groups are weakened and people are given more liberty to choose between dif-

ferent forms of belonging, classic methods of shaming lose their old power and sources of legitimacy. At the same time, new institutions and associations arise and create new practices of degradation, often under the auspices of rituals of initiation.

It isn't always possible to detect straight away whether such practices serve as normative, integrative sanctions or as acts of categorical exclusion. Homosexuals may be openly shamed if their sexual orientation is treated as an illness to be cured, as was once common practice and remains so in many countries even today. However, some societies also treat homosexuals in a humiliating, radically stigmatizing and exclusionary manner.

On the other hand, language changed considerably over the course of the 19th and 20th centuries. The issue of dignity came to the fore, while the concept of honor, once a guiding principle, lost its attraction. Accordingly, humiliation became a more common topic in public discourse while talk of shame was relegated to secondary importance. Despite this, it is often difficult to distinguish between the meanings of honor and dignity. When the German Federal Court of Justice ruled in 1957 that honor and decency were aspects of the "inalienable dignity of the human person, bestowed upon them at birth," it was repeating the prevailing view held by more people than just legal experts. However, in doing so, the court also recapitulated that view's lack of conceptual precision, which makes it nearly impossible to draw a clear dividing line between shaming and humiliation.

Yet this dividing line does exist in the perception of emotions that accompany such practices. A person who is shamed for violating the norms of their group or collective might feel a mixture of shame and regret, provided that they have emotional ties to these norms and to the group that adheres to them. But a person who is humiliated, stigmatized and excluded because they are different would feel embarrassed only if they considered their own otherness as something negative.

In this sense, an individual might feel ashamed of their social or ethnic heritage just as they might be of their sexual orientation or physical appearance. Yet this person won't feel regret for these things, as they have all come about without any action on their part and can't be controlled. ◀



THE AUTHOR

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