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Shame and the Challenges of Postwar Western Democracies

Lisa Koks & Natalie Scholz

As the Second World War approached its end, Saul K. Padover worked as an intelligence officer for the US Army's Psychological Warfare Division. In this capacity, he interviewed inhabitants of the first US occupied German cities about their relationship to the National Socialist regime that was about to collapse. After the war, he published a report about this time in a book entitled *Experiment in Germany*. His descriptions of the different German characters he encountered and their reactions to his questions testify to his astute capacity of observation and his psychological sensibility. Whereas Padover was mostly interested in assessing the political views of the Germans he had interviewed, this rich material also offers a unique insight into Germans' varied emotional responses to the end of the war in their confrontation with a representative of the new political power.

Regularly, Padover would ask Germans at some point during an interview what they knew about the German crimes during the war. In response his interlocutors displayed the full range of typical reactions: denial, banalization, rationalization, callousness, the defense of alleged ignorance, and occasionally a strong moral indignation about what was sometimes explicitly called the national "shame" (Padover 1946, 66-68; 192). Most strikingly, however, one small group reacted differently from all of those mentioned above. They stopped talking, averted their eyes and

started shivering, crying or praying. Padover's question triggered an emotional reaction in them that showed all the characteristics of shame (Padover 1946, 68, 136, 145). These Germans did not only accept the reality of the German crimes but also the fact that they were themselves connected to them. Thus, those who used the term "shame" were not necessarily those who showed the signs of shame. Both groups nevertheless expressed the same moral convictions regarding the German atrocities. They differed, however, in the way they positioned themselves towards those crimes. Those who seemed to feel shame accepted a collective responsibility, those who were outspoken about the German disgrace tended to disavow their own connection to it.¹

Shame is experienced as the strongest possible attack on a person's self-worth. It is a self-reflexive emotion which is intimately tied to the social norms an individual consciously or unconsciously subscribes to, and at the same time it makes these connections discernible. When shame is triggered, there is a breakdown of the self and the usual social interactions are incapacitated. Because of this, shame demands to be acted upon, to find a way out of it. This is also the reason why shame, when it is directly spoken about, has already lost its power over the individual who speaks, either because the cause for shame was only temporal, or because it was transformed into something else by adjusting the individual's, or the group's, normative convictions and forms of identity. The latter can be observed in the case of postwar Germans who stopped thinking of themselves as Germans because being German itself was experienced as shameful (Moses 2009; Parkinson 2015). Padover's book illustrates the intricacies of shame in one of the twentieth century's most crucial moments of rupture. In what follows we want to argue that because of shame's specific and complex character a systematic focus on this emotion can alter our understanding of the most fundamental historical shifts and challenges within western democracies since the Second World War. (On the history of emotions see Rosenwein 2002; Frevert 2013; with respect to deep political change Reddy 2001).

Various scholars have elaborated on shame's social and emotional complexity. Jennifer Manion defines shame as a "self-reflective emotion of negative global assessment, [which] involves a painful, sudden awareness of the self as less good than

hoped for and expected, precipitated by the identification [...] of a seemingly significant character shortcoming” (quoted in Locke 2007, 149). In experiencing shame, the individual interacts with the opinions and views of external actors through the emotion’s inherent self-reflection. This dynamic makes shame a fundamental emotion in the formation of identities of both individuals and groups (Jasper 2011, 5-6). Thomas Scheff therefore calls shame the “master emotion” designating “a large family of emotions and feelings that arise through *seeing the self negatively, if even only slightly negatively*, through the eyes of others, or only anticipating such a reaction.” Shame, then, regulates other more basic emotions such as anger, fear, or despair (Scheff 2003, 247, 254).

The specific way in which shame is connected to the individual’s relationship with itself *and* the social world means that, as Elspeth Probyn has emphasized, experiencing shame can bring about a heightened consciousness of one’s interests, insecurities, values, and aspirations. Feeling shame, in other words, always involves experiencing crucial aspects of one’s identity and one’s dependence on others. Shame therefore constitutes a vital bridge between the self and society (Probyn 2005, ix-x and 30). But shame is not only a social emotion that connects us back to our own values, it is also a heteronomous emotion. We feel shame as a result of “a failure to live up to norms, ideals, and standards that are primarily public”. Because of this focus on a (dominant) group’s norms, minorities, lower classes, and marginalized groups are more vulnerable to experiencing shame and to being victims of shame practices (Maibom 2010, 568 and 569).

This role of power relations in how shame operates plays a central role in the work of Cultural Studies scholar Sally Munt. Munt describes shame as “a socially constructed and historically contingent entity, system or psychic process that in turn constructs us as subjects” (Munt 2007, editor’s preface ix-x). She underlines that shame has a *transformative* potential and is in that sense *performative*. On the one hand, groups can be persistently stigmatized through shame within society. On the other, shame can be a powerful force in that it incites reactions against such shame practices. By turning the negative experience of shame into a positive feeling of uniting and coming into action, shame can provide groups with cultural and

political agency. Munt connects shaming practices specifically to power structures when she asserts that “histories of violent domination and occupation are found frequently lurking behind these dynamics of shame, and the shame, although directly aimed at the minoritised group, also implicates the bestower” (Munt 2007, 2-3). The complexity of shame’s social dynamic can therefore only be fully understood if we acknowledge that shame is a relevant emotional factor on both the dominating and the marginalized side of exclusionary social mechanisms.

The rich body of literature on shame, then, gives us ample reasons to regard shame as a particularly strong force in history, a force that cannot only exert power over social groups but that can also make them aware of their own social attachments and normative attitudes, a force, furthermore, that connects those who are at the lower end of an established structure of domination with those who inhabit a superior position of (shaming) power. Munt also emphasizes the temporality of shame and comes up with a crucial distinction between short-term and long-term shame. Short-term shame is mostly individually experienced shame resulting from shameful behavior, for example, getting caught while doing something unjust and socially unaccepted can cause short-term shame. This kind of shame works correctively, as it triggers the subject of shame to change the shame-causing behavior. Because of this relatively easy solution, shame in these cases is only experienced briefly. Long-term shame is much more complex as it is the direct result of existing power structures and fundamentally questions the identity and moral standards of minority groups. Long-term shame, then, touches upon the foundation of human social existence. Because the behavior and actions of the group are disapproved of, the particular group becomes a social outcast and is placed outside of society. In that way, long-term shame can have far-reaching effects (Munt 2018, 4-8).

It is such long-term shame above all which should be taken seriously as a relevant factor in larger historical developments. Firstly, it points to strongly embedded power structures in society. Secondly, group stigmatization can be an extremely strong motivation for social action. Both aspects of long-term shame can expose, or give rise to, a strong desire for societal change. As long-term shame is persistent because of its deep embeddedness in society, a rigorous transformation is necessary

to alter the status quo. If the shamed group takes matters into their own hands, comes into action against the shaming practice and succeeds, this can be accomplished. The new normative cultural framework arising from such successful social actions provides society with a new perspective on identity, culture, and morality. In that way, society can be fundamentally changed.

The role of shame in social action and historical change is certainly manifold, but two aspects in particular can be identified. On the one hand, shame functions as the key motivator for the shamed group to start political action. The collective consciousness of a shared experience of shame can produce a strong urge, as well as the means, to turn the imposed shame into pride. On the other hand, the contested group in power experiences a different kind of shame. If a substantial shift in the dominant normative framework happens, members of the dominant group can be accused of their – individual or collective – responsibility in stigmatizing the minority group in a way that starts to resonate with a broader public. As the criticized power structures tend to be deeply interwoven with a given culture, the shift in perspective necessary for members of the dominant group to acknowledge the “others” viewpoint can itself trigger feelings of shame.²

The historical changes and accompanying waves of social movements and normative shifts that occurred from the middle of the twentieth century onwards in so-called Western societies could take on a different historical meaning if systematically viewed from this angle. As postcolonial thinkers such as Aimé Césaire have argued early on, the shock of the German colonial empire on European terrain entailed an, albeit immediately disavowed, recognition of similarly de-humanizing techniques underlying European colonialist policies in its respective overseas territories (Césaire 2000, 36f.). Maybe the reactions of postwar Germans as recorded by Saul Padover have to be seen as a specific variant of a moral and emotional reckoning that would ensue in many forms from both National Socialism and the postwar processes of decolonization. In his 1948 preface “Black Orpheus” to Léopold Senghor’s anthology of “new Negro and Malagasy poetry”, Jean-Paul Sartre evoked a collective white subject’s disconcerting shift in perspective when he wrote that “these poems give us shame [...]. All those, colonist and accomplice, who open this

book, will have the sensation of reading as though over another’s shoulder, words that were not intended for them” (quoted in Bewes 2011, 4).

Voices of the *négritude* movement, such as Césaire and Senghor, introduced a perspective to the European public which made it impossible for white readers to continue excluding the subjective experience of the formerly objectified Other. Sartre immediately grasped that a major consequence of such a shift would be the experience of shame connected with the realization of one’s position on the side of the oppressor. Meanwhile, black GIs’ participation in a war against Nazi Germany’s racist regime, and in the subsequent occupation of West-Germany, resulted in a different shift of perspective and heightened their consciousness of US society’s moral double standards when it came to race relations. In an ironic historical twist, African American soldiers came back from occupied Germany having experienced for the first time a “breath of freedom” compared with the racial segregation which would welcome them at home (Höhn and Klimke 2010).

The ensuing Civil Rights Movement demonstrates how the two different experiences of shame are intertwined in the way they can fuel fundamental societal change. From 1954 onwards, the Civil Rights Movement actively engaged in transforming what could be called an (externally imposed) African American “ancestral shame” (Probyn) – shame for one’s origin or descent – into pride. This process could build on decades of cultural work within the African American community that provided a different frame of reference for African American self-perception (Wall 2016). The transformation brought about by this movement ultimately influenced American society as a whole as well, since it provoked others to start acknowledging the African American experience and thus recognizing American racism as a shameful practice. The combination of the pride formed within the African American community and the shame about racist practices imposed on white Americans would eventually bring about significantly more equality and a new status quo.

The emotional dynamics of this strategy clearly inspired other social groups, such as, for instance, the Front de Libération du Québec (FLQ) – founded in 1963 to

liberate French-speaking Québec (Koks 2017). In order to identify the Québécois cause with the Civil Rights Movement, the FLQ created a new Québécois identity around the figure of the so-called *nègre blanc*. Pierre Vallières, one of the founding members and leaders of the FLQ, declared that the Québécois were the “white niggers of America”, a statement he supported by explicitly comparing the Québécois movement to the Civil Rights Movement and French-African decolonization activism. The *nègre blanc* metaphor worked in three ways. First, it evoked collective shame and legitimized the struggle. The metaphor emphasized, dramatized and thereby emotionally intensified French-speaking Québécois’ collective experience of a structurally unjust political, economic, social and cultural position within British-Canada. This interpretation was then used to argue for the violent struggle of the FLQ and to help gain support within Québec society. Secondly, the metaphor also made it possible to refer to the Civil Rights Movement as a model for a successful revolution. Vallières requested the Québécois to follow the example of the Civil Rights Movement and to turn Québécois *nègre blanc* shame into pride. Thirdly, the metaphor helped to reveal specific British-Canadian practices (such as demanding that French Canadians “speak white”) as shameful.³ In all three ways the use of the metaphor invigorated a movement which ultimately achieved a better position of Québec within Canada. With the Charter of the French Language in 1975 and the informal status of independence, the struggle of the FLQ can justly be called successful.

The role of shame as a crucial emotional component driving collective human perceptions and actions, and thereby contributing to social change, cannot, of course, be empirically proven in the strict sense. Scholars interested in understanding the workings of modern democracies should nevertheless take the existing scholarship on shame seriously, not only to deepen their imagination of the human experience in the past, but also in order to systematically take the role of emotions into account in their analyses of political conflict and social change. This is particularly important in the context of the complex political struggles of twentieth-century democracies, which reverberate, and continue, to this day. As women, descendants of slaves, former colonial subjects, homosexuals and other marginalized groups entered the political and public arenas, they gave a voice and a language to both their

experience of being dehumanized and their alternative view of their selves as politically active citizens. Shame, then, was collectively confronted and transformed by those new actors. This change, as a consequence, induced shame within many of those watching or listening from the perspective of the dominating social groups.

As Claude Lefort has emphasized, democracy opens the question of power without ever closing it again (Lefort 1988, 19). This also means that, as long as a liberal form of democracy exists, there can never be one group, one perspective, within unequal social relations, that exclusively occupies the political forum. The presence of radically different social experiences in the public arena is therefore a democratic necessity. This very presence, however, may inevitably produce reactions of shame in so far as it throws light on past or present acts of injustice, oppression, and violence that contradict the moral standards and self-images of those who, consciously or unconsciously, benefit from or participate in such acts. Saul Padover’s description of how Germans broke down as they looked into this kind of mirror is a stark reminder that it is not only the shame experienced by ostracized people which can be a threat to their existence, but that this can even be true for the shame of those exposed as having been complicit in the ostracism. One way to come out of this kind of shame is to disavow the past acts of exclusion and violence as part of one’s own collectivity.

In the introduction to the 1945 edition of her book *Race*, the anthropologist Ruth Benedict reminded her readers of how Nazi Germans used American segregation politics for their war propaganda by asking: “How could America object to her dogma when in her country Negroes even in the uniform of their country could be turned away from restaurants and from the movie houses?” Passionately arguing the case against racial discrimination, Benedict concludes her introduction by appealing directly to an exclusively white audience: “We of the White race, we of the Nordic race, must make it clear that we do not want the kind of cheap and arrogant superiority the racists promise us” (Benedict 1945, vii and xi).

The “we” Benedict addresses here in order to plead for an end of racist thinking is itself a racially defined we. Benedict apparently deemed it necessary to hold on to

that racial “we” in her fight against the evil of a racism that legitimized oppression on the basis of the category of a “White” or “Nordic race” (and their Other). In doing so she proclaimed a new self-image of the “White race” itself as non-racist. In one and the same sentence she thus demanded an end of the *racist* paradigm by continuing to embrace the *racial* paradigm. This rhetorical strategy certainly illustrates the universal acceptance of the racial paradigm in 1945, the moment of publication (Guterl 2001). It could, however, also be read as an effect of the specter of shame. Benedict might have felt the need to explicitly position the “we” of the “White race” outside of the very paradigm of racial superiority that had constituted this “we”, precisely because the alternative would have been too shameful. The passage might thus serve as an early expression of what Gloria Wekker has called “white innocence” (Wekker 2017).

Shame can incite us to quickly assume a defensive position of moral purity or “innocence” and thus incite us to solely focus on protecting our self-image. Such a reaction is often accompanied by the denial of racism (or sexism etc.) as a shared experience of social groups. It thus blocks the necessary emotional work of opening up to others’ perspectives. In other words, shame can impede the difficult work of actually bringing the different experiences expressed in the democratic arena into conversation *with each other* instead of their mere articulation *against each other*. Studying up close the role of shame in the political struggles of twentieth-century democracies might therefore generate insights that can contribute directly to the quality of current political debates.

Notes

1] The largest group, however, neither talked about shame nor showed any signs of shame when it comes to the topic of German crimes for the apparent reason that they remained inside the moral and political framework of thinking that had reigned during the Nazi regime.

2] The recent debates around women’s disclosures of their experiences of sexual harassment under the twitter hashtag #MeToo illustrate once again the multiple ways in which shame plays a crucial role in such moments of social change on both sides of the power relation.

3] This practice was reflected upon in a poem written by Michèle Lalonde and first performed in 1968 (Lalonde 1974).

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