Power, Politics and Humiliation: Feeling and Shame in the Modern World

Lucy Noakes, University of Essex

In the closing months of 2020, the world was given an object lesson in the politics of humiliation as Donald Trump refused to accept his mortifying defeat in the United States' presidential election. Ignominy piled upon ignominy as Trump and his legal team saw their claims to electoral fraud overturned as baseless, as social media posts were flagged up as misleading, and as press conferences and speeches were rejected by television news stations as misinformation. Mishandled press conferences, unfortunately televised hair-dye mishaps and increasingly incredulous news coverage marked the weeks following the election. As power seeped away from the President and his coterie, the public space for their humiliation seemed to open up.

Ute Frevert's timely new book, *The Politics of Humiliation*, opens and closes with an insightful discussion of Trump's time in the presidency and the way his office attempted to use the humiliation of other leaders, individual journalists and others as a political weapon and as a powerful means of deepening and strengthening divisions between social groups. As she shows, however, public humiliation operates most effectively within the context of asymmetrical power relations: if the person 'doing' the humiliating has more power than the target of their actions, then that person is likely to feel humiliated rather than simply irritated. Hence, Trump's exceptionally thin-skinned reactions to his many detractors whilst in office showed irritation, or anger, rather than shame or embarrassment. Without the protective power of office, however, public criticism was more likely to hit its mark and to possibly achieve the intended humiliation of its target, even one as apparently immune to feelings of shame as Trump.

Feelings matter – not just in the intimate spaces of interpersonal relationships but in the public world of political policy and action. Recent years have reminded us of how central

emotions, including humiliation and shame but also anger, jealousy, hatred and pride, are to this political world. Elections have been won and lost because of 'feeling' rather than rational thought, something that was perhaps recognized by successful right-wing populists in Europe, South America and the United States ahead of their more centrist or left-leaning rivals. The British referendum on European Union membership of 2016, which resulted in a small majority voting to leave the Union, was driven by the Leave campaign's prioritizing of feeling over fact: whether in Boris Johnson's unsubstantiated promise of 350 million pounds per week for the National Health Service, in the simple slogan 'Take Back Control' or in Nigel Farage's claims that 'floods' of immigrants and refugees meant that the United Kingdom was at the 'breaking point', pride and fear were successfully mobilized in support of leaving the European Union. Emotional attachment to an idea, or the effective marshalling of feeling behind a slogan, means that people will vote against their own economic interests.

In the supposedly 'rational' world of Enlightenment Europe, control of one's emotions was meant to be a means of distinguishing between the 'civilized' and the 'uncivilized', between those who should have access to power (largely white professional or wealthy adult men) and those who should not (women, children, the working class, the colonized). Humiliating and shaming those who transgressed the boundaries of 'civilized' behaviour developed, as Norbert Elias argued in 1939, as a powerful means of reinforcing these social mores and their underpinning power structures.[1] Feelings like being shamed thus exist at the interface between the external world of public life and social belonging and the internal world of feeling and a sense of self. *The Politics of Humiliation* sits at this point, considering the relationship between social action and internal feeling. Like many other historically situated studies of the emotions, it rejects the idea that these might be universal, felt in the same way across different cultures, societies and times. Instead, with the cultural

theorist Sara Ahmed, it urges us to ask not 'What are emotions?' but 'What do emotions do?'[2]

Frevert's careful study reminds us that emotions have always played an important role in public and political life. The act of humiliation, and subsequent feelings of shame by the humiliated, is a powerful mechanism of power and control, serving to delineate social norms and reinforce power relations. Trump was not the first politician to try to humiliate his political opponents as a means of achieving power over them: his 'Little Rocket Man' taunting of North Korea's Kim Jong-Un in 2017 had its antecedents in the diplomatic politics of nineteenth-century Europe. In newly emergent nation states and in newly democratizing countries, an attempt to humiliate a nation's politicians and diplomats was intended and perceived as an insult to all members of the nation. The use of Versailles's Hall of Mirrors as the site for the signing of the Treaty of Versailles in 1919 was well understood by German leaders and the German people as a humiliation, overturning for France the shame of the French surrender at Versailles at the end of the Franco-Prussian War in 1871. Almost all German politicians voted for a 1920 resolution that termed the French occupation of the Rhineland an 'indelible dishonour' for the country, inadvertently laying the ground for Adolf Hitler's rhetoric of national 'honour' and 'shame'.

But while examples of shaming and humiliation may be widespread across geographies and chronologies, Frevert reminds us that emotions, like the power relations that act to shape them, are always and everywhere historically contingent. At the heart of Frevert's study is Karl Marx's (paraphrased) maxim that people make their own histories but not in the circumstances of their own choosing. While practices of shaming and humiliation may be sparked by individual actions and performed by individuals or social groups, the reasons for the humiliation, and the ways in which these are enacted, are always shaped by underlying power structures, as well as social and cultural values and beliefs.

Although public acts designed to humiliate and shame may have moved from the pillories of the early modern period to the online world of social media, they continue to be shaped by social identity. Gender in particular has long been a driver of both what is seen as worthy of condemnation and subsequent public shaming and also what form acts of humiliation have taken. In seventeenth-century England, women who were unfaithful or had otherwise mistreated their husbands were forced to go on 'Skimmington rides', with either the woman or a crude replica of her paraded around the community on a donkey, accompanied by 'rough music' in an act that served to punish, entertain and reinforce moral boundaries and expectations of behaviour. Throughout the early modern period, English and Scottish women could be pilloried or dragged around the streets in a 'scold's bridle' for committing adultery, bearing a child out of wedlock or acting in a manner that the community deemed unacceptable, such as defying their husbands or quarrelling. Women who were perceived as transgressing gendered norms of behaviour, especially sexual behaviour, are of course subject to punishment designed to shame and humiliate in the modern era. The 'femmes tondues' [shaved women]of post-war France (and indeed most of occupied Europe) were publicly shamed by having their heads shaved as punishment for supposed liaisons with German soldiers, an act of humiliation that, as Frevert shows, had its roots in ancient practices, whilst today young men repeatedly attempt to shame ex-partners by releasing explicit images online when a relationship falters or ends. Our membership in communities and societies may mean that we are all potentially subject to acts of shaming and humiliation, but some are more vulnerable than others.

At other times, women's behaviour or treatment is seen as shaming to the wider group. Rape is often used as a weapon of war. The mass rapes of women in Bosnia-Herzegovina were designed to humiliate the male population, unable to defend them, as well as to terrorize the wider community. Refugees fleeing Soviet troops at the end of the Second

World War knew that women were being raped as a means of demonstrating dominance over the population and reinforcing the shifting power relationships; likewise, the rape and slavery of Yazidi women by ISIS members was a collective act of humiliation as well as a multitude of individual acts of abuse. In so-called honour killings, women are murdered by their family if they are seen as having brought shame on them through their actions, and female rape victims in Afghanistan have been jailed as adulterers, convicted of illegal sexual relations and imprisoned, often abandoned by their relatives, who fear the shame of having a woman who has been sexually active outside of wedlock, however involuntarily, in the family.

Frevert's wide-ranging study helps us to place acts such as these in their wider historical context and to trace similarities across time and place. She shows us how public acts of shaming and humiliation put power on display. Such acts can serve to exclude, either temporarily or sometimes permanently, collective groups as well as individuals from the social body: when anti-Semites made Austrian Jews scrub the streets of Vienna in 1938, this act announced their exclusion from the social polity through an intended humiliation; the many petty cruelties of the Jim Crow era in the United States were designed to shame and humiliate those who transgressed them as a means of reinforcing social hierarchies and boundaries. As well as attempting to shame or dishonour one another, states can act to shame their members as a means of coercion and control.

This short discussion of Frevert's book opened with some reflections on Trump's time in the presidency, and its end, considering what a study of the past four years might tell us about humiliation, shame and power in the modern political world. But I want to close with a political act that demonstrates the difference between humiliation and shame: Willy Brandt's historic *Kniefall* [kneefall] in front of the memorial to the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising when he visited the city in 1970. Brandt's public expression of national shame and humility marked a turning point in international relations but also demonstrated the emotional potency

of a political gesture. While this was generally well received, some German conservative commentators understood his actions as acts of humiliation, not humility. But by the turn of the century, the politics of humility and apology had become powerful political currency, even when such acts were not accompanied by reparations: the Australian Prime Minister led apologies to Aboriginal people; Tony Blair apologized for Britain's role in the slave trade; and the Canadian government apologized for the treatment of Indigenous children in state-run boarding schools. However, as Frevert shows, this cycle of apology and humility for past actions has been succeeded by a politics that rejects such acts, marked not only by a refusal to apologize but by the perception that to do so is a humiliating expression of weakness. *The Politics of Humiliation* is a timely reminder that, however much contemporary societies might like to congratulate themselves on their imagined rationality and modernity, the politics of emotion are always with us.

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[1] Norbert Elias, *The Civilising Process* (first published Germany, 1939).
[2] Sara Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (London: Routledge, 2012), p. 4.