Translated excerpt

Ute Frevert
Die Politik der Demütigung.
Schauplätze von Macht und Ohnmacht

S. Fischer Verlag, Frankfurt am Main 2017
ISBN 978-3-103-97222-1

pp. 7-24

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Humiliation Politics.
Scenes of Power and Impotence

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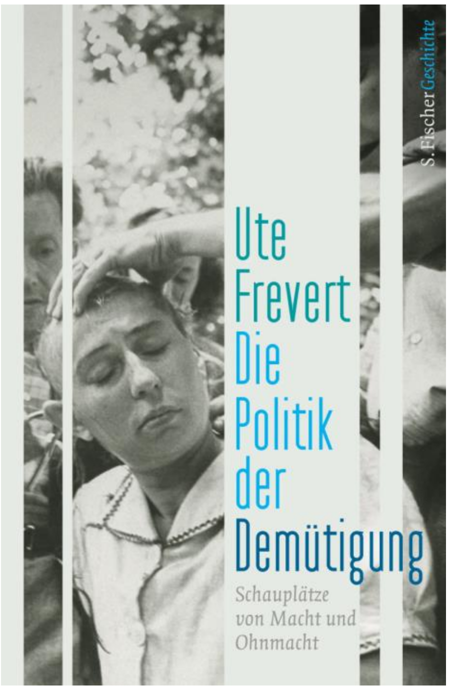

The issue

Sidi Bouzid, December 2010: in front of the house of the Governor of this provincial Tunisian town, Mohamed Bouazizi, a 26-year-old street vendor of fruit and vegetables, douses himself with petrol and sets himself on fire. Shortly before this, a policewoman had confiscated his wares for the umpteenth time, and had also slapped his face. It was later reported that Bouazizi's intention in setting himself alight was to signal that he was 'no longer willing to accept being demeaned and humiliated'. He could never have dreamt that his desperate protest would spark a massive conflagration, a 'revolt of dignity' that has gone down in the history books as the 'Arab Spring'.[1] Demonstrators mobilised against authoritarian regimes in numerous places in North Africa and the Near East, occupying central squares and defying police. The word 'dignity' appeared again and again on placards, in graffiti, and in Facebook entries. When asked about their motives and objectives, people replied that they felt 'humiliated' by their governments - causing the *New York Times* columnist Thomas Friedman to draw the conclusion that 'humiliation is the single most underestimated force in politics'.[2]

It was not so much humiliation as shaming that was involved in an episode in Cleveland, Ohio, in November 2012, when a woman named Shena Hardin was to be seen standing at a busy crossroads bearing a placard with the words 'Only an idiot would drive around a school bus'. That was exactly what Hardin herself had done, and on more than one occasion. The judge had levied a fine and suspended her driving licence for 30 days - but not content with that, the judge had also imposed what the Americans call a 'shame sanction', whereby Hardin was publicly branded an idiot. Sanctions of this kind are intended not only as a form of discipline and punishment, but also as a means of educating the miscreant and improving their behaviour. Whether this got through to Hardin is doubtful. On the first day she made it very clear that the whole thing left her cold, and she was plainly bothered by the media attention that she had attracted; on the second day, following a rebuke from the judge, she declared through gritted teeth that she had learnt her lesson - but also that 'this won't break me'.[3]

This response makes 32-year-old Shena Hardin's case very different from that of 13-year-old Izabel Laxamana. In May 2015 this young girl leapt to her death from a bridge in Washington State because she couldn't cope with being publicly shamed by her father. Angered by a selfie circulating in his daughter's school showing her in leggings and a sports bra, he cut her long hair off, filming her as he did so. When the video started circulating on the internet and became a hot topic at her school, Izabel put an end to her life.

For one journalist who reported on the matter, the events had echoes of the darkest Middle Ages. Ritual shaming, she concluded, is practised not only by the judicial system but also within families, who in the process very readily make use of social media and other new technologies. Facebook and YouTube are a highly effective means of parading and condemning an individual's mistakes - often with tragic consequences for the person thus condemned. Teenagers devoid of any real self-confidence are completely helpless in the face of such humiliations, and have no means of combating them: standing there in the spotlight with all eyes upon them and negative comments raining down, they fall apart, and end up completely broken.[4]

What accounts for this compulsion to parade and publicly expose other people, even your own children? What is the purpose of such shaming, and what effects does it produce? Why is it common even in societies that place a high value on dignity and respect? Is it really true that the dark Middle Ages are alive again here? Or is it rather that our so enlightened modern age has mobilised shaming mechanisms of its own, and invented new forms of humiliation?

The power of shame

Public shamings are always a demonstration of power. By forcing others to their knees in front of witnesses, people reaffirm their claim to a position of power and elevated status within their society. Power, according to Max Weber, exists 'wherever anyone in a societal relationship has the opportunity to impose their own will even in the face of resistance, no matter how that opportunity may have arisen'.[5] Izabel Laxamana's father exerted power over his daughter in precisely this sense. He had strictly forbidden her to put selfies on the internet, and when she nonetheless did so he punished her by humiliating her and making his record of the procedure available to all and sundry. In so doing he demonstrated his own power and Izabel's powerlessness, her total inability to defend herself. The shaming process inflicted a sense of shame on her, inducing her to lower her eyes and hang her head. She wanted to make herself invisible, and saw no way of doing so except by completely obliterating herself.

It was already clear to ancient philosophers that the feeling of shame is immensely strong, and extremely intense in its effects.[6] It can have fatal consequences, and it has a lifelong impact on those left behind. Anyone who has felt total and utter shame at some point in their life is unlikely ever to forget the experience - and if others are present to witness it, this has enormous significance. At the same time, it is quite possible for us to feel ashamed of our own behaviour when we have done or thought something that runs counter to our ideal of ourselves or to prevailing moral concepts. I might feel ashamed of myself for envying a colleague's well-deserved promotion, for instance, and the same sense of shame would creep up on me if I found myself enjoying the spectacle of my boss giving someone a rocket in front of other people. The public shaming of people is generally regarded these days as an intolerable abuse, or indeed as a violation of human dignity - and if I were to find myself relishing the sight of it, I would have to feel ashamed at myself.

But what makes shaming so appalling? It is our painful knowledge of the brutal power of the public gaze, a gaze that cannot be evaded, and which gets under the victim's skin and never goes away again. When others are made aware of someone's errors or their violations of prevailing norms, their sense of shame is intensified; and the more the individual values the others' esteem, the greater their sense of shame. A child who steals a piece of chewing gum from a shop in the knowledge that they shouldn't do so may or may not feel a degree of shame somewhere deep down; if they are caught in the act and their parents are informed, they will be filled with shame even without being told that 'You should be ashamed of yourself!' The mere fact of being shown up in front of other people will turn the child's face beetroot red and provoke an overwhelming urge to escape their shame-inducing gaze.

It is for this reason that psychologists define shame as a social or interpersonal emotion. It manifests itself chiefly in the presence of third parties: only one sixth of questionnaire respondents reported having experienced shame as a private, self-referential feeling.[7] It is its social context that makes shame such a powerful and dangerous phenomenon. People will risk life and limb out of their fear of being ashamed. Thus little Uli in Erich Kästner's children's classic *The Flying Classroom* jumps from the top of a high ladder to prove that he's not a coward. His classmates had often teased him for being a 'cowardy custard', invariably causing his face to turn 'bright red'. His leap leaves him hospitalised with serious injuries - but it silences his tormentors.[8]

Kästner's book was first published in 1933, and little Uli's boyhood world was accordingly one in which cowardice was regarded as a serious moral flaw. Boys had to be brave, and they had to prove it. Failure to do so brought contempt and rejection, even total exclusion from the group. Knowing this, and having internalised it, Uli's only defence against his tormentors was to do something totally reckless. The situation was different in the case of Izabel Laxamana. In all likelihood her sense of shame didn't stem from her awareness that she had gone against her father's orders in uploading images of herself in scanty clothing, since her notions of morality and decency were not necessarily the same as his. What was shaming for her was the punishment her father inflicted on her, and the fact that it was broadcast for everyone to see. If the cutting off of her hair had been done in private - and remained private - Izabel could perhaps have represented it as her own trend-setting hair-styling decision. But the video made her humiliation and powerlessness public.

The effects wrought by acts of public humiliation are clear from these and many other examples. They not only demonstrate the power of the perpetrator to condemn and penalise behaviour that they regard as running counter to norms or to behavioural expectations: they also demonstrate the power of those watching, be it real or imagined. The drama of power and powerlessness, shame and disgrace, perpetrator and victim, is always played out in public places. Those watching can endorse and indeed intensify the shaming process - but they can also oppose it. Power relationships can be inverted, with the shamers becoming the shamed. Modern history provides many examples of this, ranging from scattered murmurings through to general disapproval, from individual protests through to a collective revolt against what is being done.

History and its interpretation

A more or less detailed awareness of earlier shaming practices is clearly well established within the collective memory, and capable of being drawn on whenever necessary. When journalists responded to the shaming of Izabel with allusions to 'mediaeval conditions', they may well have had pictures of pillories in their mind's eye. They might even have known that shorn hair is a positively archetypal marker of societal humiliation and abasement, especially in the case of women.

Such practices and the markers associated with them are the subject of this book, which will trace their development from the eighteenth century to the present day, focusing chiefly on Europe, but also taking a look where necessary at other parts of the world. It examines continuities and discontinuities, it analyses significant trends and heated controversies. The fact that the repertoire of shaming procedures is known and handed down through the generations in all manner of different societies does not mean that they necessarily occur in the same form or in similar contexts. The question of who deploys them against whom, and to what end, depends on their political opportuneness, which depends in turn on social factors and the prevailing moral economy: women aren't always and everywhere shorn of their hair; citizens are not always and everywhere deprived of their dignity by their governments; criminals are not always and everywhere publicly paraded and branded as such.

What is the make-up of societies that accept such practices, or even actively welcome them? Which political regimes tolerate humiliation, which prevent it? Can the history of humiliation be understood as a story demonstrating Western progress, its heroes and heroines drawn from a liberal-minded civic society that has made human dignity its great aim? Or has the modern era created new settings and new rationales for humiliation, provided new ways of justifying it, and lent it new kinds of significance?

It is often asserted that the experience of the Second World War served decisively to enhance progress in such matters and to give extra momentum to the cause of respect and mutual understanding. Indeed in the preamble to its charter in 1945 the United Nations Organisation specifically affirmed its faith in the 'dignity and worth of the human person', and in 1948 the Universal Declaration of Human Rights laid down in Article 1 that 'All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights.'[9] In 1949 Federal Germany's Basic Law also enshrined human dignity as the prime and inviolable fundamental right of all people, and laid an obligation on the state to 'respect and protect it'.[10] However, the notion of human dignity and the rights of individuals that depend upon it have long been an important topic. As early as the seventeenth century 'human dignity' surfaced as an argument when people began to criticise forms of state punishment that ran counter to it, and sought to banish them from the legal system.[11]

In his famous book on the origin of prisons Michel Foucault ironised this argument as a *discours du coeur*. For him, all talk of 'humanity' in the context of the penal system was at bottom simply a strategy for 'refining its mechanisms', dreamt up and propagated by the state in order to achieve ever tighter and more complete control over the 'social body'. But why did those who allegedly sought maximum control attempt to achieve it by deploying the language of the heart and of sentimentalism? Why did judges suddenly start voicing disgust at brutal modes of punishment, and sympathy for those on whom they were required to inflict such punishments? What had happened in their hearts that made them receptive to this new discourse centred on 'humanity'? How did human dignity come to be an emotionally charged topic in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century, and remain so right into the present day? Contrary to Foucault's assertion, the invocation of feeling did nor arise not from a 'calculation principle', but rather it has a historical logic of its own. To dismiss it as opportunistic is to deny oneself the chance of locating it within modern culture and within the make-up of modern society.[12]

In contradistinction to the great French thinker, the Israeli philosopher Avishai Margalit ascribes constitutive significance to decency, dignity and honour. For him, a decent society is one whose institutions respect people's dignity and do not humiliate them.[13] This view is very close to those propounded by a number of people around the end of the eighteenth century. Lawyers had already been exhausting themselves throughout the Enlightenment era grappling with the notions of honour and dignity as they challenged the traditional system of humiliating punishments, and proposed new concepts of self-respect and respect for others. Viewed from this perspective, the modern world comes across as one that seeks to replace the destructive power of prevailing modes of social and political humiliation with equally powerful ones that will protect human dignity and honour.

Humiliation as a political tool

At the same time, however, modern societies are in fact still using shaming and humiliation as a means of exerting social and political power. We are not referring here to those private little episodes in everyday life when individuals are rude to each other - episodes that rarely come to public attention. If in a row about the height of a hedge one neighbour shows disrespect to another by calling him an idiot, that's at worst an insult, which the 'insultee' might possibly pursue through the courts. A true act of shaming or humiliation only occurs when it happens in a public setting in the presence of other people, who thereby take on an active and crucial role.

Furthermore, public acts of humiliation do not occur because of disagreements about trivial issues of concern only to a pair of squabbling individuals. There has to be more at stake - for instance where a norm has been violated that matters to the larger collective and which it considers so important that it has to be upheld. To demean someone publicly is to exclude them symbolically from the relevant group whilst also punishing them. Where the individual is subsequently readmitted to the group, social scientists apply the term ‘reintegrative shaming’.[14]

‘Stigmatic humiliation’, on the other hand, is intended to exclude the individual permanently. When Wehrmacht soldiers cut off the beards of Jewish men in occupied Poland, or when Serbian soldiers and militiamen deliberately and systematically raped Muslim women during the Bosnian war in the 1990s, the purpose was neither punishment nor re-integration: their aim was to demonstrate their own power, and debase members of a different ethnic group to the point where their self-respect suffered long-term damage or was even totally destroyed.

Both these forms of humiliation are carried out in a planned, co-ordinated and fully overt way. They do not occur spontaneously or as a knee-jerk response to an unexpected situation: they follow a carefully considered script and evince a ritualistic pattern. Instantly recognisable as a result of being so frequently deployed, their constituent elements can be readily adjusted to match whatever function they are designed to have. Both types have the same objective: to establish or consolidate a power relationship by demonstrating an opponent’s utter weakness in front of witnesses. In this sense we can speak of humiliation as a political act, as a strategy for projecting power, and one that requires a variety of participants and can be deployed in a variety of settings.

The ubiquity of such strategies, practices and settings demonstrates their enduring attractiveness to those who at any given time already have power, aspire to power, or are engaged in a struggle for power; but it also reveals how great the obstacles have always been - and still are - to ‘decent’ forms of society that reject the use of humiliation. Even liberal regimes have seen the continuance, or even the creation anew, of forms of pillorying and stigmatisation that have precious little to do with decency and dignity. The concept of newspapers as a form of pillory has been current since the late nineteenth century, and there is no shortage of examples of its ongoing use. Thus for instance a double-page spread in *Bild* in October 2015 published the names and profile-pictures of people who had posted xenophobic and racist messages on social media sites. A woman thus featured went to court to object to her image being displayed in the paper’s so-called ‘Pillory of Shame’, on the grounds that it was a violation of her personal rights, and she ultimately won her case in an appellate court.[15] Again, the ‘shame sanctions’ mentioned earlier are much favoured by American judges (though numerous influential voices have spoken out against them). And when in 2008 a BBC documentary revealed the officially approved shaming practices used in Chinese schools, viewers were divided in their response: while some felt as if transported back into the ‘darkness’ of the European Middle Ages and hoped that China would see the light at some point, others could see decided advantages in the shaming rituals, all of which ended up with the shamed child being reintegrated into the school community.[16]

Humiliation in the political sphere

As in the case of the public penances once inflicted on sinners by the Church, these kinds of rituals are intended to expose and ostracise those who have deviated from the proper path, and then, once they are purged of their error, reintegrate them into the community. Ideally speaking, forgiveness and reconciliation are conditional upon shame being followed by remorse. Things are not very different when it comes to instances of humiliation within the sphere of politics, except that the interplay of power and honour is far more blatantly in evidence here than in the social sphere. If one state violates the honour of another and fails to apologise and give due satisfaction, the result can be war, as happened between France and Prussia in 1870. If a war ends in a peace treaty that humiliates the losing side, as was the case for Germany, Austria and Hungary in 1919, a new passage of arms is rendered more likely. In such situations politicians and diplomats are well advised to proceed with sensitivity and to avoid anything that smacks of humiliation. They may seek to gain an advantage in the national or international battle for power by imposing some measure of humiliation on their adversary, though they will be playing with fire by so doing.

This is well exemplified by an incident that took place in 2010. When Turkish television broadcast a series that branded Israeli soldiers as child murderers, Danny Ayalon, Israel’s Deputy Foreign Minister, summoned the Turkish ambassador. Prior to the meeting he informed the TV team in attendance that they would be witness to a symbolic humiliation: the ambassador’s chair would be lower, there would be no Turkish flag, and the Israelis would avoid smiling in the ambassador’s presence. In line with the country’s right-wing foreign policy, this was designed to demonstrate strength and pride, instead of just trading niceties. This very deliberate scenario was not lost on the Turkish government, who responded with a severe formal protest, and poured oil on the flames by declaring that the entire Turkish people had been humiliated. President Abdullah Gül demanded that Ayalon issue a public apology, which he refused to do. Only on the intervention of the Israeli President, Shimon Peres, who feared damage to his country’s then good relations with its most powerful military ally in the region, could Ayalon bring himself to issue a statement that ‘it was not his custom to insult foreign ambassadors’. In the eyes of the Turkish government this did not go far enough, and after another day’s hectic exchange of diplomatic messages Ankara’s ambassador finally received a letter saying the following: ‘I had no intention to humiliate you personally and apologize for the way the démarche was handled and perceived. Please convey this to the Turkish people for whom we have great respect.'[17]

Ayalon's phraseology was formulaic, and drew on a reservoir of diplomatic language that has been evolving ever since the very beginnings of the modern era. One of the relatively more recent additions to this parlance, however, is reflected in the reference to the *people* of Turkey, who were to be specifically informed of the apology, and for whom the Israelis expressed their respect. In the wake of the French Revolution the state had become the concern of the entire nation, which declared itself to be the sovereign fount of all laws. The honour of the state, which had previously resided in its monarch, now resided in the nation as a whole, so that any insult to a state's honour henceforth constituted an insult to all its citizens. The Turkish government was thus able to assert that the entire Turkish people had been humiliated in the person of their representative, and the Israeli minister duly offered his apologies to the Turkish people as well as to the ambassador. As this and similar episodes show, international relations are played out these days before a public that is not only huge but also to the highest possible degree an interested party - and such incidents are rendered considerably more dramatic as a result. When diplomacy is conducted in front of whirring video cameras, any word or gesture tending to humiliate acquires a powerful resonance quite unthinkable in the days when political machinations were a secretive business carried out behind closed doors.

It follows from this that the politics of humiliation are driven on the international level by democratisation and the growth of nationalism just as much as they are by those elements of the mass media that propagate and editorialise them. In this respect, the media have increasingly become political players in their own right: they are readily able to ferret out breaches of conventional norms, uncover and exaggerate alleged instances of humiliation, and press for sanctions to be imposed. They can also actively intensify the humiliation process themselves by mocking, caricaturing or defaming the politicians of their own and other countries. In 2016 a major furore was stirred up by the German TV presenter Jan Böhmermann and his so-called 'abusive poem' targeting the Turkish president, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. The latter's deputy described it as an insult to the president and to the entire 78-million population of Turkey. Erdoğan then not only instigated a private suit against the satirist alleging that he had been insulted, but also sought to have him prosecuted under Article 103 of the German Penal Code ('Defamation of organs and representatives of foreign states').[18]

Semantic distinctions

We need at this point to clarify the concepts at issue. Paragraph 185 of the German Penal Code, on which Erdoğan based his private prosecution, does indeed use the term 'Beleidigung' ('Insult' in the official English translation), but does not define its meaning. In 1989 the Federal Court duly provided a definition: 'The penal code must provide protection against attacks on an individual's honour (...). An attack on a person's honour occurs when the perpetrator wrongly ascribes to them faults which, if they existed, would lower their reputation. The person's entitlement to respect, deriving from their honour, is violated only by the "defamatory act" itself (which may consist in a disparaging value judgement or in an assertion of facts deleterious to the person's honour). In making disdain, contempt or disrespect public the defamation meets the legal definition of an insult.'[19]

So what differentiates an insult from shaming or humiliation? Shaming, too, expresses disdain and contempt, and acts of humiliation may reasonably be understood as practices constituting outright disrespect. The shaming or humiliation of a person therefore invariably entails an attack on their honour, indeed its very purpose is to destroy their honour and respect, including their self-respect. Anyone publicly humiliated or shamed will have difficulty re-establishing their 'reputation' and reasserting their 'entitlement to respect'. Insults, on the other hand, are less grievous, for they arise from a two-way process of provocation and response: it is only the response to a provocation that lends substance and significance to a perceived insult. In contrast to someone who has been shamed or humiliated, a person who has been insulted is not merely a passive victim, but must actively decide whether to respond to the provocation or ignore it. One possible category of responses would be to demand an apology, answer insult with insult, or take the matter to court - but the 'insultee' could also choose to laugh off the attack, turn away with a shrug of the shoulders, or turn the confrontation into a sort of game in which each tries to 'out-insult' the other, as in Erich Maria Remarque's *Three Comrades*.[20] After all, insults are not based on real 'failings' or on any breach of conventional norms; according to a ruling by the *Bundesgerichtshof*, Germany's Supreme Court, an insult is no more nor less than an act of baseless defamation: if it *were* based on facts, then it would no longer constitute an insult.

Insults thus do not involve either power (and lack of power) or punishment, both of which elements have always been cardinal to shaming practices. Shaming is a response to a violation of a prevailing collective norm of some kind. Insults, on the other hand, have nothing to do with social norms and sticking to the rules. Whenever they become a court matter, therefore, it is as a result of a private prosecution, and such matters are usually dealt with under civil law: criminal proceedings ensue only in exceptional cases, for instance where an insult has a racist dimension.[21]

Racism also serves to exemplify the difference between shaming and humiliation. The two terms are generally used interchangeably, but both historically and conceptually they mean different things. Shaming relates directly to a behavioural norm regarded by a community or institution as binding on its members, and is carried out *within* that community or institution. Humiliation, on the other hand, is something done to people *outside* the group: 'We are us, and you are different and of less worth'. Anyone demeaning, mocking or belittling another on the grounds of their ethnicity does so with a view to isolating and excluding them. The more abased the victims of humiliation become - as in the infamous 'scrub parties' in Vienna in 1938, when Jews were forced to go down on their hands and knees and scrub the pavement - the greater their humiliators' sense of power.

A disparity in power is of course also central to the process of shaming. The person shamed is to all intents and purposes defenceless, and even if they are subsequently accepted back into the group, their honour and standing remain diminished. Nonetheless, the relationship between shamed and shamer is not not in any real sense hierarchical. The sense of otherness experienced by the victim is their own fault, in that they have propelled themself out of their community by behaving as they did. The Jews of Vienna, however, were simply instructed that they no longer belonged to the community of German and Austrian peoples. It was not anything they had done, but the mere fact that they were Jews, that made them pariahs, outcasts, outsiders - and it was their public humiliation that made this clear to one and all.

Notwithstanding these differences between 'shaming' and 'humiliation', our everyday language usage does not clearly differentiate between the two words.[22] One determining factor here is the increasing fluidity of the delineations between things and the proliferation of hybrid forms, a process that is becoming ever more evident in the modern era. When the bonds uniting a social groups begin to weaken and people are able to choose which grouping they wish to lend their allegiance to, classic shaming procedures lose their traditional place. At the same time new institutions and groupings emerge and develop their own ways of showing people up and humiliating them, which they also deploy in their initiation rituals. In such cases it is not always clear what is involved: a sanction aimed at upholding a norm, or a straightforward act of exclusion. Where homosexuality is regarded as an illness that needs to be cured, as was commonly the case in earlier times, and remains the case in numerous countries to this day, the treatment of homosexuals may count as a shaming process - but it can also very readily become a humiliation process that radically stigmatises and excludes its victims (and it is immaterial here whether the homosexuals involved are themselves aware of this distinction).[23]

Another major consideration is the fact that language usage changed very considerably in the course of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The concept of 'dignity' gained in prominence, while 'honour', formerly a key social principle, lost its appeal and disappeared from everyday parlance. Correspondingly, 'humiliation' became a more frequent issue in the public domain, while 'shaming' receded into the background.[24] It does have to be said, however, that semantically it is often very difficult to differentiate between 'honour' and 'dignity'. When in 1957 the German Supreme Court declared that the basis for the notion of 'honour' and 'honourableness' was 'the personal dignity that is forever inherent in every human being from birth onwards', it voiced a widely held view, not only amongst lawyers, that is so conceptually vague as to render it almost impossible to draw a clear, unambiguous distinction between 'shaming' and 'humiliation'.[25]

People, places, times

This book is concerned with *both* these modes within society of exercising power and, concomitantly, experiencing powerlessness. It looks at a variety of people, groupings, places and institutions: lawyers who pronounce on the pros and cons of shame sanctions, honour sanctions and flogging; teachers and educational authorities who argue about whether it is permissible to smack children or make them stand in the corner; soldiers and parliamentarians who get hot under the collar about abuses in the armed forces; parents who wonder whether it is right or wrong to shame a recalcitrant child; authors of parenting guides and children's books who voice opinions on the subject; youth groups and student societies that subject recruits to humiliating initiation ceremonies; perfectly normal, law-abiding citizens who publicly cut off the hair of women who have transgressed against the prevailing conventions of female or national honour; a mother who regards school competitive sports as potentially humiliating for her children; diplomats and politicians who either humiliate others, or claim to have been humiliated themselves, in order to advance and legitimate their own interests.

Most of the people and events covered here hail from Europe, which has a long history of public shaming, and a somewhat shorter history of criticism of that tradition. But shaming and humiliation practices are to be found elsewhere, too: during the Cultural Revolution in China, when schoolchildren and university students publicly mocked and maltreated their teachers, or in Mexico, where in 2016 six schoolteachers had their hair cut off and were forced to walk barefoot through the streets with placards around their necks saying 'Traitor to the country', all because they had refused to support a teachers' strike.[26] In the same year in northern India a fundamentalist group seized a young man accused of trying to convert Hindus to Christianity, shaved his hair off, put him on a donkey, and paraded him through the town for four hours.[27] These countries have their own shaming traditions, their own indigenous humiliation rituals - but all of them draw on a seemingly worldwide reservoir of powerful practices and symbols that are remarkably similar to one another.

Changing perceptions

However, shaming and humiliation are not anthropological constants that run in minimally varying forms throughout the whole of human history, and the corresponding feelings of shame and humiliatedness are likewise not universal, unchanging responses that can be triggered at any time and in any age. Historically, the sense of humbleness, and of being humbled, has been experienced, expressed and regarded in a huge variety of different ways. The Old and New Testaments attach great value to it: to achieve God's approbation, man must show himself to be humble and submissive. 'When men are cast down, then thou shalt say, There is lifting up; and he shall save the humble person' (Job 22,29). By the same token, God in his anger humbled his subjects to his heart's content in order to shatter their pride and overweening arrogance. Humility has thus always been a key value in Christianity, and neither priests nor the laity have ever had any difficulty bowing down in word and deed before God and his altar. The ancient societies of Greece and Rome, on the other hand, associated humility with the subservience of servants and slaves. This encouraged Friedrich Nietzsche in the 1880s to equate humility with cowardice, weakness and submissiveness, and disparage it as the manifestation of a 'slave morality'. From the late eighteenth century onwards, Europeans had perceived the 'Orient' in similar terms, namely as a culture in which people exhibited an extreme degree of abasement and humiliation in the face of their godlike ruler and the countless other people in authority over them.[28] Such acts of grovelling homage were no longer compatible with the ideals and values of a self-confident civil society. Instead, they provided Europeans with yet another reason to consider themselves superior to the peoples of all other lands and cultures.

Like humility, shame, too, is a socio-cultural convention. The sense of shame only arises in children once they have reached a certain age. Children learn to feel shame as a result of the guidance and admonitions they receive from adults, and their observation of adults' own behaviour. Shame and shaming as a means of discipline, both in schools and more generally, is used by some societies more than others. Whether and to what extent a given society does so depends essentially on the degree of social differentiation within it, and the value it places on individuality, freedom and personal autonomy. In hierarchical societies with strong collective bonds we usually encounter a multiplicity of shaming practices, which in turn implies a similarly high incidence of feelings of shame. But people who grow up in rather more individualistic societies are also social beings, and as such dependent on approval from others, and therefore susceptible to being shamed and feeling shame.

It may readily be argued, along with Norbert Elias, that this susceptibility is becoming more marked in the modern era, rather than decreasing. If in circumstances of defencelessness shame is exacerbated by fear of a 'diminution of social status' and of ‘other people’s aggressive assertions of superiority’, and if the march of civilisation is serving to intensify the ‘shame and embarrassment’ quotient, then it is clear that Europeans must have experienced shame more frequently and more strongly in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries than they had done in the sixteenth and seventeenth.[29] The sociologist Georg Simmel argued on similar lines in the early 1900s when he proposed that ‘self-awareness’, much emphasised and ever more prominent in the modern era, was the ‘decisive factor’ in our experience of shame. Whilst self-awareness can smooth a person’s path to an autonomous, self-determined life, in certain circumstances it can also encourage people to see themselves as reflected in the eyes of others, and to look fastidiously and anxiously for signs of contempt or disparagement. Narcissism and shame, or the feeling of being shamed, are closely connected, as psychologists and psychotherapists know only too well.[30]

However illuminating the observations of psychologists and the theories of sociologists with respect to shame and shaming may be for a critical analysis of the situation today, they tell us very little about the historical events and developments that led to various societies abandoning numerous practices aimed at inducing shame. It also remains unclear why, and under what circumstances, some of these traditional practices have been - and continue to be - re-adopted and brought back into use. It is for this reason that the central focus of this book is neither on individual sensitivities and traumas, nor on abstract transformation processes and macrostructures. Instead, its focus is on actual, real-life figures and their relationships to a variety of episodes of public shaming. It is about perpetrators, victims and spectators; about pretensions to power and the contradictions involved; about approval and disapproval.

This journey through the modern politics of humiliation accordingly takes its lead from a famous pronouncement by Karl Marx: ‘Human beings make history, but not through their own free will, not under circumstances they themselves have chosen, but under the given and inherited circumstances with which they find themselves confronted.’[31] It is in the course of this process that people wear themselves out, take offence, seek alternatives. Concepts of honour and dignity play a decisive and often overlooked or insufficiently appreciated role. What people understand by these terms changes in line with the times and the ‘given circumstances’. The semantic ambiguity of the word ‘honour’, and the egalitarian thrust of modern Western societies, have given a considerable lift to the concept of human dignity and helped to raise awareness of it. Public shaming practices and strategies designed to humiliate have increasingly fallen into disfavour.

This shift began in state institutions, above all in the courts and their decisions (Chapter I), and then carried over, albeit very slowly, into schools and families. In this area the last few decades have seen a much increased sensitivity to violations of human dignity. At the same time, however, the media, and especially social media and the internet, have provided a new platform for acts of public humiliation, and peer groups also play an equally active and ignominious role (Chapter II). The politics of humiliation have proved especially durable in the realm of international relations (Chapter III). Whenever the concept of 'national honour' bursts back into life, sensitivities are laid bare and humiliations are suspected around every corner. The more the public falls in with this mood, the more effective the weapon becomes. It is highly questionable whether official apologies, such as those that became fashionable in the 1990s, are capable of improving the situation: the countervailing tendencies are massive, and generally become more rather than less intense in times of political populism.

Notes

1 Gero von Randow, 'Jetzt kommt das Volk', *Die Zeit*, 20.1.2011 (with quotations from the journalist Sihem Bensedrine and other eye-witnesses).

2 *https://web.archive.org/web/20121116003123/http://www.tagesschau.de/ausland/marokko122.html* (accessed 24.4.2017); Thomas Friedman, 'The Politics of Dignity', *The New York Times*, 31.1.2012. See also Klein, 'The Humiliation Dynamic: An Overview'; Lindner, *Making Enemies: Humiliation and International Conflict* (includes numerous examples); Zink, *L'Humiliation, le Moyen Age et nous*, pp. 7–20.

3 *http://www.cleveland19.com/story/20091870/supporter-bearing-idiot-sign-stands-with-defiant-driver* (accessed 5.7.2016).

4 Amanda Hess, 'The Shaming of Izzy Laxamana' *(http://www.slate.com/articles/technology/users/2015/06/izabel_laxamana_a_tragic_case_in_the_growing_genre_of_parents_publicly_shaming.html?wpsrc=kwfacebookdt&kwp_0= 35576* (accessed 5.7.2016).

5 Weber, *Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft*, p. 28.

6 Demmerling/Landweer, *Philosophie der Gefühle. Von Achtung bis Zorn*, pp. 223 ff.

7 Tangney, 'The self-conscious emotions: shame, guilt, embarrassment and pride', pp. 543, 545; Taylor, *Pride, Shame and Guilt: Emotions of Self-Assessment*, pp. 53, 59, 67; Scheff/Retzinger, *Emotions and Violence: Shame and Rage in Destructive Conflicts*; Deonna/Rodogno/Teroni, *In Defense of Shame: The Faces of an Emotion*. For a psychoanalytical view, see also Seidler, *Der Blick der Anderen. Eine Analyse der Scham*.

8 Kästner, *Das fliegende Klassenzimmer*, pp. 31, 45, 68, 72, 76–79.

9 *http://www.ohchr.org/EN/UDHR/Pages/Language.aspx?LangID=ger* (accessed 9.7.2016).

10 Czeguhn, 'Das Verhältnis von Menschenwürde und Menschenrechten in historischer Perspektive'. 'Human dignity' or 'personal dignity' is explicitly mentioned in three quarters of the world's written constitutions (Baets, 'A Successful Utopia: The Doctrine of Human Dignity'). See also Pfordten, *Menschenwürde*;

Weber-Guskar, *Würde als Haltung. Eine philosophische Untersuchung zum Begriff der Menschenwürde*.

11 Whitman, *Harsh Justice: Criminal Punishment and the Widening Divide between America and Europe*, pp. 100f. The booming literature on the development of human rights largely concentrates on the twentieth century, however, and pays little attention to the construct 'human dignity' (Eckel, *Die Ambivalenz des Guten. Menschenrechte in der internationalen Politik seit den 1940ern*; Eckel/Moyn [eds.], *Moral für die Welt? Menschenrechtspolitik in den 1970er Jahren*; Hoffmann [eds.], *Moralpolitik. Geschichte der Menschenrechte im 20. Jahrhunder*). But cf. also McCrudden, 'Human Dignity and Judicial Interpretation of Human Rights'.

12 Foucault, *Surveiller et punir: Naissance de la prison.*

13 Margalit, *Politik der Würde. Über Achtung und Verachtung*, pp. 15, 61; see also Bieri, *Eine Art zu leben. Über die Vielfalt menschlicher Würde*, p. 35 ('Dignity is the right not to be humiliated'), p. 172.

14 Braithwaite, *Crime, Shame, and Reintegration*; Rossner, 'Reintegrative Ritual: Restorative Justice and Micro-Sociology'; Münster, 'Wiederentdeckung von Scham und Beschämung in der strafrechtlichen Sozialkontrolle: Das Konzept des reintegrative shaming'.

15 Judgement delivered by the Oberlandesgericht (Higher Regional Court), Munich, 17.3.2016, ref. 29 U 368/16 (pillorying on the internet).

16 *Chinese School* (BBC documentary).

17 Aaron J. Klein, 'Israel and Turkey: Anatomy of a Dissing War', *Time*, 14.1.2010 (*http://content.time.com/time/world/article/0,8599,1953746,00.html* [accessed 12. 7. 2016]).

18 *http://www.spiegel.de/politik/deutschland/erdogan-stellt-strafantrag-gegen-jan-boehmermann-a-1086637.html* (accessed 13.7.2016).

19 Federal Court judgement, 15.3.1989, ref. 2 StR 662/88, Rn. 15. See also Schönke et al., *Strafgesetzbuch. Kommentar* (2010), pp. 1742 ff.

20 Bourdieu, *Die Dialektik von Herausforderung und Erwiderung der Herausforderung*. In Remarque's story, two strangers meet, and insults fly back and forth; both try to be original in their insults, and as a result end up respecting each other (*Drei Kameraden*, pp. 38f.). For a psychoanalytical perspective on the avoidance of shame, see Wurmser, *Die Maske der Scham. Die Psychoanalyse von Schamaffekten und Schamkonflikten*, pp. 305–14. See also Meier, *Beleidigungen. Eine Untersuchung über Ehre und Ehrverletzung in der Alltagskommunikation*.

21 A study has shown that in the 1950s and early 1960s Federal German prosecutors rated only 5% of all complaints alleging insults as being matters of public interest (Christiansen, *Die Beleidigun*g, pp. 87f.). See also Bemmann, 'Ehrverletzungen und Strafbedürftigkeit'.

22 Cf. Klein, 'The Humiliation Dynamic: An Overview', pp. 117f., on the difficulties of differentiating between humiliation und shame. The New York psychiatrist does so

by arguing that people regard shame as being deserved, and humiliation as undeserved. See also Miller, *Humiliation and Other Essays on Honor, Social Discomfort, and Violence,* pp. 117–24, 164.

23 I am following the lead of Tatjana Hörnle here (‘Warum sich das Würdekonzept Margalits zur Präzisierung von “Menschenwürde als geschütztes Rechtsgut” eignet’, p. 102): ‘Whether a particular act constitutes humiliation must be determined from the viewpoint of an observer familiar with the relevant symbolism, and not on the basis of the emotions of the individual concerned.’ These emotions (shame, despair, indignation) can in certain circumstances arise in response to shaming just as readliy as in response to humiliation. Cf. also Landweer, ‘Ist Sich-gedemütigt-Fühlen ein Rechtsgefühl?’

24 In articles dating from 1949 to 2016 stored in the internet archive of the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung (FAZ)*, the term ‘Demütigung’ (‘humiliation’) occurs ten times more often than the term ‘Beschämung’ (shaming), with the disparity becoming more and more marked from the 1970s onwards. The search was conducted on 7 September 2016 via the data banks ‘F.A.Z. 49-92’ and ‘F.A.Z. BiblioNet (1993ff.)’, accessed through ‘Das F.A.Z.-Bibliotheksportal’, *http://faz-archiv-approved.faz.net/intranet/biblionet/r_suche/FAZ.ein*. The digital archive of *The Times* for the period 1785-1985 shows 10,105 occurrences of the word ‘humiliation’, but only 313 of ‘shaming’.

25 Federal Court judgement, 18.11.1957, ref. GSSt 2/57, Rn. 17; Geppert, ‘Straftaten gegen die Ehre’; Hilgendorf, ‘Beleidigung. Grundlagen, interdisziplinäre Bezüge und neue Herausforderungen’.

26 *http://www.eluniversal.com.mx/articulo/estados/2016/06/1/no-fueron-maestros-los-que-nos-raparon-dice-profesor* (accessed 14.7.2016).

27 *http://www.telegraphindia.com/1160131/jsp/nation/story_66748.jsp#.V4d3UXptBXt* (accessed 14.7.2016).

28 Preuss et al., ‘Demut’; Zink, *L’Humiliation, le Moyen Age et nous*, pp. 23ff.; Nietzsche, *Jenseits von Gut und Böse*, pp. 200 ff.; Paulsen, *Regierung der Morgenländer*, pp. 129, 134.

29 Elias, *Über den Prozeß der Zivilisation*, vol. 2, pp. 397–400.

30 Simmel, ‘Zur Psychologie der Scham (1901)’; Wurmser, *Die Maske der Scham. Die Psychoanalyse von Schamaffekten und Schamkonflikten*, pp. 24f., 453; Lewis, ‘Shame and the Narcissistic Personality’; Williams, *Shame and Necessity*, p. 222. This too, like the material discussed in the paragraphs that follow, argues against the view advanced by Greiner in *Schamverlust. Vom Wandel der Gefühlskultur* (p. 24 and *passim*) that shame culture has been replaced by a culture of minor embarrassments.

31 Marx, *Der achtzehnte Brumaire des Louis Bonaparte*, pp. 96f.