Critical Dialogue

Shame: The Politics and Power of an Emotion. By David Keen. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2023. 360p. $35.00 cloth.
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In *Shame: The Politics and Power of an Emotion*, David Keen recognizes a paradox in our political discourse that is at once puzzling and pervasive. On the one hand, we are inundated with attempts to shame. Fueled by bitter polarization and combustive social media, oriented toward norm-breaking politicians, canceled celebrities, and gaffe-prone citizens, "the lure of public condemnation has surely never been stronger" (p. 1). On the other hand, the rise in populism in the United States and elsewhere has introduced a breathtaking shamelessness, ushered by leaders who are defiant in their transgressions and apparently immune to any semblance of embarrassment or moral propriety. Here, Keen observes that the problem is "not that politics exhibits too much shame but too little" (p. 4).

How can societies suffer from an overabundance of both shame and shamelessness? To approach this paradox, Keen urges us to recognize the ways in which shame, shaming, and shamelessness are instrumentalized in the pursuit of various interests. His main claim is that shame is "made to serve important political and economic functions" (p. 3), often in the form of promising ephemeral solutions to systemic problems. Spanning wide empirical terrain, Keen identifies weaponized shame and shamelessness as central components in some of the world's most pressing problems, including right-wing populism, mass violence, consumerism, and more.

Chapters 3 and 4 lay the conceptual groundwork, elucidating the multifaceted nature of shame and its relationship to shaming. Weaving together an impressive array of theoretical resources—from philosophy and psychoanalysis to history and anthropology—Keen highlights several distinctions and ambiguities: Shame reflects both a private, personal emotion as well as an unequal social distribution, with some suffering more shame than others. Shame can be based on who one is (race, gender, class, etc.) or what one does (violating social norms, inflicting cruelty). Shame is both a critical pillar of social order—including in "rational" Western societies—while also producing severe social harms. Distinct from shame, *shaming* can instill a sense of regret, leading to prosocial reform, or backfire by encouraging further abuses.

One of Keen's central insights is that shame is so painful that people make strenuous efforts to prevent or expel it, including by projecting shame onto others in the form of degradation and even violence. As Keen writes, this "flight from shame—whether at an individual or societal level—can sometimes be more damaging than shame itself" (p. 9). He illustrates this using various cases of political violence, where perpetrators employ cruelty to shield themselves from the shame associated with weakness or failure. Chapter 7 recalls Adolph Eichmann, who exhibited a remarkable shamelessness toward his role in organizing the murder of millions; but look closer, Keen claims, and you will find an extreme sensitivity to shame around failure. Likewise, we learn in Chapter 6 that shaming child soldiers in Sierra Leone was largely ineffective and even counterproductive because their sense of shame was oriented toward appearing weak or soft. Even Trump, whom Keen discusses in Chapter 8, uses the veneer of shamelessness to mask a characterological fear of shame around weakness. The theme also extends to former colonizing countries, discussed in Chapter 11, which exhibit more shame over the loss of empire and preeminence than they do over the horrors of colonialism. Similar dynamics can be found in violent criminals (Chapter 5), civil conflict (Chapter 13), and a number of Western-led wars (Chapter 14).

Because shame is so painful—and so powerful—it naturally invites social and political manipulation. "One of the most important methods of advancing your own agenda," Keen writes, "has been to offer people some kind of plausible 'escape' from shame" (p. 6). These "solutions to shame" take various forms and serve various interests. Chapter 12 highlights the strategies used by advertisers to sell products that promise to relieve consumers of shame through the right purchase. Several chapters emphasize political systems that offer an escape from shame through violence and counter-shaming. For those who can manipulate it, "shame is a form of economic and political gold" (p. 206).

Some of the most successful manipulators of shame, Keen argues, are leaders of right-wing populism, to which the book devotes several chapters. Chapter 8 and 9 center on Trump, who expertly tapped into the reservoir of shame

produced by decades of economic decline and widespread sentiments of being "left behind" among the white working class. For his supporters, Trump's main appeal was his promise to relieve shame, often by projecting it onto other groups such as migrants or progressives. The most seductive relief came in the performance of shamelessness: a defiant, "no apologies" attitude that has become the defining aesthetic of right-wing populism. Chapter 10 extends this logic to Brexit, in which "a theater of shamelessness seems to have offered a kind of vicarious and symbolic escape" from the shame of bowing-down to Brussels (p. 147).

The great irony of these "escapes" is that they do not so much eradicate shame as reproduce it by feeding into "subsequent spirals of shame and shaming" (p. 189). Perhaps Keen's most revealing insight is that such "solutions" work by imposing the very shame they promise to relieve—what Keen calls a "double game." Leaders of right-wing populism, for example, must constantly remind their supporters of how disrespected or despised they are by others, thereby sustaining the abundance of shame that demands reprieve and fuels the movement. At a rally, Trump reportedly asked attendees to stand on stage while asking the crowd if they looked "deplorable" (recalling Hillary Clinton's famous insult) (p. 142). He often repeats the mantra that other countries are "laughing at how stupid we are" (p. 128). In making shamelessness their raison d'etre, populist leaders enter into a dependent relationship with the very shame they promise to eradicate. As a result, they *need* to violate norms—and have their supporters violate them as well—to enact the self-fulfilling prophecy producing shame and shamelessness. Keen recounts Arendt's observation that demagogues "use inflammatory statements and inflammatory actions as a way of *making* their predictions come true" (p. 122). This is why shaming the MAGA movement feels so counterproductive. As Keen writes, criticism is "like pouring fuel on the fire" (p. 142).

Keen's book joins a recent surge of interest in shame across philosophy and the social sciences. His strongest contribution lies in the emphasis on interests, instrumentalization, and "weaponized shame." This explicitly political approach is a refreshing addition to current debates on shaming, which tend to focus on normative questions around whether shame is either "good" or "bad" for society. The book is also a welcome counterpoint to the growing literature on emotions in Comparative Politics and International Relations. By attending to the dialectic between politics and shame, Keen is able to move past essentialist frameworks that cast emotions either as enigmatic, "irrational" forces or as epiphenomenal reflections of material interests. He convincingly shows us how shame, as an individual and collective experience, is a powerful driving force behind "our buying and our voting, and frequently leads us away from our best interests" (p. 206), which is why it is so often recruited in the service of particular political ends.

A book this wide-ranging is bound to prompt numerous questions and avenues for debate, but here I want to raise just two issues, in the spirit of thinking deeper about the politicization of shame and shaming.

First, what is the relationship between subjective experiences of shame and objective social conditions? The book is sometimes ambiguous on this front. On the one hand, Keen highlights the uneven social distribution of shame, fueled by "underlying injustices and inequalities" such as those related to race, gender, and class. From this perspective, those who suffer the most shame, and are the most common targets for shaming, reflect the most marginalized and oppressed in society. On the other hand, many of Keen's cases involve shame—or perhaps, the threat of shame—operating in the most powerful and oppressive actors. Here, a sense of grievance and persecution is deliberately constructed to invert perpetrator/victim roles and justify the domination of others. The *Make America Great Again* movement illustrates this ambiguity. In Keen's presentation, Trump's supporters are both victims of real material deprivation while also participants in an ideology that cultivates a fiction of victimhood to fuel self-righteousness and justify wrongdoing. Given its utility as a weapon, can a sense of shame (around weakness or perceived victimhood, for example) be perpetually manufactured? Put differently, does it *matter* whether those who see themselves as victims are actually victims?

This leads me to a second, related concern. Shame does not always result in violence, shamelessness, or countershaming. Keen successfully demonstrates the use of shame to justify political ends but is less clear on the conditions in which shame is *amenable* to manipulation. Reading through these wide-ranging cases (war, terrorism, criminal violence, populism, economic inequality, misogyny, and more), one may get the impression that *everything* can be explained by shame, the threat of shame, or both. But can shame be instrumentalized in any political strategy? If not, where are its limits? When should we expect to see actors manipulate shame effectively, and for which purposes?

These points are not meant to impose some rigid, rationalist template that wash out the subtleties in Keen's argument. Nor do they degrade the capaciousness and breadth of the book, which is undoubtedly one its strengths. By drawing out the political uses and abuses of shame, Keen's book should attract wide-ranging interest from scholars of political violence, populism, genocide, consumerism, and more.

Response to Rochelle Terman's Review of *Shame: The Politics and Power of an Emotion*

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— David Keen

I would like to thank Rochelle Terman for her generous and perceptive review. I am going to be charitable toward