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## Review

# Shame: A genealogy of queer practices in the 19th century

Bogdan Popa

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Bogdan Popa's *Shame: A Genealogy of Queer Practices in the 19th Century* constitutes a politico-historical exploration of the activism and liberal thought of certain figures prominent in the first wave of feminism. John Stuart Mill, Josephine Butler, and Victoria Woodhull are some of the main characters featured in Popa's genealogical account, developed with a view to assessing the role of shame in a queer, feminist politics. The idea is to restore 19th century activists and theorists to queer feminism, which, according to Popa, has overlooked and marginalized especially liberal thinkers such as Mill; to 'rethink agency at its alleged roots' as an alternative to liberal conceptions of power; and to do so by drawing out how shame was used by these figures for political ends (p. 22). Popa wants to 'unmoor feminism,' with its basis in liberalism, by providing alternative readings of his chosen liberal subjects that expand their traditional legacy to encompass a queerness, identified via political 'interventions that do not fit the standard view of [their] liberalism' (p. 16). For Popa, queer practices, such as 'illicit relationships, silence, and slurs' (p. 8) are exhibited by his protagonists in their deployment or negotiation of shame, which means we should understand these figures as more than (merely) liberal, and rather, as disrupters of the 'liberal order,' or what, following Rancière, Popa also calls 'the police' (p. 12). Moreover, by highlighting the particular, queer engagement of shame by Mill, Butler, and Woodhull, Popa seeks to historicize shame and to present it as a potentially productive political force. This generative conceptualization of shame stands in contrast to theories emphasizing shame's deeply destructive and harmful consequences, which Popa presents as 'theories that police shame' and 'restrict shame's capacity for political action' (p. 4).

As such, Popa's book forms an interesting addition to the literature on shame, which has gained renewed attention lately, especially in light of recent scholarship in feminist affect theory and the politics of emotion. There has long been a debate about shame's productive or deleterious nature, and the implications these



competing accounts of shame might have for feminist politics. Making the case for a positive, politically creative understanding of this emotion via an examination of shame in the lives and work of 19th century feminists is a risky, but in many ways rewarding project. Especially the elaborations on how shame was experienced and utilized by these feminist thinker-activists in their sexual relationships and advocacy work bring to life a complex historical context that is often neglected in expositions of liberalism and early feminism. With that said, I am not convinced that the book develops a robust enough argument for the strong thesis that shame is largely politically productive and generative, especially as many of the examples cited for this thesis actually underline the opposite, that is, the destructive and adverse nature of shame.

While the book sets out the 19th century deployment of shame in political speeches and writing to advance feminist causes – a tool similarly used by today’s political activists – it also highlights the pernicious effects of shame on the lives of the figures under discussion. Popa describes the fear of public shaming experienced by Mill and Harriet Taylor, a married woman he shared a life with in secret, as they felt it ‘better to remove any indication of sexuality from the story of their relationship,’ given the ‘consequences and vulnerability that one has to face in a public sexual scandal’ (p. 106). Nonetheless, Popa views this relationship, and Mill’s silence around the relationship, as ‘performative’ and disruptive of ‘*the police order*’ (p. 71). Similarly, Mill’s advice to a married friend, Unitarian preacher W. J. Fox, who was outed for his relationship with another woman, Eliza Flower, was to deny the affair. Popa rightly maintains that the strategy of cloaking these illicit relationships in denial and silence was a way for Mill, Taylor, Fox, and Flower, to maintain private lives away from the glare of the public and, especially, from public shaming (p. 105). However, it is not clear how such a strategy is performative or disruptive beyond the fact that these were unconventional relationships. If anything, the threat posed to these lives and their reverting to hiding, secrecy, and silence, point to the extreme anguish and fear of exposure caused by shame. Indeed, covering, hiding, and silence are classic mechanisms of the politics of shame, as shame involves the threat of rupture of the bond with one’s community, should one fail to reach the community’s standards, especially standards of sexual morality. It is therefore puzzling for Popa to maintain that Mill was not concerned with ‘the idea of “inclusion” in a greater community’ (p. 105). The very purpose of living such a secret intimate life was surely to remain within this community and to fend off the shaming that inevitably comes with rupture and the lived transgression of the community’s standards.

True, the destructive nature of shame can be disruptive. However, as evinced by the above example, too much emphasis is placed, throughout the book, on the disruptive and generative potential of shame, without adequate assessment of its severely limiting and damaging nature. In fact, the genealogical examples used to highlight the former characterization of shame draw attention to the latter. I did find



the negotiation of shame by Popa's protagonists instructive, and it was a pleasure to learn more about the strategies and tools they used to deal with being shamed and the threat of shame, and their engagement of shame for feminist activism. This is where Popa's book shines and sheds new light on a fascinating historical context. I did find myself, though, longing for a deeper probing of ideas and greater conceptual clarity at certain junctures of the book. For instance, the definition of shame in terms of experiencing a wrong is misleading, as the feeling of inadequacy, which I think rightly characterizes shame, need not be accompanied by recognition of wrong-doing (p. 9). Indeed, recognition of having been wronged is more commonly attributed to the feeling of anger. More could also have been said about the relationship between shame and humiliation – the latter described as a more extreme form of shame – especially in light of the 'humiliating rhetoric' trope used later on in the book (p. 9). Additionally, some concepts used for the framing of the genealogical work of the book, such as the need for a rethinking of 'agency' and 'power' for an alternative to liberalism, should have prompted a more thorough analysis of the idea of 'agency' and its role in the apparently contentious relationship between 'identity politics,' 'liberalism,' feminism, and queer critiques. Too much was taken for granted here without adequate justification for the need to 'unmoor feminism' in the first place. Despite these concerns about the theoretical framing and conceptualization of certain themes, I recommend *Shame: A Genealogy of Queer Practices in the 19th Century* as a provocative read for critical theorists, especially in its elucidation of the experience and deployment of shame by some of the 19th century's most important and charismatic feminist figures.

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