



Tender Comrades: The Left and the Politics of Shame

Laura Pascoe lfpascoe@ucdavis.edu
John Haffner j.haffner@queensu.ca
John Rose

Trevor Noah recently found himself needing to defend his interview with Tomi Lahren because he did not “eviscerate” her enough. In The New York Times Opinion piece he subsequently wrote in response to the backlash he received, he cautioned against this approach, stating: “Instead of speaking in measured tones about what unites us, we are screaming at each other about what divides us — which is exactly what authoritarian figures like Mr. Trump want: Divided people are easier to rule.”¹ Similarly, the Women’s March was at once an inspirational moment of united political opposition that showed the incredible strength of solidarity in numbers, and yet immediately became the butt of jokes and the site of intense criticism because many of those who partook—particularly white women—were first-time marchers who had not been seen participating in other efforts – notably Black Lives Matter. What is this desire to eviscerate, where is it coming from, and how constructive is it in building a strong resistance to Trump and the politics of the Right?

Shame, it seems, has become a very prominent mechanism for political organizing. In many spaces it is, in fact, the *only* mechanism employed. Over the course of the 2016 presidential election season it was hard to locate any political action that did not involve a degree of shaming. This shame manifested itself in different ways, depending on the context. When directed at the Trump campaign (and now the Trump presidency) the goal was to *shame out of existence*; to dismantle a growing political entity through berating every far-fetched campaign promise, and making viral every problematic statement Trump uttered (or Tweeted). When directed within the general Left political environment, shame became a politics of self-defeat—to devour, divide and perpetuate an exclusionary politics of self-righteousness within an echo chamber political discourse. Unfortunately, as Trevor Noah so aptly argues, this is a misplaced and overly simplistic blame placed on individuals and events instead of a nuanced understanding and focus on historic systems of disrepair that are really to blame and, importantly, require a united front to overcome. The concentrated result of the shaming is to eviscerate something...anything. Sometimes, it seems, it is not even clear what that the target of evisceration is: an ideology? An individual? A speech-act?

¹ (Noah, 2016)

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The compulsion to shame is real and powerful, and yet it is a compulsion based on fear and exclusion that, at its core, is meant to foment division. So, the authors find themselves asking, what is the allure of shaming, and why has it become the preferred mechanism of political engagement on the left? What are the costs of shaming, as a self-defeating political strategy, in attempts to build solidarity and achieve the ends of progressive political action? Moreover, and critically, what are potential alternatives to shame, and what are the means by which the Left can embrace such alternatives?

The 2016 U.S. Presidential Election: A Narrative of Shaming

Those attuned to the fractious and shaming-bent left saw the writing on the wall that Trump would likely win the election. Dubbed the “Teflon candidate” for a reason, the strategy of shaming employed by those who opposed him failed to achieve the desired results again and again. Every ridiculous Trump statement, from “build the wall” to “lock her up” to “grab ‘em by the pussy” fueled the shame machine, and yet Trump supporters were undeterred. With every comment it seemed inevitable that those inclined to vote for Trump would feel enough shame to change their mind, or those who were not planning on voting at all would be successfully shamed enough to go to the voter’s box for Hillary Clinton, for “a vote for Hillary is a vote against Trump!” Yet this strategy rested on the assumption that the boundaries set by the left—often driven, in particular, by an urban elite left—on what was virtuous and righteous were universally accepted and, importantly, conveyed through only the most specific of terminology. The problem with resting too comfortably on this narrative is that shame is such a temporal emotion. Once the outrage settled, voters were able to look past the shame and put their names down for Trump anyway.

This politics of shaming can be seen well before the general election. Before Trump was even advanced as the Republican candidate, the emergent camps of the political left were already entrenched in the politics of shame. Gloria Steinem and Madeleine Albright notably berated women who supported Bernie Sanders, claiming “There’s a special place in hell for women who don’t help each other!” There was also the small yet unfortunately very well-known pocket of Bernie Sanders’ base (the notorious Bernie Bros) who also targeted shame tactics at Clinton supporters. Needless to say, it became difficult to have a political dialogue within the left as well as within the broader population without shame shutting the potential for engagement.

This devouring inwards is indeed not new at all, and as we reflect on the Women's March, it is imperative to remind ourselves of where else we see this behaviour

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replicated. In seeking to keep us contained and distracted from the real struggle, the patriarchal society we live in has taught women to compete with one another, to judge one another and cut one another down, and in so doing made it incredibly challenging for women to find solidarity with one another.

But what is shame, and how does it operate? Foremost shame researcher Brenè Brown defines shame as “the intensely painful feeling or experience of believing that we are flawed and therefore unworthy of love and belonging – something we've experienced, done, or failed to do makes us unworthy of connection.”² As humans, Brown explains, we are hard-wired for connection, for love and belonging, and shame is the “fear of disconnection,” or the fear of being deemed unworthy of essential connection with others that we need to survive. Shame, Brown very strongly argues, is neither helpful nor productive. Within the politics of shame, in particular, shame must be recognised not only as a self-defeating strategy of division, but also as a product of the very system the left seeks to rise up against. The practice of shaming and calling-out, without even trying to first listen and understand, mimics the coercive nature of our most oppressive systems. That is, shame can be understood as a product of neoliberal capitalism, whereby individuals are singled out at the expense of the collective, in the name of “competition.” Yes, shame has been used in cultures and contexts beyond the bounds of today's neoliberal capitalism, but the particular version of shame that we see operating in the politics of shame is one that wields shame not only as an exclusionary tool—a means of disconnection—but as a stepping stone to build a hierarchy of individual self-righteousness and triumphant worthiness over another's perceived failings.

It makes sense why shaming has become a political strategy. We are in troubling times, and our primary means of venting our frustrations and sharing our concerns is through social media, a medium that far too easily breeds disconnection and judgment. Furthermore, Trump has executed many deplorable acts, both as a candidate and now as a president. The concern, however, is that shaming has done nothing to prevent the ascendancy of Trump and the worst aspects of his regime. Shaming has only seemed to entrench his supporters in a reactionary position. Perhaps more problematically, it has also failed to conscientize others to join a more progressive politics, for it has instead spurred fear at the prospect of reaching out, of risking being shamed if one missteps or misspeaks. So why has shaming as a political strategy failed? The answer concerns both the nature of shame as an emotion as well as the reactions it engenders in those who experience it. There is a significant temporality to shame. Shame itself is reactionary; it does not lend to a

² (Brown, 2012 p. 69)

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sustained and robust political movement or discourse, nor does it do anything to cultivate solidarity. It is anxiety. It is fight or flight. And it moves quickly. Shame seems to vibrate through matter; once it is generated it has a visceral presence, and everywhere people feel exposed to its forces. Political discourse becomes a game of deflect and react, leaving little space for thoughtful engagement and nuanced conversations.

As we now continue this practice of shame within the various anti-Trump resistance campaigns, we feel it is time to reconsider the utility of the reactionary politics of shame on the Left.

What is Left? What is the Resistance?

But what is the Left? And what is this emerging Leftist resistance movement? Binary spectrums can be very problematic, as they tend to suffocate the realities of nuance and tend to be grounded in a Manichean morality of dualism that seeks to situate one side of the binary superior to the other. So it is with a binary political spectrum of Left and Right. But that is only if Left and Right are taken literally. Abstracting from “left of center” and “right of center” reveals the possibility for nuances in our political categories and points to a more all-encompassing politics of resistance. The day after Trump was elected, urban geographer Andy Merrifield³ drew from a cadre of philosophers such as Hannah Arendt, Henri Lefebvre and Gilles Deleuze in order to unpack what it means to be “Left.” Merrifield landed on a critical analysis of the types of totalizing systems we see in the world to communicate the squishy (but also hopeful) definition of who is Left. Drawing on Lefebvre, who stated that “every system leaves a residue that escapes it, resists it, and from where an effective (practical) resistance can take off”⁴, Merrifield pointed to how multiple and powerful the Left actually is. In this definition of the Left, the systems—capitalism, racism, patriarchy—that produced Trump and the reactionary forces being brought to bear on modern politics also produce a residue—a resistance that is meant to challenge and push against these inequitable and divisive systems. This “residue” is the Left. The Left is the resistance.

However, just because a system is a totality does not mean that individual experiences under that system are understood in universal and totalizing ways. That is why Kimberle Chrenshaw’s introduction of intersectionalities was such a critical contribution to scholarship and activism. An intersectional approach

³ Merrifield gave a similar talk at the 8th Meeting of East Asian Regional Conference in Alternative Geography. View this talk here: <https://andymerrifield.org/talks/>

⁴ (Lefebvre, 2016 p. 299)

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variegates discrimination to include a multidimensionality of experiences under oppression—arguing against a single-axis of analysis. The application of intersectionalities generated much needed discourse around the role that differences of race, gender, sexuality, ability and class play in understanding oppression. It reminds us not to flatten one another's experiences and to think more dynamically about our forms of resistance on the left. But an intersectional approach is not one that is based on hierarchy. Sarah Ferguson helps us remember this with a critical interpretation of intersectionalities. Ferguson argues that differences in identity take "shape within a complex field of social relations in which each and every axis of oppression converges with and diverges from every other axis of oppression."⁵ It is an important reminder that points us to the ways in which totalizing systems of oppression work dialectically with particular intersecting identities in order to generate kaleidoscopic social experiences. And yet, it would seem that the notion of intersectionality and the way it is employed within the left has gone awry at some point, so that rather than being a mechanism to understand and be inclusive of a variety of experiences, standpoints, and identities, it has instead, far too often, resulted in a so-called "Oppression Olympics" which is inherently hierarchical. While this is a devastating strategy on the left that only fosters division, it is also admonished by the Right as proof that political correctness is in fact a corrupt means by which to suffocate free expression.

To be fair, understanding the kaleidoscope has been an ongoing political project of the Left. The Left as a political orientation has a rich intellectual and activist tradition. The Left is the scholarship of Karl Marx and the movements of the Wobblies and subsequent trade unionists; it is the sociology of W.E.B. Du Bois, the revolution of Tuissant L'Overture and the rich history of Black Radicalism; it is the iterative thoughtfulness of feminist scholars and movements from Simone de Beauvoir and the Suffragettes to Kimberle Crenshaw's intersectionalities and Chandra Mohanty's transnational solidarities. These variegated traditions often conflicted over the means and ends of movements, whether it was the Communist Party of America's resistance to integrate the concerns of the NAACP and Du Bois or Second Wave Feminism's resistance to look beyond the sex-gender system towards a more intersectional politics. Moreover, the actual existing Left is often overlooked in favour for the more palatable traditions of mainstream liberalism. Considering this diverse history, it is no wonder that the Left is often fractured - that movements materialize only to quickly dissipate against established formations that resist revolution in preference for an "end of history" politics that espouses our current economic system of capitalism as the final arrival point of

⁵ (Ferguson, 2016 p. 40)

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what is “natural” and Western liberal thinking as the best framework for achieving universal rights for everyone regardless of race, gender, religion or sexuality.

While it may be desirable to throw up our hands in frustration in reaction to the factions in the left, we want to argue that they are actually a precious gift, and one that in fact has the capacity to remind us of just how strong the Left can be. It makes sense that a revolutionary politics that is actively pushing against this deceptive “end of history” narrative actively push against itself. It is what makes the Left dynamic, resilient, and capable of tirelessly provoking calls against complacency with the status quo. Drawing on both philosophical considerations and experienced social movements, the Left effectively stands for revolutionary change. While one might make the assumption that those oriented towards revolutionary change includes a mere radical elite, consider the lessons of a little known German philosopher and sociologist, Frank Hirtz: “Revolutionary change is an oxymoron.” The contradiction here only being that revolution is not *evolution* – the change is not automatic. And so, anybody who recognizes that the status quo must change needs to also recognize that this change will be revolutionary. That revolutionary capacity, as we all too well know, can either be organized towards progressive or regressive ends (to borrow far too lazily on a linear notion of progress, we realize). Unfortunately, we see that rather than mobilizing across different traditions, movements and identity and finding solidarity in the commonalities within, the Left often prefers to devour itself—qualifying the feast by differences in identity, philosophical inclination and strategic methodologies. It is in this way, we argue, that the Left often cuts off its nose to spite its face. This phenomenon could not be clearer than in the 2016 U.S. Presidential election and the subsequent struggles in harnessing solidarity rather than goading division in the aftermath of the Women’s March.

The Emerging Resistance: A Cautionary Tale of Competition and Disconnection?

Engaging in theories of difference and identity has engendered intense competition amongst activists. This “Oppression Olympics” misinterpretation of intersectionality has been turned into a reductive exercise in distilling the most marginalized identity; often locating the discourse of that identity as the most radical. The discourse that comes with this reductive exercise is very technical; it is also very mobile. The discourse changes frantically. A good example is the oft-changing terminology for non-heterosexual and gender nonconforming populations (i.e., LGBTQIA2+). The intention behind adding additional letters to the acronym in order to ensure inclusion is incredibly important, and it is testimony to the ways in which the Left excels at challenging binaries and embracing a much more inclusive spectrum of individuals. But somewhere along the way it seems we have perhaps

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lost that intention. Rather than an ever-growing acronym representing a means by which solidarity and inclusion can be fostered, it has instead become the secret password to a speakeasy, a test for who is “in the know,” and who is no longer worthy of membership into the Left. One is required to constantly consult their own speech as well as the speech of others within activist and academic communities to locate the proper discourse. And it is a terrifying exercise. That is because this exercise is framed in neoliberal competition. Misstep and you are eviscerated—knocked out of the hierarchy of activism. Fail to even consider the proper discourse and you are nearly placed outside the realm of humanity. In this way, the politics of shame wields a significant power of social disconnection.

It is odd that this is the case. For one, much of this discursive practice extended from unpacking hegemonic discourses and problematizing orientalist language constructions.⁶ We find ourselves asking: Why, on the left, are we not deconstructing our own discourse? Why do we place so much emphasis on everyone speaking like us? And why are we as quick to disconnect ourselves from those who don't correctly use our terminology, as we are to reactively connect ourselves to next so-called “most progressive” terminology? It seems as though the discourse that emerged is actually one that is far more regulated through neoliberal free market thinking than social consideration. The coercive laws of competition dictate who is allowed to be heard based on their ability to wield the appropriate social justice speak. Bernie Sanders ran into this trouble early in his bid for presidency. His inability to speak in intersectional terms and his awkward discussion of race (using terms like “ghetto”) were quickly used to discredit his convictions to social justice. The Democratic Party lurched at the opportunity to paint him as problematic on race, citing his lack of success in southern states as evidence. The quick conclusion, then, was that the Left continually suffers from its inability to reconcile the factions that focus on class and the factions that focus on difference and identity.

But these factions are not, theoretically or practically, at odds with each other. It is just that progressive circles, over the last decade especially, have been the purveyors of shaming and alienating tactics. These tactics engender the appearance of animosity and incompatibility.

Towards a Politics of Reflexivity

So what can be done about this politics of shame, and are there alternatives that might offer more space for solidarity and progress? It won't be the only solution, but it seems that the opposite of a politics of shame would be a politics of reflexivity. In

⁶ see (Said, 1979) and (Derrida, 2016)

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particular, a politics of reflexivity that operates through a practice of curiosity. Curiosity, as it is built into reflexivity, is a much more resilient emotive response than shame, and one that provides an avenue for compassion, which further cultivates resilience. In curiosity, there is much greater potential for openness—an openness to the possibility that something is not simply right or wrong; accepted or rejected; welcome or in need of eviscerating. One can sit with curiosity—and benefit far more from the consequences of doing so—far longer than one can sit with shame. Whereas with shame, a person must hold a reactionary position—a tense and heightened state of responsiveness where peace is only obtained through the evisceration of an opponent—either real or imagined. Curiosity, on the other hand, has the capacity to be patient, and seeks connection rather than jumping for disconnection the moment discomfort or disagreement arises. Curiosity allows us more space and understanding to find strategies to reach across the divisions—whether within the Left or across to the Right—and have the difficult but much-needed engagement with those who think much differently from us.

The practice of curiosity, we posture, engenders a powerful “why” politics, and, importantly, one that is focused on moving forward, rather than blaming what transpired in the past. That is, it provides space to ask the following questions: Why are the conditions the way they are? Why has solidarity become so hard on the left? Why have we become so fearful and judgmental of each other, and why have we allowed ourselves to become the product of the very system to have vowed to resist? After a “why” politics gestates and grows, we can begin thinking of a “how” politics. How can we stop the politics of shame? How can we hold each other accountable in building a resistance grounded in solidarity? How can we ensure that our commitment to diversity expands our inclusionary criteria, rather than contracting it? How do we ensure that we are not divided, and thus become much more successful in our resistance? The “we” here must consider the relational bonds between all people. When we are curious about these bonds we leave space for questions that challenge the relationality of the very most oppressive systems: Racism, Patriarchy, Capitalism. Shame fails to untangle these complex relational bonds. We believe that curiosity and reflexivity are powerful antidotes to the politics of shame.

Embracing the vulnerability in the politics of reflexivity is not for the faint hearted. Accepting the possibility that one might wrong, and having the willingness to listen and ask questions when one is incredibly passionate and knowledgeable about an issue or topic is incredibly challenging. It is an incredibly courageous act and unfortunately one that those from the most marginalized populations will have to do more than others, for such populations have the most wrongs to be righted and the most trauma to recover from. For those who hold privileged positions in society,
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whether through race, class, gender or a post within a particular institution, the politics of reflexivity require us to hold ourselves and our peers accountable to our social justice aims through compassion and connectedness as opposed to divisive one-upmanship on “checking one’s privilege.”

One of most detrimental character flaws with the Left is our lack of commitment to rehabilitation, and the lack of belief in reformation. We can be awfully good at identifying discrimination, but quite impatient when it comes to understanding and healing. This has to change. We must have a strategy for reformation once discrimination is identified; if someone is racist, or sexist, or homophobic, or ableist: what do we do about it? What commitments do we make? Do we post angry polemics online or do we build movements that have a commitment to solidarity and are willing to talk face-to-face with the public? Do we eviscerate our political opponents or do we build a platform that has an expressed interest in gaining power? What political practice points us towards the valued direction once it is identified? Is it the politics of shame or the politics of reflexivity?

Armed with the politics of shame we can only hope to temporarily demobilize our opponents. Despite the deep desire to eviscerate political opponents out of existence shame does not have the material force to dislocate individuals from the social world. It only has the capacity to generate a temporal fear of social death. Once that fear passes, the person being shamed is left with a deep resentment. Social alienation is then continuously reproduced. Neither our political means, nor our political ends, should suffer that level of alienation on anybody. If that is the path we choose, then we are only perpetuating the unjust social relations of our present condition.

Instead, perhaps it is time to look to the politics of reflexivity. One who practices a politics of reflexivity does not look at another person and see a target for evisceration. Armed with a valued curiosity grounded in a desire for connection, the reflexive activist looks instead and sees the resistance as a place for solidarity and camaraderie. When we can see the resistance in our fellow comrades instead of just in our own individual inclinations the opportunity for a true revolutionary political project is much stronger. And so, in the next moment of knee-jerk shame reaction, where can we instead find a space for reflexivity and curiosity? If we are to survive, and indeed if the efforts of the resistance are going to survive and be successful, we have to be courageous. We have to choose, again and again, compassion and connection over fear and shame.

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