Ain’t that a shame

On the moral safeguard of dignity.

What is shame? In the Nicomachean Ethics, Aristotle regards shame—aidōs—as a feeling that must be kept in proper balance. Too little shame and the brazen will say or do anything, with no respect for the opinions of others. Too much shame and the bashful will not speak up in the face of opposing views, even to do what is right.

Shame is not a virtue in itself. But a good sense of shame helps us distinguish between virtue and vice. This sense is especially important for the young, who might be otherwise prone to do shameful things were it not for their flushed, embarrassed faces. As we age, a healthy sense of shame ultimately directs us away from shamefulness as we grow to understand virtue. “Whilst shame keeps its watch,” writes Edmund Burke in the Reflections on the Revolution in France, “virtue is not wholly extinguished in the heart.”

Is there any doubt that culture today has lost this balance of shame? Just do it, we are told. Be yourself. From educators to advertisers, entire industries exhort us to express supposedly suppressed urges and identities by ignoring our natural feelings of shame.

In the West we have been hearing such misdirection since the 1960s. In a flash, the social norms that helped us understand shame were actively abandoned, all with disastrous consequences. In the name of self-expression, self-empowerment, self-actualization, and whatever other form of selfish sophistry, the traditions of shame that we once found around divorce, or raising children out of wedlock, or other failures to family, community, and true self were counseled out, medicated away, or straight up ignored.

The result has been a society in which more and more is permitted but less and less is allowed. How is this possible? Just ask Vladimir Lenin. Stripping us of our inward conscience, the radical Left steps in to impose a new outward consciousness. Our sense of shame is replaced by a culture of shaming.

In “Leninthink,” this month’s lead essay and the subject of his talk for our inaugural Circle Lecture, Gary Saul Morson writes about how such reversals of shame are built into the very design of communist ideology. “Lenin worked by a principle of anti-empathy,” Morson explains,
“and this approach was to define Soviet ethics. I know of no other society, except those modeled on the one Lenin created, where schoolchildren were taught that mercy, kindness, and pity are vices. After all, these feelings might lead one to hesitate shooting a class enemy or denouncing one’s parents.”

“The soul-denying experiment of Marxism-Leninism demands shamelessness from its adherents and uses shame to impose this political discipline. The more ruthless and indiscriminate and inward-turning the shaming, the more assured such actions stay true to Party doctrine. “What is new, and uniquely horrible about the Soviets and their successors,” Morson writes, “is that they directed their fury at their own people.”

From the show trials of the 1930s on through Stalin’s mass purges and denunciations, the use of political shame to impose shamelessness—and the shamelessness required to expunge personal shame—has been a hallmark of socialist terror. In China, Chairman Mao made a high art out of public shame. Everywhere from workplaces to stadiums, China’s Cultural Revolution choreographed elaborate “struggle sessions” to torture and shame class enemies. Those who denied their crimes and pleaded their innocence were, of course, regarded by the Marxists as the most guilty. One favorite spectacle was to force professors to balance on stools in the sports arenas of their universities. The Maoists hung classroom blackboards around their necks and wrote out their names and supposed crimes in chalk.

A nything sound similar to the campus struggle sessions of today? The revolution eats its own. It is now mainly “liberal” professors who find themselves dragged before tribunals or simply denounced on the quad for supposed slights against the latest iteration of race, class, and sexual doctrine.

A similar fervor now extends to all corners of contemporary life. Much of social media and the news cycle revolve around this “call-out culture” and its forensic analysis of one’s supposed transgressions. Shaming words also become shaming actions. Political non-believers now find themselves pelted with eggs and covered with liquids, with videos of their “milkshaking” made available online for further mocking. Diners have been hounded out of restaurants. As in the recent assault of the journalist Andy Ngo by an “Antifa” mob in Portland, Oregon, such Leftist violence is turning increasingly vicious.

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Some fifteen years ago, we had occasion to comment on Martha Nussbaum’s *Hiding from Humanity: Disgust, Shame, and the Law*
(‘Does shame have a future?’ September 2004). Back then, Professor Nussbaum, an epitome of everything politically correct, was dead set against the practice of stigmatizing or shaming certain attitudes or behavior because they departed from traditional canons of morality or mannerly conduct. But as far as we know, Professor Nussbaum—along with many other soi-disant supporters of liberal values—has not been on the barricades defending the victims of Antifa and the squads of academic scolds that have made the academy so inhospitable a place for learning.

Instead of being “famous for fifteen minutes,” as a certain wit once promised, the future seems determined to make each of us the focus of the “Two Minutes Hate” of George Orwell’s Nineteen Eighty-Four. “The rage that one felt was an abstract, undirected emotion,” Orwell writes of the daily shaming ritual, “which could be switched from one object to another like the flame of a blowlamp.” The object of ire is ultimately meaningless. What matters is the display of denunciation and the pitiless scorn that must be arbitrarily shown. (D. J. Taylor has more to say about Orwell later in this issue.)

What a shame. In shameless times, it is these shamers who should be the most ashamed.

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