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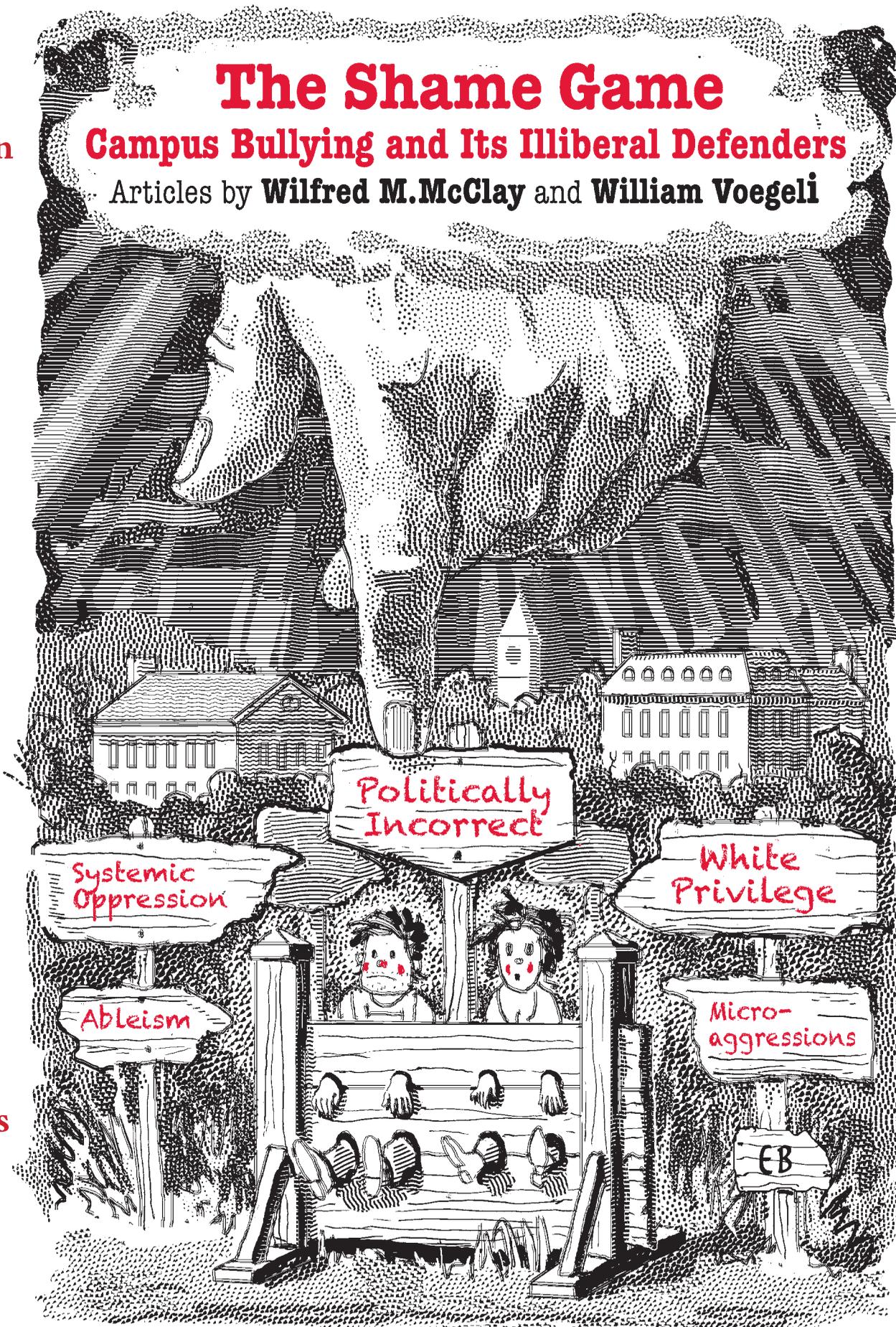
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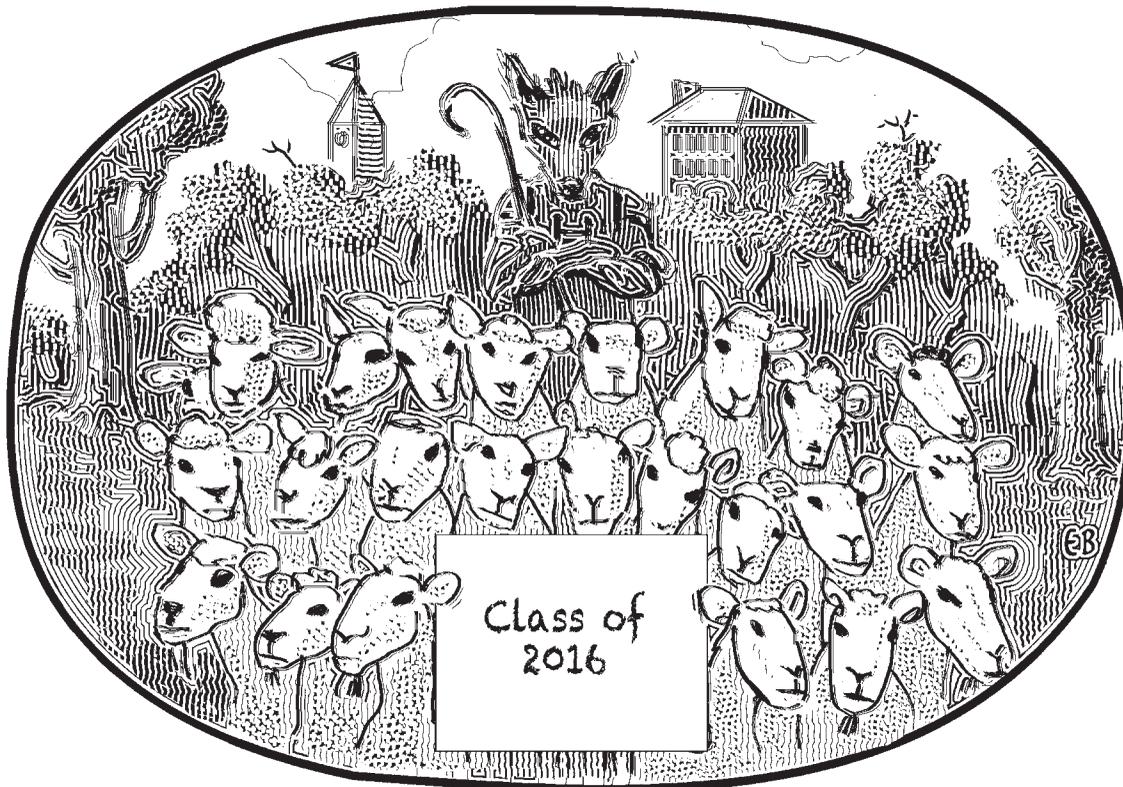
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Book Review by Wilfred M. McClay

THE HIGHER SHAMELESSNESS

Shame: How America's Past Sins Have Polarized Our Country, by Shelby Steele.
Basic Books, 208 pages, \$25.99



SHAME HAS ALWAYS BEEN VERY HIGH on the human agenda, at least since our expulsion from Eden. In fact, as Mark Twain observed, shame seems to be one of our peerless talents: “Man is the only animal that blushes. Or needs to.” Or to put it more neutrally, shame has always been an inescapable element in our social existence, one of the most powerful of the sanctions by which the moral life of a community is sustained. Shame stems from our need to be well regarded by others, and is usefully distinguished from guilt, which involves our own sense of wrongdoing. Shame is inherently social, and is one of the chief means by which the community lets individuals know when they have transgressed acceptable boundaries. Shame disciplines the transgressors, both externally and inwardly, and makes an example of them to others. The more cohesive the community, the more effective the sanction when it is applied.

The problem with shame is that it often proves to be too crude an instrument, too

brutal and indiscriminate for the task at hand. It can land on its targets like a giant sledgehammer, with such primal, anthropological force as to be utterly crushing, especially in cultures and subcultures where generally held notions of honor are sturdy and authoritative, and where the prospect of being found “in disgrace with fortune and men’s eyes” is as dreadful as the countenance of a pitiless stone god. When Admiral Jeremy Boorda—the first man in U.S. naval history to rise from the enlisted ranks to Chief of Naval Operations—shocked the nation by committing suicide in 1996, he did so in response to unconfirmed reports that the validity of two of his service medals was under investigation. In so doing, he showed graphically how great and unappeasable that stony countenance could be for a man whose very soul was enmeshed in the Navy’s intense honor culture. Nathaniel Hawthorne’s great 1850 novel, *The Scarlet Letter*, was a memorable cry against the folly of such stoniness of heart, particularly when it meant that of-

fenses against the law’s letter were punished with primitive cruelty, while those who traduce the law’s spirit with discreet hypocrisy could hide in the darkness, undetected.

BUT THAT WAS THEN, AND NOW...WELL, now it might seem that *The Scarlet Letter* is as useless to us as *Beowulf* for explaining the moral environment we inhabit. Thanks to the blessings of the therapeutic revolution, which has replaced the imperatives of personal morality with those of personal health, we are beyond all that now. Shame is now to be understood less as an imperative moral force than as a superfluous psychological burden, the disabling and pleasure-squelching product of punitive childrearing and ignorant religious beliefs. We have liberated ourselves from these ancient curses, vanquished the lingering effects of original sin, taken control of our own narratives, and stepped out of the shadows, into the broad, sunlit uplands of a new level of consciousness: a world beyond shame. Call it The Higher Shamelessness.



Such a development is bound both to reflect and to promote changes in the texture of our common life. When we all have permission to “not give a damn” about what anyone else thinks, the effects can be both profoundly freeing and deeply isolating—both effects serving to weaken the social bond. And yet, as the lingeringly negative connotations of the word “shamelessness” should suggest, we are not yet entirely comfortable with those changes. According to James Twitchell’s *For Shame: The Loss of Common Decency in American Culture* (1997), Daniel Patrick Moynihan devised the phrase “defining deviancy down” to “describe how we legitimize behavior previously regarded as antisocial or criminal.” (Cole Porter made the same point more entertainingly in his song “Anything Goes.”) The admonition to “judge not, that ye be not judged” has become translated from a high principle of moral restraint into a *quid pro quo*, a backscratching beatitude of the streets; I will agree not to hold your deeds to high moral standards so long as you agree to let me slide, too.

SURELY BILL CLINTON’S PERSONA AND career represented some kind of milestone in this moral transformation. For a sitting president of the United States to do the things he did while in office, and for him to have lied about those deeds brazenly and repeatedly, and authorized his minions to lie about the character of Monica Lewinsky and the other women whose lives he had damaged, would in the past have been permanently disqualifying, and would have ensured that the sight of his name on public buildings and works would have been rarer than that of Benedict Arnold. But, following in the pattern that morally stained figures like Ted Kennedy and Richard Nixon had successfully pioneered, Clinton has simply brazened it out, thus demonstrating two things. First, that beyond a certain point, the force of shame can have no effect on a person who is immune to it, and refuses to yield to its power; and second, that the aura of celebrity and charm, if applied with sufficient persistence, will cause much of the amnesiac American public to release its moral reservations, and overlook things it would never have overlooked in the past.

Cheating on one’s spouse, lying about one’s past, consorting with underage interns, conceiving children out of wedlock, embellishing one’s curriculum vitae, uttering patent falsehoods—these are all now excusable offenses, if they are done with sufficient panache and entertainment value. Which is to say, with sufficient brazenness. And for those who lack

the shamelessness gene, the very idea of entering into public service, particularly when it involves electoral politics, may have simply become unthinkable and unendurable. We may have come to the point where, when we speak of the thorough “vetting” of candidates, what we really mean is that they have become so thoroughly familiar to us, foibles and all, and so thoroughly compromised, that nothing is left that can surprise us about them. They have shown themselves energetically immune to any of the shaming mechanisms that might be thrown in their paths. They are sufficiently calloused to withstand the barrage that our public life throws at them.

IT IS PLAUSIBLE, THEN, TO ARGUE THAT over the course of the 20th century, our society was slowly shedding the idea of shame, as we have generally understood it, and that we are now arriving at that long-sought destination. But there is another possibility. Perhaps what has happened is that shame has not disappeared at all, but has instead been reshaped, redirected, repurposed. After all, cultures change, and often find themselves renegotiating what is considered shameful. Perhaps shame in our times has merely changed its colors rather than gone away. Perhaps the general weakening of moral authority, accompanied by the declining importance of marriage, family, kinship networks, communities, places of worship, and other morally formative institutions, along with the rise of an anomic individualism, has left a moral vacuum that begs to be filled by alternative forces.

It is in this context that one can understand the growing sanctioning power of social media, a force for shaming that is unprecedented, and capable of being marshalled at will and wielded with sudden and remorseless power. Far from disappearing, shame and shaming appear to be everywhere, and lurking around every corner. There is an atmosphere of *The Lord of the Flies* about it all, a chaos of amoral moralism and reputation-trashing in which there is no visible adult supervision. Jilted lovers upload revenge videos of their exes. People who make a casual, careless remark on Twitter late one night can wake up the next morning to find their reputations and careers in ruins, as they become objects of swirling mob outrage that quickly grows to tornadic force, and, like some savage god, demands a public sacrifice to satisfy its appetite for blood. Journalist Jon Ronson’s book *So You’ve Been Publicly Shamed* (2015) has detailed these and dozens of similar phenomena, concluding ruefully that we are “creating a world where the smartest way

to survive is to be bland.” Monica Lewinsky herself reemerged into public view in 2014, through a *Vanity Fair* article and a compelling TED talk, calling for a “cultural revolution” that would prevent the kind of cruel and disproportionate public shaming on a worldwide scale that she and others have had to endure.

However much Ms. Lewinsky deserves our sympathy in this regard, and I believe she does, such a cultural revolution will not be happening anytime soon. In the first place, the rough and tumble of genuinely free speech is always going to produce wounded feelings, as well as charges of shaming, “microaggression,” and the like, which may or may not be valid. We cannot decide in advance which verbal offenses are intolerable. Besides, even feminist sages like Planned Parenthood’s Leora Tanenbaum—who is the author of, among other deathless works, *Slut!* (1999) and *I Am Not a Slut* (2015)—cannot decide whether to make the word “slut” into a badge of honor (as is attempted for an even more offensive word in Eve Ensler’s ubiquitous shame-busting play, *The Vagina Monologues*) or to ban it from all discourse, as a word too devastatingly charged even to be uttered. Such are the conundrums one faces when the revisiting of traditional sexual morality is the one option that is ruled out from the start.

THE WEAPONIZING OF SHAME, THOUGH, is far too familiar and tempting a tool for political and cultural warriors—particularly (but not exclusively) those on the Left—to resist using. Indeed, the potential “positive” uses of shaming as a weapon to advance political causes are spoken of more and more frequently and openly. We see it especially with regard to environmental issues, where the effort to paint all dissident voices as illegitimate and malevolent has served to justify the aggressive use of shaming as a tactic. When asked by reporters about how last year’s Paris climate accords can have any effect, when they are nonbinding and have no enforcement mechanism, Secretary of State John Kerry responded with smug praise for the power of “public shaming,” which he called “the most powerful weapon in many ways.” Complementing Kerry’s position, Jennifer Jacquet, an environmental studies professor at New York University, has argued in her book *Is Shame Necessary?* (2015) for the systematic use of “public shaming” as a way of defeating environmentally incorrect behaviors by individuals, corporations, and governments, and installing “new norms” that are more environmentally acceptable. Jacquet’s book is earnest, sincere, humane—and com-



pletely oblivious to its chilling undertones. We shall be seeing a lot of this sort of thing in the years to come.

BUT AT THE MOMENT, THE MOST CONSPICUOUS arena for the use of consciously weaponized shaming is the American college campus, where issues of inflamed racial sensitivity are front and center, accompanied by a few sexual minorities' and indigenous peoples' grievances. Gathering momentum from the Ferguson and Baltimore police shootings, and subsequent rioting, and from organizations like Black Lives Matter, a protest movement has been sweeping the campuses of the country, notably at institutions such as Yale, Harvard, the University of Missouri, Claremont McKenna College, Dartmouth, Amherst, and others. The aim has been to promote various radical changes in the personnel, curricula, and spending priorities of these colleges, in response to perceptions of systemic racism and other forms of structural inequality. This movement, which is clearly far from spontaneous, has produced an impressive website, thedemands.org, listing the institutions faced with demands, many of which could not conceivably be met.

The fact that this is occurring on college campuses, and not in the general population, is a sign that weaponized shaming is involved. Liberals on campus who are appalled by the protesters' combative attitude shouldn't be, for the students are merely carrying out the implications of what their institutions have been teaching them about the nature of American society. It is on liberal college campuses that the moral claims of the past are taken most seriously, and are most likely to weigh on the consciences of those who are aware of them. And the student groups know it, which is why they press their demands so insistently, and why the response of presidents, deans, and other campus leaders so far has been much more likely to be one of timid capitulation than minimal assertiveness, let alone anger. The discourse of political correctness in which campus life is now almost completely enmeshed is a discourse in which canons of rationality and civility, let alone the exercise of basic freedoms, can be pushed aside at a moment's notice by the rapid deployment of organized shaming brigades. Say the wrong thing—or fail to express a sufficiently vehement intolerance for those who do—and even a university president can find himself in big trouble.

A particularly illuminating case occurred at the University of Missouri, where a president and chancellor were forced to resign over

the charge that they had been insensitive in addressing alleged racial incidents on or near campus. The first demands of the student group leading the protest stated:

We demand that the University of Missouri System President, Tim Wolfe, writes a handwritten apology to the Concerned Student 1950 demonstrators and holds a press conference in the Mizzou Student Center reading the letter. In the letter and at the press conference, Tim Wolfe must acknowledge his white male privilege, recognize that systems of oppression exist, and provide a verbal commitment to fulfilling Concerned Student 1950 demands.

Wolfe did not do all of these things; but the demand was made, nevertheless, for what would have been a kind of Maoist shaming exercise or public humiliation, and I am not aware of any sustained criticism of the students for making this demand. Whatever one

Without some larger moral consensus there is no way of distinguishing between shaming and sheer bullying.

thinks of the students' substantive complaints, this way of expressing them is not only grossly disproportionate but ominous. Even more ominous is the strange passivity of those in authority, on whom we count to recognize destructive actions for what they are, and to defend the integrity of their institutions accordingly. One of the many advantages of shaming as a technique for gaining political advantage is that it does not need to trouble itself with the niceties of argument or debate. P.C. discourse, with its wooden abstractions and its servile obedience to ideological desiderata, is its natural home.

WHICH BRINGS ME TO SHELBY Steele's new book, *Shame: How America's Past Sins Have Polarized Our Country*. A senior fellow at the Hoover Institution and one of the sharpest and most elegant writers on the African-American experience, Steele may well have given us his most important book yet, as it offers the best explanation for the otherwise baffling dramas we have seen unfolding on our campuses (dramas

which will, I think it is safe to say, only grow in number and intensity during the spring of 2016). This is not to say that the book, which was written and published well before these protests erupted, was composed as a response to these specific events. It provides us with something even better than that: an explanation for what lies in the deep background of the protests. Steele understands that what we are seeing unfold is a profound moral drama, not a garden-variety struggle for power, and moreover a drama that touches the soul and future of America, although in ways that even its morally energized participants do not see or understand.

Readers of Steele's previous books will know that he has an extraordinary talent for the revelatory anecdote, whose explication illuminates the entire landscape of a larger problem. His book begins with one. He was speaking as the token conservative at an Aspen Institute confab about race and politics, whose participants were asked to say a few words about what they most wanted for America. Steele said that "what I wanted most for America was an end to white guilt," to "the terror of being seen as racist," a terror which had led to "a benevolent paternalism" that had "injured the self-esteem, if not the souls, of minorities in ways that the malevolent paternalism of white racism never had." The policies enacted since the 1960s had led "minorities to make an identity and a politics out of grievance and inferiority," and to believe that "their collective grievance was their entitlement and that protest politics was the best way to cash in on that entitlement." It was ironic, he concluded, that this should have taken hold at the very moment when America was at last beginning to free minorities to pursue their well-being as individual citizens. White guilt had become a "smothering and distracting kindness that enmeshed minorities more in the struggle for white redemption than in their own struggle to develop as individuals capable of competing with all others."

What happened next speaks volumes. An agitated young white man, not a member of the panel, huddled with the moderator and Steele, and asked if he could have a few minutes to speak to the audience in response to Steele's remarks. Steele said, "Go right ahead," and the nervous young man launched into a diatribe against him, pleading with the audience not to believe Steele, and insisting that the problem of white racism was worse than ever. He had felt compelled to intervene, Steele sensed, because he had to bring the conference back into alignment, and enforce the boundaries of the conventional wis-

dom. “He wanted this friendly, upscale, and overwhelmingly white crowd to see me as a snake in the garden of their liberal identity,” threatening them with a kind of shameful moral disgrace, “since their agreement with any part of my argument would open them to charges of racism.” The sheer terror of being liable to such a charge was what motivated the young man’s own speech, which, having been uttered, could in turn then serve as proof to the world that his heart was properly aligned, and that he was adequately protected against such a charge. Thus the bizarre spectacle of a callow but earnest white man shaming a mature and accomplished black man, in front of an affluent white audience, all for the sake of racial justice. He thought he was “speaking truth to power,” when in fact, he was playing out a ritual that symbolized liberal white America’s tortured way of pursuing moral redemption.

THE STORY CAN BE TAKEN AS A MICRO-cosm. That America has been guilty of racial injustices in the past is certainly true; but it is equally true that blacks face fewer external barriers to achievement than ever before, and that we long ago reached a point of diminishing returns in attributing all the problems of black America to racism. Why then do so many educated whites cling so fiercely to the notion that prejudice and bigotry are rampant and that their persistence is utterly dispositive with regard to our understanding of these matters? Why then have so many talented and privileged younger blacks, such as the students at Yale and Dartmouth, chosen to fall back upon self-segregating identity politics, and the mechanisms of a grievance industry, rather than seek to exercise their talents freely?

As Steele sees it, the literal truth about a changing and steadily improving America has been ignored, in favor of a “poetic truth” in which the essential and enduring story of America is reducible to its oppression of minorities. This “poetic truth” is deemed “more true” than the evidence of one’s senses and experience, or the larger factual record, and by embracing it, one is relieved of the burden of being self-responsible, of being judged in life by the content of one’s own character or deeds. But that is not all. Whites who want to be seen as cleansed and innocent of America’s past ugliness will also embrace the poetic truth that racism is still a near-insuperable barrier for blacks, an assertion that paradoxically serves to certify their innocence of such sins.

On the other hand, Steele continues, whites who treat racism as a less serious barrier

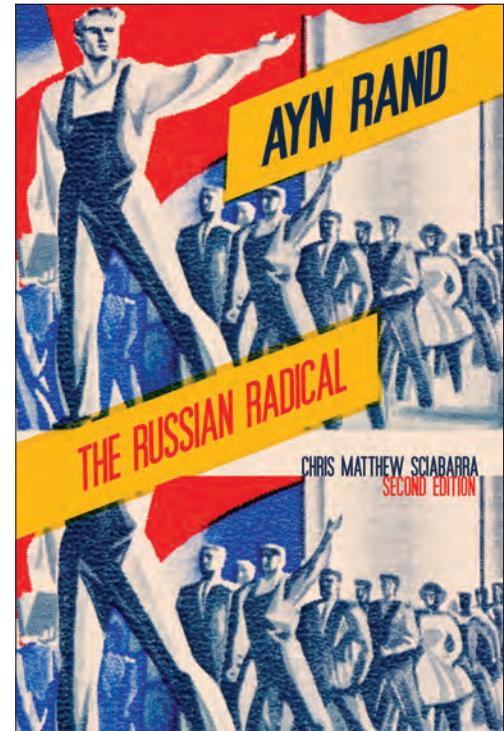
run the risk of being stigmatized with that same ugliness. Which is precisely why the run of successes enjoyed by student protesters is likely to continue into the foreseeable future, with ultimate effects unknown. It is why, for example, the silly demand that the term “Master” designating the head of an academic unit be abolished at Yale and Harvard and elsewhere was heeded with such forlorn alacrity. It is not because the students are traumatized by the use of such a patently harmless word. It is because they know that their liberal preceptors are so anxious to be found innocent, and can so easily be made to feel ashamed of certain words, and have so little pride in their institutional traditions that they no longer have the heart to defend them. It is why Steele is right to say that this is less a problem of black anger than of white fear.

WHAT MAKES THE SITUATION SO DISTURBING is that it is so thoroughly saturated with shame in all its varieties: historical shame felt, both by whites and by blacks, shame displaced upon others, shame feared, shame evaded, shame administered, and shame being shamelessly manipulated. The chaotic moral machinery of all this whirls and grinds so intensely and loudly that calm, honest, and dispassionate discourse between rational individuals is rendered nearly impossible, and only the language of moral accusation is heard.

That this should have become the condition of our universities, of all places, is unconscionable. One is even tempted to call it shameful, but the devolution of that word has itself, alas, become part of the problem. Without some larger moral consensus there is no way of distinguishing between shaming and sheer bullying. And when shame becomes a consciously wrought and wielded instrument of cultural warfare, fought by digital or pick-up armies in the name of abstract causes like social justice or sustainability, rather than being the uncoerced expression of an established community’s shared values and norms, it has become something sinister, even malevolent.

In any event, as Shelby Steele’s new book on the subject so ably demonstrates, it appears we are not living without shame after all. So much for those broad, sunlit uplands of unconditioned moral freedom. The Higher Shamelessness has proven to be neither.

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