10-Minute Talks: The politics of humiliation

By Professor Ute Frevert FBA

The modern history of humiliation is different from the history of public shaming; both share certain features and practices but differ as to intentions and goals. In this talk, Professor Ute Frevert FBA argues that liberal societies have made some progress in abolishing public shaming. But they have failed to bring about "decency" in Avishai Margalit's terms – a general refusal to humiliate others.

This talk is available to watch on YouTube

Image: Vintage engraving from 1868 showing the writer Daniel Defoe in the Pillory. © duncan1890 via Getty Images.

The following transcript was developed using speech recognition software and human transcribers. Although all care has been taken to check, proofread and correct the transcript, it may contain errors.

[00:00:06] I don't know about you, but to me, humiliation seems to be the political buzzword of our present time. Everybody claims to feel humiliated and in turn demands recognition and respect. Identity politics in Western societies firmly rests on those claims, and so does international diplomacy.

As I argue in my recent book on the politics of humiliation, this is due to a heightened sensitivity about human dignity. People not only feel strongly about outright violation of human rights, they have also become extremely touchy when confronted with debasement, degradation, bullying and the like. Tracing this sensitivity back in history, my book starts around 1800, when the notion of equal citizenship and human dignity entered political discourse and practice.

As long as traditional societies subscribed to the idea that some individuals are fundamentally superior to others, people had a hard time feeling humiliated. They might feel treated unfairly. They might undergo public shaming, but they would not perceive such treatment as humiliating per se.

Humiliation can only be experienced when the victim considers themselves on a par with the perpetrator. Not in terms of actual power but in terms of rights and dignity. Such terms were gradually spelt out since the early 19th century in many parts of Europe. They came along with a new type of honour that followed the invention of citizens rather than subjects.

Citizens who carried political rights and duties were also seen as possessing civic honour. Traditionally, social honour had been stratified according to status and rank. In the modern world, civic honour pertains to each and every citizen. This helped to raise their self-esteem and made even members of the lower classes object against verbal and physical abuse.

[00:02:33] The semantic and political shift could clearly be observed within the legal system. Officially administered shame sanctions were increasingly criticised by legal scholars and other intellectuals. Among the many arguments against such sanctions, human dignity stood out as the most principled both in philosophical and political terms.

It also proved to be the most effective, finally convincing governments to abolish the pillory, public flogging and branding in the 1830s and 1840s. Since the Middle Ages, those practices had served as supplementary punishment and were meant to instil shame and ideally remorse in the culprit. Now they were considered as humiliating because they violated basic civil rights of honour and dignity.

The fact that courts abandoned public shaming did not mean though that such practices disappeared altogether. Rituals of shaming had been an integral part of folk culture all over early modern Europe. Men and women who acted against the unwritten rules of the local society were often subjected to collective forms of admonishment.

In England, women who mistreated their husbands were forced to go on so-called “skimmington rides”. They, and sometimes their husbands too, sat backwards on a donkey and were paraded around while neighbours and other village people mocked them.

[00:04:24] Those whose sexual, social or political behaviour was not in sync with popular conventions were met with “charivaris” or rough music, accompanied by the clanging of pots and pans. The phenomenon of peers shaming peers has remained a staple during the more modern period, despite many attempts to crack down on practices that threatened the authorities’ monopoly on the legitimate use of physical force.

In the 1820s, Bristol shipbuilders tied blacklegs to a mast and dragged them around town. In the 1920s, German miners similarly erected shaming posts on which to display the names of strike breakers. As late as the 1970s, Italian workers used rough music and shaming parades against their bosses and supervisors. Labour conflicts, however, were only one out of many sites of public shaming.

During the Northern Irish Troubles, Catholic women who dated British soldiers ran the risk of being tied to street lamps, having their hair cut off and being tarred and feathered. Similar practices were used in the wake of World War Two. Crowds targeted women who had conducted love affairs with German soldiers during the occupation. They shaved their hair and paraded them through the streets as onlookers cheered and clapped their hands.

[00:06:16] Alongside such popular shaming rituals, institutionalised forms of humiliation persisted as well. Even though European legal systems have long since refrained from administering shame sanctions. State-controlled institutions such as schools, prisons, the police and the military openly and deliberately continued to use such strategies in order to achieve conformity and discourage seemingly dysfunctional attitudes.

Since the 1960s, liberalising trends in Western societies have helped to bring such strategies to light and pressure institutions to abolish them. But it took the British parliament until 1986 to pass a law forbidding corporal punishment in state schools. In public schools, it was permitted until a decade later.

Up to this very day, soldiers are subjected to cruel practices of personal debasement at the hands of their superiors and in front of their comrades. Looking at the long history of public humiliation, we encounter a kind of paradox. On the one hand, people become increasingly concerned about respect, honour and dignity. On the other hand, individuals and social groups enjoy ever greater freedom to humiliate and inflict harm on each other.

Notwithstanding ongoing pedagogical attempts to cut down on such practices, they have continued to flourish, especially in the recent era of social media. The internet puts no constraints on how widely a humiliating video, image or text can be proliferated.

[00:08:20] It also invites more and more people to actively participate in the humiliation game and thus gain followers. The game itself is no longer about shaming someone into socially acceptable conduct. Instead, it is about degrading others for what they are – too smart or too dumb, too fat or too skinny, too white or too black, too feminine or too masculine.

Religious and ethnic backgrounds, as well as sexual orientation, have also served as popular targets of humiliation. Individuals who find themselves targeted can hardly protect themselves. Collectively though, vulnerable groups have been fighting back. Since the 1960s, feminists condemned sexist media that reduced women to sex toys and sharply criticised the ubiquitous discrimination as a violation of human rights and dignity.

The gay movement organised against what they experienced as the homophobic politics of humiliation. Countering it with claims of pride and self-esteem. Anti-racists continue to fight an uphill battle against the prejudice, resentment and hatred that resounds in multiple arenas and publics.

[00:09:56] As a general rule, migrants and refugees find it the most difficult to raise a collective voice against everyday occurrences of abasement. They rely on the assistance and support of human rights activists who step in to remind citizens of their basic duties and responsibilities – above all, the duty to respect human dignity and thus establish, as the philosopher Avishai Margalit has called it, “decent societies”.