

Should anyone be ashamed of their nation's history? Should anyone be proud of it?

Introduction

The nation-state forms the core organizational unit of modern human societies. Broadly speaking, culture, laws, and customs are decided at the national level in today's world. While citizens of a nation don't necessarily share the same language, ethnicity, or ideology, they all have a part in its history to identify with. As university education rates continue to rise and post-colonial powers begin to reflect on their histories more critically, it's natural that questions should arise around whether their citizens should continue to be proud of that history, view it with shame, or take up a perspective less aligned with nation-states altogether.

One's instinctive answer to this question should be expected to correlate to political identification. Those more inclined towards deconstructivist views of nation-states will be sooner to accept the third option — examining nations' histories without the personal stake implicit in feelings of pride or shame associated with that history — while those who feel that criticism of their nations' historic actions have gone too far might gravitate towards a more reactionary response that promotes blind national pride at the expense of not only shame, but critical evaluations of history altogether.

The question of whether citizens should be proud, ashamed, or disconnected from their nations' histories is layered in contemporary political subtext and impossible to approach without addressing the assumptions informing each of the question's components: the social utility of shame, the importance of national identity, and how they can most meaningfully interact on the national cultural level.

The Social Utility of Shame

It goes without saying that shame carries singularly negative connotations, both within and beyond the context of modern national societies. When extended to this societal context, shame has historically suggested the use of widespread pressures to enforce often archaic and arbitrary social standards and conventions — and scorn applied to those who failed to conform. Human beings are social

creatures, who rely on interaction with others to function at a sustainable baseline. Accordingly, social ostracization has represented a serious mechanical and psychological threat to this subversive of social systems. It may be said that sensitivity around taboos, peer pressure among children, and the informal enforcement of cultural norms all represent applications of shame on the societal level. Thus, the conception of shame has taken on a wholly negative social connotation; to be ashamed in society is to be made to acknowledge (and, often, to face the appropriate consequences for) personal failure.

Nonetheless, shame has an important function in liberal democratic systems. Per Francis Fukuyama's *The End of History and the Last Man*, though liberal democratic systems are superior at both fulfilling humans' need for recognition and in economic efficiency compared to alternative systems, this purely mechanical preference does not guarantee the stability of liberal democratic societies. Rather, an element of cultural dogma is needed to maintain stability in any system, liberal democracies being no exception. In order to secure a cultural grounding for this dogma (lending it cultural credibility beyond the often intangible letter of the law), individuals who subvert democratic processes must first face shame as society's first line of defense against anti-democratic tendencies.

To expand on Fukuyama's argument, a widespread sense of shame surrounding unsavory episodes within a nation's history that forms a strong taboo against those episodes is an effective strategy to prevent the repetition of that history. The contemporary West's turn towards criticism of its colonial history, for instance, has had such great influence on former colonial powers' societies to render returning to their previous colonial patterns inconceivable — even when similar intellectual traditions had provided justification for those actions within living memory.

It might be said that a simple drive for awareness, as opposed to the development of a societal system of shame, is a more honest or less problematic approach that addresses the same issues. However, this argument fails to account for the unique gravity that shame around historical awareness lends the perspectives informed by it. Societies led by policymakers who view their predecessors' missteps with shame will naturally act far more cautiously in avoiding similar policy errors. Social systems informed by those same impulses are similarly far less likely to apply pressure on policymakers to do otherwise

because of the gravity of this perspective. More theoretically compelling is the argument that the development of social systems that actively utilize shame for policymakers to exert social control is a dangerous door to open. Though this is a fair concern, shame-based social systems intended to promote historical awareness need not originate from (much less be controlled by) government; one need look no further than the 1619 Project and other grassroots racial awareness efforts in the United States for examples corroborating this. Although the political backlash against this movement has been perhaps more conspicuous than its own cultural influence, recent racial justice movements — and notably not their reactionary detractors — have remained the voices guiding this cultural conversation, and the voices whose opinions have become the mainstream. Critics would also only be half right in asserting that there is no certainty systems of social shame will only target the worst elements of history; though this idea has mechanical merits, systems of shame will naturally gravitate towards first criticizing that which is most clearly incompatible with such a society's values. Provided a counterbalancing force that elevates the best elements of a nation's history, systems of shame need only target discourse around a nation's most illiberal and antidemocratic historical actions.

Though it may seem counterintuitive or instinctively dishonest, shame around a nation's history is the soundest preventative measure against the repetition of its worst elements (provided a counterbalancing cultural force to steer it correctly), as it creates a cultural bulwark of unique gravity against the objects it targets.

The Importance of National Identity

It's perhaps needless to say that social shame alone for a nation's history does not constitute the ground for a particularly robust national identity, whatever its other benefits might be. This fact, applied to the previous analysis, not only calls into question what the corresponding role of pride might be in national social systems, but calls on society to reevaluate the qualitative elements of the importance of national identity.

The nation-state is and will remain for the foreseeable future the core organizational unit of human societies. Independent nations — most of them liberal democracies or striving towards a similar ideological model — will continue to define interpersonal human discourse, and are not “going anywhere” in their societal or political roles. The question of national identity, then, is not a question of the fact of nations’ existence (and the manner thereof), but of the resonance of their grounds for existing. Nations are important — and that their citizens choose to identify with them is critical to the success of liberal democratic societies.

In a liberal democratic system, nations exist by the consent of the governed through a social contract that provides for the protection of the people in exchange for the reduction of certain liberties. A sense of national identity is notably absent from the transactional terms of this theoretical definition, but national identity, not unlike the role played by shame in supporting a culture of liberal democracy, significantly eases the process of governance and relations between the government and the governed.

Most crucially, a strong national identity directly facilitates the execution of the social contract by using the idea of a nation to provide for the protection of individuals and the national system. A strong National identity engenders an amount of shared ideological identification potent enough to reduce risks of internal extremist threat without dangerously encroaching on ideological diversity. National identity — especially when founded on history that all a nation’s citizens share parts in — also takes the place of potentially divisive axes of identification like language, race, religion, or ethnic origin, allowing nations to more effectively insulate themselves from outside military and ideological challenges without necessarily sowing internal division. This shared identity across a nation may also increase organizational efficiency by bridging the social divide between different economic classes in a society, reducing internal barriers to cooperation and collaboration.

Arguments critical of this role of national pride often fail to acknowledge that eliminating the societal importance of the nation-state is neither realistic nor productive to safe and efficient societal organization. Similarly to the case of shame, there are valid concerns that the extremes of pride in one’s national history may result in the romanticization of historical episodes and ideas better not repeated.

Here one finds the true importance of shame-based awareness as discussed previously: as a counterbalancing element to excessive national pride, working in concert and focusing on different elements of national history to create a more tempered outlook overall.

The modern world is defined by the existence of the nation-state in the organizational level, and this will not change anytime in the foreseeable future. A strong sense of national identity strengthens existing liberal democratic conventions and expectations by reinforcing the terms of the social contract, reducing internal social conflict, and increasing economic and political efficiency to promote a safer, stabler, and more righteous society.

Determining a Suitable Balance

As discussed previously, it's clear that some measure of shame and some measure of pride around one's nation's history are ideal to create safer, stabler, and more righteous social conditions and political outcomes. The next question is naturally where the balance between these two seemingly oppositional forces lies.

Crucially, the notion that social pride and social shame for nations' histories are necessarily oppositional forces must first be challenged. These forces work in opposite directions and are partly intended to temper one another's effect. However, they can and must coexist without directly contradicting one another, lest one diminish the other's social impact. While such forces should check each other's extremes — shame so absolute it erodes national identity on one side, and pride so uncompromising it prevents constructive systemic criticism on the other — neither can be allowed to directly challenge the other, as this risks the absolute triumph of one of these balancing narratives over the other.

Everyone should be ashamed of their society's worst historical conduct, because such is the surest way to create a social system that prevents the repetition of that history. At the same time, everyone should be proud of the parts of their national history they share a part in. No nation's conduct has been wholly despicable, and no nation's conduct has been wholly ideal; only in acknowledging this fact can

one utilize their national history and the social impulses surrounding that history to constructive ends. These facts can be true and useful at the same time — it is through the adoption of a singular, dominant narrative that these social forces might be left unchecked, and that concerns around their extremes might be realized.

Conclusion

Shame and pride around the history of one's nation are social forces with the potential to affect tremendous harm and sow deep division at their extremes. If realized appropriately, however, these forces are essential in promoting a sense of historical awareness that will ultimately lead to a social and political landscape safer, stabler, and more consistent with the values of liberal democracy than that of today. People, cultures, and policymakers require shame over their predecessors' worst mistakes to prevent their repetition; likewise, they require pride for the laudable elements of their nations' histories and the part they have in them. Only through the tandem operation of these two social forces can the modern nation-state live up to its social contract, and effectively resist the material and ideological threats it faces.

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