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The next moral revolution?'**

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DOI

[10.1332/204378920X15785692888198](https://doi.org/10.1332/204378920X15785692888198)

Publication date

2020

Document Version

Accepted author manuscript

Published in

Global Discourse

Citation (APA)

Pesch, U. (2020). A reply to 'green shame: The next moral revolution?'. *Global Discourse*, 10(2-3), 273-275.
<https://doi.org/10.1332/204378920X15785692888198>

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A Reply to “Green Shame: The Next Moral Revolution?”

Udo Pesch

According to Sigmund Freud, shame can be seen as a major pre-condition for civilization. He claimed that the shame that a child may develop about her bodily functions, such as peeing and pooping, is the first and foremost manifestation of the individual internalization of cultural norms. Experiencing shame allows one to become attuned to the moral codes that prevail in a certain societal context.

Shame not only motivates compliance with a moral code, it also contributes significantly to the creation of a self that is separated from the wider societal context (Pesch, 2019) – a self with secrets, a self that requires a private space for dealing with shameful bodily functions (Geuss, 2001; Moore, 1985). It can be claimed that this awareness of a self is a fundamental condition for both individuality and sociability, while the necessity of a private space sheltered from a public space gives rise to the very idea of liberal democracy (Pesch, 2005).

This suggests that it would be very functional to *use* shame in order to stimulate desirable types of behaviour or to even set off a ‘moral revolution’. However, having such an instrumental take on shame is unacceptable, especially within the context of the democratic state, as is compellingly shown by Martha Claeys in her analysis of the emerging phenomenon of green shame.

To further underline this argument, we could take a look at the sanitary movements of the nineteenth century (Melosi, 2000). These movements were usually started by doctors, wealthy benefactors and city planners that aimed to educate the masses, most basically by teaching them how to deal with their excretion. The most salient of the activities that can be connected to the sanitary movement is the creation of sewage systems, which were unrivalled in the disciplinary effects on the poor, as was intended by city planners such as Georges-Eugène Haussmann (Gandy, 1999).

The development of sewage systems is also interesting for another reason; it can be said to have given cause to the modern governmental bureaucracy, which came to be the designated actor to manage this system. As I have remarked elsewhere, the primary role of the government is to be the ‘caretaker of crap’ (Pesch, 2015).

We have come a long way since then. Not only in terms of hygiene and governmental activity, but also in terms of how much disciplining we allow the state to impose. It has

become morally unacceptable nowadays to have the state declaring that a major part of its population is living in a shameful way. Society has become egalitarian and democratic; no way of living can be said to be superior to another.

So while shame is a strong force for persons to comply with societal norms, helping them to grow both their selfhood and their sociability, *shaming* can be seen as an act that denies a person these capacities. Imposing shame upon others, especially if it is done by the state, invades the fundamental autonomy and dignity of humans – traits which, ironically enough, have been nurtured by the very presence of the emotion of shame itself.

Not only is it morally reprehensible to demand that people be ashamed of their unsustainable practices and decisions, it is also simply counterproductive. Increasingly, sustainability policies are subjected to ‘moral tribalism’, giving rise to diametrically opposed positions within society (Markowitz and Shariff, 2012). Such tribalism does not induce change, but to a reinforcement of the rightness one’s own position, and the wrongness of the position of the other party.

Added to this, it seems unjustified to make people feel ashamed for their individual contributions to the emissions of greenhouse gasses. These contributions are far more than the mere aggregation of choices made by individuals, instead they can be seen as *systemic*: economic and societal forces that are very much afforded by policy constrain the range of individual choices. Given this, shaming individual choices just does not add up to the fundamental societal changes that are necessary.

To make use of the potential of shame to set off a moral revolution, we have to reconsider the contribution of green shame in, as Claeys emphasizes, it should not be the goal of societal debate, but *it should its starting point*: the debate should be intended to encourage discussions about which economic system and which policy measures are desirable.

The challenge is that a moral revolution is not imposed by state actions but facilitated by them. Neither governments nor societal actors should condemn certain activities that until now have been completely normal, such as taking an airplane or driving a car, as shameful. Following Claeys’s analysis, governments should be urged to develop and stimulate alternative options for unsustainable practices, such as making the train a viable alternative for air traffic and for making public transport or bicycles viable alternatives for cars. Only in that case may we maintain a defensible moral code that denounces unsustainable choices.

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