

## The Shanker Chronicles – Season 1, Episode 5 – Shamelessness

### Show Notes and Key Points from Dr. Shanker:

- Last podcast was about shame. This podcast is talking about the opposite, shamelessness.
- The growth of shamelessness is coming from the top.
- Not simply referring to what's happening in the US, but something that we see happening around the world.
- A new breed of politicians that are seemingly impervious to shame.
- In fact, that see shameless behaviour as a bragging right.
- In part this is because brazenness--or better, "unashamedness"-- *confirms* their specialness.
- But more than narcissism is involved here.
  
- Michelle Dean, 'A Mentor in Shamelessness', *The Guardian*, April 20 2016
- "Shamelessness was [Roy] Cohn's defining trait. And it was a shamelessness that Trump picked up and ran with".
- Her point is not just that Trump learned that he could get away with. shamelessness, but that he could exploit it.
- The fact is, we are drawn to stories about shameless behaviour like moths to the light.
- So, for a narcissist, shameless behaviour is self-rewarding and self-reinforcing.
- But for a politician who first floated the idea of running for the Presidency in 1987, and first ran in 1999 (as a Reform Party candidate) shamelessness turned out to be far more important.
  
- In the last podcast, looked at how shame is critical for group cohesion.
- The classic idea here, going back to Meade, is that Group cohesion is essential for human survival, and shame is a way of compelling individuals to conform.
- "Shame is a way of getting people to behave in conformity with what a group needs, or thinks it needs".
- What happens when the shameless behaviour is manifest in the most visible members of society?

- If shame is used to preserve a group's morality, could overt shamelessness be used to do the opposite: to change a group or a society's view of shame, in the manner proposed by Nietzsche?
- Nietzsche argued that there are two fundamental types of morality: "master morality" and "slave morality"
- Master morality values power while slave morality values empathy
  - For those who are naturally intended to be Masters, the "good" is the noble, strong, and powerful
  - The "good" is anything that benefits them individually or as a group
  - Their needs supersede those of society at large
- Slave morality is the opposite:
  - It insists on universal rights, humility, on justice tempered by charity
  - In other words, Judeo-Christian morality seeks to enslave all: especially, those who are natural Masters.
  - Hence the emphasis placed on shame, which is nothing more than a tool to suppress the strong-minded.
  - "Here is where the significance of the Jewish people resides: With *them*, there begins the *slave revolt in morals*" (*Beyond Good and Evil*).
- The Enlightenment is thus a slave morality: it denies the reality of human nature, the natural social order.
- Nietzsche saw democracy in these terms: as a morality that seeks to make everyone equal by enslaving those whom Nature intended to be masters.
- It does so using the tools of guilt and shame.
- Is what we are seeing today not simply an attempt to overthrow democracy: is it an attempt to institute an Enlightenment counter-revolution?
  - A denial of universal rights, universal education, emancipation, welfare policies.
- In other words, we are dealing with something far more serious than narcissism
  - In pathological narcissism the individual is saddled with deep feelings of self-doubt and unworthiness but nonetheless displays rampant arrogance and a sense of entitlement.

- That is not to deny the narcissism that we see, but rather to clarify the deeper philosophical currents, which extend back to the Cold War
- The Soviet Union under Stalin is the epitome of a Master morality culture
- With absolutely terrifying results (20 million died)
- Where democracy resorts to guilt and shame, the Master political system uses terror and surveillance (Orwell, 1984)
- It quickly became clear that Stalin had no intention of sticking to the Yalta Agreement
- The Soviet Union would use any means it could to turn all of Europe into communist states
- According to the doctrine of Historical Materialism, the peoples “enslaved” in “democratic” states would be “liberated” **whether they wanted to be or not**
- Propaganda, subversion, cover actions, military actions: the ends would justify the means
- At first the US policy – in particular, the Marshall Plan – was influenced by “The Wise Men”
- (Issacson & Thomas 1986) and in particular, the US Ambassador to the Soviet Union, George Kennan
- Kennan’s writings inspired the Truman Doctrine of “containing” the Soviet Union
- Kennan’s “Long Telegram” from Moscow in 1946, and his 1947 article in *Foreign Affairs*, ‘The Sources of Soviet Conduct’, embraced the Enlightenment principle that a stable international order could only be built on the principles of freedom of speech, belief, and political choice
- *“To avoid destruction, the United States need only measure up to its own best traditions and prove itself worthy of preservation as a great nation.”* (Kennan, ‘The Sources of Soviet Conduct’, *Foreign Affairs*, 25)
- But by 1949 Kennan’s influence had begun to wane as Stalin’s intentions became clear
- The new Secretary of State, Dean Acheson, ushered in a new approach under Truman
- The National Security Council decided that they had to fight fire with fire
- The CIA was created and given the task of undermining Soviet influence using:

- *“Propaganda, economic warfare; preventive direction action, including sabotage, anti-sabotage, demolition and evacuation measures; subversion against hostile states, including assistance to underground resistance movements, guerillas and refugee liberation groups, and support of indigenous anti-communist elements in threatened countries of the free world” (Gaddis 162-3)*
- All this was to be done in secret
  - The public was not to know and should news leak out it would be denied
- Under Eisenhower the CIA was regularly engaged in covert actions abroad
- The 1954 Doolittle Report (a top-secret analysis of the CIA) concluded:
- *“We are facing an implacable enemy whose avowed objective is world domination. There are no rules in such a game. Hitherto acceptable norms of human conduct do not apply” to fighting the Cold War (Gaddis p.165)*
- The legal and moral restraints that the Government must follow in internal politics do not apply to actions abroad
- Kennan himself was led to write in his *Memoirs* that *“going along with this was the greatest mistake I ever made”*
- The CIA is still trying to cover up their role in the 1973 coup in Chile
  
- A major development occurred in the early 1970s
- Nixon overturned the NSC doctrine: what could be done abroad could also be done at home
- Nixon’s notorious remark to Haldeman: *“We’re up against an enemy, a conspiracy. We are going to use any means. Is that clear?” (Gaddis, p.175)*
- The US itself now became a Cold War battleground
- The Democrats were no longer just an opposition party:
  - they were the Enemy, and must be stopped using the same sort of subversive tactics that the CIA used abroad
- The shift introduced by Nixon was to have a profound impact on American politics

#### The rise of “shamelessness” in the 1990s

- The Democrats had held a lock on the House for thirty-three years, what was known as the Permanent Democratic Congress

- Determined to overturn this, Newt Gingrich led the Conservative Opportunity Society (the “Young Turks”), a group of radical Southern Republicans, using shamelessness as one of his primary tactics
- He first succeeded in provoking Tip O’Neill to boil over in rage at Gingrich’s shameless attacks on leading Democrats
- Then Gingrich went after O’Neill’s successor Jim Wright, shaming him over the way he had illicitly benefitted from supporters who skirted financing regulations by secretly buying up scores of his recent book of essays
- Just as in international affairs, the Republican minority would no longer play by ‘gentleman’s rules’
- Finally, Gingrich forced the Republican Minority leader Bob Michel, “Mr. Nice Guy,” to retire
- Gingrich used shaming shamelessly
- Nor, as was seen during the Clinton years, was this just a Republican shift
- Trump did the same (belittling nicknames), the blasé response to the Access Holiday tape, stalking menacingly behind Hillary Clinton in the second presidential debate to project an image of brute power
  
- Kornacki’s *The Red and the Blue* is not just an account of “*The 1990s and the Birth of Political Tribalism*”: it is the story of a major ethical shift
- The idea of consensus politics had been consigned to the dustbin of post-war American history
- The new politics was about the naked pursuit of power with no shame attached
- A Master Morality was taking hold
- Jan 6th, and what we’ve seen since, isn’t just about trying to become a new Permanent Republican Congress
- They are seeking to instil a counter-Enlightenment revolution
  - MAGA is code for a Master Morality (Bannon)
  
- All of this sheds an interesting light on the argument that Cannon made at the end of *The Wisdom of the Body*
- Reflecting on the crushing blow of the Depression and the rise of fascism in Europe, Cannon argued that homeostasis serves as a model for democracy
- Applying the principles of the self-regulating body to the body politic would “*foster the stability, both physical and mental, of the members of the social*

*organism and provide the primary conditions for the discipline and enjoyment of individual aptitudes” (p.324)*

- Shared norms act on the body politic in the same way that the ANS acts on the human body
- The norms he was referring to were those of the Enlightenment
- Cannon was not suggesting that democracy is the only viable form of a stable society
- As could be seen in the Soviet Union, a totalitarian society could be highly stable – or at least, so it seem in the 1940s
- It may try to cultivate group cohesion: i.e., controlling the media and education
- But the only way it maintains its stability through terror and surveillance
- You build a Wall, not to keep Westerners (or Mexicans) out, but to stop your citizens from fleeing to the West
- Respond to the Hungarian uprising and the Prague Spring with tanks
- Cannon’s point, when he argues that homeostasis provides the model for preserving stability, is that there are always going to be shocks to the social system, just as there are shocks – sudden powerful stresses – to the human body
- Only a stable democracy is able to adapt to these shocks – stresses like COVID – and remain stable
- This isn’t just a case of “coping” with the crisis
  - a homeostatic society grows from a crisis like the pandemic: emotionally, socially, prosocially
  - Certain institutions – e.g., an unfettered science – or charismatic individuals rise to the fore
- Cannon’s thesis is that a totalitarian society is not able to respond flexibly to grave threats to its existence
- It remains rigid, stuck to something like the Brezhnev Doctrine calling on Russian intervention (including military) wherever socialism was under threat
  - Threats such as the rise of Solidarity, the force of Pope John Paul II, the sharp drop in the price of oil
- An aging gerontocracy was unable to respond dynamically to these threats
- The Politburo finally reversed course and brought in a young new leader in Mikhael Gorbachev
- Gorbachev sought to preserve the system with Perestroika and Glasnost reform

- But try as he might to stem the tide, Gorbachev was forced to oversee the collapse of the Soviet Union, as heralded by the arrival of Boris Yeltsin
- And Cannon was making a deeper point: a self-regulating democracy is the only way of preserving individual freedom
- His argument dates back to Bernard's original claim that "*La fixité du milieu intérieur est la condition de la vie libre, indépendante*" (1865)
- Abandon the Enlightenment's norms and you become a Master society in which the bulk of the populace loses its freedoms
  - To act and think as one chooses, provided it doesn't harm anyone else
  - To protest gov't policies
  - To change leaders
- But why would anyone raised in a democratic society "choose" to give up their rights?
- DST provides us with an important answer
- The transition from one entrenched social attractor to another can only occur in the midst of great stress: i.e., in Nietzsche's terms, shift from a "slave" to a Master Morality
- Societal Dysregulation is essential for this to happen, and this is rarely (if ever) bottom-up
- The secret of the Leninist revolution: not a spontaneous proletarian uprising such as Marx envisaged
- Rather, led by revolutionary vanguard who will do anything and everything to bring about their revolution
- Do the members of the revolutionary vanguard have suppressed feelings of shame, such as I mentioned in the last podcast?
- Or is that just wishful thinking?
- Has a massively constructed defense system suppressed any feelings of inferiority and enabled them to feel "above the law"?
- Or have key parts of the social brain been suppressed – turned off as it were?
- The difference between *suppressing shame* and *not feeling shame* (Lord Voldemort)

- But why would anyone *choose* to join a movement bent on destroying their own basic freedoms?
- This is surely self-harmful behaviour: i.e., irrational, in the classic sense of the term
- For Self-Reg, that is precisely the point
- We are not dealing here with a matter of *choice or reasons*: i.e., Blue Brain behaviour
- This is rather a case of strong emotions that lead individuals and a group to go Red Brain
  - Fear is certainly pivotal
  - But even stronger than fear is anger
- When giving the Republican rebuttal to Obama's 2016 State of the Union address, Nikki Haley warned voters: *"During anxious times, it can be tempting to follow the siren call of the angriest voices. We must resist that temptation."*
- Interviewed about this afterwards on CNN, Trump responded:
- *"Well, I think she's right, I am angry. I'm angry, and a lot of other people are angry, too, at how incompetently our country is being run. As far as I am concerned, anger is okay. Anger and energy is what this country needs."*
- Trump's strategists and focus groups had done a much better job than Haley's
- Trump didn't cause, but rather tapped into and intensified this anger, as was so plainly manifest in his rallies
  
- There have been various analyses of why the American populace had become so angry
  - The speed of cultural and demographic change
  - The decline in one's social status
  - Targeted disinformation
  - The contagion effect of anger
- With the Red Brain controlling the Blue Brain, moral compasses can be reversed
  - What would have been seen as shameless behaviour now becomes virtuous
  - what would have been seen as virtuous behaviour now becomes shameful

The march of shamelessness is picking up speed

- We now tolerate behaviours that, just a short while ago, would have spelled the end of a political career

- Some openly celebrate their shamelessness
- Even something as horrendous as the possibility that the gov't's response to COVID was politicized does not cause the widespread outrage that one might have expected
- Perhaps we've just become habituated to seeing shameless behaviour in all sorts of media figures, political and business leaders
- But the risk here, which lies at the very heart of the Enlightenment, is that our shared sense of *right* and *wrong* will be subverted
- For that is ultimately what the Master Morality is seeking
- In its place it will install its own perception of morality
  
- The Soviets had the doctrine of Historical Inevitability to buttress their new morality
- Trumpism has the myth of American Exceptionalism (and every far Right movement has its own version of nationalism)
- The key to any anti-democratic revolution is to convert the *Enlightenment values* that have hitherto bound the society together into *obstacles* to realizing your society's "true" destiny
- And as Panksepp showed, it is that feeling of being blocked or forced to do something that triggers the Rage system
  
- Where the Enlightenment insisted on certain absolutes – all humans are created equals – the Master Morality insists on epistemological relativism
- In her infamous interview on Meet the Press, Kellyanne Conway insisted, when Chuck Todd pressed her on Sean Spicer's lie about the size of the inauguration crowds: ""You're saying it's a falsehood. And they're giving – Sean Spicer, our press secretary – gave alternative facts."
- And, of course, she said this with utter shamelessness
  
- How the very concept of *truth* gets upended will be my topic for the last in this 6-part series



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