

House of Cards and the Use of Shame and Stigma as Strategy: A Folklore Study of an Elite Group

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This is total war....If we just let our vision of the world go forth, and we embrace it entirely and we don't try to piece together clever diplomacy, but just wage a total war...our children will sing songs about us years from now.

Richard Perle, one of the founders of PNAC (Project for the New American Century), was being interviewed by the journalist John Pilger (2002). Does Perle really expect his children to sing his praises? I don't know; but most would agree that Perle presents a classic case of hubris.

War—global domination—empire: these concepts have become respectable goals to a certain sector of Americans and their leaders (see Kiernan 2005). To other, more traditional U.S. citizens, it is a mystery how this has come about, a matter of extraordinary concern. My intention in this study is to look at these elites, powerful as they are, as a folk group and to try to comprehend their views, motives and strategies from an examination of their narratives. As might be expected, war is a favorite topic amongst Republican story-tellers: one example, the Jessica Lynch tale, still (after two years) gets more than 711,000 hits on google. However, “manufacturing consent” to transform the U.S. into a military dictatorship requires more than hero tales; progress towards a more egalitarian society—particularly in the realm of gender relations—has occurred on an unprecedented scale over the past half century (Therborn 2004), and strong disapproval of this circumstance has proved invaluable in cementing together otherwise disparate factions of conservatives into the power block we are examining here; and it is this issue they have targeted for a carefully-designed program of cultural engineering. “Family values,” a term that conjures up apple pie and picnics in the park, is no longer relegated to the society pages; one of its major stories—the marriage initiative—gave me 2, 280, 000 hits on google today. Now it turns out that the two seemingly unrelated issues are two sides of the same coin: retrenchment to an époque unhampered by feminism, peace and other egalitarian ideals. For egalitarianism is out in a country recently tabulated as the most unequal society of all industrial nations (Johnstone 2005). 1) According to Irving Kristol, “Godfather of Neoconservatism”: “You have to care less about equality because growth creates inequalities. Always” (Wohlgeleitner 1999). The point has often been made that a hierarchical society must be founded on an authoritarian family structure. In his analysis of fascism, Wilhelm Reich found that the crucial foundation of the fascist state in Germany was the patriarchal family (Reich 1946: 88). Images of duty to God, country, and family had been used to destroy the burgeoning feminist movement in Germany just as Hitler came to power and women were told that their duty was to breed sons for the state (Millett 1970:159ff).

Judging from the frequency with which it is mentioned, it becomes clear that the core strategy for right wing social engineering is the reinjection of shame into U.S. society. Female anatomy and autonomy—their shameful potential for the society at large—were suspect in Nazi Germany as they have become in the U.S. Then as now, well-off women were shamed for being gainfully employed, poor women for not, and all women for wresting the control over their bodies from the authority of church and state. Recently, Ben Wattenberg, a senior Fellow of the American Enterprise Institute, blamed “the perfect control of women over their reproductive lives” for a “plummeting birth rate” (on Think Tank) while James Q. Wilson, also associated with the AEI, called “the decline of shame...a catastrophic influence” which, having led to “out-of-wedlock births and “single-parent families,...can only be remedied by the authority of marriage” The reiterated theme: poverty is not a matter of money; it is a matter of marriage and morals.

“I am a member of the undeserving poor,” asserts the Welshman Doolittle in Shaw’s *Pygmalion* as he charms democratic Americans through his candid admission that he needs more money than the deserving widow because he drinks more than she does. In fact, the original U.S. crafters of “The Mothers’ Pension Program” (at about the same time the play was written) also had those deserving (white) widows (of noble military heroes) in mind, a circumstance that didn’t change until the Social Security Act of 1936 shifted state largesse to federal welfare benefits and support became more widely distributed.

“The personal is political”—the rallying cry of 1970s feminists took on new meaning when The Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act was signed into law by President Clinton in 1996; it was a retrenchment to state control as our contemporary politicians were not charmed by benefits disbursed to their least favorite constituents: impecunious single moms, many of them African-American. More commonly referred to as “welfare reform,” the new law replaced the principle of entitlement with that of charity accorded to destitute persons. Thus shame for being “on the dole” was substituted for the dignified recognition that child care is as legitimate a use of tax monies as highways for cars or pensions for the elderly. The use of state block grants has provided the opportunity to cleverly circumvent federal mandates against educational segregation, church-state collusion, and unfair labor practices. Local control, of course, makes it easier to enforce moral litmus tests according to the present administration’s code of ethics.

Why can’t you just keep your legs closed?

This put-down by a welfare counselor to a brilliant City University of New York student (mother of three, editor of the student newspaper) infuriated the young woman: “I could not believe that a woman would say that to me” (personal interview). She was one of the few single moms who had managed to continue her college education after 1996. According to statistics kept by C.U.N.Y., 21,000 students at that one university alone dropped out of school after 1996; forced to accept temporary, below minimum-wage jobs, their dreams of a better future for themselves and their children had come to an abrupt end. To date, the re-authorization of welfare “reform” has not come to pass, its

proponents waiting for a mean enough Congress to ratchet up its demands. However, that has not prevented social engineering from moving ahead. The administration has discovered how to circumvent Congressional approval on sensitive issues—a circumstance that has actually destabilized elements of the Constitution itself—e.g. the principles of checks and balances and the separation of church and state. Local control has continued to stigmatize unmarried mothers; most recently, unwed moms are being “encouraged” to submit to long-term contraception and/or give up their children for adoption. Wade Horn of HHS has announced that it is time to, in his words, “re-stigmatize divorce.”

Suddenly in spring 2002, the main thrust of all this social engineering became clear as the President’s marriage initiative made headlines; newspapers reported that the administration, tired of waiting for Congressional approval, had found a novel way to move ahead without it; a small fortune was being disbursed to credentialize one particular family structure: the patriarchal, two-parent, formally-married, heterosexual “Leave It to Beaver” type, leaving out of the picture gay couples, heterosexual cohabiting couples, single parent households, and other diverse types that actually exist in the U.S. today. The loosening of church-state separation allowed funding to flow to favored religious institutions—such as Pat Roberson’s Christian Coalition, Rev. Sun Myung’s Unification Church and Michel McManus’s Marriage Savers. McManus and Maggie Gallagher were subsequently caught in a payola scandal involving the acceptance of payments from the Department of Health and Human Services to promote the government’s marriage initiative. Abstinence-only courses are being funded with increasing generosity despite a negative committee report prepared under the direction of Rep. Henry A. Waxman (Waxman 2004). The report revealed that the most prevalent abstinence texts used by public schools are riddled with incorrect information and teach gender stereotypes as facts. Concurrently with the publication of this report, Wade Horn, under whose auspices at H.H.S. the payola scandal took place, accepted a new post: the directorship of a new grants program for abstinence-only classes.

Clearly, for humiliation to be successful as a tactic—to make its victims feel ashamed—there must be an acceptance of inferiority. Sadly, there are indications of some measure of success. Let’s consider the case of State Senator Kay O’Connor (R-Kansas) who, despite presently running for Attorney General of her state, has consistently expressed her opposition to women’s suffrage (Hanna 2005). Whether she is on the level is not so interesting as why she has proven effective with enough voters to keep her in office. Just before and just after the welfare “reform” bill was signed, first a group of African-American men, then a group of European-American men sought atonement for their “sin” of loosening a patriarchal grip on their families, vowing never to seek government “hand-outs”:

Who has to atone?.....ME!

Who went wrong?.....ME!

(1995: Farrakhan eliciting responses at the Million Man March, Washington, D.C.)

Dear God, I am a sinner....Please forgive me and change me!
(1997: Chanting by Pat Robertson's Promise Keepers)

It was no accident that the two demonstrations were segregated by race and by sex. Furthermore, it was no accident that the notoriously racist book, *The Bell Curve*, was published in 1994 and that co-author Charles Murray went on a lecture tour upon its confirmation. Murray's previous book *Losing Ground*, which served as a template for the present welfare policies, was not taken seriously when it was published in 1984. As one sociologist put it:

The controversy about *The Bell Curve* is not about *The Bell Curve* only. It is about the sudden astonishing legitimization, by the leading intellectuals and journalists of the mainstream American right, of a body of racialist pseudoscience created over the past several decades by a small group of researchers, most of them subsidized by the hereditarian Pioneer Fund. *The Bell Curve* is a layman's introduction to this material, which has been repudiated by the responsible right for a generation. (Lind 1995: 172)

Exaggerated claims for the importance of genetics, especially after the completion of the Human Genome Project, have created an audience for racist, classist and sexist explanations for the futility of social programs--the ultimate manipulation of shame. The eminent biologist Ruth Hubbard, Professor Emeritus of Harvard University, has warned that the public needs to arm itself against a too uncritical acceptance of the supernatural wonders of science. In reference to the image of the human genome as the "Holy Grail of genetics," she writes, "...such imagery, intended to elicit a religious awe for the wonders of science, has become common among genome scientists and is carried over into most media reports on the project" (Hubbard 1999: 3.).

The present social engineering program is not a newly created narrative but the latest version of a many-told tale. Even its latest incarnation is not uniquely Republican as may indeed be surmised by the almost complete lack of opposition to it in Congress. Within the past half century, major influences have come from the culture of poverty theories of Oscar Lewis and Edward Banfield as well as images of the emasculating mom (David Moynihan), the welfare queen (Ronald Reagan), and the incessant single-mom demonizing of Wade Horn and Robert Rector joined to long-disproven racist theories that have received seeming legitimacy through the present uncritical adulation for all things genetic.

The right-wing narrative, encoded in a silent structure of fundamentalist biblical doctrine, may well be regarded as the most recent interpretation of a hoary world view that resurrects archaic and stigmatizing motifs—virgin, virginity-testing, chastity, bastard, out-of-wedlock, illegitimate, intact family, family wage, abstinence, emasculating moms, pure bloodlines. Washington's masterful manipulators have successfully enflamed antagonism between men and women, young and old, rich and poor, black and whites, gays and straights, impoverished workers and welfare recipients, native born and immigrant. They expect the stigmatized person or group to be ripe for manipulation in a

deft strategy of divide and conquer that will turn public attention away from determining the root cause of social problems. Perhaps a close look at their folklore—the stories they tell—will show them as they really are, not impenetrable—indeed nothing but a house of cards.

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