David Keen. *Shame: The Politics and Power of an Emotion*. Princeton University Press 2023. 360 pp. $35.00 USD (Hardcover 9780691183756); $24.95 USD (Paperback 9780691248219).

Reading David Keen's *Shame: The Politics and Power of an Emotion* is akin to navigating a complex, dimly lit corridor, where shadows of shame, humiliation, and collective trauma constantly emerge. The journey through this book is not merely an intellectual exercise but a moral and emotional confrontation with the human condition. In an era dominated by stark political polarization, global conflict, and moral ambiguity, Keen invites the reader to consider how deep-seated emotions such as shame and humiliation function not only as individual psychological experiences but also as powerful social and political forces that shape historical events and contemporary conflicts. Through this lens, violence, cruelty, and political manipulation are reframed not only as strategic or economic acts but also as responses to emotional and moral wounds that remain unacknowledged.

The central argument of the book is most clearly articulated in Chapter II, where Keen asserts that shame and humiliation are deeply intertwined with social and political dynamics. Rather than being confined to the private sphere, these emotions operate collectively, influencing the behavior of groups and shaping the contours of political life (43). The author persuasively demonstrates how unacknowledged shame can trigger cycles of violence that are not easily broken, emphasizing the distinction between cultures of shame and cultures of guilt. This distinction is critical for understanding societal responses to moral transgressions: while guilt tends to encourage reparative action, shame often produces withdrawal, resentment, or aggression. By arguing that shame is both a personal and collective force, Keen challenges traditional narratives that reduce violence solely to material or strategic interests.

Keen's book is structured to guide readers progressively from theoretical considerations to historical and contemporary case studies. Early chapters focus on the theoretical and conceptual foundations of shame, exploring its psychological, anthropological, and political dimensions. Subsequent chapters apply these insights to specific historical contexts, such as the Sierra Leone civil war, the dynamics of the Cold War, and contemporary conflicts framed within the "war on terror." The analysis is compelling because it links seemingly abstract emotions to concrete outcomes: shame generated by political defeat, social marginalization, or public humiliation can catalyze cycles of revenge, destabilization, and even large-scale conflict (33).

One of the most striking aspects of the book is Keen's narrative use of individual stories to illuminate these dynamics. For instance, the story of Idriss, a figure who navigates the cruelty of civil war through empathy and a steadfast respect for human dignity, exemplifies the potential for moral and emotional intelligence to interrupt cycles of violence. Keen's account demonstrates that behind acts of extreme cruelty often lie distorted needs for recognition, justice, and acknowledgment. These humanistic vignettes serve not only as illustrative examples but also as ethical reflections that challenge the reader to reconsider simplistic explanations of political violence (Lavenne-Collot et al., 2022). By grounding theoretical insights in personal narratives, Keen effectively bridges the gap between abstract ethical concepts and lived human experiences.

These stories invite readers to recognize the complexity of moral choices in extreme circumstances and to appreciate the interplay between individual agency and structural forces. Moreover, they highlight the importance of cultivating empathy and emotional literacy as tools for understanding, rather than simply condemning, the actions of others. In this sense, Keen's work encourages a reflective engagement that goes beyond intellectual analysis, prompting readers to consider how moral awareness can inform both personal behavior and societal responses to violence.

The book also critically examines the ways in which political elites and major nations exploit shame as a tool of manipulation. Keen discusses, for example, how the strategic language of nuclear deterrence during the Cold War masked human suffering, or how the rhetoric surrounding the "war on terror" reinforces cycles of humiliation and retaliation (209). This analysis underscores the emotional dimensions of international relations, which are frequently overlooked in traditional political and economic analyses. By highlighting the interplay between emotion, politics, and conflict, Keen expands the analytical framework for scholars of political violence, human rights, and peace studies.

Keen's discussion resonates with philosophical traditions that prioritize the ethics of responsibility, yet it diverges by integrating psychological and emotional perspectives. While classical ethical frameworks often emphasize rational deliberation or the moral agency of individuals, Shame foregrounds the collective and historically situated nature of emotion. This perspective aligns with contemporary work in political psychology, sociology, and anthropology that seeks to understand the emotional substrates of social behavior. For example, research on collective trauma and post-conflict societies (Volkan, 1998) complements Keen's analysis by documenting how unaddressed emotional wounds can perpetuate intergroup hostility. In this way, Keen contributes to an emerging interdisciplinary dialogue that bridges political theory, psychology, and ethics.

However, the book is not without its limitations. The focus on emotional and psychological dimensions occasionally comes at the expense of in-depth discussion of political and economic structures. While Keen acknowledges this trade-off, readers seeking concrete policy recommendations or detailed economic analyses may find the text less satisfying. Moreover, the abstract nature of some chapters may challenge readers unaccustomed to philosophical or reflective writing, particularly when concepts such as collective shame are explored in highly theoretical terms. Yet, these limitations are also reflective of the book's ambition: Keen does not aim to provide prescriptive solutions but rather to open new perspectives for understanding the emotional underpinnings of human behavior in political contexts.

The book's originality lies in its synthesis of diverse literature and its humanistic approach to political analysis. By connecting individual emotional experiences to collective historical processes, Keen offers insights that are often absent in traditional studies of war, conflict, and international politics. Unlike purely strategic or rationalist accounts, *Shame* foregrounds the moral and psychological stakes of political action, prompting readers to reconsider the ethical dimensions of policy and leadership. This approach is particularly relevant in a contemporary world marked by polarization, social fragmentation, and persistent cycles of revenge and humiliation.

Furthermore, Keen's work resonates with ongoing debates about the role of emotions in social and political life. Scholars such as Martha Nussbaum and Adam Smith have long argued that emotions like empathy, shame, and indignation play a crucial role in moral reasoning and civic life. Keen extends this tradition by demonstrating that emotions can also function as catalysts for conflict, suggesting that understanding and addressing collective shame is essential for peacebuilding and conflict resolution. This insight has practical implications for scholars, policymakers, and practitioners working in post-conflict reconstruction, transitional justice, and peace studies, as it emphasizes the need for interventions that engage both material and emotional dimensions of human experience.

This title also raises profound ethical and philosophical questions: what motivates cruelty and aggression beyond material interests? How can societies acknowledge and address collective emotional wounds without triggering cycles of retaliation? Keen does not offer easy answers, but the very act of engaging with these questions cultivates moral awareness and reflective judgment. In this sense, the book functions not only as a scholarly contribution but also as a guide for ethical reflection, encouraging readers to confront the moral complexities inherent in both personal and political life. In addition, Keen's discussion of shame and ethical responsibility extends beyond personal reflection to societal considerations. By analyzing how emotions are shaped by cultural and historical contexts, the book invites readers to reflect on the social patterns that sustain injustice or hinder reconciliation. This approach underscores the relevance of ethical thinking in real-world situations, from everyday interpersonal interactions to broader political and social conflicts, emphasizing the role of empathy, dialogue, and critical self-awareness in promoting more just and compassionate communities. In this way, the text connects theoretical insights with practical moral engagement.

The book's broader significance can be appreciated when considering current global challenges. From escalating geopolitical tensions to domestic polarization, many conflicts are underpinned by unacknowledged grievances and emotional injuries. Keen's analysis reminds us that interventions focusing solely on structural, legal, or strategic solutions may be insufficient if the emotional substrates of shame and humiliation are ignored. In highlighting these dynamics, the book contributes to a growing recognition that sustainable peace requires attention to both the material and affective dimensions of human experience.

Finally, Keen's narrative strategy blends rigorous analysis with reflective storytelling—enhancing the accessibility and impact of the book. While some passages may be abstract, the inclusion of human stories, historical examples, and vivid descriptions of social and political contexts help to bridge the gap between theory and lived experience. This balance between analysis and narrative is a notable strength, as it allows readers from diverse disciplinary backgrounds to engage meaningfully with the text.

David Keen's *Shame: The Politics and Power of an Emotion* is a seminal work that reconceptualizes the role of emotion in political life. By foregrounding shame and humiliation as social and political forces, Keen challenges conventional explanations of conflict and violence and invites readers to engage in ethical reflection on the human condition. While the book may be

demanding in its abstraction and reflective style, it rewards careful reading with deep insights into the psychological and moral dimensions of political life.

In today's world of heightened polarization, conflict, and moral ambiguity, Keen's work provides a crucial lens for understanding the unacknowledged emotional currents that shape human behavior. It encourages scholars, policymakers, and readers alike to confront the moral and emotional complexities of social and political life, emphasizing that true peace and justice require more than strategic interventions they demand empathy, recognition, and the courage to acknowledge collective wounds. Shame does not offer simple answers, but it teaches readers to live thoughtfully with complex questions, making it a vital contribution to contemporary discussions on politics, ethics, and human psychology.

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