## Democracy and the Death of Shame

Is shame dead? With personal information made so widely available, an eroding public/private distinction, and a therapeutic turn in public discourse, many seem to think so. People across the political spectrum have criticized these developments and sought to resurrect shame in order to protect privacy and invigorate democratic politics.

*Democracy and the Death of Shame* reads the fear that "shame is dead" as an expression of anxiety about the social disturbance endemic to democratic politics. Far from an essential supplement to democracy, the recurring call to "bring back shame" and other civilizing mores is a disciplinary reaction to the work of democratic citizens who extend the meaning of political equality into social realms. Rereadings from the ancient Cynics to the mid-twentieth century challenge the view that shame is dead and show how shame, as a politically charged idea, is disavowed, invoked, and negotiated in moments of democratic struggle.

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## *Political Equality and Social Disturbance*

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*For Eric*

# Contents

# Acknowledgments

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In the intervening years, I put this manuscript away and came back to it several times. During my 2006–2007 sabbatical at the Center for Ethics and Public Affairs and 2007–2008 visiting position in Political Science at Tulane University, I reconceptualized it and began working on the material that comprises the book you hold in your hands. Richard Teichgraeber and Meg Keenan graciously invited and welcomed me to Tulane. Susanne Sreedhar and Dana Zartner were essential sounding boards and soul-sustaining company in the early stages of the book planning.

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Portions of Chapters 4 and 5 appeared previously as parts of "Aristocratic Mourning: Tocqueville, John Quincy Adams, and the Affairs of Andrew Jackson" and "Little Rock's Social Question: Reading Hannah Arendt on School Desegregation and Social Climbing." Thank you to Pennsylvania State University Press and the journal *Political Theory*, respectively, for permission to use sections of those chapters here.

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# Note on the Cover Art: *Sleeping Venus* (1944) by Paul Delvaux

I am grateful to the Tate Modern and the Artists Rights Society that manages the Paul Delvaux estate for permission to reproduce *Sleeping Venus* for the cover of *Democracy and the Death of Shame*. I came across Delvaux's 1944 painting of the *Sleeping Venus* before I had completed a full draft of this book, yet I knew instantly that I wanted to use it for the cover. The stunning painting with its sumptuous palette and evocations of feminine embodiment, *pudeur* (and its lack), death, Victorianism, supplication to the heavens, and neoclassical architecture has been an inspiring, visual reminder that the tropes of the story I wanted to tell resonated beyond my own thinking and writing. My interest in including the painting as a character in my story is not unique. As I learned by reading about Delvaux and his work, his paintings appear with some frequency in French novels of the 1950s.[1] Although he insisted that his paintings had no narrative structure but were rather figures in a composition, French novelists used them to construct their own.[2]

In keeping with Delvaux's own understanding of his work, I do not want to map my own narrative onto the *Sleeping Venus* but rather present it as a set of images for meditation. The figures in Delvaux's composition conjure ambivalence about the "death of shame." On the one hand, there is a naked and unashamed female body – Venus, no less – who is at ease. And on the other hand, there is death, Victorian mores cloaked in black as if in mourning, Furies-like supplication by other nude women, and vacant buildings that suggest they used to contain the bustle of activity and politics. The images conjure threat, stasis, and possibility. The stories people tell about democratic politics do much of the same.

[1] Gavin Parkinson, "The Delvaux Mystery: Painting, the Nouveau Roman, and Art History," *Nottingham French Studies* 51, no. 3 (2012): 298–313.
[2] Ibid., 306.