

Beyond Shame and Pride: A Balanced Approach to National History

The relations of citizens and history of the nation are becoming increasingly polarized in contemporary discourse. On the one hand, some advocates attribute to national shame and collective guilt of historical wrongs, such as "white guilt" in American and European communities;¹ on the other hand, some conservatives desire national pride and celebration of legacy by minimizing historical evil, such as Japanese reverence for Yasukuni Shrine despite its honoring of war criminals.² Both positions, though understandable by emotional origins, represent flawed approaches to addressing the complexities of national history. Instead of taking either pride or shame as the primary response to the collective past, citizens should consider a more practical, educational, and balanced solution that acknowledges historical realities.

The Problems with Historical Shame

The calls for national shame following historical injustices have usually been made out of gracious intentions. However, they generate a wide range of issues that undermine historical knowledge and social progress rather than advance in justice and equality. First of all, shame is a paralyzing mood that is based on self-condemnation instead of positive acts. When people or cultures are stuck in the mud of shame, their moral impotence takes center-stage so that they can no longer see any practical way out of modern ills.³

Historical shame tends to breed what may be theorized as temporal injustice: the imposition of moral blame on members of the present-day group of individuals by virtue of the actions of the previous generations that the present generation had no power over. Such a synthesis mistakenly harmonizes the responsibility of morality with nothing more than descending by ancestry. True responsibility is agent-dependent and presupposes that an agent has a choice of actions;⁴ current generations, regardless of their ancestral affiliation with past actors, cannot be rightly blamed to act on the decisions of former actors in social, cultural, and moral environments that are vastly different than their own. This problematic approach to historical responsibility is compounded by the fact that shame-based historicism is often prolific in producing accounts that are reductionist in the sense that a complicated event is reduced to a dichotomous evaluation of good and evil. These reduction schemes discard in advance all the webs of causation, effects, and conflicting values that are what make events historically important. To give an example, when one considers the particularities of the American Civil War due completely, solely to a moral clash between the abolitionists and slaveowners, it erases the

complex effects of economic, political, and social processes that defined this conflict as well as its outcome.⁵ Given both the temporal unfairness of imposing blame across generations and the oversimplified moral frameworks that ignore historical complexity, descendants in the South are not supposed to bear collective shame for their ancestors' participation in slavery.

An example of problematic historical shame can be found in post-World War II Germany. Though admitting responsibility for Holocaust was necessary and appropriate for Germany, the extremely acute form of such a historic reckoning has given rise at times to what scholars term as negative nationalism where collective identity is largely developed around the negative value of national complicity in the Holocaust.⁶ This has created political paralysis with respect to some international affairs because German leaders are fearful of a political and military response because they would be easily regarded as aggressive and militaristic, as seen in their hesitation during 2011 Libya intervention,⁷ which is actually to serve a reasonable humanitarian objective. This overemphasis on guilt of the past has lent itself to the contemporary political polarization as the stifling of the mainstream nationalist discourse has accidentally cleared the way for the extremist tendencies, with the far-left-historical guilt eventually directly facilitating development of far-right political responses which would be called a horseshoe effect of political extremism,⁸ such as what occurred in Germany over recent decades.⁹

Historical shame works both at collective and individual levels of psychology. Nations who view history based on shame may lead to what psychologists call learned helplessness, a condition in which groups and individuals perceive themselves as morally inferior and unable to act usefully or creatively.¹⁰ This type of condition acts as a barrier instead of a facilitating factor to civic engagement that is necessary to tackle emerging challenges, such as trade wars, military conflicts, etc.

The Dangers of Historical Pride

In contrast to uncritical historical pride provides equally serious negative phenomena toward individuals and societies. This inclination would lead to the creation and perpetuation of mythologizing stories that eliminate or trivialize dark history. These constructs distort the understanding of history profoundly, and at the same time, they create a condition of cognitive dissonance when facts do not adhere to the desirable version of the account. Beyond these internal distortions, extreme historical pride also leads to the most dangerous variants of nationalism that perceive the country in question as superior in nature compared to others. This

type of superiority complex can help in dehumanizing other peoples and cultures thus creating the kind of psychological atmosphere that increases the possibility of discrimination and conflict.

A stark example of dangerous historical pride can be found in Japan's approach to World War II history. Though heavily documented in history, some political and educational attempts in Japan have continuously downplayed or outright refuted Japanese war crimes, including the Nanjing Massacre and the utilization of the "comfort women". Such an approach has not only destroyed the relations between Japan and neighboring nations but also disallowed Japan from reconnecting with the rest of the world on some kind of reconciliation as a way of learning their lessons. Many Japanese politicians insist on being merely a victim of the second world war which has been a cause of constant diplomatic difficulties with its neighbors.¹¹

Moreover, the pride approach to history has a tendency of what historians refer to as cherry-picking, that is, highlighting the good happenings and downplaying or pretending the bad ones in the past.¹² This biased use of historical evidence negates the intellectual honesty needed in historical education among the masses. By being conditioned to be proud of accomplishments and unaware of the shortcomings of the country, they live in an incomplete realization of their history which will turn out to be completely false in the end.

The Educational Alternative

Rather than embracing either shame or pride as the major attitudes to the national history, citizens must take what can be termed as an educational approach where comprehension overrides the affective response. This methodology starts with the acknowledgement that history is all about learning, learning how past events happened, why they happened, and what can be learned in future decision making.¹³

An educational approach emphasizes critical thinking rather than emotions, making it more balanced instead of toward either extremes. Instead of asking the question as to whether we should or not be proud or ashamed of such an event, this approach poses constructive questions: What were the factors that caused the event? What are their short-term and long-term consequences? What other actions did historical actors have? What do these events tell us about more general patterns of human behavior and social change?

A successful example is the post-apartheid Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) in South Africa. Instead of focusing on collective shame or defensive pride, the TRC attempted to find a full picture of human rights abuse during the era of apartheid by investigating potential

criminal behaviors methodically and allowing people to testify. The commission style concerned itself with the accuracy of facts, a contextual understanding, and reconciliation looking at the future instead of punishment or glorification.¹⁴ While not perfect, the TRC proved that there is an effective way to show society to overcome historical difficulties not with hyped emotions but with education and dialogue, which provides a basis of national healing and creation of democracy without tearing the nation apart.

In this conceptual framework, citizens can understand the complexity of history in a more subtle way. In contrast to the tendency to define past events by some simple moral rules, the educational approach acknowledges that the vast majority of historical events are full of competing values, unintended results, and moral complexity.¹⁵

Practical Benefits of the Balanced Approach

Adopting a balanced, educational approach to national history provides numerous practical benefits.

Firstly, this approach encourages an acquisition of critical thinking skills which are essential to democratic citizenship. As citizens are taught to interpret past events in a more objective manner, they are able to compile the intellectual tools that they need to assess political statements and policy recommendations in the present.¹⁶

Furthermore, the teaching method of history supports interpretation and empathy between the cultural and national borders. By making citizens familiar with the fact that all societies contain complicated histories of achievements and losses, one discourages the legacy of superiority or prejudice when viewing other peoples. It is a much broader perspective that effective international cooperation and resolution of conflicts require.¹⁷

In addition, the balanced approach also offers a more viable ground for sustainable patriotism and civic dedication. Instead of building a love of nation on mythologized accounts of the past or denying the nationhood because of past sins, citizens may develop what we could call a mature patriotism, the ability to act and feel in the best traditions of the nation and not in denial of the sins of history or the failings of the present.¹⁸

Addressing Common Objections

Critics and opponents of the balanced and educational approach often argue that such a position creates moral relativism or a callousness to past wrongs.¹⁹ This exception misperceives the difference between apprehending and forgiving. Educational approach to history is an

attempt to know why injustices were committed without necessarily justifying the same. A more profound knowledge of the conditions leading to historical injustices tends to give more edited interpretations on how to avoid the repetition of the injustices than the feelings of either shame or pride.

Another common objection is that a balanced approach lacks the emotional attachment to the past which is essential for civic engagement. The grounds of such objection presume that only shame and pride can motivate civic action.²⁰ In fact, curiosity, empathy, and hope, which result naturally from the educational method are equally effective ways of motivating an individual toward civic participation without the psychological and intellectual risks of shame and pride.

Some also argue that certain events of the past can be objectively evil, so that they have to be thoroughly morally condemned without analysis. Although there is a certain amount of truth in this objection, the educational approach does not exclude any moral judgment. Instead, it attempts to get the deeper basis of such judgments than mashes of emotional response.²¹ For example, the Holocaust was a horrific atrocity, but we should still analyze factors to prevent recurrence, which is the reason for importance of studying functionalist and intentionalist perspectives.²²

Conclusion

It is a false dichotomy obscuring a constructive alternative approach that the choice between shame and pride as primary responses to national history represents. The shame brings about paralysis and simplification whereas pride tends to create mythology and possibly foster extreme nationalism. A balanced, educational, and comprehensive alternative, of which neither extremes acknowledge, therefore, holds a more realistic course of direction. With rational comprehension above emotional reaction, critical analysis above simple judgements, and objective presentation above biased indoctrination, this approach equips the citizens with the knowledge and ability to form their own subjective understanding of emotionally detached historical facts, ensuring that the society as a whole undergoes an organic development of nuanced historical perspectives. Ultimately, the goal of engaging with national history should not be to feel better or worse about ourselves, but to understand our past more clearly so that we could build a better future.

Endnotes

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