

Book Review: Terman, Rochelle. *The Geopolitics of Shaming: When Human Rights Pressure Works—and When it Backfires*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2023. 216 pages. Paperback, \$29.95.

Why do previous measures of shaming, (as a mechanism of human rights enforcement), tend to conclude that this tool is either overly effective or hopelessly flawed? According to Rochelle Terman, a self-described representative of the “third wave” of research in this subfield, it is because scholars are not using the right theoretical framework. She adopts an approach from social psychology to explain why states—nations in the international arena—may utilize shaming, to whom it is targeted, and the variety of responses to its employment.

Dr. Terman, an assistant professor of political science at the University of Chicago, earned her Ph.D. in gender and women’s studies at the University of California at Berkeley. She conducted post-doctoral research at the Center for International Security and Cooperation at Stanford University. This book is an expanded version of her dissertation.

The structure of the book includes seven chapters, bordered by a list of tables and figures along with acknowledgments before, together with works cited and index after. In the Introduction, Terman observes that “shaming has emerged as the chief tool of norm enforcement in international politics” (pp. 6). She examines the recent record of research in the area, arguing that there are still questions about why some states pursue shaming despite the potential for backlash and about the patterns of compliance or resistance by target states. She argues that shaming should be conceived in relational terms, and that once done a theory can be constructed which emphasizes the strategic and social nature of shaming within the international milieu.

Terman’s relational theory of international shaming is described as it pertains to the recommender, or shamer, and the target in Chapter 2 and Chapter 3, respectively. States resort to

shaming as a tactic to change the behavior of the target nation, to accommodate the position of other nations in the international environments, and to damage the reputation or standing of the target states. While the incentive to shame allies is low, the costs of doing so are high; this is reversed when confronting adversaries. When attention is turned to target states, Terman claims that the alternative responses to shaming are based on a combination of international and domestic pressure along with perceived costs; they include compliance, deflection, or defiance.

The relational theory of international shaming is then tested in various ways. For example, in Chapter 4, Terman utilizes data available from the Universal Periodic Review—a process conducted by the Human Rights Council—over two cycles to assess whether selected variables impact either severity of recommendation or probability of compliance. She discovers that geopolitical similarity and arms trade between reviewer and target state affects behavior in a manner consistent with her theory. In Chapter 5, Terman probes the intrastate element of her theory by conducting two survey experiments, uncovering more evidence for a backfire reaction to international shaming than domestic human rights mobilization because of it. Chapter 6 implements a case study format to examine two recent examples of international shaming, including America’s relationship with Saudi Arabia following the murder of Washington Post journalist Jamal Khashoggi by Saudi forces in Turkey, and the international reaction to a stoning sentence imposed on a woman by the Iranian government, later commuted.

In the conclusion, Terman reminds the reader of the political nature of shaming, and that “responses to international shaming—as well as resistance and backlash to norms more generally—hinge not only on the *content* of norms but also on the relational *context* in which they are invoked” (pp. 161).

The topic of human rights enforcement has been covered in various ways by

contemporary scholarship. For example, enforcement mechanisms are presented objectively in works by Timothy Yerima (2011), Faheem Iqbal Shayiq (2013), Kathryn Sikkink (2019), and Ingrid Westendorp (2024). Conversely, publications by Eric Posner (2014) and Kate Cronin-Furman (2022) depicts the failure of human rights pressure and treaties, respectively. The closest research to that of Terman is a 2015 edited book by H. Richard Friman and a 2023 kindle offering by Clemente Kubiszewski, both of which include shaming among other means of leveraging influence.

Terman's work has been the recipient of many awards in political science, and she should be commended for recasting the debate in the shaming subfield of human rights enforcement. Her study verifies that findings are dependent on the manner by which the subject is conceived. Of course, there are limitations here, as the author is first to identify. First, the social psychology approach upon which the relational theory is founded cannot fully capture the complexities of the international system. Second, the presentation of data in the text is incomplete and is not accompanied by an appendix, mitigating the ability to judge the success of the model used to test her theory. Further, the variables constructed to weigh severity of recommendation and probability of compliance lack historical and economic considerations together with a measure for sudden, critical events. Finally, there are other devices for fostering human rights enforcement, from dialogue to capacity building to coercion. Still, Terman's desire that human rights defenders "can use this book as a resource as they continue to fight for freedom and justice across borders" (pp.169) is both worthy and realistic.

References

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