
SHAME AS SPROUT: SOME OTHER VIGNETTES FROM THE HISTORY OF PHILOSOPHY

LA VERGÜENZA COMO GERMEN DE LA POLÍTICA: ANÉCDOTAS DE LA HISTORIA DE LA FILOSOFÍA

PHAM, Kevin D.: *The Architects of Dignity: Vietnamese Visions of Decolonization*, New York, Oxford University Press, 2024, 219 pp., ISBN: 978-0197770276 (paperback).

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Concluding *The Architects of Dignity*, Kevin D. Pham observes that “some Vietnamese intellectuals today [...] are using shame in new ways to motivate contemporary Vietnamese to construct new forms of national dignity” and turning to “these six thinkers for ideas and guidance in making sense of Vietnam’s past” (Pham 2024, 182). Pham, as a Vietnamese-American intellectual himself, presents through his book a genealogy that seeks to guide readers in making sense of Vietnam’s political-theoretic history –offering them as architects with varying blueprints for constructing human dignity in their specific contexts. I understand this work to be, as Pham mentions at several points in the book, primarily addressed to “[us] (citizens in Western liberal democracies)” –many of whom would be likely unfamiliar with ideas of the quote unquote ‘the East,’ much less the hybrid worlds of Southeast Asian political thought (*ibid.*, 77). The contemporary, even cosmopolitan Euro-American audience is also clear from the comparatist touchpoints with thinkers assimilated into the global academic-industrial complex throughout the chapters. Most prominently with the concepts of shame and dignity, but also with contemporary (but not contemporaneous) theorists of Confucianism and democracy (e.g. Sungmoon Kim, Sor-hoon Tan), Du Bois, Adorno and Horkheimer, Jalal Al-e Ahmad, Gandhi and Tagore, Burke, Fanon, Mills, Vaclav Havel, and so on. These are otherwise not the most congenial of intellectual bedfellows.

A social or political philosopher might take issue with Pham's dismissal of the concept of false consciousness itself, especially if we are using it as Adorno and Horkheimer do (cf. Wilson 2021). A historian of philosophy might thus be tempted to take issue with the interpretive liberties of the philosophies as well as (mostly understandably yet frustratingly) light historical details canvassed in this work of political theory: e.g., whether and, if so how, Liang Qichao's Buddhist interpretation of Kant's understanding of transcendental freedom in his essay (1903–1904) "The Teachings of Kant the Greatest Philosopher of the Modern Era" (Cambi 2025), might have found their way to Phan Bội Châu and Phan Chu Trinh.

However, Pham's choice to address his readers with the term 'citizens' is revealing: the implied audience is a political one –and the book's conversational (and at times perhaps unintentionally didactic) style also suggests this. I thus take it for granted that his project is more political than scholastic in its aim: like the thinkers he canvassed, Pham is better read as playing the role of the *theoros* (θεωρός) to gather accounts from abroad, so as to present a blueprint for solidarity among 'citizens in Western liberal democracies' in relation to struggles against oppression wherever they be. And, like Phạm Quỳnh, the book would shame such citizens into quote "fulfilling their own idealized, universalist pretensions" of *liberté*, *égalité*, and *fraternité* (Pham 2024, 123). The book and its readers, then, function as a *receptive public* in the Euro-American public sphere (Habgood-Coote et al. 2024), as a subtype of public sphere spaces wherein people who do not experience a particular form of oppression can go to learn about that oppression from people who do experience it.

It is in this spirit that I will now too collect four vignettes from the history of philosophy as an attempt to refine and expand this sense of solidarity, by appropriating Pham's analytic of the concept of shame for Christine de Pizan against patriarchy in Medieval French court (1.), Voltaire against Catholic intolerance in Enlightenment France (2.), Mencius against tyrannical kings in Warring States China (3.), and finally, Fanon against colonialism at the Second Congress of Black Writers and Artists in Rome, 1959 (4.).

1.- Christine de Pizan

In her 1405 *Book of the City of Ladies*, Pizan begins her narrative with an allegorical version of herself, Christine, lamenting in shame about being a woman denigrated by philosophers and poets alike. She consequently despises her own womanhood, distrusts her own sense of self-worth, and arrives a crisis of faith as to why God would make her as a woman. In response, Three Ladies of Virtue, Lady Reason, Lady Rectitude, and Lady Justice visit her on behalf of the divine. Lady Reason comforts and corrects her, locating the fault not in womanhood or in the internalisation of the slander of the philosophers and poets, but in Christine's evaluative and hermeneutical approach to the latter. She then charges Christine with founding an everlasting, non-earthly city in the field of letters, clearing the ground with the pick of inquiry. Christine was to found the city as a community for other women who would individually otherwise fall into the same error and be exposed like a field without a hedge.

In this, we see Christine's shame quite literally addressed by reason, although for dignity to be of a group, specifically to be of women readers across time and space, the moral virtues of rectitude and justice were necessary. On Lady Reason's instruction, Christine establishes the city's cornerstone with the trowel of her pen: setting up as exemplars of the political capabilities of women the legendary Assyrian regent Semiramis and the Amazonians. Pizan continues to then construct the city and populate it with women of renown and virtue from various parts of the world history, before finally finishing the construction with the Virgin Mary as queen. Citizenship was for French women readers of Christian virtue, who would be assured access to the dignity and solidarity the imagined community afforded against the slander of male philosophers and poets. As Sophie Bourgault and Rebecca Kingston put it:

"Christine the author places responsibility for the continued growth and maintenance of her community in the hands of women themselves. Members of the City of Ladies will remain unknown to one another unless women themselves do the work of keeping alive their reputations. In other words, their ultimate destiny as a community lies neither in divine intervention, nor in fate, but rather in the continued acts of virtue and the continued efforts of mutual recognition and remembrance. [...] The building of the City of Ladies is presented to us as an ongoing enterprise—one that can be sustained and *strengthened* through constant additional acts of virtue and solidarity on women's part" (Bourgault and Kingston 2018, xxiv).

2.- Voltaire

Three centuries later, Voltaire, who was prized by Trinh and also wrote about Semiramis, chastised religious intolerance in France under Louis XIV by appealing to the Jesuits' accounts of China. In his 1756 *Essay on Universal History*, Voltaire observes from the accounts that Buddhist and Daoist “sects are tolerated in China for the use of the vulgar, as a coarse sort of food proper for their stomachs; while the magistrates and the learned, who are in every respect separated from the common people, feed on the purer substance” –i.e., Confucianism (Voltaire 1759, 27). In his 1763 *Treatise on Tolerance*, he remarks that the banishment of Christian missionaries under the Yongzheng [“Yung-Chin”] Emperor (r. 1723–1736):

“was not because he was intolerant, but rather because they were. [...] It was enough that he should be informed of the squalid quarrels between Jesuits, Dominicans, Franciscans and secular priests, sent into his domains from the other end of the world to preach the truth and who spent their time cursing one another. The Emperor did no more, then, than to send packing some foreign trouble-makers. But with what display of kindness! Such paternal attention was there lavished on the preparation of their journey home and such great care taken that they should escape insult along the way! Their banishment was itself a supreme example of tolerance and humanity” (2000, 22).

Elsewhere, Voltaire approvingly quotes Yongzheng's chastisement of the Jesuit missionary Dominique Parrenin, grounding the critique in the principle of reciprocity shared by Christianity and Confucian thought. As Xianzhe Hui and Mario Wenning observe (2024), Voltaire cites the moral ‘silver rule,’ as formulated in the *Analects* as opposed to the ‘golden rule’ in the Catholic gospels.

Such characterisations of Qing China that Voltaire provides are, importantly, mostly inaccurate. But like the previous vignette of Pizan, we find here creative appropriations of a foreign culture and history in seeking to employ shame to guide readers of one's own culture towards emancipatory goals and self-criticism. They are perhaps *theoroi* only in *theoria*, but with global appropriations similar nevertheless to those by Trinh and the Black Lives Matters movement which Pham condones.

3.- Mencius

Pham rounds off his book noting that quote “[w]e are still left with the challenge of steering these powerful, emotive social forces toward productive, world-building projects and away from narrowing projects of resentment and violence” (Pham 2024, 193). Jumping back to the Warring States period of *Mencius* 1A7, we see Mencius precisely play the role of an ‘honest minister’ who advises King Xuan of Qi and sought to direct his compassion from an ox meant for ritual sacrifice towards the people so as to convince him of his ability to rule a government for the people. In 2A6 (trans. Bloom 2009), we learn that the “feeling of pity and compassion” is the sprout of humaneness (仁 *rén*), while the “feeling of shame and aversion” is the sprout of rightness or rectitude (義 *yì*). The latter is exemplified in 3A5, when it is related that some in high antiquity who did not bury their parents and saw their bodies being devoured by foxes and wildcats and bitten by flies and gnats viscerally experience shame: quote “sweat broke out on their foreheads and they averted their eyes to avoid the sight” due to “what was present in their innermost hearts.” Thereafter, Mencius concludes, these people of high antiquity buried their parents’ bodies because it was quote “truly right.” Even a beggar, he would observe in 6A10, would not demean himself by taking food that has been trampled upon in an undignified manner.

However, a general concern might be raised for all three foregoing vignettes: in supposing particular values and virtues –whether they are understood as Christian, Confucian or cosmopolitan –or in creatively appropriating another’s culture and history in order to shame, we encounter what Linda Martín Alcoff calls ‘*the problem of speaking for others*,’ a practice that “is often born of a desire [...] to privilege oneself as the one who more correctly understands the truth about another’s situation or as one who can champion as just cause” (Alcoff 1991, 29). This is a particularly salient problem for Pham’s intended readers in liberal democracies that emphasise ‘governance *by* the people’ –but also a problem that he presented for the various Vietnamese thinkers in the book, in their attempts to galvanise the people to assert their agency against colonial domination. Shame and indignation must be given political meaning for it to counter colonial violence, but how can we impart productive, world-building meaning without imposing it and problematically speaking for the other? I understand this to constitute Pham’s steering challenge at the end –somewhat anticipated by Nguyễn Mạnh Tường.

4.- Fanon

I imagine that Pham would be tempted to follow Tường to advocate the principle of free speech in the public sphere as a means to solve this problem, for the reasons that Tường gave (e.g. rectifying leaders) and perhaps more. However, it is here that I am most puzzled by Pham's presentation of Fanon's counter colonial programme as two-staged: the first of counter colonial violence for independence, and the second of a "heroic and positive path" of a newly independent nation where its party leaders and elites would leave their city vocation and go to the masses to learn from the people and in turn teach the masses what they have learned in Western universities (Fanon 2004, 99; cited in Pham 2024, 192). As Majid Sharifi and Sean Chabot (2020) have articulated, Fanon's understanding counterviolence is meant to address the threefold organising principle of the colonial system as violence: *instrumental violence*, which is enacted upon an individual's physical body; *institutional violence*, where socio-economic institutions of the colonial peripheries are beholden to the metropole's; and *epistemic violence*, where one's reason, values, and virtues are determined by the coloniser's paradigms.

For Fanon, any assertion of the people's agency that can effectively counter the extent of colonial violence must be directed and organised by a *national* culture in the Hegelian sense of the term, in order to overcome rural-urban divides, ensure focus and proportionality, and introduce safeguards to prevent another system of exploitation. This was the heart of his argument to the writers and artists at the 1959 congress in Rome, many of whom were allied otherwise to the internationalist Négritude movement. For Fanon, the relevant values and virtues for national culture were not to be found in devotion to a 'golden age' of one's own in some by-gone pre-colonial era or, worse still, the values and virtues of the imperialist (whether Confucian or Enlightenment). Both these are understood to be shameful, inert idealisms of the ivory tower in relation to the material struggle of the people. Rather, the animating values and virtues for Fanon were to be found quote "in the people's struggle against the forces of occupation" –and, even then, only tentatively (Fanon 2004, 159). The past, for Fanon, was "irrelevant to the present" unless it could be imparted with new meaning and dynamism by the nation's intellectual for the

organisational needs of the present struggle, but this needs to be done in a back-and-forth in tandem with the people being addressed (*ibid*, 161) –what Alcoff would call a ‘speaking with.’ Fanon portrays this as a *dialectical* process:

“Every time the storyteller narrates a new episode, the public is treated to a real invocation. The existence of a new type of man is revealed to the public. [...] The crystallization of the national consciousness will not only radically change the literary genres and themes but also create a completely new audience. [...] The storyteller responds to the expectations of the people by trial and error and searches for new models, national models, apparently on his own, but in fact with the support of his audience” (*Ibidem*, 174–175).

That is, the national elite’s turn to their people is less of a stage *after* independence is achieved, but marks the sprouting of the nation in the heat of the very struggle for independence. Moreover, national culture is thus less constructed than *cultivated*, maturing as it breaks through colonial restraints.

What is puzzling to me in Pham’s gloss over Fanon’s Hegelianism is that I understand Pham’s book to be precisely attempting an appropriation of such a Fanonian project: creatively drawing on materials, structured with the aim of a new humanism, to transform citizens in Western liberal democracies (neo-colonised or otherwise). Whether such an attempt could sufficiently resist the inexorable assimilative power of the academic-industrial complex remains to be seen. In our co-authored paper, I and Natalie Alana Ashton (2025) expressed a lack of confidence that receptive publics could be effective in colonial contexts. But I am confident that Pham, like Châu, as a *political* theorist, would be responsive to the different and changing expectations of his audiences (quite unlike a published book). While I cannot speak for the ‘citizens in Western liberal democracies,’ the book has nonetheless certainly changed this fellow Southeast Asian academic who looks forward to his next story.

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