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The Geopolitics of Shaming: When Human Rights Pressure Works—and When It Backfires Rochelle Terman. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2023. pp. 216.

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Review

The Geopolitics of Shaming: When Human Rights Pressure Works—and When It Backfires

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In *The Geopolitics of Shaming: When Human Rights Pressure Works—and When It Backfires* (Princeton University Press, 2023), Rochelle Terman takes on the important and interesting question of the effectiveness of states' denunciation of each other in the enforcement of human rights. "Naming and shaming" states for their human rights abuses has long been a feature of international relations. Despite its consistent presence in the international arena, it is often met with skepticism by IR scholars and seen as nothing more than power politics in disguise. Rather than seeking to downplay or push back against this criticism of norm enforcement, Terman embraces the fact that human rights shaming is political. She argues that states' decisions to shame, and their responses to shaming, are shaped by the geopolitical relationship between shamer and target.

The author defines shaming as "the public expression of disapproval by states of specific actors—typically other states—for perceived violations of appropriate conduct (for example, protecting human rights" (6). She justifies the focus on this act in

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international human rights because "shaming is by far the most common mode of enforcement" (1). Moreover, while she acknowledges that non-governmental organizations, international organizations, media outlets, and others engage in shaming in the international realm, she focuses on states in her study because they tend to influence non-state actors and non-state actors are typically trying to get the attention of states to condemn human rights violations. Terman draws on multiple fields of scholarship beyond political science and international relations, including psychology and sociology, to illuminate the concept of shaming and its role in the international arena. In brief, the power of shaming depends on the social context in which it takes place—in order for the act of shaming to have meaning—and the relationship between the shamer and target—in order for the act to potentially come at a cost and to prompt a reaction.

Terman presents two major research questions in this work: First, "Why, and under what conditions, do states punish human rights violations in other countries?" (2). This question is motivated by the fact that states make a choice regarding whether and how to criticize another's human rights practices. Choosing to criticize may come at a cost, yet we observe states doing it, which highlights the puzzle of states' need to balance human rights principles with national interests. Second, Terman asks, "When does shaming lead to an improvement in human rights conditions, and when does it backfire? And in cases when shaming *is* counterproductive, why do actors continue to do it?" (3).

The relational approach contributes to our understanding of human rights shaming by underscoring that it is a political act, mediated by pre-existing geopolitical relationships. The explanatory power of the framework can be summed up in Terman's statement that "shaming transmits vastly different signals depending on the relationship between source and target" (4). In short, states tend not to criticize their friends because they do not want to risk harming their strategic partnership. Yet, criticism from a friendly state does bear results, leaving us with the uncomfortable recognition that where human rights shaming can be most effective, it is least likely to happen. Meanwhile, states condemn their adversaries because there is no strategic partnership at risk. In fact, as Terman argues, states utilize enforcement of human rights norms against their rivals as a means to *stigmatize* them, "imposing a label that distinguishes, devalues, and degrades the actor in the eye of others within the stigmatizer's community" (39).

Through the relational approach, we can see that states engage in shaming for the express purpose of undermining the power and prestige of their adversaries. Moreover, the

geopolitical context of shaming explains why it happens even in circumstances in which it may be ineffective. According to Terman's relational theory, shaming is less effective when it comes from an adversary, because the target state considers the source of the criticism and interprets the condemnation through that lens, seeing it as a political exercise rather than an expression of genuine concern for human rights. Consequently, shaming from an international adversary is more common, yet less effective, than when it comes from a friend. This insight points to the puzzle of why states would bother to engage in shaming even when it is ineffective (failing to improve human rights conditions in the target state) or even backfires (leading a target state to double-down on their anti-human rights practices). Terman explains this again by highlighting the relational context in which the shaming takes place. The adversarial relationship incentivizes a state to condemn a rival in order to show third-party actors such as other states or domestic audiences they are good human rights actors and to harm the rival's reputation. The state is motivated by the pursuit of strategic advantage, rather than by a genuine desire to improve human rights conditions. Therefore, it is rational for the shaming to continue, even when the shaming is ineffective or backfires.

Terman explains the outcome of human rights shaming by outlining four possible responses from a target state, as determined by the intersection of shaming from friends and/or rivals on the international stage. First, minimal shaming from both friends and rivals results in *maintenance of the status quo*. The target simply brushes off criticism due to its low intensity, regardless of the source, and keeps doing whatever it is doing. Second, a high degree of shaming from geopolitical friends, combined with less shaming from geopolitical foes, leads a target state to *comply* with the demands placed upon them. Criticism from a friend is the condition in which shaming is successful. Third, abundant criticism from both friends and foes leads to a response in which the target state *deflects* by "affirm[ing] the legitimacy of the norm in question while minimizing perceptions that they violated said norm" (48). Essentially, the target state acknowledges the importance of the issue in order to please their geopolitical friends while denying their violations, in order to avoid awarding a victory to their enemies. Fourth, a high degree of shaming from geopolitical rivals, combined with a lower level of shaming from geopolitical friends, results in *defiance* from the target. Condemnation from an adversary is the condition in which human rights pressure fails, and possibly even backfires.

Human rights shaming can backfire when a rival is responsible for the condemnation because the target state may see it as an attack—possibly an accurate interpretation of the attempt to stigmatize the country that may have motivated the criticism—that provokes a defensive response. Independent of the content of the criticism, the adversarial source can invoke a feeling of "status threat, a hostile attempt to degrade the target country in a social hierarchy" (57). Human rights shaming, interpreted as a threat to the national identity of the target state changes domestic politics because leaders are incentivized to push back against a foe's criticism of their country, regardless of the substance of the criticism, as well as elevating opponents and undermining local advocates of the human rights issue. This is a dynamic process in which public opinion and elite mobilization against foreign meddling can play a role in creating and further stoking a domestic political environment unfavorable to improvements in the human rights conditions at stake in the original shaming.

Terman employs an impressive array of methods in this study. She utilizes 57,000 recommendations from the first two cycles of the United Nations' Universal Periodic Review (UPR), covering the period from 2008 to 2011 and 2012 to 2016, to conduct quantitative analysis of the effects of states' geopolitical relationships on shaming. Terman identifies the level of strategic ties between states based on their geopolitical affinity (UN General Assembly votes), formal military alliances (Correlates of War formal alliance data), and arms trade (Stockholm International Peace Research Institute's Arms Transfers data). In order to explore target states' responses, especially public opinion and the dynamics of status threat, the study employs experimental methods, presenting respondents with hypothetical human rights criticisms. Finally, the book also presents a pair of illustrative case studies of real-world human rights shaming. Terman chooses Saudi Arabia and Iran, because she is able to hold constant key factors such as being non-democracies in the Middle East both regarded as "pariah regimes" with "clear and compelling evidence of human rights abuse" (126–27). And again drawing on the UPR as the mechanism of shaming, Terman examines the reports from the same observers—the United States and its Western allies—for both Saudi Arabia and Iran. The point of difference is the strategic relationship, whereby the U.S. and its allies have a strategic partnership with Saudi Arabia while being geopolitical foes of Iran. Through the specific stories of the aftermath of Saudi Arabia's murder of dissident journalist, Jamal Khashoggi, in 2018, and the 2010–2011 "Save Sakineh" campaign against stoning in Iran, Terman presents a compelling

illustration of the U.S. and its allies being reluctant to shame Saudi Arabia because of the risk of damaging the strategic relationship while freely and harshly condemning their adversary, Iran, despite both having serious human rights abuses to reprimand.

The methodological variety in *The Geopolitics of Shaming* is impressive, but it raises some challenges regarding the cohesiveness of the study across the research questions it seeks to answer. While the explanation of the behavior of shaming states is pursued primarily through analysis of the UPR, the response of target states is examined through experiments that seek to uncover public attitudes about human rights shaming. Those attitudes are prompted by hypothetical instances of shaming that allow for testing of the effects of shaming coming from a friend or foe. As with any experiment, there is a potential limitation to its external validity—that is, do the findings apply outside of the experimental environment—and here the concern would be specific to the departure from the real-world effects of human rights shaming leveled at states in the UPR. In the real world, is the average person in any country aware of the UPR? Are they aware their country has been the subject of human rights shaming via the UPR or any other international mechanism?

Future studies can employ the relational approach and further test some issues raised in this study. For example, while this work speaks broadly of geopolitical relationships and the shaming behavior that flows from them, as Terman acknowledges, the relationship is ultimately tested on the basis of security issues (e.g., formal military alliances). Future work can shed light on whether the potential costs of shaming hold true for economic engagements in the same way. Does a state equally hesitate to shame a trading partner as it does a security partner? What effect does a significant trade imbalance have on a state's decision to shame or for the target state to respond? Similarly, with the existing security-defined geopolitical relationship, it may be important to understand the effect of power imbalances within a dyad on states' behavior. Does the junior partner in an alliance behave the same way as the major power? Terman's test of UPR criticisms provides a potential proxy for this in the weapons sales element of the relationship, but it would be interesting to see this examined in greater depth.

Similarly, future studies can test the relational approach on historical shaming. Does the geopolitical explanation hold during the Cold War, for example? Does the 1940s-70s era differ from the 1970s-90s time period, given the importance of social context in

giving meaning to the stigma attached to shaming for both the state undertaking the criticism as well as the target?

The Geopolitics of Shaming is a valuable contribution to our understanding of human rights enforcement in the international arena. By employing an innovative approach and multiple analytical methods, Rochelle Terman finds that shaming conforms to a strategic logic based on geopolitical relationships. And far from being window-dressing in international relations, the geopolitical dynamics explored in this book are evidence of the power of "naming and shaming" in international politics.