



Book Review

Sara Salman (2023) *The Shaming State: How the U.S. Treats Citizens in Need*. New York: New York University Press

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The Shaming State: How the U.S. Treats Citizens in Need offers a searing critique of the shaming and stigmatising response of the post-modern state to citizens in need. Sara Salman's book provides an insightful structural analysis of the shaming state, exploring, in particular, "how need and care are perceived and meted out, respectively, in moments of adversity" (p. 5). Through ethnographic case studies of the experiences of two seemingly dissimilar groups, Salman skilfully weaves theory, fieldwork, and analysis to elucidate for the reader the ubiquity of the shaming state for Americans today. In demonstrating this universality, Salman reveals the difficult reality that the vast majority of Americans are just one adverse event away from being at the whim of the shaming state themselves.

The Shaming State is structured in three parts, with the first two guiding the reader along the respective journeys of the two communities involved in this research. Part I, *Social Rights and Shame in Resettlement Assistance Programs*, traverses the experiences of resettled Iraqi refugees in Wayne County, Michigan, in the 2010s—many of whom were driven from their homeland for their service to the Americans during the Iraq War (the Second Gulf War). For these Iraqi refugees-cum-newly minted American citizens, the demands of resettlement can be overwhelming. For many, employment is elusive, and the design of the aid given to them means that for most, despite their legal entitlements, the best they can hope for is underemployment in service industry jobs. This means ongoing reliance on precarious state support, which this case study shows they desperately want to be free from.

In Part II, *Social Rights and Shame in Post-Disaster Relief Programs*, Salman describes the experiences of New Yorkers from the Jamaica Bay neighbourhood whose homes were devastated in 2012 by Hurricane Sandy and the seven-foot storm surge that inundated the area, surpassing all local experience and expectation. While the Iraqi refugees we meet in Part I of the book are facing precarity in almost every area of their lives, in contrast, the New Yorkers we meet in Part II are mostly homeowners, employed in government and first responder jobs and, on average, earning salaries higher than New York's median. For many in this community, their middle-class status obscures the severity of their need. As Salman explains, although the poor are always worse off when disasters strike, after decades of conflation of vulnerability with failure, the ability of the system and those within it to recognise these middle class, employed, white American citizens as vulnerable and in need of urgent fiscal support had been compromised. And so, in Part III, *Unraveling Rights, Intensifying Vulnerabilities*, Salman establishes that the groups we have met are not dissimilar in their experiences of shame, stigma, and precarity at the hands of



the state. This final part provides a structural explanation of the economic and political settings that have enabled the advent and momentum of the shaming state.

As Salman reveals in her account of the interactions of each of the two groups with the shaming state, the state—rather than acknowledging the vulnerability of the groups to their temporary and situation-dependent realities—viewed the members of each of these groups with open suspicion. Both the Iraqi refugees and the Jamaica Bay residents were consistently reminded of the importance of fraud-prevention as an explanation for the complexity of the forms and processes they were forced to navigate repeatedly to obtain any assistance. As Salman puts it, the American state “deployed discourses of waste and fraud to legitimate its hollowed appearance in the social and civil spheres” (p. 151). In the face of this suspicion, the people we meet in this study show both understanding and contempt for those “others” who would defraud systems delivering aid. Salman explores the nature of stigma and shame at multiple levels—by the state, by the electorate, and by vulnerable people themselves. Her work is both a useful contemporary application and an extension of Goffman’s (1963) legendary work on stigma—in particular, clarifying the production and perpetuation of cycles of stigma and shame.

A significant contribution of this text is the nuance of the contradictions that sit within this lived experience of vulnerability in the American context—between the identity of being a vulnerable citizen in need of the support of the state (to which they have a right) and the conscious and unconscious elements of casting this identity off as something only those that are lazy, corrupt, fraudulent, and un-American would embody. Salman connects these tensions in to the post-modern reality of the “American Dream” – which she concludes is not only impossible for most Americans to achieve, despite their hard work, but a reality of which the people are simultaneously aware and unaware. In explaining these contradictions, Salman notes that “[i]n 2020, approximately 70 percent of Americans reported that the economic system unfairly favours the powerful ... at the same time, 60 percent of Americans also believe that ‘most people who want to get ahead can make it if they are willing to work hard’” (p. 10). On the one hand, Americans are sceptical of the American Dream and, on the other hand, hope to join a race that they believe is “both rigged and winnable” (p. 182). In her navigation of these incongruities, Salman gets to the heart of the conflicts in the lives of both groups with whom she worked.

In beginning to unpack the experiences of the Iraqi refugees and the New Yorkers, the dichotomy between the deserving and the undeserving poor, which Salman develops from the work of Katz (2013), provides a framework on which to hang the understanding of shared vulnerability in American society. Nobody in either group wanted to be viewed as undeserving, nor as vulnerable, and certainly not as part of the near-legendary problem with waste and fraud alleged by the state. Rights and entitlements aside, in each of Salman’s case studies, we see the state abandoning its people in their moment of greatest need of care and support. It is important to note that in each of these circumstances, neither group *wanted* a permanent crutch. Instead, they sought support to navigate their *way out* of hardship caused by factors beyond their control. The structural absence of care and support by the state in times of need is a pillar of this text, and Salman’s case studies—though different in many respects—collectively demonstrate the consistency of this absence.

In addition to the discussion of the state’s roles in the stigmatisation and resulting precarity of these two communities, Salman’s structural analysis quickly identifies the role of the state in causing the circumstances that brought these communities into a state of vulnerability in the first place. It was predictable that the Iraq War would generate refugees who would be in need of assistance and integration. The flood plans and disaster communications plans existed in New York in advance of Hurricane Sandy, but had not been maintained adequately or updated regularly. In examining the fallout of each of these events, Salman explains that these were not completely unpredictable or unmanageable events for the state; rather, the consequences these communities experienced were the result of a lack of planning by the state, and a myriad of structural gaps. For the new Iraqi-American citizens in Wayne County, Michigan, they were at the mercy of an overloaded system that was struggling to cope with the sheer numbers of refugees even before accounting for the effects of the collapse of the housing market and the ongoing negative ramifications of the Global Financial Crisis (in Wayne County moreso than Michigan, as a whole, and in Michigan moreso than in other states). For the Jamaica Bay locals, as the “superstorm” approached, they were unaware that New York flood maps were out of date, and that evacuation plans and methods of communication had not been updated as was required. Salman illuminates in great detail the state’s absenteeism at both ends of these cases.

The market fundamentalism at the heart of the structural arrangements that drive the shaming state is ultimately at fault for the absence of care and the shame experienced by vulnerable Americans from each of the groups examined in this book. Where the American Dream has entrenched the theory that hard work ultimately produces deserved results, market fundamentalism has knocked down the imagined ladder to success, leaving only those with generational wealth or astronomical luck to prosper. The ontological insecurity and contradictory belief systems that fill this gap consequently have a gaslighting effect on the people who feel, but may not be able to quantify, the loss. As Salman explains, “[a]ll that is solid is melting into air, and the feeling that *things are not what they used to be* is not simply a nostalgic one, but an expression of material loss” (p. 187). The

state stigmatises and casts doubt on legitimate need, tormenting citizens who are asking for what is rightfully theirs, and “emphasizing personal responsibility and thus tacitly blaming citizens in need for relying on state programs. Shaming operates by reminding the group being shamed that they are exhibiting need which is at best questionable and at worst altogether illegitimate” (p. 5).

In the final part of the book, *Unraveling Rights, Intensifying Vulnerabilities*, Salman leads the reader through her synthesis of theory and the results of her comprehensive fieldwork, distilling a range of complex ideas and experiences into a coherent and clear argument with intentionality and without excess. Here, as we see throughout *The Shaming State*, Salman acknowledges points of intersectionality, and the complexities of the role of race and class within the lived experience of the communities with whom she worked. She traverses these with great respect for the dignity of all groups experiencing discrimination largely as a consequence of the structural settings pitting vulnerable groups against one another. Overall, *The Shaming State* is structured and written with precision and integrity: the solemnity of the subject matter is never compromised, and despite the power of the messaging from the state about individual responsibility for all and the devastating consequences of the absentee state for those we meet within the book, Salman retains hope for a better alternative.

The Shaming State traverses the structural arrangements that have enabled the contradictions of thought and the impossible realities faced by the communities storied within. In setting out the economic and political structural considerations, Salman argues convincingly for a turn away from “neoliberalism” as an all-encompassing term and toward “market fundamentalism” as more nuanced nomenclature for the free market shifts that never quite gave up government intervention in any sphere. It is this market fundamentalism that, according to Salman, has created the conditions for both the state’s retreat from the lives of its citizens, and the shaming that now exists in the place of social safety nets. It is the consequences of market fundamentalism that push the majority of the American people to the precipice—teetering precariously over the edge when confronted with (the possibility of) disaster. The communities we meet in the book retained and built solidarity where they could, drew on communal networks where possible, and often considered themselves personal failures for their inability to navigate the systems well enough to steer their way out of the ongoing vulnerability they were experiencing. In exploring the individualisation of these societal problems, Salman provides a fresh examination of this recurring sociological problem.

The Shaming State provides a deep exploration of what it means to be vulnerable, and how class, race, and nationality can intersect with the optics of vulnerability. Ultimately, Salman argues for “citizenship rights that correspond to the changes in economic production, so that people do not lose their worthiness at the loss of labor or economic participation” (p. 16). In this political climate, it is difficult to be sanguine that such rights will be realised anytime soon.

Salman closes the book with hope that another way forward is possible, that taking frustrations at structural realities out on fellow vulnerable groups is avoidable lateral violence, and that deservingness can and should be viewed as innate. The author’s optimism for the possibility of a future more caring state remains, despite the overwhelm of the current settings feeling palpable with each turning page.

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