

Scandals

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By Laura Kipnis



Scandals about race hold a certain queasy fascination for Americans, but why wouldn't they, given our history? And if the incident in question offers the opportunity to hurl accusations of racism at someone prominent (especially when the someone is a self-styled moral taskmaster known for her on-air sadism), this is a happy day indeed. Every scandal is a register of social anxiety, and let's face it, race is right up there with sex and money, scandal's perennial motifs, on the social neurosis meter.

Scandals tend to break out in already-existing social trouble spots, when individuals trip over some festering social contradiction or fall into open sewers of failed self-awareness. (Scandal thrives on blind spots.) Scandals are stories about people negotiating social life badly, something any of us are prey to, though hopefully not on a national scale. For all these reasons, there was palpable schadenfreude on the part of

white America when radio host Dr. Laura Schlessinger's ham-fisted exhortations on the touchy subject of racial speech taboos added her name to a rogue's list of previous malfeasants and gaffe-makers, including the likes of Trent Lott, *Seinfeld* alum Michael Richards, Joe Biden, **Mel Gibson**, Don Imus, Mark Twain, and **Dog the Bounty Hunter**, the A&E reality star whose show was canceled after his son sold the *National Enquirer* telephone recordings of Dog spewing a racial tirade about the son's black girlfriend. (Dog was publically contrite, and the show resumed on A&E six months later.)

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Schlessinger's bid to join this distinguished pantheon involved using a particular racial epithet *11 times* on the air during an **exchange** with Jade, a black woman married to a white man. Jade had called Dr. Laura (of all people) for advice on situations when her husband's friends and relations brought up race in ways she found insulting. "Well, can you give me an example of a racist comment? 'Cause sometimes people are hypersensitive," countered Dr. L. Jade tried to describe an incident the night before when a neighbor used the phrase "you black people." Dr. L quickly cut her off, declaring, "That's not racist." When Jade responded, "What about the n-word—" she was once again cut off by Schlessinger, who pointed out that "black guys use it all the time" on HBO and elsewhere, then recited the word in question—"nigger, nigger, nigger"—like an incantation, as if trying to strip it of its force by repetition. "I don't get it," protested Schlessinger. "If anybody without enough melanin says it, it's a horrible thing; but when black people say it, it's affectionate. It's very confusing." She also told Jade that she had a chip on her shoulder and shouldn't have married out of her race if she lacked a sense of humor.

What swiftly ensued was a national outcry, sponsors pulling their ads, affiliates fleeing, and Dr. Laura announcing on **Larry King Live** that she was quitting her radio program. What also ensued was the making of a scapegoat. "*There's the racist, over there!*"

Let me be clear: *Scapegoats don't have to be innocent victims*. A scapegoat's crimes can be entirely real. In fact, criminals have always made excellent scapegoats, convenient targets for every moral disability threatening the community. One of the reasons scandals are so popular is the steady supply of new sacrificial figures they yield.

Scapegoats help the rest of us out by taking hits for the group; that's been their symbolic role throughout history. Guilty or innocent, they allow the community to ritually purify itself, offloading its guilt and other toxins onto designated candidates. According to Rene Girard's classic study, *The Scapegoat*, this process is intrinsic to all social groups; in fact it dates back to the foundations of the social order. The eternal search for new scapegoats can make the world a brutal place—these unlucky figures are subject to patterns of cross-cultural violence, both actual and symbolic, from stoning to being dragged through the media by your hair. But collective violence, even the symbolic sort, has a socially cleansing effect, says Girard.

The scapegoat process persists because scapegoats continue to be socially useful; after all, it's not like Dr. Laura's the only one in town with some issues about race. Think of scapegoating as the collective version of what's known in psychology as "projective identification": attributing to others something you refuse to acknowledge in yourself, then punishing them for it. It's a universal tendency. The downside of a moral order organized around purity rituals is that it favors melodrama: good vs. evil; right-minded vs. racist, victims vs. victimizers. It lets us see the world in simplistic terms, which in turn feeds our punitive tendencies. Gray areas become black and white; we become a bit overeager to step into the prosecutorial mode. Perhaps there's something to cheer when the scapegoats come from the ranks of the powerful rather than the margins, as in the current instance. Still, with scapegoats providing convenient receptacles for everything we disavow in ourselves, it's easy to get a little too convinced of our own moral superiority.

In the interests of scandal-avoidance myself, I'm not going to try to adjudicate the question of whether Dr. Laura is or isn't a racist; on the language issue, I'll follow the lead of linguist John McWhorter **who argues that** while it's "too delicate a business to decree that whites cannot even use the n-word when *referring* to it," using it 11 times is cocky and rude. For my part, I'd just like to point out that Dr. Laura's harangue to Jade—that she had failed to get it right about race (she was overly sensitive on the subject)—took the same form as the public's response to Dr. Laura—that *she* had failed to get it right about race (she lacked sufficient sensitivity on the subject). But not getting it right about race is the condition of our time. At the moment, accusations of racism are leveled at those who foreground racial identities, those who fail to foreground racial

identities, and those who may be covertly foregrounding racial identities. A few weeks ago, rapper-mogul P. Diddy accused a *Nightline* host of posing racist questions for inquiring about a pricy car (a \$360,000 Maybach) he'd bought his 16-year-old son. In this context, it's surprising that anyone can think they've got it right about race.

So what kind of advice did Jade—who described herself in a **CNN interview** as a devoted fan of Dr. Laura's—think she'd get about negotiating the awkward spots of interracial coupledness from someone whose trademark lines are "Stop whining," "Tough luck," and "Shape up," and someone who's vociferously against even interfaith marriage? What was almost more egregious than the 11 repetitions of the n-word was that Schlessinger interrupted Jade at least that many times, then scolded Jade for interrupting *her*. She was incapable of actually hearing anything the other woman had to say, so profoundly infatuated was she with her own certitude. But so are her listeners apparently, who've appointed this deeply flawed, deeply authoritarian personality as a moral beacon, turning to her for ritual thwackings. The temptation to see the universe in black-and-white terms can be tempting, though when transposed to the realm of race—and probably any other meaningful question—that much certainty tends to be the sign of moral idiocy.

But see, I'm doing it too: Projective identification *is* the great temptation in scandal. (*She's* the overcertain one.) Recall the Clinton scandal, the most transparent example in recent memory, as one after another of the congressional leaders and family values proponents driving the impeachment process were **outed as adulterers** themselves. The outing of hypocrites is, of course, among the foremost pleasures of scandal. The hypocrites are all over *there*.

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