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SCHOOL FOR SCANDAL

Review subhed

By Laura Kipnis

Discussed in this essay:

On Scandal: Moral Disturbances in Society, Politics, and Art, by Ari Adut. Cambridge University Press. 341 pages. $27.
The Art of the Public Grovel: Sexual Sin and Public Confession in America, by Susan Wise Bauer. Princeton University Press. 337 pages. $26.95.

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People do the darndest things, propelling their tangled psychodramas and illicit urges onto the public stage in attention-grabbing and self-destructive ways, either courting punishment or somehow temporarily oblivious to the possibility of it, while the rest of us avidly devour the spectacle and cast brutal judgments. This is what is commonly known as a "scandal," which proceeds along these general lines: 1) a transgression of community norms; 2) the exposure of that transgression; and 3) surprise and outrage on the part of the community. Well . . . surprise and outrage of a sort, since a substantial percentage of otherwise norm-abiding citizens also love a good scandal and are never happier than when other people's lives are imploding and the gory details are splashed across every available media outlet, with hourly updates. Needless to say, the higher the transgressors were previously placed on the social hierarchy and the harder they hit ground, the greater the enjoyment for the rest of us.

Plucking a few paradigmatic examples from the overstuffed archives of recent such occurrences, consider the case of the former presidential candidate and one-time vice-presidential nominee revealed by vigilant tabloid reporters to have been stepping out on his much-revered cancer-stricken wife, possibly even fathering a love child with the other woman. What a monster! The airwaves vibrated with right-

eous indignation; the blogosphere was abuzz for months. Not only had he billed himself as the model family man and then betrayed his family (in the arms of a New Age twit everyone agreed was far inferior to the much-revered cancer-stricken wife) but he'd lied when asked about it, then hedged, then split hairs about the timing of the affair, then said that his wife's cancer was in remission at the time—as if that mattered! His political career was obviously over—as one commentator put it, "It's hard to recall a political burial as fast and cold"—his résumé was retroactively rewritten (hadn't there always been something smarmy about him underneath the do-gooder populist act?), and he instantly became an outcast. (Every society reinvents its own version of the shunning ritual: being dragged through the tabloids is the modern equivalent of being locked in stockades in the town square to be spit upon and mocked.) He was also known to have paid huge sums of money for haircuts while on the campaign trail; with the benefits of hindsight, we could see that the overpriced coif turned out to be the key to his character. One political columnist recalled having previously compared the candidate to a Ken doll and took the opportunity to apologize for having been unfair—to Ken.

Shortly before these revelations, we had another treat: the married governor of a populous northeastern state, previously a crusading attorney general with a reputation for sanctimony and moral fervor, which included a campaign to prosecute prostitution rings and raise penalties for men caught patronizing prostitutes, was nabbed in a prostitution scandal involving high-priced call girls. (Reports were he'd forked over more than $80,000 on secret trysts at upward of $3,500 a pop.) He resigned, amid threats of prosecution and impeachment. Which brought to mind the married governor of the adjacent populous northeastern state who'd been forced to resign after being caught in an adulterous gay affair with someone on his staff; which brought to mind the abstinence-preaching conservative southern senator who'd been caught in a pros-

titution sting (it just so happened he'd gotten his big political break replacing a congressman who'd resigned after being caught in an adultery scandal); which brought to mind the Republican senator who'd been arrested for lewd conduct the month before, after allegedly propositioning an undercover cop in an airport bathroom . . .

But does anyone still care? The big problem for someone writing a book on the subject of scandal is the rapid exhaustion rate of the example pool—by the time you read this, the current crop of "recent" scandals will seem passé, having been replaced by an all new crop of similarly soon-to-be exhausted scandals. At the moment, financial transgressions are edging out sexual transgressions in the scandal imagination, with billion-dollar Ponzi schemers and bribe-demanding governors as the scum du jour, though who knows how long this will last? Besides, greed seems more like an analog to lust than a replacement for it. The most paradigmatic forms of scandal tend to involve sex and money: someone wants *more* of something than they're socially entitled to, has "excess" desires, which just about describes the human condition. When is enough ever enough, especially when someone else is getting more? In addition to which, hypocrisy is not exactly unknown in the annals of human behavior, nor is self-obliviousness; most of us are probably on familiar terms with these tendencies, to greater or lesser degrees. Which is why it's puzzling that every new scandal is regarded with such astonishment, as if Martians had landed in Times Square. The talking heads convene, the bloggers go into overdrive, the late-night comedians outdo themselves. (About the governor-hooker story: "To be fair, he did bring prostitution to its knees—one girl at a time . . ." "Reports are the governor will be stepping down to spend less time with his family . . ." "He left his resignation on the night table with a $300 tip . . .") Even the news reports take a startled tone. During one recent scandal episode, I noticed—glued as I was to the TV and devouring every headline—that one cliché in particular was

repeated in virtually every story: "Americans reacted with jaw-dropping disbelief"; "Jaws were dropping across the face of the nation"; "It was a "jaw-dropping fall from grace"; "The sound of jaws hitting the floor could be heard."

The sun rose, jaws dropped? By which I mean: isn't anyone's capacity to register surprise (let alone go gape-mouthed) over the ability of the highly placed to publicly self-immolate on a regular basis actually far more surprising than the propensity of the highly placed to get themselves into these messes? Just what is this form of collective amnesia afflicting the population? To the extent that the scandalizers keep "forgetting" about social consequences, and to the extent that the scandal audience keeps "forgetting" about how routine such lapses are, one begins to suspect that this ability to both know and not know something at the same time is the trait that unites these seemingly disparate groups.

Then again, if potential scandal watchers weren't taken by surprise with each new scandal eruption, if we failed to muster sufficient umbrage about the latest assault on our social norms, it would be disastrous. Scandal requires an *audience*: without a punitive-minded public primed to dole out the requisite shame and censoriousness, scandal as we know it would cease to exist. In short, we are the key ingredient in the enterprise. Consider the failed scandal, the potential tabloid headline about which everyone goes "So what?"—the umpteenth politician adultery story, or the lucky society scion arrested for murder the day war breaks out. But most of the time we do pay attention; in fact, we're positively rapt. For one thing, scandal does make the world a more lively and unpredictable place; and for another, moral superiority about other people's screw-ups is one of the great human pleasures. What better opportunity to revel in it than by watching others get publicly humiliated for failing to navigate social norms and minefields of their own desire? No doubt these public shaming rites also distract us from our own moral shortcomings and transgres-

sions—note the element of excess levity in all the frantic jokes. (Note also that scandal and lawbreaking aren't the same thing: scandalizers don't necessarily violate laws; they violate the current conventions of social normalcy, whatever those happen to be at the moment. The law punishes lawbreaking; the community shames the scandalous.) In short, what a complicated fizz of self-congratulation and moral condemnation scandal offers all of us watching from the sidelines, and no wonder we rule-besieged citizens have such insatiable appetites for these convoluted little tales.

What's odd is how little inquisitiveness there's been about the social dynamics involved, which is to say the "meaning" of all this. Two recent books step into the breach, covering scandal from beginning to end: Ari Adut's *On Scandal: Moral Disturbances in Society, Politics, and Art*, which tells us how scandals are created, and Susan Wise Bauer's wittily titled *The Art of the Public Grovel: Sexual Sin and Public Confession in America,* which covers scandal's aftermath, advising scandalizers on how to plead their cases when that becomes necessary (clearly required reading for anyone planning to enter public life these days).

Both Bauer and Adut see scandal as a negotiation about power between those who have it and those who worry about its abuse; both are interested in the ways that scandals committed by elites call the legitimacy of the institutions and values they represent into question. But there are differences between the two writers as well: whereas Bauer sees public confessions as a laying down of power, a way of reassuring the public that the powerful aren't using their power in predatory ways, Adut frets more about the vindictive uses of morality and the excesses of mob justice. Still, both would agree that felling selected members of the political elites with the weaponry of community justice does at least throw a few checks and balances into the mix.

Although limiting one's purview to upper-echelon scandalizers may not be entirely fair to aspiring Long Island Lolitas or the tabloid contingent (Adut goes so far as to say that those with low social status can create only small scandals, if any scandal at all), *On Scandal* still casts a wide net, offering case studies both historical (Oscar Wilde, Watergate) and cross-cultural (French political corruption, American political adultery); there's also a final chapter on the provocations of modern art, which is slightly asymptotic to his argument. According to Adut, anything that can bring about shame and embarrassment is a potential scandal, though his larger mission is to turn the popular understanding of scandal on its head, by examining the social forces that construct scandals rather than the actions of the luckless individuals caught at the center of them. For this reason, Adut's interest veers more toward the publicity stage of the process than the social transgression preceding it, in part because, in his view, there's actually no correlation between rule-breaking and scandal itself. True enough: false allegations do sometimes have larger repercussions than proven transgressions, and unpublicized rule-breaking does occur all the time, with no ensuing scandal. In fact, a scandal-provoking accusation doesn't have to be *true*; it only has to catch a publicity wave. Publicity is a rather malign social force in this telling: it has its own unique logic that alters the meaning of the transgression and shapes our responses to it.

Adut hopes that by explaining how publicity works, not only will scandal itself be explained but so will most of the hypocrisy in the world. This is a rather sweeping aspiration, and also one potentially endangering to scandal, let's note. As something of a scandal aficionado myself, I fear that Adut would like to eliminate scandal through explanation, which is not in scandal's best interests, nor in those of its audience. Indeed, the audience itself is one of the social factors un-

der Adut's microscope, though the audience is not a monolithic unit: scandal attracts all sorts of spectators and means different things to all of them. Those in thrall to the individual stories and motives are, in Adut's terminology, "objectivists": they assume that scandal stems primarily from real misconduct, from people doing bad things. "Constructivists," conversely, understand that scandals have less to do with the individuals involved and are really about moral panic and the cultural divisions in society; for the constructivists, public opinion creates scandal rather than the moral failings of the scandalizers alone. Objectivists are moralizers trafficking in denunciation, whereas the more judicious constructivists realize that scandal is a version of mob justice and can be insidious. (Although Adut doesn't exactly say this, it does sound like objectivists are having more fun.)

Constructivists seem to occupy the moral high ground in this binary, but Adut is a critic of both positions: as a sociologist, he's interested mainly in delineating the structural factors and the underlying logic that scandals have in common. Although he's adept at weaving in interesting examples, from the Dreyfus case to Kate Moss's drug habit, the shift in focus from human foible and agency to the role of social forces does put the book at a certain remove from its subject. Scandalizers and their audiences are "social actors"; scandal fallout is "managed and manipulated through strategic interaction." The benefit of this approach is that it strips scandal of its subjectivity; the drawback is that it strips scandal of its subjectivity. Adut acknowledges that he isn't interested in subjective assessments of people's actions, but isn't what's gripping about scandal precisely the opportunity to make those assessments, to contemplate the frequently amazing levels of self-sabotage, self-contradiction, will, desire, and public displays of neurosis that permeate these stories (while nervously weighing one's own inclinations)? The historic segmentation of the academic social sciences into warring camps, each jealously guard-

ing its own specialized turf, can obscure the intersections of structure and psyche, and if future sociologists cross the quad and audit a psych class or two, this might liven up a sometimes excessively arid field, which wouldn't be a bad thing for the larger project of human understanding in general.

At the same time, shifting the focus to structural conditions does lead to some jarringly counterintuitive points about the scandal enterprise, including the surprising claim that the sexual liberalization of our culture has actually led to *more* scandal outbreaks, rather than the fewer we might have supposed. Insofar as a more permissive society has decreased modesty and reticence, allowing more public discussions about sex, it sets the stage for what Adut calls "sexual politics"—heightened disputations about sex and public arguments about how it should be conducted. Also, the United States can never seem to decide whether it's a modest country or a sexually liberated one, which leads to even more yakking about sex. All of which has made sex an intrinsic part of the public sphere, with unpredictable results. The fact that it wasn't possible in the sexual culture of the early 1960s to discuss openly what John Kennedy was getting up to in the White House was what saved his career; by contrast, the country managed to spend an entire year talking about whether oral sex is really sex when Bill Clinton occupied the White House in the 1990s. Sexual liberalization turned out to be a bit of a mixed blessing for Clinton. It hasn't been entirely salutary for the Right either, since their own participation in "sexual politics" puts conservative cultural critics in the hypocritical position of amplifying the sexualization of the public sphere that they're simultaneously denouncing. Worse, they frequently end up contaminated by the same elements with which they're hoping to tar their enemies, as scandal has a propensity to pollute those who attempt to promulgate it. A quite satisfying example was Independent Counsel Kenneth Starr, who ended up looking even more

scummy and sex-obsessed than the eternally conflicted sex hound he was so intent on bringing to justice.

Bill Clinton did ultimately wriggle out of Starr's creepy grip; for a while he looked almost valiant, having beaten back that phalanx of opponents. According to Adut, this was due less to his political acumen than to the strong economy (a structural factor rather than a subjective one), but Susan Wise Bauer would probably disagree, since Clinton is the apologist-hero of *The Art of the Public Grovel,* if not Bauer's personal muse: a sheepish yet endearing photo of him graces her cover, and his three public apologies—each one inching ever closer to the Platonic ideal to which every public apology should aspire—lend the book its narrative arc. This structure gives Bauer's argument a certain teleological momentum: perfection is achieved when Clinton finally stopped hedging and gave the public what it craved—the full grovel ("I agree with those who have said that in my first statement after I testified I was not contrite enough. I don't think there is a fancy way to say that I have sinned . . ."). The country was appeased, at least judging by his extraordinary approval ratings at the end of his term.

Confess early and often is Bauer's advice to elected officials and men of the cloth who find themselves caught up in similar cringe-inducing circumstances. (And they still are mostly men—sex scandal turns out to be the ultimate glass ceiling, though this may change as more women maneuver their ways into male enclaves and sinecures.) Bauer does include one woman in her lineup: radio evangelist Aimee Semple McPherson, who disappeared for a month in 1926 with her married lover, made up a story about having been drugged and kidnapped when she resurfaced, then charmed her way out of the ensuing hubbub when the story fell apart (leading to a grand jury appearance and charges of financial improprieties) by embarking on an eighty-day national speaking tour, during which she was greet-

ed by cheering throngs.

Although McPherson got away with admitting nothing, that was then and this is now. Instead, Bauer advises, should you find yourself in the midst of a life-wrecking exposé, try to remember this crucial point: confessions are *not* the same thing as apologies. "An apology is an expression of regret: *I am sorry,*" Bauer writes. "A confession is an admission of fault: *I am sorry because I did wrong. I sinned.*" A real confession requires soul-searching and an exploration of motives: the self must *consider* itself—channel St. Augustine and you'll be on the right track. And don't nitpick about the minor details, because no one cares. "Confession requires that the accused give up innocence and self-defense, taking moral responsibility for an evil act."

Bauer's larger argument is that our basic democratic expectations have become irrevocably intertwined with the rites of modern evangelicalism, which now structure the norms of political culture in ways that secular types (or this particular secular type) may not have sufficiently recognized. It's easy to see the way religiosity permeates the content of political messages—the family values stuff, the battles over creationism and abortion—but while secularists have been busy fighting over issues, it turns out that the very *forms* of public rhetoric have been taken over by holy-war religiosity, transforming public culture into one big revivalist tent, with politics and religion united in the war against Satan. Neo-evangelicals have made their identity as Americans into a new kind of holy crusade, confessing on behalf of the rest of the nation, particularly Democrats, and deploying "repentance and confession as weapons against the rising tide of secular humanism and the debased values of mainstream America." The goal is to save the soul of the nation, one sinner at a time. Those of us who don't particularly wish to be saved just confirm the direness of the situation.

Like it or not, this is our new national idiom, one that's been so suc-

cessful at insinuating itself into the political sphere because of the family resemblance between American democracy and American evangelicalism, as Bauer persuasively explains. Both aspire, at least formally, to egalitarianism—though the fact that the egalitarianism is illusory is also what scandal keeps exposing; public confessions exist as a counterbalance, a ceremonial laying down of power—though power is only ever handed over "so that followers could pick that power up and hand it back." Our leaders pretend to be accountable, and we pretend to believe them—a complicated pas de deux:

> We both idolize and hate our leaders; we need and resent them; we want to submit, but only once we are reassured that the person to whom we submit is no better than we are. Beyond the demand that leaders publically confess their sins is our fear that we will be overwhelmed by their power.

It's not only secularists who lose out in the new idiom. Although confession originated as a Catholic ritual in the Fourth Lateran Council of 1215, present-day Catholics caught in tight spots also turn out to be particularly clumsy at the elaborate versions the public now demands, left behind in the cosmic battles being waged by the revivalist holy wars. These contemporary forms of public confessional actually come to us by way of evangelical Protestantism, which borrowed them from the public conversion narratives of English Puritans—one reason that scandalous Catholics (cardinals caught up in the priest abuse mess, for instance), having been acclimated into "vertical" style confessions between God and sinner, prove to be inept at negotiating the "horizontal" sort of confessions required to repair the relationships between exposed leaders and reparation-demanding publics. A private communion with one's God or priestly stand-in won't wash with today's confession-greedy public, which is why Bill Clinton, schooled as a Southern Baptist, is Bauer's poster child for the apology well made. He placed himself on the right side of

the holy war, managed to portray himself as an American among Americans, aligned himself with the downtrodden, *and* avoided the appearance of having been a predator—all necessary items on Bauer's grovel checklist.

Compare this with Ted Kennedy's televised explanation of what transpired forty years ago when his car went over a Chappaquiddick bridge with a twenty-eight-year-old passenger, Mary Jane Kopechne, whom he failed to save from drowning. Not only did he not rescue Kopechne; he didn't even call the police until *the next morning*—and first he called a lawyer. Bauer takes a fine-toothed comb to Kennedy's half-hearted apology, emphasizing that as a lifelong Catholic, Kennedy simply didn't get how mealy-mouthed the assurances that he was dealing privately with his own moral failings sounded to his audience. He also failed to grasp that describing the tragedy and accepting legal responsibility for it weren't the same as admitting moral culpability. The senior surviving member of America's most powerful political dynasty, Ted Kennedy simply didn't speak the democratic language of the neo-evangelical public grovel, and he obviously didn't grasp the underlying public nervousness about predatory uses of power. His apology was supposed to reassure the public that he hadn't used his position to victimize an innocent woman; his failure to pull it off wrecked his chances at the presidency.

But even evangelicals can fail to hit the right note. Recall Jimmy Carter, a born-again Christian, who did indeed confess to moral failings; unfortunately, he did so in the pages of *Playboy*. Carter's gaffe led to a break with neo-evangelicals, who helped usher Ronald Reagan into office in 1980. Televangelist Jim Bakker also failed when he blamed his adultery on having been "wickedly manipulated by treacherous friends and colleagues who victimized me with the aid of a female confederate," a bungling non-confession that cost him his ministry. The following year, when pictures surfaced of minister Jimmy Swaggart checking into a motel with a prosti-

tute, Swaggart, too, resorted to the public confessional, though, having learned from Bakker's self-involved floundering, Swaggart took full responsibility and refused to shift the blame: "His brief sermon contained no less than nine clear statements of fault, and eight pleas for forgiveness," according to Bauer's tally. Although the confession was successful, his efforts to give up the hooker habit weren't: three years later he was caught with another lady of the night and forced out of his pulpit.

If the scandal fan's attention is riveted to such sordid little sagas, and scandal is the most successful entertainment genre around, one reason is that scandal purports to be revealing the *truth* about something, exposing secrets illicitly concealed, things that are imperative for us to know. Truth is valuable, but it is also socially rationed—more than ever in times like ours, when surfaces reign supreme and "truthiness" (in one TV satirist's coinage) is in the ascendancy. The irony is that the truths exposed by scandal are typically open secrets, information we already have: that married people sometimes consort with persons other than their spouses, that public moralists are private hypocrites, that the rich treat the rest of the world like a feudal estate.

In the scandal audience's psyche, maybe we're all Mary Jane Kopechnes, about to be driven off a bridge and left to drown while the leaders party and ignore our cries for help. We're looking for the life raft that would save us, the crucial missing piece of knowledge—something that would change the outcome. Clearly we're looking in the wrong place: the truths we need are hidden in plain sight, the depredations of power are no secret. How much anger toward leaders and elites gets played out around their minor personal missteps, how much sense of social injury; yet how little of it is directed at the moral failures and inequities that actually matter. ■