theories and methodologies

Leaking All over the Page

LAURA KIPNIS

"WE WERE WARNED TO EXPECT 'DIRTY TRICKS,'" HE TWEETED. "NOW WE HAVE THE FIRST ONE." HE'D BEEN SET UP, HE TOLD REPORTERS. HIS lawyer attributed the allegations to "dark forces," part of a "greater plan" to discredit him (Harnden). The "we" (and "he") in question was Julian Assange, a thirty-nine-year-old Australian and founder of the guerrilla media organization WikiLeaks, which dedicates itself to embarrassing governments and corporations through strategic leaks of classified and secret documents to the media. Assange has yet to be formally charged with anything, although he's currently under house arrest at the English country estate of one of his supporters and facing extradition to Sweden after allegedly sexually assaulting two women there. The women, both WikiLeaks supporters, did consent to have sex with him, but apparently not the kind of sex he had in mind. As one of them put it, "Not only was it the worst screw of my life, it was also violent" (qtd. in Davies).

The details of the police reports have, in turn, been strategically leaked to the media, generating a worldwide outbreak of commentary, argumentation, and conspiracy theories, as well as a $1.5 million book deal with American and British publishers for Assange's memoirs. Little known until recently, Assange, a digital age international scofflaw, is now an international celebrity. The quantity of information in circulation about him increases exponentially with each passing day: details on everything from his complexion (ghostly) to his relationship with his mother (complicated) to his personality (egomaniacal, self-aggrandizing, charming one moment and autocratic the next—he himself says he's "somewhere on the autistic spectrum" [qtd. in Hosenbail]). Thanks to the assault allegations, now we even have play-by-play accounts of his sexual style: caddish or criminal, depending on whom you ask.

One problem in writing about contemporary scandal, I've found, having recently completed a book on the subject I started a decade ago, is the unending barrage of new material coupled with the rapid exhaustion rate of the example pool. "Are you going to include this new

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scandal or that one?" everyone you know queries so helpfully every time another ingenue self-implodes or the latest billion-dollar Ponzi scheme is exposed, until the prospective manuscript starts resembling one of those Jorge Luis Borges stories about the infinite book with an indefinite number of pages containing every known instance and scrap of information relating to its ostensible subject, driving writers, readers, and librarians to despair.

Given the shelf-life issue, no doubt Assange will be superseded by a hundred new scandals long before these remarks hit print. But at the moment he's impossible to ignore, which is the sine qua non of a good scandal: somehow you can't look away. This one also happens to put conventional political affiliations and divisions up for grabs: it's not just feminists against leftists; it's leftists against First Amendment advocates and Pentagon Papers–era First Amendment advocates against WikiLeaks-era First Amendment advocates and feminists accusing other feminists of being rape apologists. No less a public-sphere feminist than Naomi Wolf has ridiculed the rape accusations against Assange as motivated by "hurt feelings" at best ("Julian Assange"), despite having created a miniscandal a few years back herself by accusing Harold Bloom of groping her thigh some twenty years earlier, when she'd been his student ("Sex"). Has she somehow forgotten this? Among the reasons high-profile scandal cases are magnets for so much social commentary is the infinitely useful opportunities for disavowal and disidentification they create.

As a self-appointed scandal theorist, and one not tethered to any particular academic discipline (my long-ago formal education was in art), I must start, when confronted with such a superb trove of material, by asking, *Now* what? One of the attractions of scandal as a subject is how little of theoretical interest has been written on it to date: it's pretty much virgin terrain, despite the vast amount of social real estate it occupies. You're forced to make your methodology up as you go along, feeling your way through pitch-black sewers on hands and knees, grasping at glimmers of insight. There's no recipe; each case necessarily generates its own techniques. The method, such as it is, emerges from the contours and particulars of the scandals themselves.

A concern about such procedures, obviously, is that the transgressions and embarrassments of the particular scandal might seep into the writing of the case or color the analysis. Still, transforming scandalizers into characters in a narrative does demand some level of authorial identification, some imagined proximity to their particular logic or illogic. (Perhaps this approach borrows more from novelists than social critics.) Another concern is not knowing exactly where you'll end up—you can lose your bearings or your overview of the situation, as have the protagonists themselves, of course, which is what got them into such a mess in the first place. You may discover alien dimensions in your own thinking that aren't what you intended to stand for; your instincts may lead you astray. You may not even subscribe to your own conclusions in the end. Occasionally, practical decisions must be made: am I really willing to say "X" or "Y" in print?

It's not that there isn't *any* critical distance but that critical proximity can be more useful. I'd go so far as to say that drawing on your worst impulses is the only way to understand contemporary scandals and the instant celebrities they create. Speaking of worst impulses, I confess that my interest in the Assange case probably had less to do with its sociopolitical dimensions than its parabolic ones: the pleasant shapeliness of a moral fable peeking through the tawdry details. Assange used exposé for what he sees as political purposes, only to have exposé turned against him for feminist purposes. Note the satisfying formal symmetry, the chiastic structure, the O. Henry twist: he who exposes the secrets of

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the powerful shall have his own powerful secrets similarly exposed.

Please don't think that I'm in favor of governmental payback or dirty tricks, should those turn out to have been in play. (Assange's lawyer did initially suggest the whole thing had been a "honey trap," though Assange himself later poo-pooed the idea [Davies].) Whatever it is that draws me to the biographical and psychological excesses being paraded through the public square, I fear it has as much to do with the tropes, puns, homologies, and literary resonances in these narratives as the sociological ones, which could be a form of excess in its own right.

I suspect, however, that this surplus is exactly what's so captivating about scandal. You're going around, minding your own business, and these split-off fragments of other people's repressions and wishes come hurtling at you from the social ether like messages in a bottle, one bedeviled psyche flagging down another, scattering coded clues and demanding to be deciphered. There's this intersubjective gravitational pull. But *then* what, methodologically speaking? Conventional modes of sociopolitical analysis yield banalities, yet following the path of fascination propels you into the murk of the unknown. For writers, there's always a certain queasy thrill in projecting fascinations and attractions you don't entirely understand into the public arena, though if your subject matter is other people's dirty secrets and public self-immolations and your method is following errant interpretative instincts and seeing where they lead, what dirty secrets are you yourself exposing in the process? No doubt more of them than you care to know.

The cases I've found myself compelled by haven't tended to be the highest-profile or glitziest ones; they've been closer to home, episodes in which someone relatively ordinary, though perhaps professionally accomplished, is thrust into celebrity or notoriety by following some desire or obsession or grudge where it leads while remaining curiously indifferent to potential social consequences. Through some brew of inadvertency or compulsion or recklessness, the blunder is brought to light (as such things generally are), frequently wrecking the scandalizer's life in the process.

But scandals are also public performances: they're about people enacting their tangled, furtive longings and grudges on a national and sometimes international scale, scattering unconsciousness around in public for everyone else to trip over, violating norms and taboos with imagined impunity as though superegos didn't exist. Often there's a theatrical whiff about these psychodramas: the curtain opens on a bizarre private world of chaos and misjudgment, and the rest of us are thrust into the role of audience. It's a role we play to the hilt: commenting on the action like a Greek chorus, dissecting motives like amateur psychoanalysts, maybe nervously pondering our own susceptibility to life-wrecking inchoateness. Every scandal reproduces this complicatedly codependent relationship between a scandal protagonist and a scandal public, precisely because scandal requires an audience: if no one paid attention, scandal would cease to exist. In short, we all have crucial roles to play in scandal formation: scandalizers screw things up in showy, provocative ways while the rest of us luxuriate in the warm glow of imaginary imperviousness that other people's life-destroying stupidities invariably provide, castigating transgressors for their moral failings while disavowing any similar propensities of our own.

Of course, disavowing such propensities is how scandalizers come to find themselves in the midst of a scandal in the first place. The uniting feature in most scandal cases is some major blind spot, some form of splitting. How else can a socialized being so completely suspend awareness of social punishment, be so incapable of thinking a couple of steps ahead? This element of self-obliviousness, and what it implies about the willingness of

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otherwise rational people to volunteer for public pillorying, is not exactly reassuring. But are we in the audience so much more self-knowledgeable? One suspects not. I'm pretty sure that my own capacity for self-knowledge is nothing to gloat about.

But how would I know? As the psychologist Herbert Fingarette points out in his rather alarming 1969 study *Self-Deception*, it's not just that "spelling things out" (38) to oneself is an acquired skill (like driving a car, as he puts it [41]) but that there can be overriding reasons to avoid doing it and to avoid becoming conscious that you're avoiding doing it. Self-examination isn't a very reliable talent, as it turns out; the available techniques are spotty at best. As the novelist-critic J. M. Coetzee frets in his essay "Confession and Double Thoughts," it's impossible to know whether the "truth" you discover in your occasional feeble attempts at self-examination is anything close to truth and not just some self-serving fiction, since the "unexamined, unexaminable principle" governing your conclusions "may not be a desire for the truth but a desire to *be a particular way*" (221)—to seem rational and coherent to yourself, for instance. In other words, all the self-examination in the world isn't going to help you if you're bent on self-deception or if one part of you is bent on deceiving another part, which is no doubt true of any of us at least some of the time. That's what having an unconscious means, and thanks for nothing.

As we know, scandal in the Internet age offers an embarrassment of riches when it comes to proving this point. The Internet and scandal are Siamese twins joined at the forehead, with the most excruciatingly private details about other people's inner lives and desires and failures of self-management archived online forever, to do with what you will. And the details are so weirdly gripping! Roland Barthes, writing about the odd biographical details that particularly pierced him in old photographs (the *punctum*, in his often cited term), refers to them as "part-objects," which "flatter a certain fetishism of mine." They nourish his "amorous preference" for certain kinds of knowledge, providing him—at least some facet of him—with delight (30).

As usual, Barthes had the courage of his fetishes, though as fetishes go, let's just say his tended to be fairly dignified ones. For my part, such delights are also tinged with discomfiture. They're rabbit holes, plummeting you into the muckiness of someone else's interiority, where you paddle around frantically trying to get your bearings.

Take the details in the leaked police reports on Assange. The allegation is that during a ten-day stay in Stockholm, Assange had sexual encounters with two women, both WikiLeaks supporters, that started as consensual but became coercive to the point of rape. One of the women, identified as Miss A, had arranged Assange's trip to Sweden and let him stay in her apartment. She charges that he pulled off her clothes and snapped her necklace, and though she more or less went along with all this, she protested when she realized Assange was trying to have unprotected sex with her. When she tried to put a condom on him, he stopped her by pinning her arms. He finally agreed to use the condom but then deliberately ripped it, she accuses, and ejaculated without withdrawing. Assange denies all this, countering that he continued to sleep in her flat with her permission for the following week; if he'd assaulted her, why would she allow him to stay? Miss A concurs that he stayed but says that they'd stopped having sex because he'd exceeded the limits of what she could accept. However, he approached her one day at her apartment, naked from the waist down, and rubbed against her. Nevertheless, after this encounter, Miss A still threw a party for Assange at her flat (Davies).

Then Assange met a second woman, Miss W, at a seminar arranged by Miss A. When the two of them began having sex at

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her flat, Assange also refused to wear a condom; like Miss A, Miss W refused to have sex without one. Assange gave up and fell asleep, but during the night they woke up and had sex after he reluctantly agreed to use a condom. In the morning Miss W woke up to find Assange again having sex with her, and when she asked if he was wearing a condom, he said no. Miss W had never had unprotected sex before, she said, and the leaks from a police interview with her former boyfriend confirm this. According to the ex, it would have been unthinkable for her. Despite these conflicts, both women allegedly continued to see Assange during the remainder of his stay (Burns and Somaiya).

When the two women eventually learned of their similar experiences with Assange and that he'd been seeing both of them at the same time, they went to the police to see if they could compel him to take an HIV test, which he'd already refused to do, saying he didn't have the time. The police said they couldn't force him to take a test and that the women's statements would have to be passed on to a prosecutor for further action to be taken. (In Sweden "unlawful coercion" is prosecutable under rape statutes.) That night the story was leaked to Swedish papers. When journalists asked Assange for his reaction, his response was that the sex had been consensual. When asked if he was promiscuous, he replied, "I'm not promiscuous. I just really like women" (qtd. in Mostrous).

For some reason these slightly perturbing details keep playing though my mind like an annoying song. Then we have the homology between Assange's alleged aversion to condoms and his political commitment to leaks. As it happens, leakiness was one of the themes in my scandal book, *How to Become a Scandal*, spurred on by Freud: "No mortal can keep a secret. If his lips are silent, he chatters with his fingertips; betrayal oozes out of him at every pore" (77–78). Notice how *viscous* Freud makes the whole thing sound—betrayal doesn't trickle or drip or bleed; it *oozes*, mucouslike (or worse). The point seems to be that human beings can't help spilling clues all over the place about the mess of embarrassing conflicts and metaphysical anguishes lodged within. The viscosity of the substance in question should interest anyone who's ever struggled to quash some delinquent libidinal urge; presumably this would be everyone.

The leaky-vessel problem struck me as a useful starting point for a book on scandals, and certain people's proclivities for getting into them. Why? All I can tell you is that leakiness kept *seeking me out*. It even turned out (as I realized only after the book went to press) that diapers figured in *two* of the scandal cases I wrote about, speaking of leakiness. In one an astronaut drove cross-country to attack a romantic rival, supposedly wearing adult diapers along the way to avoid making rest stops (25–67); in another a renowned judge threatened his ex-lover while impersonating a fat, diabetic, diaper-wearing detective from Texas (68–109). Scandal cases often do seem to contain these strangely antic elements, as though an invisible screenwriter with a penchant for bad puns were working behind the scenes. What's a diaper, after all, but the perfect symbol for incontinent feelings, for being out of control? Consider the usual idioms for falling afoul of social codes: getting yourself in "deep shit," winding up with your life "in the toilet." These scandal protagonists couldn't have found a better symbol if they'd tried. (Or had they? The unconscious has a particular sense of humor, not to mention a potty mouth, or so it's been said; Freud wrote a classically unfunny book on the subject.) The diaper motif rather brilliantly distills the scandalizer's situation down to its essence, since what's an adult in diapers but someone whose self-management skills have critically failed?

This isn't very dignified territory, to say the least. Also, you start wondering what unknown elements are leaking through *your*

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prose onto the page. It struck me numerous times in the course of writing on scandal how many alarming similarities there are between writing and scandal, poised as writers so often are between the murky chasms of unknowingness and whatever thin protections against it form or style provide (so you hope). If the terrain of scandal is especially riddled with compulsion, neurosis, and a thousand other unflattering propensities, so is writing about it. Writing on scandal means writing about unconsciousness, along with every variety of ugly feeling, compulsion, self-destruction, and failed self-knowledge. But the only method really adequate to the subject is letting your mind veer where it wants to and risking some embarrassing leakage yourself. This isn't a tidy procedure. But as Fingarette laments, regarding the waywardness of his own investigations into self-deception, "As is characteristic when paradox lies at the heart of things, there is a particular slipperiness about this object of investigation" (13). Slipperiness, leakiness—clearly we're into some damp terrain.

As celebrity studies emerges as an academic discipline, the question of what to do with all the embarrassing scandal effluvia will have to be addressed. A certain amount of dampness is inevitable for anyone who embarks on such a path. Yielding to the logic—or illogic—of these leaky narratives, favoring a poetics of proximity over critical distance, transports investigators to unexpected and possibly alarming places. Of course, the usual methods of academic critique come with their own risks: banality, generality, overfamiliarity—in other words, dryness.

Which brings me back to the Assange case. After Assange left Sweden, the police issued an international arrest warrant compelling him to return to Sweden for hearings. Whether the allegations will hold up or whose version of these events is true doesn't really matter for the purposes of scandal: scandal details don't have to be true to be scandalous. The substrata of meanings and associations that accrue around the narratives give them their social resonance, not their factuality. Yet by what method are these substrata to be excavated?

The historian Sean Wilentz has impugned Assange for being offended by any actions that are cloaked, which Wilentz regards as simpleminded (qtd. in Italie). Condoms, cloaks . . . something in the scandal theorist perks to attention. Assange is accused of ripping a condom? Obviously—isn't he committed to penetrating every security protocol he can? Aha! There's that punster-symbologist, working behind the scenes again. The language of scandal is especially plastic, stretching this way and that and sullying everything in its path, transforming anything it encounters into material. Although Barthes doesn't mention it in *Camera Lucida*, another definition of the word *punctum*, according to *Wiktionary*, is "the sharp tip of any part of the anatomy." It can also be a tiny orifice, as defined in *Oxford Dictionaries*, like the small opening that allows tears to drain from eyes. Reading this, the scandal theorist's antenna again perks up: more leakiness. Let Barthes's remark that the punctum isn't necessarily in good taste stand as a warning to others who might venture down this road.

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