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SCANDAL IN JAPAN: AN IN-DEPTH LOOK INTO JAPANESE SOCIAL AND MEDIA PHENOMENA

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Mediated scandals play an important role in a democratic society; they uncover unethical behavior as seen in the specific society, but they also can lead to sensitization. By showing the “bad” and how it should be punished, they teach the respective society what is acceptable. By this principle, scandals can be strong hegemonic tools (Thompson, 2000; Adut, 2008).

Scandals as the media present them fascinate, excite, or cause disgust. Among media consumers, there are very few left completely disinterested when encountering a scandalous story with its narrative or adventurous pursuit of truth (p. 17). Průša claims that while they are embedded within societies across the cultural spectrum, their studies are not usually discussed academically, as the topic does not appeal to the traditional institution of academia. While scandals do remain an under-researched topic, there are several authors focused on it; it is worth mentioning the authors as Hans M. Kepplinger, John B. Thompson, or Ari Adut who have researched the topic for decades, or more recent publication

from Howard Tumber and Silvio Waisbord (2019).

Scandals take up a relevant part of media space and of cultural life, in some cultures more than others. As Igor Průša shows in his book *Scandal in Japan: Transgression, Performance and Ritual*, scandal plays a crucial role in Japanese society, considering the aspect of conformity within the society is very strong. He bases the book on his second doctoral research on scandal in Japanese news, while the theoretical background is based on Průša's deep knowledge of Japanese media and society, which was the topic of his first dissertation.

Igor Průša provides a theoretical background in the first chapter. He uses Durkheim's notion about the moral basis of society (Durkheim, 1955) in the sacred-profane binary to illustrate the symbolism of scandals, and as Průša points out later in the book, this is especially true for the celebrity scandals in Japan. Průša also explains the framework of his research from the point of view of social code rather than individual psychology.

Průša looks at scandal in three dimensions: scandal as a narrated and framed text; scandal as a product of media routines, and scandal as social drama and ritual (p. 5). The book however does not mention the concept of a public figure; neither a political figure, a celebrity nor a public organization, even though he bases the three case studies on these three actors.

In mediated scandal, “the audience is expected to ‘naturally’ recognize goodness and badness in the narrative and ideally side with the victim while

condemning the antagonist,” (p. 17). Průša defines three levels of public involvement (p. 13): low public involvement, average public involvement, and high public involvement. Průša's typology of scandal usually comes in three, as in the Case Studies chapter he goes into detail on three case studies. Each of them represents one type of Japanese scandal, the reaction of the transgressor, involvement of the public and evolution of its medialization.

The first case study is a celebrity media scandal. The case of Sakai Noriko's drug possession in 2009 was one of the biggest scandals in Japan. Her husband was arrested in August 2009 for possession of illegal stimulants, after which Sakai disappeared for six days. In Sakai's apartment, a small amount of stimulants was found. The search for Sakai caused a media frenzy, which was followed by her return and confession to the police, pleading guilty, suspension from the Management Company and cancellation of all commercial contracts, divorce from her husband, the 18-month sentence in prison, and finally studying social work and reintroduction back to show business.

Sakai was Japan's sweetheart, a famous actress and idol. She became famous at the age of 15, making her pure in the eyes of the public. After marrying and becoming a mother, she transitioned from a good girl to a good mother. (p. 31) While Průša does not consider Sakai's transgression inherently bad, he claims that her “symbolic frame magnified her transgression and triggered a public outcry.” It was a case of expectancy violation based on Hinton's (2000) theory, where

violation of expectations leads to much harsher judgment than of other people (p. 32). This allowed Sakai's scandal to become a mega spectacle as described by Kellner (2003), including pseudo-events such as Sakai's press conference after her release on bail in September 2009, during which she apologized. The conference was called “a moment of history” (Nashimoto, 2009, p. 14) and had over 43 % national viewing, after which the media scrutinized the plausibility of her apologetic performance. In Sakai's case as in other celebrity scandals, the media proved its power; it can give and take away the love of the public. The media, however, failed to analyze the deeper social issues such as drug-related organized crime. Moreover, paradoxically, the scandal led to an increase in interest in drugs among young people (p. 40).

The author paints a comprehensive tale with the story of Sakai, using a single case study for the celebrity scandal can meet its limitations. As was already mentioned, Průša uses the sacred-profane binarity, but as other academics suggest, this approach is not applicable to all celebrities. Nevertheless, Průša does not touch the typology of celebrities at all. There are several authors providing further definitions of celebrity, their mediation and the societal reaction, to name a few David Marshall, Graeme Turner, Chris Rojek, Su Holmes, and Sean Redmond. While all of these authors provide background, Průša could use it to implement his findings within the broader scope. Namely, the typology of Chris Rojek (2004) is ascribed: ascribed, achieved and attributed; describing different ways of achieving fame and

becoming a celebrity. Especially attributed is worth mentioning, as it is the type of celebrity that becomes famous by media exposure itself - reality TV celebrities etcetera. This type of celebrity would not fit the shoe of sacred-profane and therefore should be addressed. While it is understandable that Průša - focusing on the topic of scandal in Japan does not pay too much attention to the typology of celebrities, which often takes into consideration primarily the North American media scene, it would be worth guiding the reader by positioning his findings in relation to the existing celebrity typology.

The second case study was focused on the political corruption case of Ozawa Ichiro. Ozawa is a political heavyweight, who served in several prominent Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) and government posts, but later quit the party and joined the opposition, in 1997 he moved to the Liberal Party, then LDP again. Eventually, in 2004 he became the head of the Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ) which brought sweeping victory to the party. Over the years of politics, Ozawa had a long record of shady financial donations, but it wasn't until his secretary was arrested in March 2009 over political donations, that it affected his political career. Ozawa never admitted to any law breach and called his investigation and scandal politically motivated. He did, however, apologize for the miscommunication. The police kept investigating further property and money-related shady businesses fuelling and stretching the media frenzy towards 2011. Although Ozawa did step down as a leader of DPJ, he never lost political influence. In 2012

his case was acquitted due to lack of evidence.

Ozawa Ichiro first took an offensive strategy, attacking the media and claiming to be the victim, after calls from the public for his resignation, he switched to an apologetic strategy. Apologizing only for the "misunderstanding", in a tearful manner, nevertheless. "Money is essential in Japanese politics," (p. 41) but the society is rather skeptical of their politicians not being surprised in the cases of corruption. This might be the reason why politicians manage to reappear in their roles not long after their scandals (p. 101).

The political scandal in Japan seems to be the most comparable to the global norm. There are several publications on the Watergate scandal in the US, sexual scandals in the UK or corruption scandals from around the world. The reader however does not learn how different the political scandal might be in a different social environment. While John B. Thompson (2000) does not shy away from comparison, most authors studying political scandals, just as Průša, do not go into comparison among societies. While it would be only appropriate to let the reader know why the political scandal happens in such a manner as it does in Japanese society. Questions, that emerge during the case study, are partially answered in the following part of the book, where Průša explains societal norms in Japan.

The last case study is an example of a corporate scandal "Olympus/Woodford." Although there were several corporate scandals in 2011, Olympus, as the third biggest publicly listed Japanese company, attracted a lot of attention for

its improper accounting practices. The scandal had a very different evolution of the narrative than the two previous case studies. The newly appointed CEO of Olympus Michael Woodford had an outside auditor confirm that Olympus had been practicing improper accounting to cover past losses. Shortly after (mid-October 2011) he was dismissed from the company. Olympus kept denying the story and blamed Woodford for the speculations in the media and for the negative effect on the stock price. After being attacked by Olympus, Woodford went to foreign media, specifically the Financial Times to uncover the malpractice. It wasn't until foreign media covered the story extensively that the Japanese mainstream media took an interest in it. In November 2011 Olympus admitted to "inappropriate" accounting practices, and Woodford stopped attempting to come back as a head of the company. Months later the majority of the board members resigned and Olympus settled the dispute with Woodford financially.

Průša argues that corporate scandals in Japan "should be analyzed from within the culture-specific framework of institutions, traditions and moralities." (p. 53). As the Japanese corporate culture has blind obedience and deference deeply ingrained. This conflict was therefore two leveled: "Olympus versus Woodford and Japan versus the World," (p. 57) equating Japan with its corporations. However, 21st-century Japan saw several scandals uncovering illicit corporate practices, where the whistleblowers were the employees themselves, casting some doubts about the above-mentioned stereotype (p. 55).

After focusing on case studies, Průša looks at Scandal as a Social Ritual. Rituals can be an effective tool of social control in specific societies (Douglas, 1973). And Japan matches the type, making it a good place for using scandal ritual as a hegemonic tool. Old sins (transgressions) are reintroduced in new tales followed by a ritual of degradation of the sinners. (p. 68) The authorities emphasize confession, followed by exclusion from society, and reintegration. (p. 70-79) Průša defines three types of confession: 1/apologetic strategy; 2/ defensive strategy; and 3/ offensive strategy. Each of these strategies was represented in case studies respectively (p. 72).

In the chapter entitled *Japanese Scandal as a Media Product* Průša introduces the mainstream mediascape of Japan, after which he goes into the power circles of the Japanese scandal. In an almost conspiratory fashion, the external forces are introduced as Antisocial forces; Support groups; Outside media; and Civic groups. They affect Political circles, Bureaucratic circles, and Business circles to which Prosecutors and Agencies are connected. Inside it all are Inside (Japanese) media. The media are easily affected by other powers as they are not holders of power themselves, just the executors. "In other words, the mainstream media do not cover, but rather cover up scandals" (p. 85). That is why when it comes to members of the power circle (politicians, institutions, or businesses) the Outside media often plays a crucial role in covering scandals. Other external forces play a limited role in the Japanese scandal (p. 90). "Scandals are socially constructed phenomena that involve conflict

and the cooperation of many people” the main motivation being: cash, conspiracy, and confession (p. 95).

Scandal in Japan is created by power circles in order to maintain social hegemony. However, the media frenzy is based on a transgression, an act that deviates from the moral basis of society. In the cases of celebrity scandals, a minor offense is blown out of proportion due to expectancy violation. In transgression framing, the transgressor can be applied to a “guilt frame” or an excuse frame. Either way, the transgressor has no option but to accept the frame. (p. 18) The media coverage combines emotional and factual content, making it a hybrid news form. (p. 19-20) While scandals are huge phenomena in Japan, their social impact is insignificant. (p. 100); media often cover the topic to a ridiculous detail (e.g., how many tears a transgressor shed during an apologetic speech) while avoiding much greater social issues. In this fashion they are regressive (p. 111), not leading to any social change, and maintaining the social status quo.

The three case studies provide the basis for Průša's Japanese scandal typology when it comes to public involvement, narrative evolution, media coverage, and transgressors' confession. Case studies serve as a reference of Průša's scandal typology while providing context and summary of the narrative. The definition of scandal and its categorization is well structured and clear. Průša bases his study well on in-depth knowledge of the region as well as of the media practice of scandal while providing his paradigms and perspectives at every step of the way. Igor Průša looks at scandal from

several angles, providing a complex description of the phenomena.

My critique of each of the case studies is very similar. The topics of celebrity scandal, political scandal as well as corporate scandal have been studied more thoroughly and the current knowledge of them is providing a more nuanced look at each of those. While Průša does not claim any possible generalization of his case studies, he does consider them representative of Japanese-mediated scandals, therefore further mention of the existing knowledge would be useful for the reader. However, the lack of comparison can be explained by the fact that the book, while studying media phenomena in a specific culture, is in fact a book that is part of an anthropological series about Japan. The study therefore rather focuses on what scandal in Japan means for the society. He however uses also relevant media scholars as theoretical sources and provides a solid theoretical ground for Scandal as a media text. In addition, the subchapter focused on power circles in Japan can seem almost conspiratory. While it is plausible, as the described power situation could possibly be the cause of the “political apathy” (p. 101) of Japanese society, a Western reader would probably profit from a more elaborate explanation of Japanese power structures and society. Průša also mentions the growing importance of social media in the Japanese scandal (p. 97), he does not however explain whether social media does play a role in democratization or if it provides more agency to groups outside of the power groups.

Igor Průša's book on Scandal in Japan

is very informative, not only for Japanese studies scholars, or anthropologists but also for readers outside of academia. The latter readers might actually appreciate the book even more. His storytelling especially with his case studies is rather captivating and comprehensive for a less academised audience. For media scholars, chapter 5 has the biggest relevance as it is focused on the topic of scandal as a routine in journalistic practices.

The book tells a fascinating tale of a society where the common good is more important than the individual. Celebrities are ritually shamed after acts of transgression, yet companies are protected by the media. Transferring the findings to another nation is not probable. However, the Scandal typology as well as its clear yet complex definition provides valuable contribution to media studies everywhere.

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