The Collapse of Shame: Corruption as Genre in a Post-Truth Age. Toward a Cultural Theory of Public Impunity

Jacqueline Fendt

Abstract This essay argues that corruption today functions not as scandal but as genre—performed, aestheticized, and infrastructurally sustained. In an era where shame collapses and impropriety becomes spectacle, corruption no longer hides: it signals power. Impunity now takes shape as public demonstration, staged and circulated as proof of sovereignty. Corruption, shame, and impunity form a new circuitry: corruption provides the recognizable form, shame recedes into spectacle, and impunity choreographs authority through performance. To understand democratic erosion today, we must analyze and expose this choreography—not only legally, but culturally, emotionally, and structurally.

Keywords corruption, neo-orality, affective politics, spectacle, infrastructure, post-truth, shame, genre

You are not serious people.

—Succession, *"Rehearsal" (HBO 2023)*

Opening provocation

We knew that power corrupts. We were warned—by Lord Acton—that absolute power corrupts absolutely. But there was a time when corruption wore a mask. It hid behind euphemism, legal complexity, and diplomatic discretion. It denied itself, or at least disguised its intent. Today, corruption does not whisper—it performs. It livestreams. It drops its own coin. We are witnessing a genre shift: not the disappearance of corruption, but its aestheticization. Not the decline of ethics, but the collapse of shame.

This essay ventures to diagnose corruption, shame, and impunity—and their choreography—in this present time of neo-orality, epistemic fragmentation, and viral aesthetics. Corruption has become a narrative form—a set of recognizable moves, played out across platforms for maximum

visibility and emotional impact. From meme coin auctions for presidential dinners to tokenized pay-to-play exchanges wrapped in nationalist rhetoric, we are no longer in the realm of hidden vice. We are in a post-shame economy of power, where the performance of untouchability replaces the performance of integrity. Access is the product. Loyalty is the currency. And opacity—once a liability—is now part of the brand. By genre I mean metaphor *and* form: a recognizable set of conventions, patterns, and aesthetic moves that render corruption legible as cultural practice.[1]

This is not a sidebar to democratic erosion. It is central. When leaders no longer pretend to be bound by ethics, when enrichment becomes a public spectacle, when influence is auctioned on the blockchain, we are not just witnessing individual corruption. We are watching the institutionalization of impropriety as political style. In this world, corruption is not a deviation—it's the genre.

This essay uses *genre* not simply as metaphor, but as a cultural analytic. Genre, in literary and media theory, refers to a set of recognizable conventions that structure meaning, guide expectation, and shape reception.[2] Genres are not static—they evolve, hybridize, and migrate across domains, carrying with them implicit social contracts. As Bakhtin observed, genres are embedded in speech and society alike, organizing the rhythms, aesthetics, and authority of communication.[3] In this light, corruption-as-genre is not merely a figure of speech: It is a structural pattern of political narration, performance, and repetition. It cues audiences, justifies transgression, and anchors impropriety in affective familiarity. When we say corruption has become a genre, we are saying it has become *legible*—and thereby operable.

What, then, is being diagnosed here? Shame operates as a disciplinary force in democratic life: a cultural mechanism that ties power to visibility and accountability, even as it is uneven and often cruel.[4] Corruption names the entanglement of private enrichment with public authority, a practice that is never only institutional but always narrated, aestheticized, and contested.[5] When placed together, the two form a volatile circuitry: shame, once restrained corruption by compelling disguise, remorse, or denial, while corruption constantly tested the edges of what could be tolerated. The present moment marks a rupture in this balance. As Marcus reminds us,[6] democratic affect depends on capacities for embarrassment and restraint; yet in today's dramaturgy of politics, as Goffman would put it,[7] the performance itself has changed. Corruption now thrives as cultural *genre*, and shame—once the friction in its circuitry—has become part of the spectacle.

A brief history of impropriety: From denial to display

Corruption, like politics itself, is not static. It evolves—culturally, rhetorically, and aesthetically. There was a time, not long ago, when impropriety required denial. Gifts were hidden. Contracts routed through cousins. Influence masked by plausible separation. Even the powerful felt the need to appear clean.

Not anymore.

Over the past two decades, impropriety has shifted from vice to *genre*. In the 1990s and early 2000s, strongmen and media moguls began to blur the lines between personal wealth and public office, testing the boundaries between scandal and charisma.[8] By the mid-2010s, populist leaders around the globe had redefined exposure itself: Being caught was no longer a problem, but a plot twist. Accusations became content. Legal threats became talking points. In this new media logic, attention trumps accountability. Visibility itself becomes a form of power—where transgression, once career-ending, now drives engagement. Corruption mutated from denial to *display*—from secrecy to aesthetic.

And now, in the 2020s, that display has found its infrastructure. Digital platforms have multiplied the velocity and virality of political performance. Livestreamed rallies, ironic merch, tokenized loyalty—they transform abuse of power into ambient entertainment.[9] If shame once constrained impropriety, it has now been replaced by something more powerful: attention. Today, corruption travels not as scandal but as spectacle.

This performative turn in corruption has been extensively observed in comparative political science, where the decline of institutional trust intersects with populist strategy and media saturation. Studies show how contemporary leaders increasingly reframe corruption accusations as evidence of elite persecution, transforming transgression into authenticity.[10] Moffitt identifies this dynamic as central to the populist style,[11] while Pleyers and Heywood illuminate the broader struggles over political meaning and the limitations of conventional approaches to corruption.[12] What was once a scandal to manage is now a genre to inhabit—a pattern that reshapes political legitimacy from normative compliance to affective allegiance.[13]

On shame, corruption, and impunity

To understand corruption as genre requires tracing how shame, corruption, and impunity form a shifting circuitry of democratic life. Shame long functioned as an affective architecture of accountability: a cultural force that compelled concealment, apology, or restraint. Locke shows how shame disciplines and marginalizes,[14] Ahmed reveals its

circulation through emotional economies,[15] and Marcus underscores its role in sustaining democratic affect.[16] Yet shame's efficacy depends on a shared moral horizon. As that horizon fragments, shame loses its ability to constrain political performance with any consistency.

Corruption, by contrast, is not reducible to material transactions. It is relational and communicative, embedded in practices of narration, spectacle, and judgment.[17] Analyzing corruption as genre highlights these patterned conventions: recurring tropes, recognizable moves, aesthetic repertoires that transform abuse of power into intelligible and often familiar performance.

Within this reconfigured terrain, impunity emerges as the decisive element. Impunity is not the silent absence of sanction but a public enactment. The defiant gesture, the triumphant posture, the viral meme that converts accusation into content—all are ways of declaring immunity. What is asserted is not simply that shame has vanished, but that *shame does not apply to me*. This is the sovereign demonstration: the refusal of accountability staged and circulated as proof of authority. Impunity is no longer concealment; it is affirmation, celebration, choreography.

In this sense, impunity crystallizes the transformation of corruption into genre. What once risked disqualification now amplifies legitimacy. The cultural script has shifted from discretion to display, from denial to demonstration. This transformation raises an obvious next question. How, then, do neo-orality, epistemic fragmentation, and virality-based aesthetics change the incentives by which audiences engage the political realm, and how do they allow for forms of legitimation that break the mold of democratic norms? The question is crucial. Neo-orality saturates politics with immediacy: Leaders perform as if in conversation, bypassing institutional mediation and rewarding those who can dominate the moment rather than sustain reasoned deliberation.[18] Epistemic fragmentation ensures that there is no longer a single public against which impropriety must be measured; there are only publics, each with its own emotional economies.[19] Within these enclaves, what counts as scandal in one register is celebrated as authenticity in another. Virality-based aesthetics then complete the circuitry, rewarding not prudence but excess. Outrage, irony, and brazenness become algorithmically amplified, reshaping legitimacy itself: Authority no longer depends on compliance with norms of integrity, but on the capacity to perform untouchability at scale. What collapses is not simply shame, but the very incentive structure that once tied visibility to accountability.

For political actors, the implication is stark: Risk has become currency, the calculus of risk and reward has been inverted. Where once the exposure of impropriety threatened careers, now the refusal to be embarrassed is itself a credential of strength. For leaders, the incentive

is to court visibility at any cost, to dramatize defiance rather than demonstrate integrity. Exposure feeds careers, scandal consolidates authority, and accusations operate as endorsements. Authority rests on audacity—the capacity to transform transgression into visibility and visibility into loyalty. Shame circulates less as a curb on behavior than as material for performance, a resource redeployed to signal power and belonging. For audiences, the incentive is to align affectively, to reward those who stage sovereignty with memes, clicks, and loyalty rather than policy or probity. The performative economy of virality thus reshapes the field: Scandal becomes a badge, shame a punchline, and impunity a style of belonging. In such a terrain, entering politics is no longer about preserving face but about proving one can thrive without it. This might sound like a playbook for shameless leaders. And in a sense it is — because that is the choreography now rewarded. Actors with democratic intent need to understand this terrain and seek other ways in which the field is playable: by converting visibility into accountability rather than immunity, by staging irony or care instead of brazenness, by dramatizing transparency as power rather than weakness. The infrastructures of virality and fragmentation will not disappear, but they can be inhabited differently. What matters is not to retreat from performance, but to recompose its grammar.

The following scenes illustrate this repertoire: corruption performed as cultural style, shame displaced into spectacle, and impunity elevated into a governing aesthetic.

Scenes from the genre

Consider the new iconography of power: A sitting president auctions dinner with him to the highest bidders—not through campaign donations, but via a volatile meme coin bearing his own name. A private jet, gifted by a foreign state, becomes a status symbol, not a scandal. A defense minister posts a grinning selfie with a luxury watch—allegedly from an arms dealer—with the caption: "Good taste is not a crime."

Elsewhere, a gold-plated rifle is waved at a rally, a cousin is awarded a billion-dollar contract on live television, and embezzled pandemic funds are joked about as "just travel expenses" among aides. There are no denials. No apologies. Just winks, hashtags, applause.

These are not isolated incidents. They are genre conventions—*scenes that signal tribal belonging, not ethical breach*. Each gesture says the quiet part out loud: I can do this because I am untouchable. And the more outrageous the act, the more powerful the aura.

What has collapsed is not the law (at least not entirely), but the *cultural constraint* that once made power feel the need to conceal its excess. The shame is gone. What remains is a new kind of legitimacy: not earned through transparency, but performed through brazenness.[20]

Political sociology has long emphasized the symbolic role of scandal in reaffirming norms, but recent work suggests a reversal: Scandal now consolidates power rather than threatens it.[21] The performative repetition of impropriety functions not to destabilize regimes but to reinforce affective bonds between leader and loyalists.[22] Studies of populist charisma show how transgression, irony, and visual spectacle become tools of political intimacy rather than disqualification.[23] Corruption no longer signals breakdown—it becomes a shared language of dominance, signaling not guilt but *genre fluency* within the new economy of mediated power.[24]

From vice to infrastructure: Crypto and the new architecture of power

Not long ago, corruption was still bound by the limits of its container. You could only book so many hotel rooms. You could only funnel so many unmarked bills. Even kleptocracy had a paper trail.

But the rise of decentralized digital assets—blockchains, meme coins, crypto exchanges—has shifted the architecture. Crypto is not the cause of corruption, but it has become a highly efficient *infrastructure* for its performance.[25] It allows enrichment at scale, with opacity by design, and emotional resonance at speed. A meme coin bearing a leader's name does not just raise funds. It signals allegiance. It turns proximity to power into a speculative asset class. It gamifies loyalty. And it bypasses the regulatory rituals that once lent legitimacy to political finance.

To be clear: Crypto is not the villain, just as government control is not the hero. Crypto emerged as a radical response to institutional sclerosis—a challenge to the opacity, inertia, and capture of traditional governance. Its foundational narratives were not about evasion, but emancipation—from centralized oversight, predatory intermediaries, and inherited injustice.

But to grasp the full dynamic, we must distinguish between *crypto as infrastructure*—a technical system with specific affordances—and *crypto as discourse*: a cultural imaginary, aesthetic style, and political signal. The former enables new modes of transaction; the latter encodes values of defiance, frictionlessness, sovereignty, and disintermediation. As Bratton argues, infrastructures are not neutral—they embed political imaginaries and administrative logics.[26] Crypto, in this sense, does more than enable financial flows: it performs ideological work. Its discursive layer—glossed in memes, merch, whitepapers, and speculative hype—allows corruption to present itself not as vice, but as rebellion. It offers a vernacular of disruption that elites now mimic to aestheticize opacity. In this mode, crypto becomes not just a tool—it becomes *theater*.[27]

But infrastructure is never neutral. It shapes what can be done, how, and by whom.[28] And the very features that made crypto liberatory—pseudonymity, frictionless transfer, global liquidity—are now being instrumentalized by actors who perform corruption as charisma and deregulation as destiny.

In this context, crypto becomes more than a financial medium. It becomes an *aesthetic*. A spectacle of rebellion, glossed as freedom. A sovereign-scented workaround to inconvenient oversight. When power adopts the infrastructure of protest, the result is not liberation—it is *genre confusion*.

This is the paradox of post-truth finance: a system born of distrust, now weaponized by those who demand unquestioning loyalty.[29] In such a landscape, the line between financial experimentation and institutional erosion becomes not a wall, but a blur.

Political economists and digital governance scholars have begun tracing how emerging financial technologies reshape not only economic flows but the symbolic architecture of legitimacy. Crypto's affordances—anonymity, decentralization, volatility—are double-edged, enabling both emancipatory potential and elite circumvention of public accountability.[30] Infrastructure theorists have long noted that technical systems encode political power.[31]

In this light, crypto does not inherently produce corruption, but makes new *styles* of impunity operable—especially when fused with platform spectacle, populist defiance, and weakened oversight.[32] What emerges is not deregulation, but a re-infrastructured corruption: faster, affective, and deniable.

The collapse of shame: Toward a theory of public impunity

If corruption has become a genre, then shame is the medium it no longer needs. What has eroded is not only the rule of law, but the emotional infrastructure that once restrained its violation. Shame was never just a feeling—it was a soft architecture of accountability. It tethered power to appearance, bound wealth to discretion, linked personal vice to public consequence. Today, that tether has snapped.[33]

This collapse of shame is not the same as shamelessness. Shamelessness is a personal trait; what we are witnessing is a structural reorganization of emotional norms. What once disqualified now amplifies. What once embarrassed now enthralls. Brazen acts no longer require denial—they require distribution.[34]

Whatever happened to shame? The question is not rhetorical. It marks a transformation in how power is felt, signaled, and constrained. Political psychologist George E. Marcus argued that democratic life depends not just on reason, but on the "affective intelligence" that

allows citizens and leaders alike to feel embarrassment, remorse, and restraint.[35] But in today's spectacle-driven politics, that circuitry appears severed. In figures like Trump, Bolsonaro, or Berlusconi, what we see is not shamelessness as audacity, but as affective strategy. The refusal to feel shame becomes a proof of sovereignty. A display of emotional immunity. And a challenge to the very premise that morality should be internalized.

Goffman taught us that social life is a performance guided by expectations of face. What we are witnessing now is a new dramaturgy, in which impropriety is not a slip—it is the role. The leader does not lose face by appearing corrupt; the leader affirms authority by *performing untouchability*.[36] The more outrageous the gesture, the stronger the claim to power. Shame, in this schema, is not a threat—it is a tool, outsourced to critics who play the role of the shocked and betrayed.

This dynamic is visible in every viral clip of defiance, every ironic t-shirt worn to a hearing, every meme that turns criminal indictment into fan merch. Corruption no longer hides—it *vibes*. It trades the old vocabulary of responsibility for the new grammar of memetic dominance. And the legal system, designed for slow adjudication and procedural logic, is repeatedly outpaced by spectacle.[37]

This is not a cultural glitch. It is a governing strategy. Political theorist Chantal Mouffe once argued that affect is central to the construction of "the people." Today, we must go further: *Affect is central to the construction of immunity*. The post-shame politician does not persuade—he saturates. Not with facts, but with mood. Not with defense, but with *overperformance*.[38]

This is the heart of the genre. When corruption becomes cultural style, and shame becomes a punchline, we are no longer debating ethics. We are analyzing the *choreography of impunity*.

Recent scholarship has explored the performative dimensions of political corruption, arguing that public transgression increasingly serves to project strength and authenticity rather than moral failing.[39] Affect theorists have shown how shame, once a powerful disciplinary mechanism, has become diffuse and displaced—redirected into polarization, irony, and affective saturation.[40] Goffman's dramaturgical frame remains foundational, but now unfolds in platformed publics where virality displaces remorse.[41] What emerges is a new governance aesthetic: impunity not as legal loophole, but as *emotional choreography*—engineered to overwhelm critique through scale, repetition, and symbolic audacity.[42] This affective choreography is inseparable from broader shifts in political communication, where neo-orality, epistemic fragmentation, and the aesthetics of virality increasingly displace deliberation and accountability.[43]

Conclusion: When corruption becomes the culture

This essay traces a transformation—not in law, but in atmosphere. Corruption no longer hides. It curates. It circulates. It performs. What once disqualified now dazzles. What once embarrassed now binds communities together in shared defiance. The shame is gone, and in its place is genre.

What I have proposed is a shift in the analytical status of corruption: from normative breach to performative genre. Corruption now functions not merely as a legal violation, but as a reproducible political aesthetic—one grounded in spectacle, circulated via platforms, and structured by infrastructural opacity. It is no longer an anomaly; it is a mode of rule. This essay therefore offers not a moral judgment, but a theoretical invitation: to understand the affective, symbolic, and material conditions that render impunity not exceptional but operable, even desirable.

My humble invitation is this: To grasp the shift, we must look beyond institutional frameworks and toward the emotional, technological, and aesthetic logics that now underpin political legitimacy. Corruption must be studied not only through compliance metrics, but through the semiotics of power: its signals, genres, and performances. For scholars, this might mean learning to read and expose corruption as performance, and to trace how legitimacy is staged and sustained through affective and aesthetic repertoires.

Future research might ask, what counter-genres are emerging in response? How are new practices of exposure, satire, and collective sense-making challenging the choreography of impunity? From networked interventions that remix dominant political imagery,[44] to meme campaigns that weaponize irony against performative power,[45] to blockchain-based transparency tools and whistleblower platforms designed to subvert the very infrastructures of secrecy[46]—these counter-genres do not restore a golden age of accountability. But they do gesture toward alternative dramaturgies of resistance. They shift the mood, distort the mirror, and reopen space for public dissonance. What I seek to trace here are three phenomena—corruption as cultural genre, shame as displaced affect, and impunity as sovereign choreography—and their relation. Corruption gains its recognizable form precisely as shame loses its force, and impunity fills the void by turning refusal into proof of sovereignty. The choreography of contemporary politics is staged on that circuitry: a genre that thrives by displacing its own constraint and celebrating its exemption.

This is not a call to nostalgia. It is an invitation to diagnostic honesty—and to an expanded toolkit for making sense of power in an age where virality, volatility, and vibe often eclipse verification. If corruption has become a genre, then critique must become one too.

And if that feels unfamiliar, unfinished, or even a little absurd—perhaps that's exactly where we begin.

Notes

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