

US actor-director Sean Penn on Hollywood and protests against global capitalism

David Walsh
3 September 2001

In Britain late last month American film actor and director Sean Penn denounced Hollywood filmmaking and solidarized himself with the opposition to global capitalism expressed in recent protests in Genoa and elsewhere. His comments have been largely blacked out by the major US media.

In Edinburgh, Scotland, where a film he directed, *The Pledge*, was screened at a film festival, Penn told a press conference August 24 that most American studio films were trash. He told reporters, according to the *Associated Press*, “Truly, half the people in this room could work on that level. It takes enormous pressure off to know that if you put two thoughts into your movie, you’re already well up on them.”

According to *The Guardian*, he continued, “The definition of a good film now is one that makes the banks happy—not one that shines a light on people’s lives. Most of my own generation just didn’t make the cut as far as I’m concerned. They have no broader interest—everything is about entertainment and no politics.” In passing, he dismissed George W. Bush as a “nowhere man.”

Penn accused big name directors of betraying the public by making films they knew were worthless. “What they are doing is on a level with raping society—and we [the public] are gluttons for punishment.” He reserved particular scorn for director Michael Bay, responsible for *Pearl Harbor*. In a comment that made most of the British national press, Penn declared, “Those type of filmmakers should be sent running home screaming with rectal cancer—they don’t care about the films they make, or about what is going on around them or the effect they having on their audience.”

In regard to the political situation, the *AP* quoted Penn as saying, “I don’t know if people value the

thought of revolution any more. I think it would be an enormously patriotic movement to invest in the possibility of revolution.

“There’s a lot of stuff going on around the world and in the US, as well, like the protests in Genoa and Seattle, and young people are putting themselves on the line.”

Press accounts spoke of Penn calling for a “cultural revolution.” On August 28 he complained to *Guardian* reporter, “You guys misprinted me. You had me talking about some kind of cultural revolution, and I was talking about taking arms against the government.... I don’t know if revolution is practical because the technology is such that we’d lose. But I think there’s an enormous amount of room for an activism that I, shamefully, am not yet enough of a participant in. But it’s starting to come. You see these kids now.... Nothing like Seattle happened in 20 years. It is a very hopeful thing.”

Penn, born in 1960, grew up in a household affected by the political traumas of postwar America. His father, Leo Penn (1921-98), after appearances as an actor on Broadway and in several Hollywood films in the late 1940s, was blacklisted for a decade for supporting the Hollywood Ten. Leo Penn eventually found work in television behind the camera, directing more than 400 hours of prime-time programming, including episodes of *Bonanza*, *Ben Casey*, *Starsky & Hutch*, *Magnum P.I.*, *Columbo* (for which he won an Emmy), *Kojak*, *St. Elsewhere* and others.

Sean Penn (whose brother Chris is an actor and brother Michael a singer-songwriter) has made similar remarks about Hollywood in the past. A number of years ago he told an interviewer, “So, if you’re an artist who is in it just for the money, I would be against you. I’m expecting something more. If there’s anything

disgusting in the movie business, it is the whoredom of my peers.” Nominated for his role in Woody Allen’s *Sweet and Lowdown*, Penn failed to show up for the Academy Award ceremony.

One of the most remarkable actors of his generation, Penn has obviously attempted—insofar as the process is under his control—to do more interesting work: *Fast Times at Ridgemont High* (1982), *The Falcon and The Snowman* (1984), *At Close Range* (1986), *Casualties of War* (1989), *Carlito’s Way* (1993), *Dead Man Walking* (1995), *The Thin Red Line* (1998), *Before Night Falls* (2000). Dissatisfied with the projects he was offered, Penn began directing in the early 1990s and now has three films to his credit, *The Indian Runner* (1991), *The Crossing Guard* (1995) and *The Pledge*, starring Jack Nicholson as a retiring police detective obsessed with a young girl’s murder. The films have conveyed Penn’s earnestness and seriousness, but they have not broken any ground artistically or socially.

The actor-director’s comments about the increased activism of young people and the need to revive the idea of social revolution have a certain significance as signs of a growing radicalization of various layers of the population, which is most certainly under way.



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