The New York Times throws Roman Polanski to the wolves

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The arrest of film director Roman Polanski in Switzerland and his threatened extradition to the US have stirred the baying hounds of 'law and order' into action. These forces respond aggressively—even preemptively—in such a case, lest humanitarian considerations and even the spirit of forgiveness be permitted to influence popular consciousness. Without any interest in the broader circumstances of the case, countless reactionary voices have been raised, sternly demanding that Polanski be locked away for society's good.

To these, we can now add the editorial board of the *New York Times*, the liberal newspaper of record. In a politically significant piece, the editors have weighed in, spitefully and maliciously, on the side of Los Angeles law enforcement officials.

In "The Polanski Case" (September 30, 2009), the *Times* first derides the notion of protesting his detention: "To hear the protests from the French, the Poles and other Europeans, you might have thought the filmmaker was seized by some totalitarian regime for speaking truth to power."

So, the possibility that human rights might be violated occurs only under "totalitarian regimes" and not in capitalist "democracies?" Amnesty International, on separate occasions this year, commented that "In the name of countering terrorism, the USA has violated the rights of individuals in Iraq, Afghanistan, Guantánamo and elsewhere. The human rights violations committed by and on behalf of the USA since 11 September 2001 are many and varied," and "There were continued reports [in 2009] of police brutality and ill-treatment in [US] prisons, jails and immigration detention facilities. Dozens of people died after police used Tasers (electro-shock weapons) against them."

Why should the benefit of the doubt be extended to the Swiss authorities, whose political history is unprincipled and mercenary enough? After all, the Swiss government provided asylum for the notorious financial swindler Marc Rich when he was a fugitive from American justice.

Of course, that particular case had a "happy ending." Rich was a beneficiary of a presidential pardon, which was granted by Bill Clinton in the final hours of his presidency. Clinton acted favorably upon a recommendation that was made by the then-assistant attorney general, Eric Holder. The latter now occupies the position of attorney general in the Obama administration. Of course, Rich was not Polanski. The financier had the good sense to wash away his sins with large financial donations to Clinton and the Democratic Party.

After reviewing briefly the facts of Polanski's crime and plea bargain, the *Times* notes in passing, "There was something strange about the Swiss deciding to arrest the director now, after having let him freely move in and out of the country for three decades. And a 2008 documentary by Marina Zenovich, *Roman Polanski: Wanted and Desired*, raised some troubling questions about the bizarre way a celebrity-hungry judge in California, Laurence Rittenband, handled the case."

The sudden decision to detain Polanski in Switzerland—a man who owns a residence in the country and apparently spent much of the summer there!—is more than "strange," as the *Times* editors know perfectly well. Under pressure over a tax-evasion scandal involving Swiss banking giant UBS, Swiss authorities—who never make a foreign policy decision without first calculating, down to the last franc and centime, its effect on bank profits—threw the US a bone by seizing the filmmaker as part of a cynical effort to protect their all-important financial institutions.

Astonishingly, the *Times* dismisses the "troubling questions" about the manner in which a "celebrity-hungry judge" handled the original case without further comment. A Los Angeles superior court judge acknowledged earlier this year that there was "substantial misconduct" in the hearing in the late 1970s. Might not this have some legal and moral bearing on whether Polanski should be pursued and prosecuted more than 30 years later? The editorial, so otherwise devoted to legal niceties, expresses no interest in this possibility.

With consummate cynicism, the *Times* proceeds, "Yet where is the injustice in bringing to justice someone who pleads guilty to statutory rape and then goes on the lam, no matter how talented he may be?"

Extraditing a 76-year-old man to southern California—whose prosecutors only a decade ago mercilessly pursued Michael Jackson, shattered his life and contributed to his early death—is the *Times*' definition of "bringing to justice!"

"Los Angeles" and "justice" are not words that belong in the same sentence. Polanski fled the US out of legitimate fear of vindictive Los Angeles authorities, notorious for their corruption and sanctioning of systematic police violence, racism and frame-ups. The filmmaker has hardly been in hiding, having directed ten feature films since his flight, including the award-winning *The Pianist*.

Summoning up all its philistine smugness, the leading voice of American liberalism concludes: "We disagree strongly [with Polanski's defenders], and we were glad to see other prominent Europeans beginning to point out that this case has nothing to do with Mr. Polanski's work or his age. It is about an adult preying on a child. Mr. Polanski pleaded guilty to that crime and must account for it."

What a disgusting effort! For the *Times* to go out of its way to comment on such an episode in this fashion has a political significance. It is a calculated concession to the extreme right, to the purveyors of "family values" and other filthy social elements.

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Fittingly, extreme right-wing commentator Noel Sheppard expressed his delight with the newspaper for its stance ("Here's something you don't often hear from a conservative media analyst: Bravo, NYT. Bravo.").

Moreover, the *Times* editors know that their position carries weight. The editorial will help poison the atmosphere against Polanski and undermine his ability to defend himself against the authorities. The *Times* is more than willing to throw Polanski to the wolves if it will appease its reactionary critics, even for a day.

American liberalism at present is entirely without principle or scruples. This wretched decay of principles, not to mention humanity, is by no means an exclusively American phenomenon. In Europe, a concerted campaign is underway to turn public opinion, initially sympathetic to Polanski's plight, against the director. And there as well, the leading role is being played by the representatives of the official "left."

Daniel Cohn-Bendit—a leading European Green politician—has made common cause with the fascist Le Pen in chastising French ministers for expressing outrage over Polanski's arrest. Back in 1968, Cohn-Bendit was the notorious "Danny the Red." He has spent much of the last 40 years atoning for his youthful excesses and proving the enduring truth of the old French adage, "Before 30 a revolutionary; afterwards a swine."

Justice must be served, intone the *Times* and the rest of the mainstream media. Their hypocrisy knows no bounds. The entire American establishment has agreed that "the country must move forward" and that the CIA and military criminals who ran—or continue to run—Guantánamo, Abu Ghraib, Bagram and the global network of "black sites," where those illegally detained have been sexually abused, tortured and, in some cases, murdered, should go unpunished for their heinous acts.

George W. Bush, Dick Cheney, Donald Rumsfeld and the rest, who launched an unprovoked, aggressive war which has cost, by the most conservative estimates, hundreds of thousands of Iraqi lives since 2003, remain free men, still collecting piles of money for speeches on behalf of various politically criminal causes. These are individuals with blood dripping from their hands. Never once has the *Times* called for their arrest and prosecution.

Attempting to discredit and delegitimize any expression of sympathy for Polanski, the *Times* and the right-wing rabble imply that opposition to his sudden seizure and incarceration signifies indifference to the fact that he molested a 13-year-old in 1977. The incident in 1977 was a crime. But we do not believe that Polanski's personality and entire life can be judged on the basis of this one tragic incident. And we hold this view not only because Polanski certainly is an important artist (though we are not reluctant to state that this fact is not so unimportant as his reactionary persecutors now insist). Of the two million human beings who languish in American jails, how many are there for reasons that have far more to do with social and environmental circumstances than with "innate" depravity?

Of course, Roman Polanski is a very wealthy man. But it is absurd to argue, as the current crop of moralizers does, that his action had "nothing to do" with the rest of his traumatic life.

Available accounts of his early life vary slightly as to details, but they all make clear its deeply tragic character. Born in 1933 in Paris to a Jewish father and Roman Catholic mother, Polanski moved with his family to Krakow, Poland when he was three years old. According to an account in the *Guardian* in 2005, "When the Germans invaded, the Polanskis were imprisoned in the ghetto, and in 1943 the Nazis ordered the civilians to move out. His father managed to cut a gap in the barbed-wire fence and told the terrified Roman to flee to the house of a family he had paid to look after him. 'Get away!' he hissed at the sobbing boy, as the SS officers were ordering the Jewish men to line up. Roman ran, never looking back.

"Later he was to discover that his mother was murdered in the gas chambers [at Auschwitz] but his father, though pressed into slave labour in a stone quarry, survived. The boy wandered the countryside, living hand to mouth, being taken in by friends and strangers."

As a teenager, the *Independen*t commented (also in 2005), "Polanski won a place at the distinguished Lodz Film School where his short films immediately singled him out as a future talent. In the intervening period he narrowly escaped death at the hands of a man who had already murdered three people. It was clear that Polanski, whatever blows life was to deal him, was genetically programmed to survive.

"The same was not always true of his loved ones. In 1969 his second wife, Sharon Tate, was slaughtered, along with four friends, by Charles Manson and his followers. The horror was compounded by the fact that Tate was eight months pregnant with their first child… When his production designer [*on Macbeth*] complained that he was using too much blood on the set, Polanski replied: 'I know violence. You should've seen my house last summer.'"

How could such harrowing experiences, which find ample reflection in his body of film work, be entirely unrelated to the crime for which Polanski was charged and to which he pled guilty? What possible value could his imprisonment serve at this time? What danger does he represent to society?

The *Los Angeles Times*, another ostensible liberal pillar, ran a scurrilous article September 30 by one Steve Lopez ("Polanski's Defenders Lose Sight of the True Victim") containing the most lurid details of the victim's original grand jury testimony. This is more salacious grist for the right-wing mill, all in the high-minded name of seeing justice done. Lopez is simply another scoundrel in the American media, which welcomes every opportunity to appeal to the basest instincts of the public.

The victim of Polanski's crime, Samantha Geimer, now 44, has denounced the media for precisely such conduct. She has shown far more humanity than Polanski's antagonists, writing in a 2003 op-ed piece, "And should he come back? I have to imagine he would rather not be a fugitive and be able to travel freely. Personally, I would like to see that happen. He never should have been put in the position that led him to flee. He should have received a sentence of time served 25 years ago, just as we all agreed. At that time, my lawyer, Lawrence Silver, wrote to the judge that the plea agreement should be accepted and that that guilty plea would be sufficient contrition to satisfy us. I have not changed my mind."

The *Times* is not concerned that the extradition of a 76-year-old man, an extraordinary artist, to the US and the inevitable media circus might have the most dire consequences. If the worst occurs, the editors will share responsibility.

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