

The sordid coalition pursuing filmmaker Roman Polanski

David Walsh
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The effort to vilify film director Roman Polanski, now imprisoned in Switzerland, and have him extradited to the United States has become the rallying point for a broader campaign against “Hollywood liberals,” intellectuals, artists, and non-conformists of all sorts.

Behind the demands that “justice must be done” and “no one is above the law” lies a reactionary social and ideological agenda. Anyone tempted to sign on to this campaign had better think long and hard about its implications.

A coalition of right-wingers and “feminist liberals” has formed, capable of the wildest demagoguery and accusations.

Polanski pled guilty in 1977 to one charge of engaging in unlawful sexual intercourse with a minor. Under the terms of the plea agreement, it was expected by both defense and prosecution that the director would receive probation. He fled the US when a vindictive judge, apparently guilty of gross misconduct in the case, threatened to renege on the agreement and sentence Polanski to a lengthy jail term.

Out of this sad affair, which the victim in the case has long wished to see concluded, the new, self-appointed guardians of society’s morals have concocted a scenario in which Polanski, along with the rest of the “intellectual elite,” is portrayed as nothing short of monstrous.

Columnist Christopher Caldwell, a senior editor of the ultra-right *Weekly Standard*, writing in the *Financial Times*, fantastically asserts that the case “of the late Maurice Papon has much in common with Mr Polanski’s.”

As secretary general for police in Bordeaux, Maurice Papon participated in the deportation of 1,600 or more French Jews to Nazi concentration camps, including Auschwitz—where Polanski’s mother was murdered, as it happens. Papon was eventually brought to justice for his role during World War II, after years of delays, and convicted in 1998.

Throwing in Communist Party officials in Stalinist Poland for good measure, Caldwell continues, “The crime of which Mr. Polanski stands accused is not less serious than theirs, nor is his case for mercy stronger.” Has Caldwell lost his mind? Collaboration with the Nazis and complicity in mass murder the equivalent of sex with an underage girl?

The derangement of the arguments should set off alarm bells. The Polanski affair is being used to stoke law-and-order hysteria and neopuritanical witch-hunting. ABC journalist Cokie Roberts declared on the television network’s “This Week,” “He raped and drugged and raped and sodomized a child. And then was a fugitive from justice. As far as I’m concerned, just take him out and shoot him.”

Not having had an issue into which they could sink their teeth in years, feminists have jumped on the anti-Polanski bandwagon, oblivious to the implications of their comments.

Writing in *Salon*, for example, Kate Harding fulminates, “Roman Polanski raped a child. Let’s just start right there, because that’s the detail that tends to get neglected when we start discussing whether it was *fair* for the bail-jumping director to be arrested at age 76, after 32 years in ‘exile.’”

Harding, along with Roberts, accuses Polanski of “drugging and raping a child.” This is now repeated as fact throughout the tabloid and “liberal” media alike. Mary Kate Cary, on a *US News & World Report* blog, writes that “Roman Polanski was a 43-year-old man who admitted to drugging and raping a 13-year-old girl.”

Polanski made no such admission. An agreement was reached between Polanski, his lawyers and the prosecutor, reportedly with the approval of the victim herself, to settle the matter on the basis of a guilty plea to a lesser charge.

The grand jury testimony of the victim, recently unsealed, is being cited as though it were proven fact. But this testimony was never tested in a court of law. The lesser charge to which Polanski pled guilty, not rape, is legally the only basis for any action taken against him.

Katha Pollitt of the *Nation* chimes in, “If a rapist escapes justice for long enough, should the world hand him a get-out-of-jail-free card? If you’re Roman Polanski, world-famous director, a lot of famous and gifted people think the answer is yes.”

The dismissal of the legal issues is extraordinary. After enumerating the initial, more serious allegations, Pollitt writes: “Those facts are not in dispute—except by Polanski, who has pooh-pooed the whole business many times... He was allowed to plead guilty to a lesser charge, like many accused rapists, to spare the victim the trauma of a trial and media hoopla.”

So the charges were not disputed by anyone... except the individual accused! Pollitt’s dedication to the principle of innocent until proven guilty is touching.

Polanski pled guilty to irresponsible, reprehensible conduct, for which state-appointed psychiatrists, the prosecution and the defense agreed that no prison time was appropriate.

In the past, “feminist liberals” would have been embarrassed by the

confluence of their opinions with those of the extreme right, and would perhaps have disavowed their newfound allies. Now they revel in the relationship.

The *Guardian* notes that Harding “blogged after her column exploded across the blogosphere and she was inundated with emails and requests for press interviews: ‘Who knew being disgusted with Roman Polanski would turn out to be the ever-elusive common ground between right-wing dudes and liberal feminists?’”

This is not insignificant. We are seeing before our eyes, so to speak, the movement of an entire layer of the upper-middle class to the right. There are those in the circles in and around *Salon*, the *Nation* and the rest of the liberal media who are merely stupid, to be frank, and easily duped. But there are others who are well aware of what is going on. They welcome the chance to cement relations with reactionary elements.

Remarkably, the anti-Polanski campaign has become yet another opportunity for liberal and ex-left elements to accommodate themselves to the right and return to the respectable fold.

In some quarters the campaign against Polanski is given a “left” twist. Some of the letter writers to the WSWS uncritically echo these arguments.

“Imagine if an average worker who didn’t have the resources to relocate abroad had been caught doing that,” writes one. “Do you hold to the aristocratic (and anti-Marxist) idea that rich guys have a right to rape working class women?” asks a second correspondent. “If he weren’t rich and famous, he would have already been in prison decades ago,” asserts a third.

The media effort to focus popular anger on the supposed double standard for the “Hollywood elite,” the impact of which these letters clearly reflect, has quite sinister implications that working people need to consider.

Right-wing forces, with the aid of feminists and liberals, are manufacturing a scapegoat, a mythological “other”—the Hollywood liberal, the promiscuous intellectual who preys on “women of the people”—against whom ordinary folk can mobilize. There is an unmistakably anti-Semitic undertone to this campaign, as in all the manipulated propaganda against film industry “decadence,” from William Randolph Hearst onward.

The present campaign against the “Hollywood elite,” of course, is mythological in another sense. For the most part, the genuine elite (studio heads, major producers, directors of “blockbusters”) are silent on the Polanski issue, terrified—as were their predecessors in the 1930s and 1940s in comparable circumstances—of being accused of “defending a rapist” by the right-wing media (and now by feminists), and the family values crowd. Enormous pressure is being exerted on those who have come to Polanski’s defense to back off.

The use of “sex scandals” has a long history in Hollywood and in America more generally as a means of settling political accounts and eliminating troublesome elements. The Mann Act, which prohibited the interstate transport of females for “immoral purposes,” was used against African-American heavyweight boxing champion Jack Johnson. Charlie Chaplin, a well-known leftist, was prosecuted in 1944, and eventually acquitted, for his involvement with actress Joan Barry under the Mann Act. He was ultimately hounded out of the country by the anti-communist witch-hunters.

No one should forget that the attack on the artistic community in the late 1940s and early 1950s in the name of the “American way of life” and the struggle against “godless communism” had incalculable consequences for intellectual and artistic life in America that have still not been overcome.

Phony “egalitarian” and “populist” efforts also have a lamentable record in US history.

In the events that led up to the 1915 lynching of New York-raised Leo Frank, a Jewish manager of a pencil factory in Atlanta, anti-Semitic forces played on the theme that Frank, falsely accused of rape and murder, was a wealthy, Northern industrialist who abused a working girl. Typically, Tom Watson, the Populist Party politician and by this time a rabid reactionary, wrote in the press, “If Frank’s rich connections keep on lying about this case, SOMETHING BAD WILL HAPPEN.” One of his editorials was headlined, “When and Where Shall Rich Criminals be Tried?”

A historian notes, “Watson cannily played upon the hatreds, fears and prejudices of his readers. He wrote of the ‘little factory girl who held to her innocence,’ and further endeared Mary Phagan to his readers by characterizing her as ‘a daughter of the people, of the common clay, of the blouse and the overall, of those who eat bread in the sweat of the face ...’” (*The Leo Frank Case*, Leonard Dinnerstein)

One of our correspondents, from Texas, writes: “Instead of comparing his case to the mass murderers who are not prosecuted, it would be more egalitarian to compare Polanski with the countless men and women in our prisons who do not have the resources to combat the political maneuverings by over-zealous judges and prosecutors who put them there.”

The reader’s description of the situation in Texas (and elsewhere in the US) is accurate, but his approach to the Polanski case and his conclusions are wrong. The abuses of state power to which he refers—the victimization of working class youth using sex offender laws—would not be halted by making an example of Polanski. On the contrary, the power of the state would be enhanced. The prosecutors could act with even greater brutality toward those who are truly defenseless. “Look what we did to someone like Polanski. What chance do you think you have?”

Moreover, socialist opposition to state persecution is not determined by the class and social status of the victim. Should socialists have defended Oscar Wilde, who (one might have argued) used his wealth to sexually exploit poor working class youth? There were quite a few socialists at the time who said, “No, he deserves whatever he gets.” What about Alfred Dreyfus, a right-wing military officer? Being swept along with the right-wing media and its fake populism is a poor way to advance the class struggle.

At a moment of seething but inchoate discontent in the US, with a population moving generally to the left, when the vast majority is outraged by the bank bailout and the deepening suffering, the Polanski case conveniently diverts energy and attention away from the fundamental economic and political issues.

The media coverage has an unstated subtext designed for the politically confused and uneducated: “We know you are angry about the bankers, about the politicians, about jobs, health care, education, the war in Afghanistan, etc. But you can’t do anything about those things. Here is something where you can add your voice of outrage, where you can be on the winning side and the side of the majority, and do something positive

for the sake of your family, your children.”

Again, we will point out, the outraged middle class feminists and liberals demand their pound of flesh from Polanski while the real criminals in America—CIA and military torturers and killers—go free.

Twenty-six CIA agents and a US Air Force lieutenant colonel were charged *in absentia* in Italy with the abduction of an Egyptian imam, Hassan Mustafa Osama Nasr, later sadistically tortured in an Egyptian prison, because American officials declared they would never allow the alleged perpetrators to be extradited to Italy to stand trial.

The US government refused to hand over to Venezuela Luis Posada Carriles, the anti-Castro Cuban terrorist who planted a bomb on a civilian airline that killed 73 people. Posada Carriles, held on minor immigration charges, was set free from a New Mexico jail in 2007.

But Roman Polanski! Here is a genuine threat to the social fabric!

Accepting that Polanski’s case involved a criminal offense, the circumstances of his sudden arrest after the passage of more than three decades at the age of 76, the substantial evidence that his earlier prosecution involved serious misconduct by the judge, the many mitigating circumstances arising from the facts of Polanski’s own tragic life, the sentiments of the victim, the artistic significance of Polanski’s work, and, finally, the reactionary characteristics of the media campaign—all these elements and circumstances should give pause to those who have adapted themselves, without taking the time to think, to official public opinion.

This is not apologetics. Thirty years after the fact, things need to be looked at critically—all the facts of the case, all the human circumstances. It needs to be borne in mind: the abuses of the state—the extension of its powers—is far more dangerous to the public well-being than the actions of any individual. Dangerous precedents are being set in this case.

Why should anyone concerned about civil liberties applaud as the United States intimidates and bludgeons a much smaller country, Switzerland, into extraditing an elderly man for a crime committed more than 30 years ago?



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