

The Nation joins the campaign against Julian Assange

David Walsh
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The *Nation* magazine in the US, with its publication of “The Case of Julian Assange” by columnist Katha Pollitt (posted December 22, 2010), has joined the right-wing campaign against WikiLeaks co-founder Assange, a campaign directed by the highest levels of the American state.

The sexual assault charges against Assange in Sweden are part of an orchestrated effort to divert public attention from the content of the WikiLeaks exposures—the duplicity, hypocrisy and criminality of American and world imperialism—and bury the important revelations in a pile of scandalous garbage. Pollitt has eagerly lent a hand to that effort.

Such a development was predictable, given the history of the journalist and the publication, but that does not make it any less reprehensible... or educational. The arguments employed by Pollitt shed further light on the politically rotten character of contemporary feminism and identity politics generally.

Pollitt has written for the *Nation*, one of the principal voices of American left liberalism, since 1980 and has had a column in the publication since 1995.

In her recent piece on Assange, Pollitt’s modus operandi is to remove the sex charges from their political context—the determined effort to destroy WikiLeaks and its founder—and assert that defenders of Assange are insensitive to rape and sexual violence against women. This is hardly a new, or persuasive, ploy.

What she has learned from the furor over the allegations against Assange, Pollitt begins by writing, is that “when it comes to rape, the left still doesn’t get it.” The self-appointed enlightened one then attempts to set “the left” straight.

She dismisses the concerns of “WikiLeaks supporters,” among whom she obviously does not number herself, about “the zeal with which Swedish authorities are pursuing Assange,” arguing that “it could also be that Sweden is following up because prosecutors get mad when world-class celebrities flee the country and then thumb their noses at them—cf. Roman Polanski.”

This is an obvious and malicious distortion of the Polanski case, but more importantly, it suggests that Assange belongs in the category of “world-class celebrities” trying to get off scot-free for their crimes, i.e., privileged, well-connected miscreants.

The picture painted here turns reality on its head. Assange is

being relentlessly pursued and persecuted by the most powerful governments and agencies on earth, with almost unlimited resources at their disposal. Elements within the US media and right-wing political figures have openly called for his assassination. This is a man whose very life is in danger. Why? Because he has helped expose a portion of the Holy of Holies—the secrets of imperialist foreign policy and diplomacy.

WikiLeaks has revealed, for the benefit of the world’s population, how the US government and its allies lie to their populations, conspire against democratic rights, repress opponents, plot “regime change” and prepare aggressive wars.

Assange is not a spoiled, arrogant “world-class celebrity,” except in the imagination of the human rubbish on the Murdoch payroll and such. What is Pollitt talking about?

This is not the first time we have noted the alliance of the extreme right and feminism (see: “The sordid coalition pursuing filmmaker Roman Polanski”). The latter has assumed deeply reactionary characteristics, misappropriating the movement for women’s rights that at one time was an element of the struggle against oppression.

Pollitt goes on to lambaste Assange’s supporters who have denounced the trumped-up and politically motivated character of the “rape” charges, including Truthout’s Dave Lindorff, filmmaker Michael Moore, MSNBC talk show host Keith Olbermann and feminists Naomi Wolf and Katrin Axelsson. “What’s disturbing,” she writes, “is the way some WikiLeaks admirers have misrepresented the allegations, attacked the women and made light of date rape.”

Date rape has nothing to do with it, by the women’s own statements. The case involves consensual relations. Each of the women actively sought a sexual involvement with Assange.

It has been widely reported that one of the “victims” hosted a party for Assange after the alleged crime and publicly boasted about the fact. The same individual once published a guide on the Internet on the means of revenging oneself on a cheating lover. Assange may be guilty of naïveté in associating with these women, but not of anything criminal.

The sexual assault case was taken up, after Swedish authorities first dropped it in embarrassment, and promoted by a prominent lawyer with connections to the upper-echelons of the Swedish ruling elite. The precise role played by the various

parties is unclear, along with their respective political or psychological motivations, but the frame-up character of the case against Assange is unmistakable. The stamp that reads “Made in the USA” is all that is missing.

Pollitt, however, has a different view of things. In response to the revelation that one of Assange’s accusers had connections to an anti-Castro group supported by terrorist and former CIA agent Luis Posada Carriles, she exclaims, “You would think the left would be more sensitive to charges of guilt by association—since when did marching in a demonstration mean you sign on to everything its supporters support?”

One has to rub one’s eyes. The Assange affair is preeminently a political affair. It involves the concerted attempt to silence a critic of the US government and military-intelligence apparatus, which includes—centrally—the CIA. Does the dubious political background of one of the alleged victims, which Pollitt does not refute, have no bearing on the case? This is simply part of the *Nation* journalist’s dishonest effort to hack away at the socio-political sinews of the affair and present it purely as a matter of sexual misconduct.

Pollitt’s argumentation, couched in the subjective, self-satisfied tone peculiar to *Nation* columnists, is similar to that of the *New York Times*’ Katrin Bennhold (“The Female Factor”), whose article, “Is It Rape? It Depends on Who Is Asking,” begins: “Is it rape when you have sex with someone who didn’t tell you it was OK, but told you it was OK earlier that night?” Bennhold presents this scenario as the generally accepted reality of the Assange case.

Pollitt concludes her December 22 piece, blandly: “WikiLeaks is revealing information citizens need to know—it’s a good thing. Assange may or may not have committed sex crimes according to Swedish law. Why is it so hard to hold those two ideas at once?”

As though those two facts were equivalent! Here you have the outlook of the petty-bourgeois philistine summed up. WikiLeaks has exposed, among many other things, thousands of unreported civilian deaths in Iraq—a world-historical war crime committed by American imperialism. That weighs no more with Pollitt than the complaints of Assange’s jilted or disappointed—or worse—lovers.

Pollitt is the representative of a social milieu. From a Stalinist family background, she belongs to the comfortable “left” circles around the *Nation* and such publications. In what, however, does this “leftism” consist?

In her autobiographical *Learning to Drive: and Other Life Stories*, Pollitt writes: “Toward the end of the 1990s... I joined a Marxist study group. This was something I had avoided throughout my twenties and thirties, when Marxism still had some life to it.” The trend in question was the “anti-Bolshevik tendency of council communism.” The passages in her book dealing with this venture are revealing.

Pollitt makes cheap jokes about her short-lived little group, but this dilettantish and impotent activity appears to be the sum-

total of her connection to “Marxism” or socialism. She belongs to the generation of middle-class lefts whose earlier association with protest, often identified with Stalinism or Maoism, has long since receded into the past. Upward mobility has brought them affluence, and their endless fixation on gender, sexual orientation, race and ethnicity is a means of promoting their own immediate economic and social interests.

There is nothing remotely progressive about such politics. Pollitt doesn’t oppose the attacks on the working class or imperialist interventions, much less champion those persecuted by the state, as her role in the Assange case makes eminently clear. Her conceptions and values flow into and merge with those of the privileged layers attached to the Democratic Party and the media establishment. It is not for nothing that one of the pillars of that establishment, the *Washington Post*, has called her column “the best place to go for original thinking on the left.”

Feminist opinion—as the Assange case and the Polanski affair before it have demonstrated—has become one of the means of legitimizing the suppression of nonconformists and political dissidents, and of changing the subject from the great social issues, above all, class oppression and social inequality, to stale and self-pitying concerns.

Those supervising the attack against Assange are no doubt congratulating themselves on its clever design. Mounting it in the guise of a campaign against the sexual molestation of women... how else could such a filthy operation, with its threat of a sweeping assault on democratic rights, be mounted and even legitimized today?

The powers that be know the Pollitts of this world, and the *Nation*. The magazine’s editor, Katrina vanden Heuvel, is, after all, a member of the Council on Foreign Relations, a leading ruling class think tank whose membership has included numerous CIA directors, along with dozens of US generals and admirals.

Identity politics in America is increasingly exposed for what it is—a method of duping people, of covering over the enormous social divide, and, not accidentally, enriching a layer of African-Americans, gays and professional feminists. Political charlatans like Pollitt should be objects of derision and contempt.



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