

# The American “left” and the Strauss-Kahn affair

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23 May 2011

The arrest May 14 in New York City of Dominique Strauss-Kahn, managing director of the International Monetary Fund and a leading French and global political figure, on sexual assault charges has triggered a significant chain of events. Strauss-Kahn, at first denied bail, was pressured into resigning as head of the IMF May 18, and any hope he had of becoming president of France in the 2012 election is presumably dead.

No one knows what went on in the Sofitel Hotel a week ago Saturday. The sexual assault charges against Strauss-Kahn are extremely serious ones, and if proven guilty, he deserves to be held accountable.

However, as is the case in all such affairs, little of the media uproar has anything to do with objectively setting out the facts of the case, delineating the personalities and issues involved or generally encouraging the emergence of the truth.

The American media has set about poisoning the atmosphere against Strauss-Kahn. The *New York Times*, the liberal newspaper of record, has been at the front of the pack, treating the French politician's guilt as an accomplished fact.

Public opinion is formed quickly in such matters, and *Times* executive editor Bill Keller knows perfectly well what he is doing, helping to contaminate the pool from which Strauss-Kahn's jury will eventually be selected. One of the *Times*' most recent contributions was the May 20 piece, “At I.M.F., Men on Prowl and Women on Guard,” which described the institution as “a sharp-elbowed place ruled by alpha male economists.”

From the point of view of the American media, the affair has become the latest opportunity to divert attention from the social calamity at home and neocolonial wars abroad. Characterizations of the IMF “big shot” as a bestial, serial “rapist,” with their anti-French and anti-Semitic subtext, are aimed at whipping up the basest sentiments in the population.

The campaign in the New York media is receiving support from a shameful, if predictable, source. The American liberal left (the *Nation*) and “far left” (the International Socialist Organization) have added their voices to this retrograde campaign.

As we say, outside of allegations communicated by the police and the authorities, too little is known that could help anyone form a definitive opinion of the case.

What *is* known, however, is the context of Strauss-Kahn's arrest, which takes on a special significance in this case and guarantees that it is not a routine celebrity scandal. These are fraught times in the ongoing economic crisis. The position of IMF director is at the center of bitter conflicts between different countries and between different sections of the ruling elite.

There is not only the possibility of a miscarriage of justice in this instance, but the prospect, as so often happens, that changes with far-reaching implications could be effected behind the backs of the population. Whether or not Strauss-Kahn is guilty, various forces will position themselves to exploit an opportunity created by murky events to achieve publicly unstated ends.

The so-called “left” serves a critical function. These middle-class elements become part of the process by which the whole business is concealed and the population misdirected. The “left” can be relied upon to participate in creating an atmosphere in which critical issues can be covered up.

In the *Nation*, in a piece posted May 19 (“DSK Déjà Vu”), Katha Pollitt treats Strauss-Kahn as more or less guilty as charged. In any event, his guilt or innocence doesn't seem of much interest to Pollitt; the case simply fits in too neatly with her narrow political agenda.

She commits serious breaches of logic, which she apparently hopes a likeminded readership will not notice. Pollitt writes: “Indeed, like everyone charged with a crime, DSK is innocent until proven guilty, but can't the French political and journalistic elite focus for two minutes on the crime of which he is accused? Say what you like about handcuffs and perp walks, they really don't compare with a violent sex attack.”

Yes, but hold on one second. No crime has in fact been proven, it remains an allegation. The handcuffing, humiliation and political destruction of Strauss-Kahn, on the other hand, took place, in full public view. Pollitt probably does not realize it, but her specious reasoning resembles that of the US establishment in the “war on terror” and beyond: police powers should be increased, because although they might lead to abuses here and there, the possible consequences of *not* giving the state massive new powers would be so catastrophic.

Pollitt scoffs at the notion that the case against Strauss-Kahn might possibly be “part of a political plot.” On what basis? What politically vigilant individual, alert to the massive damage done by the CIA, FBI, MI6, Mossad and other security agencies, could be so dismissive? Anyone thoughtless enough to exclude the possibility that Strauss-Kahn was set up, or at least that the affair is being used for political purposes, is either fooling herself or her readers.

Pollitt, who previously participated in the witch-hunts against Roman Polanski and Julian Assange, throws in rumors and innuendo about alleged past sexual wrongdoings, none of which led to criminal charges, to further incriminate Strauss-Kahn. She operates, in short, in the manner of a Murdoch-style tabloid journalist.

Further, she writes: “Now DSK's defense attorney is saying the sex, if it took place, was consensual. Because nothing is more likely than that a housekeeper—a Muslim widow in a headscarf, no less—will leap at the chance to fellate a 62-year-old hotel guest who springs naked out of the bathroom.”

Pollitt seems satisfied to cite the allegations of the accuser, or the New York City police department. She apparently holds the view that the accuser should not be challenged or examined.

How does Pollitt know what went on in the hotel room? For her, a trial is simply a means of ratifying the authorities' case against the accused. The *Nation* columnist takes the French politician's guilt as her starting point and works backward.

The presumption of innocence, that the burden of proof lies with the

state, is not a minor issue, to be paid lip service to and then dismissed, as with Pollitt. It is one of the foundations of any democratic legal system, set out in numerous law codes and constitutions, including the Declaration of the Rights of Man adopted by France's National Assembly in August 1789, a fruit of the great revolution.

The presumption of innocence is not referred to as such in the US Constitution, but legal scholars argue that the Fifth, Sixth and Fourteenth Amendments, with their emphasis on the right of the accused not to incriminate him- or herself, to "due process of law," to "an impartial jury" and to confront one's accuser clearly lead in that direction. Pollitt treats the presumption of innocence as an inconvenience.

Individuals or entire social layers indifferent or hostile to elementary democratic principles, in the supposed name of "feminism" or anything else, play a politically befouling role, and serve as adjuncts to the capitalist state as it builds up its machinery of repression.

The arguments of Sherry Wolf ("Not even close to a socialist") of the International Socialist Organization, posted on socialistworker.org, are in no way superior to those of Pollitt's; they are simply more hysterical.

Wolf, an associate editor of the *International Socialist Review*, the ISO's theoretical journal, hardly pays lip service to the presumption of innocence. She *knows* what went on in Strauss-Kahn's hotel room; her middle-class identity politics are her unfailing guide.

Strauss-Kahn, she informs her readers, is "a serial misogynist who raped a maid in a hotel—he's not in jail for an affair. Assuming that every female subordinate he's ever come in contact with is not a liar, Strauss-Kahn is an arrogant pig with enormous power who has gotten away with the sort of crimes that can get you 25 to life in most states."

Stating that the denial of bail of Strauss-Kahn "is most likely because his political opponents, who currently control the French government, have given the go-ahead to do him in," Wolf declares: "Tant pis, as the French say—tough shit, is my rough translation."

Generally in the US the use of this sort of "tough-guy" law and order rhetoric, complete with obscenities, is the province of the extreme right wing. Every left-wing publication in America is familiar with this sort of thing, hostile letters of an anticommunist character, full of vulgarity, backwardness and venom.

But indeed from what politically meaningful perspective can Wolf be considered a left-winger? She works in a few "left" criticisms of the French Socialist party; however, the bulk of her column is devoted to character assassination, carried out in wildly subjective and moralizing tones. For example:

"When the *New York Daily News* headline writers have to take a break from bashing Muslims to ravage your party's key political hope as 'Le Perv' on its front page, it's time to reassess. Dominique Strauss-Kahn is accused of—let's just call it by its proper name—RAPING a Manhattan hotel maid in his \$3,000-a-night room, thus traumatizing a woman in the middle of her workday, obliterating his political career and shaking up French politics."

Wolf offers as proven fact "that one of the most powerful figures in international finance and politics assaulted a journalist trying to interview him for a book, manipulated an IMF economist who was his subordinate into sleeping with him at a conference, and now raped a maid trying to clean his room."

She concludes: "In coming weeks we'll see the institutions he [Strauss-Kahn] represents and his former hangers-on scurry about to cover their asses, but for now, we can take a bit of pleasure in the political, social and personal collapse of such a man. Let's use his fall to shine a light on the organizations that have protected him all these years."

"Au revoir, Monsieur Pig! FSP and IMF, j'accuse!"

In reality, Wolf doesn't care about the accuser, or her fate. Without knowing anything about what happened May 14, Wolf has determined to do everything in her limited power to destroy Strauss-Kahn's reputation

and life. If he were convicted, even wrongfully, and sentenced to decades in prison, she would be satisfied. This is not a socialist, but someone who lacks elementary humanity.

The violence of Wolf's language is almost unhinged. One might suggest that the ISO leader is attempting in part to intimidate any of her readers, including a portion of her own organization's membership, who might be tempted to raise uncomfortable or troubling questions about the Strauss-Kahn affair.

Without exception, genuinely left-wing arguments are grounded in facts, logic and reason. One has the sense that for Wolf, Strauss-Kahn must be guilty and that if, by some terrible turn of events, he proved innocent, the world would be horribly out of joint.

The subjectivism, disdain for rational argumentation, and lack of concern for democratic principle expressed in Wolf's comment fuses with and serves reactionary political ends. Individuals such as Wolf and Pollitt are hurtling to the right.

The *Nation*, of course, is already a supporter of the Obama administration, including its prosecution of imperialist war in Libya and its proposed austerity measures. The ISO, whose quasi-allies in France, the New Anti-Capitalist Party (NPA), also back the "humanitarian" bombing of Libya, is not far behind.

Katha Pollitt concludes her piece with the assertion that "Powerful men molest with impunity, enabled by friends, wives, political cronies, a servile press and a culture deeply hostile to women. Tell me again how feminism's job is over."

"Feminism" in this context is divorced from the struggle for democratic rights, including the right to vote, equal pay, abortion rights, and becomes a vindictive plaything of the upper middle-class female, apparently resentful and perhaps jealous of "powerful men." In fact, this is a gross misrepresentation of feminism in its historical context.

This has nothing to do with any socialist or progressive tradition. A Marxist such as Rosa Luxemburg understood that the "lack of rights for women is only one link in the chain of the reaction that shackles the people's lives." Socialists have viewed the struggle for those rights as part of the effort to unite and strengthen the entire working population and raise it to the level of its historic task, settling accounts with capitalism.

Identity politics of the Pollitt-Wolf variety, as we wrote in regard to the Assange case, has become one of the means by which the American elite or its hangers-on regulate and manipulate public opinion in their favor and change "the subject from the great social issues, above all, class oppression and social inequality, to stale and self-pitying concerns." (See, "The *Nation* joins the campaign against Julian Assange")

These are right-wing, conformist elements, whose arguments discredit them. The only question is, how far will they go?



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