

# The New York Times' Roger Cohen lavishes praise on Rupert Murdoch

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Roger Cohen of the *International Herald Tribune* and *New York Times* took the trouble to heap praise on Rupert Murdoch in his July 11 column ("In Defense of Murdoch").

In the piece, Cohen referred to the billionaire media magnate as "alive and vigorous and noisy and relevant," as a "visionary" who shows "risk-taking determination" and stands for "gutsy endeavor and churn," as a "force of nature" and "restless" innovator, and as a practitioner of "no-holds-barred journalism" who "loves a scoop."

Mr. Cohen's warm feelings are nothing new. He explains in the current column that he came away "impressed" after "having spent time with Murdoch 21 years ago when writing a profile for The New York Times Magazine."

In that article, "Rupert Murdoch's Biggest Gamble" (October 21, 1990), Cohen did not stint on the praise either. "Think of him," Cohen wrote then, referring to Murdoch, "as an inspired juggler, inventing tricks that the world had not imagined possible."

Mr. Cohen was and clearly remains entranced.

He has chosen to express solidarity with and sympathy for Murdoch at an extraordinary moment. The ongoing hacking scandal in Britain has exposed the Murdoch media group as a sewer of law-breaking and corruption. Murdoch's journalists have engaged in serious criminal activity, including targeting Prime Minister Gordon Brown over a 10-year period, seeking access to Brown's voice mail, bank accounts, legal files and medical records. Some 4,000 victims of the scandal have come to light. If the investigation were pursued, it would no doubt lead right to the top.

Over his years at the *Times* and the *International Herald Tribune*, the British-born Cohen has cultivated an urbane and cultured image. Notwithstanding his obvious devotion to the capitalist free market and his snobbery, readers were meant to assume that his urbanity went hand in hand with a vaguely "progressive" point of view. The defense of Murdoch came as a shock to some, as numerous comments posted on the *Times*

website revealed.

Murdoch, the owner of many newspapers and media outlets, is one of the most detestable and widely detested global public figures. An inveterate opponent of democracy and workers' rights, an open admirer of dictatorial regimes, a behind-the-scenes manipulator of political life in several countries (including having a role in the hijacking of the 2000 US presidential election), an infamous warmonger with mass quantities of blood on his hands, he embodies—perhaps as much as any single individual—an entire period of social and political reaction.

Were there a genuinely independent and honest international court of justice, Murdoch would likely face indictment for crimes against peace, war crimes and crimes against humanity for helping instigate the Iraq and Afghanistan wars alone.

The ascendancy of Murdoch's media empire coincided with, and to a certain extent facilitated, a sharp shift to the right in the consensus policies of the ruling elite in the US and Britain in particular. He was a strident champion of the reckless "free market" policies identified with Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher, policies which have helped bring both economies to the edge of ruin and devastated the lives of millions of working people. Out of the ensuing social chaos, pandering to the basest and most confused sentiments, Murdoch coined a fortune.

Roger Cohen writes for the *New York Times*, the leading American liberal newspaper and a business rival of Murdoch's operations. The columnist expresses his polite disagreements with Murdoch on a number of issues, "from climate change to the Middle East." Something, however, overrides those disagreements. One can dismiss with a certain amount of contempt Cohen's claim that what he finds admirable in Murdoch is the latter's "loathing for elites, for cozy establishments, for cartels."

However much this posturing as an anti-establishment rebel may be bound up with Murdoch's own self-image, it has little bearing on reality. The future mogul no doubt came up against

certain entrenched interests in his early days, but he has striven perhaps unlike any figure in history to establish his own media monopoly and impose his own ultra-right viewpoint. If Murdoch had his way, there would be no voice other than his own and his cronies' available to the world's population.

His media outlets are notorious purveyors of lies, smears and scandals. In 1980, the normally restrained *Columbia Journalism Review* commented that Murdoch's *New York Post* was "no longer merely a journalistic problem. It is a social problem—a force for evil."

Cohen's flattery of Murdoch as a supposed "vigorous and noisy" enemy of the status quo and "anything standing in the way of gutsy endeavor and churn" has sinister implications. Extreme right-wing movements in the 20th century used such language in their struggle to overthrow bourgeois democracy and its institutions and establish authoritarian rule. Nazi propaganda minister Joseph Goebbels, for example, asserted that his efforts were "in principle active and revolutionary. ... Effective propaganda avoids any form of bureaucracy. It requires lightning-fast decisions, alert creativity and inexhaustible inventiveness." What is Cohen playing at?

The *Times* columnist goes out of his way to endorse Murdoch's "breaking of the unions at Wapping [in London] in 1986," which he terms "decisive for the vitality of newspapering." This is not a small matter; it speaks to the evolution and outlook of social circles that have prospered over the past 30 years at the expense of the overwhelming majority of the population.

The destruction of thousands of jobs at Murdoch's News International in 1986-87, the brutal attacks on pickets in Wapping during the yearlong strike and the eventual capitulation of the unions was a nodal point in the effort by the British ruling elite to smash working class resistance and drastically reduce living standards. It also helped create, in the words of one of the journalists who resisted Murdoch, "a compliant and non-confrontational press."

With individuals such as Cohen, one never knows whether genuine conviction or simply opportunism plays the dominant role. He probably doesn't know himself. Anyone capable of admiring the repugnant Murdoch is a long way from having firm principles of any kind, other than the worship of wealth and power. Like the *New York Times* leading personnel collectively, Cohen both idolizes and fears the ultra-right Murdoch empire. The article is both a paeon and an olive branch. He admires those who trample over others and hopes by his sycophancy to avoid a trampling himself.

In the end, why does Cohen hold Murdoch in such high

esteem? It's not the magnate's personal charm or charisma, but precisely because he incarnates the period during which—and the methods by which—the *Times* journalist and his ilk made themselves very wealthy and comfortable.

This upper middle class layer benefited from the stock market, real estate and profit boom in recent decades. As David Denby, the *New Yorker* magazine's film critic, explained in his book about the 1990s, *American Sucker*: "The change was not just financial, it was cultural. Liberals like me had watched with surprise as their residual distaste for capitalism slipped away, turning to grudging tolerance, and then, by degrees, to outright admiration ... [A]nyone with sense now knew that our economic system was far better than any other. It was certainly making some of us prosperous."

Cohen, like a garden-variety petty bourgeois philistine, may be in awe of Murdoch the ruthless and "risk-taking" individual, but that sentiment would not carry much weight if he were not far more bedazzled by Murdoch the social principle. Cohen is in love, above all, with low wages, the subservience of the oppressed, American economic and military domination, and his own privileged condition.

The July 11 column tells us considerably more about the evolution of Cohen and the *New York Times*, and social relations in the US as a whole, than it does about Rupert Murdoch's real or imagined qualities. The piece is a self-portrait of contemporary liberalism, irretrievably corrupted by vast sums of money. Cohen now lives in London. With whom does he hobnob? He is utterly indifferent to the pernicious impact of enormous wealth on society; he has become one with it.

The *Times* "type," and there are thousands of this type, identifies more and more openly with the plutocracy, regards the population with contempt and looks increasingly to a "gutsy" and "visionary" strongman to hold things together.



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