

The petition against Matt Damon and the “erasing” of Kevin Spacey: The fiercely antidemocratic character of the sexual misconduct campaign

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A number of recent developments point to the vehemently and dangerously antidemocratic character of the ongoing sexual witch hunt in the US.

An online petition currently gathering signatures demands that actor Matt Damon's cameo performance in the all-female *Ocean's 8* (directed by Gary Ross), scheduled to be released in June 2018, be eliminated.

The petition—"Sexual Harassment Isn't a Joke—Remove Matt Damon from Oceans 8"—accuses Damon of having "enabled his friend [producer] Harvey Weinstein's inappropriate behavior," by supposedly helping to quash a 2004 *New York Times* article about Weinstein, a charge that Damon emphatically denies, and having suggested that he (Damon) would still work with people accused of sexual misconduct, "on a 'case-by-case basis.'"

Damon's inclusion in *Ocean's 8*, "a movie," according to the petitioners, that spotlights "the talents of its tremendous female cast," would "trivialize the serious nature of the charges against sexual abusers like Weinstein—a show [of] massive disrespect for the brave women speaking out."

The petition, remarkably, calls on the film's producers George Clooney and Steven Soderbergh "to toss Damon's *Ocean's 8* cameo where it belongs: on the cutting room floor." It has been signed by some 28,000 people.

The right-wing initiators of the petition have clearly never heard of the concept of free speech. Damon made some mild-mannered comments in an interview reasonably criticizing those who were incapable of distinguishing "between ... patting someone on the butt and rape or child molestation." For that, he has come under vehement attack, an attack that may well have also affected the critical reaction to his new film, Alexander Payne's *Downsizing*. The movie has been widely and undeservedly panned.

Along with Damon, veteran British actor Ian McKellen, according to the media, is also "in hot water" for relatively innocuous comments about the sexual misconduct campaign. After expressing his hostility to rampant sexual harassment in

show business, McKellen, during an appearance at the Oxford Union, pointed to the dangers of false allegations ("some people of course get wrongly accused—there's that side of it as well"). He also noted that in the 1960s, actresses would sometimes send photographs to directors indicating that "'if you give me a job, you can have sex with me.' That was commonplace for people who proposed that they should be a victim. Madness."

For suggesting that female performers, in the face of economic and other kinds of serious pressures, had not always acted in a saintly manner, McKellen, with more than half a century of stage and film experience behind him and having received every major theatrical award in Britain, came under sharp attack as well, complete with obscenities. It was a contest between Damon and McKellen, suggested one commentator on Twitter, "for the dumbest thing said about sexual harassment today." While another tweeted, "Goddammit Ian McKellen, Can I like anyone any more or are you all a—holes [?]."

Among other things, the promoters of the sexual misconduct campaign feel obliged—often, ironically, in the most violent language—to paint women as an unpolluted, victimized gender, akin to the fantasized ideal of Victorian maidenhood.

Another antidemocratic petition is presently circulating online, this one insisting that the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York remove or "contextualize" *Thérèse Dreaming* (1938), a painting by the Polish-French artist Balthus (Balthasar Klossowski de Rola, 1908-2001). The museum, on its website, notes that the painter's "pubescent model ... Thérèse Blanchard, who was about twelve or thirteen at the time," is seated with "closed eyes" and "lost in thought."

The online petition, launched by New Yorker Mia Merrill, a human resources professional at a financial company, argues that the work "depicts a young girl in a sexually suggestive pose" and that it "is an evocative portrait of a prepubescent girl relaxing on a chair with her legs up and underwear exposed."

Merrill writes that she is "not asking for this painting to be

censored, destroyed or never seen again," before demanding precisely that the museum censor the work, "by either removing the piece from that particular gallery, or providing more context in the painting's description."

So far the museum has withstood this reactionary, philistine petition, signed by 11,000 people (although some of the signatories have added their names for the chance to oppose its content in their comments). In a predictably timid response, Alexandra Kozlakowski, a publicist for the Met, explained, "At the moment, we don't have any plans to make changes based on the request of this petition." In a press release, the museum commented, "Moments such as this provide an opportunity for conversation."

A search for "nudes" in the Metropolitan Museum's collection produces 2,819 results by hundreds of artists, ancient and modern. The list includes works, for example, by the Italian Jewish artist, Amedeo Modigliani (1884-1920). Exactly a century ago, in December 1917, the chief of the Paris police closed down Modigliani's first one-man exhibition, scandalized by the painter's nudes. If Merrill or others of her ilk were to make a careful search of the naked female and male figures at the museum, they could undoubtedly come up with other images that are "disturbing" or "inappropriate."

In a comment in the *New York Times* ("We Need to Talk About Balthus"), which has played a filthy role in promoting the sexual witch hunt, columnist Ginia Bellafante essentially endorses Merrill's demands. Bellafante comments that the initially provocative character of the online petition "gives way to an utterly reasonable demand ... for some provision of context, in the form of expanded text for instance, around a work of art that is rooted in the kind of sexualized power abuses we are now so aggressively trying to dismantle." This "reasonable demand," with its entirely unproven claim about "power abuses," merely opens the door for full-scale censorship.

Meanwhile, Ridley Scott's *All the Money in the World* opened Christmas Day, with Sony, according to *Variety*, "expecting positive word of mouth and awards attention" to give the film "a sustained run at multiplexes."

Probably the most distinctive feature of *All the Money in the World*, a dramatization of the 1973 kidnapping of John Paul Getty III and the refusal by his grandfather, oil tycoon J. Paul Getty, to pay the \$17 million ransom demand, was the decision by Scott and Sony executives to excise the performance of Kevin Spacey. Following allegations of sexual misconduct against Spacey, his characterization of the billionaire Getty was cut from the film and he was replaced by Christopher Plummer.

The *Times*, again, put in its despicable two cents. Brook Barnes' article, "The Race to Erase Kevin Spacey," recounts admiringly how Sony executives and Scott removed Spacey from the film. Following the actor's downfall, Barnes observes, "So began a race to pull off something never before attempted in Hollywood: revisiting a finished movie, reassembling major

members of the cast, refilming crucial scenes, re-editing many sequences, retooling the marketing campaign—and doing it all at the last possible minute." As though this were something to be proud of!

To "expunge" Spacey, in Barnes' words, from *All the Money in the World*, meant "refilming 22 scenes."

The British-born Scott, a mediocre action movie director, has played a particularly deplorable role. "The director said he did not tell Mr. Spacey that he was being replaced because Mr. Spacey had never contacted him to discuss the misconduct allegations." No one involved, not the director, not the producers, not Plummer, not the author of the sycophantic article in the *Times*, seems to have an ounce of shame, or principle.

The elimination of Spacey from the Scott film is of a piece with the reactionary character of the entire sexual misconduct campaign.

For the *Times* and the American ruling elite, the obsessive publicizing of allegations of sexual wrongdoing reflects in part the desire to "change the subject" from the social disaster in America, the cancerous growth of social inequality and the eruption of US militarism around the globe. It also serves to deepen the attack on democratic rights and inure the population to the "disappearing" of heretical or controversial figures, helping to set the stage for outright mass political repression.

The arrogant, self-absorbed and affluent layer, male and female, pursuing the campaign also has its own economic and social agenda. Individuals who are already in many cases privileged and wealthy would have us believe that sexual harassment, which now includes a wide range of behavior, is a martyrdom and its victims are among the most put-upon and oppressed members of society.

Such a claim would have been unthinkable even a few decades ago. It was generally recognized then, and not simply by socialists, that the working class and the poor, and especially working-class and poor women, were the principal sufferers in modern society. There has been a huge economic and ideological shift. A self-absorbed upper middle class, determined to elbow everyone else out of the way, now insists that its experiences are earthshaking and world-historical.

This layer, made wealthy by the stock market boom, various media and entertainment industry activities and other parasitic enterprises, is distant from and hostile to the working class. Like the American ruling elite as a whole, it is utterly contemptuous of democratic principles.



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