

Washington Post columnist goes after Woody Allen's "lechery"

David Walsh
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The sexual misconduct witch hunt, now entering its fourth month, has increasingly shown its true colors as a right-wing, repressive movement guided and manipulated by the Democratic Party, the *New York Times* and other component parts of the establishment. It has literally nothing to do, despite the claims of its pseudo-left defenders, with "workplace safety" or the conditions of working class women. This is a movement of the selfish and affluent, for the selfish and affluent.

Along with the anti-Russian hysteria, the "fake news" drive and the calls for Internet censorship, the sexual abuse campaign is part of the effort to divert popular anger against the Trump administration, the rule of the billionaires, the endless wars and the growing social misery into reactionary channels. It further undermines democratic rights and due process. The identity politics mafia has attempted to create a reign of terror in Hollywood, the media and on college campuses in particular. Any disagreement is greeted with abuse and efforts to destroy the reputation and career of the critic.

In peculiarly American fashion, layers of the well-heeled middle class have suddenly discovered piety and morality, at least in public. An absurd and repulsive prudishness has overtaken the media and official circles. "Womanizing" and "serial dating" have been criminalized. Making "unwelcome" or "unwanted" advances is likewise threatened with being outlawed, although no one has as yet been able to explain how the initiator is to know whether his or her advance is "unwelcome" or "unwanted" until he or she makes it.

As the *World Socialist Web Site* has noted, "America is passing through yet another 'Scarlet Letter' moment, with the letter 'A' (for adulteress) being replaced by the letter 'P' (for predator)... The writings of frothing rightwing feminist columnists combine America's age-old Puritanism with the staples of Victorian wisdom, passed down for generations from bourgeois mothers to daughters, about 'what men always want.'"

A recent article in the *Washington Post* has brought this home in an especially grotesque fashion. The "frothing rightwing" columnist in this case is a man, Richard Morgan, and his article is headlined, "I read decades of Woody Allen's private notes. He's obsessed with teenage girls." The sub-headline states, "His [Allen's] 56-box archive is filled with misogynist and lecherous musings." The *Post* advertised the article as "Making Art out of Lechery."

If it were simply a matter of a single especially misguided or disoriented column, one might leave well enough alone. However, Morgan's views are only an extreme and purified distillation of more widely held conceptions that need to be held up to the light and exposed.

After all, the *New York Times*, the *Post* and other publications have for some time been musing about the advisability of censoring, suppressing or eradicating the work of artists whose sexual or moral conduct is deemed beyond the pale. These are only a few of such commentaries: "Charlie Rose, Louis C.K., Kevin Spacey: Rebuked. Now What Do We Do With Their Work?" in the *New York Times*; "What Do We Do with the Art of Monstrous Men?" in the *Paris Review*; "Can we pretend an artist's

conduct doesn't matter in post-Harvey Weinstein Hollywood?" in the *Los Angeles Times* and so forth. The makers of *All the Money in the World* put this into practice, "erasing" Kevin Spacey from their film.

Morgan, in his piece on director-writer Woody Allen, takes neo-Puritanism a step further. He informs the reader of his conclusion based on his examination of the entire contents of Allen's "56-box, 57-year personal archives" housed at Princeton University: "Running through all of the boxes is an insistent, vivid obsession with young women and girls," he writes. This is not going to come as earthshaking news to many.

Essentially, Morgan's 2,300 word article in the *Post* is an expansion and fleshing out of this one (to him) disturbing thought. He quotes from Allen's "decades of notes and stories and sketches" to prove the point. He writes that the filmmaker's "screenplays are often Freudian, and they generally feature him (or some avatar for him) sticking almost religiously to a formula: A relationship on the brink of failure is thrown into chaos by the introduction of a compelling outsider, almost always a young woman."

First of all, so what? Second, Morgan makes the obvious mistake of rummaging through Allen's papers and determining that the artist is writing about nothing but himself, that each lead character is the author. He writes, "Sometimes Allen is in his work, but even when he isn't, his characters are often obvious stand-ins." Says who? Of course, every artist incorporates an element of autobiography in his or her work, but it is illegitimate and irresponsible for Morgan to indict Allen on the basis of his fictional creations.

After one passage to which Morgan objects, he writes that "in all likelihood" the bits in question "were intended as parody, but they are grounded in the reality that Allen seems to see the function of women in his life as their begging to be a part of it." So they are parody and fiction, but they represent how Allen truly sees women? What if the writer-director is mocking himself and his fantasies?

Of course, one of the difficulties Morgan has in treating Allen as a subject is that he appears to have no sense of humor whatsoever. In general, he proceeds with the stolid smugness and officiousness, and brutality, of a mid-19th century provincial censor. Indeed, the prosecutor of Gustave Flaubert's *Madame Bovary* in 1857, who decried that novel for its "offense against public morals and offense against religious morals" and its "glorification of adultery," would have found himself quite at home in Morgan's intellectual company. Much of what he references in Allen's work is adolescent or undeveloped, but hardly illegal or "degenerate."

While Morgan is at it, why not raise question marks over Thomas Mann's *Death in Venice* and *The Holy Sinner*, Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita* and *Invitation to a Beheading*, Gabriel García Márquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, each for its unconventional sexuality? From classical literature through the Elizabethan and Jacobean playwrights, complicated love relations abound. Artists worth their salt are known for exploring difficult and even taboo territory.

Morgan, along with the rest of today's vice squad at the *Post*, elsewhere, seems utterly oblivious to issues of free speech. It wasn't that long ago that James Joyce's *Ulysses* was held to be obscene. D.H. Lawrence's *Lady Chatterley's Lover* was not available in the US until 1959. The US Supreme Court did not finally decide the fate of Henry Miller's 1934 novel, *Tropic of Cancer*, until 1973.

Woody Allen is a humorist who belongs to a generation that came of age in television in the 1950s and 1960s, a generation that includes Mel Brooks, Sid Caesar, Carl Reiner, Larry Gelbart and others. Overshadowing them all perhaps is the figure of Lenny Bruce, who directed his satirical and scathing fire against official hypocrisy and censorship, and came into sharp conflict with the authorities as a result. Bruce was the spiritual father of George Carlin, Richard Pryor and more.

Allen created the persona of the Jewish nebbish with sexual problems. Many of his routines became known as comic classics. He too influenced many comedians of subsequent generations. If he remains residually admired and beloved by many today, it is a measure of the delight he provided some audiences in the 1960s.

Allen's most successful films were made several decades ago. In recent years, his moviemaking has become intolerably flat. He has largely run out of things to say. But we would defend him a hundred times against the likes of Morgan.

The latter eventually gets around to the heart of the matter, referring to "allegations that he [Allen] abused one of his girlfriend's daughters and began an improper relationship with another."

Allen, 57 at the time, became involved with the adoptive daughter of his companion, Mia Farrow. It may not have been wise, it may have demonstrated a degree of self-centeredness or worse, but it was not unlawful. In the end, it was no one's business but their own. The relationship became the central feature of an ugly, drawn-out public scandal, with Allen pitted against his bitter estranged former lover.

The element of controversy and even disgrace is not unheard of in artistic circles. One doesn't have to approve entirely of Allen's conduct to avoid turning the issue into the basis for a campaign of ostracism and even persecution. No one suggested that Allen be assigned to write a volume devoted to ethics. He is not Spinoza, he is a comic.

The sexual assault allegations against him in regard to Mia Farrow's seven-year-old daughter, Dylan Farrow, were not pursued by the New York Department of Social Services because it found no credible evidence to support them. Earlier, a team from the Yale-New Haven Hospital Child Sexual Abuse Clinic concluded about the child's claims: "We had two hypotheses: one, that these were statements that were made by an emotionally disturbed child and then became fixed in her mind. And the other hypothesis was that she was coached or influenced by her mother [Farrow]. We did not come to a firm conclusion. We think that it was probably a combination."

Morgan has no time for such facts. He has a witch hunt to incite. The article is a venomous, sanctimonious travesty. The columnist finally determines, reluctantly, that there's "nothing criminal" about Allen's fixation with young women, "But it's deeply, anachronistically gross. More than that, he seems not to care about bettering or changing himself in any way." Who appointed Morgan chief sexual inquisitor and moral arbiter? Why should we pay the slightest attention to his retrograde and patronizing views about how people should "better or change" themselves?

Morgan concludes, "Loving the art treats it as a finished product, polished and packaged for the public. But what are the thoughts that go into the art? The emotions? The priorities? The ugliness? All art is partly autobiographical—it comes from inside someone's mind, inside their soul. Allen's archive shows what is inside his."

And Morgan's column reveals something far more sinister inside his soul and mind, the overwhelming desire for Orwell's Thought Police (for

whom sexual ~~desire~~ was one expression of "thoughtcrime") to rule supreme. The fact that the *Washington Post* carries and promotes such an article is revealing—this is how far American liberalism has moved in the direction of authoritarianism.

There is something distinctly sick about this column and the entire sexual misconduct campaign. The latter has activated priggish and bluenosed trends in the disoriented, frightened, overwhelmed middle class. How far is this from the ultra-right "family values" campaign of a few years ago, which was aimed at those who felt the earth slipping out from under them? The level of un-reason, hysteria, abuse, banality is remarkable. People scream and shout stupid, slanderous things to shut out or shut down discussion.

Indeed, one of the driving forces behind the attack on Allen is his refusal to genuflect before the #MeToo campaign. Morgan notes disapprovingly that "Allen did lodge a complaint about the [Harvey] Weinstein moment, warning the BBC about 'a witch hunt atmosphere, a Salem atmosphere, where every guy in an office who winks at a woman is suddenly having to call a lawyer.' He seems to believe that co-workers wink at each other all the time."

Actresses Greta Gerwig and Mira Sorvino have joined the effort to smear and destroy Allen, each announcing in recent days she will never work with the director again. Sorvino's letter is remarkable for its emotive, near-hysterical tone and tortured logic. She writes, "Even if you love someone [apparently Allen], if you learn they may have committed these despicable acts, they must be exposed and condemned, and this exposure must have consequences."

The comment is subjective and entirely out of place. Were his actions criminal or not? To "expose and condemn" someone because he "may" have committed "despicable acts" apparently strikes the identity politics crowd as entirely reasonable. What if he hasn't?

Sorvino's role is especially unbecoming in light of her comment in a 2014 interview with the *Guardian* that Allen was one of her early "heroes" and that "getting to actually work with him [in *Mighty Aphrodite*, 1995] was such a thrill." At the time of the interview, she brushed aside a question about the abuse allegations against Allen, noting, "All I can say is he is a wonderful man to work with."

Now, in true "Et tu, Mira" style, she sticks the knife in and twists the blade. The actress declares today she regrets having worked with Allen, and will not do so again. But will she, honorable lady that she is, return all the money she made as a result of her association with Allen, and—as a symbolic act of contrition—return the Oscar she won for *Mighty Aphrodite*?

In general, the effort to demonize Woody Allen is reactionary and deplorable.



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