“Scoundrel Time” returns: The neo-Puritan #MeToo censors and their predecessors

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The sexual misconduct witch-hunt in the US continues, with far-reaching implications for democratic rights and free speech.

One could only rub one’s eyes in disbelief upon learning that *Vanity Fair* magazine’s editors had digitally removed actor James Franco from the cover of their annual Hollywood issue. The photograph originally included Franco along with Oprah Winfrey, Nicole Kidman, Reese Witherspoon, Tom Hanks, Jessica Chastain, Claire Foy, Michael Shannon and others.

The *Hollywood Reporter* explained that Franco “sat for a [*Vanity Fair*] photo shoot and interview and was to be featured in the magazine’s Annie Leibovitz-shot portfolio. He was removed from the cover digitally, however, due to allegations of sexual misconduct that surfaced in the wake of his Golden Globe win for *The Disaster Artist*.”

The excising of Franco follows the re-shooting and re-editing of Ridley Scott’s *All the Money in the World* to eliminate actor Kevin Spacey’s performance.

In regard to the claims of misbehavior, Franco recently told talk show host Stephen Colbert, “The things that I heard that were on Twitter are not accurate, but I completely support people coming out and being able to have a voice because they didn’t have a voice for so long.”

A *Vanity Fair* spokesperson confirmed the *Hollywood Reporter* account, commenting, “We made a decision not to include James Franco on the Hollywood cover once we learned of the misconduct allegations against him.”

Astonishing. The magazine cringes before the #MeToo movement and metes out instantaneous punishment for unsubstantiated claims passed on by the corrupt, sensationalist American media. Did the editors even bother to ask Franco about the truth or untruth of the charges? Presumably not.

And the removal of a prominent figure from a photograph, identified heretofore with the Stalinist regime in the USSR, has not raised an eyebrow in the American media. Will this now become standard practice in the case of anyone deemed unacceptable to the establishment?

In regard to the American film industry and media, this episode will undoubtedly go down in history as the Second Hollywood Witch Hunt, or “Scoundrel Time Returns.” This entire filthy affair will be remembered with shame, as a moment of almost bottomless hypocrisy and cowardice.

There’s more. The National Gallery of Art in Washington, DC, which promotes itself as “the nation’s museum,” has decided to postpone indefinitely two scheduled solo exhibitions following allegations of sexual misconduct against the artists in question, painter Chuck Close and photographer Thomas Roma. The *Washington Post* noted that such action was unprecedented.

A National Gallery spokeswoman, Anabeth Guthrie, told NPR, “We have great respect for their work. Given the recent attention on their personal lives, we discussed postponement of the installations with each artist.”

In the case of Close, the charges rise to the level of the grotesque. The artist is 77 years old and confined to a wheelchair as the result of a catastrophic spinal artery collapse in 1988 that left him severely paralyzed. Close learned to paint again with a brush strapped to his wrist.

According to NPR, “The allegations detail him unexpectedly asking multiple women to pose nude for him, in some cases asking intimate questions about personal grooming and making lewd comments about a woman’s vagina.” Close told the *New York Times*, “I never reduced anyone to tears, no one ever ran out of the place. If I embarrassed anyone or made them feel uncomfortable, I am truly sorry, I didn’t mean to. I acknowledge having a dirty mouth, but we’re all adults.” Apparently not.

Seattle University recently decided to remove a self-portrait by Close from the second floor lobby of the school’s Lemieux Library. “We were concerned about potential student, faculty or staff reaction to seeing the self-portrait, and decided that the prudent and proactive course of action would be to replace the self-portrait with another work,” university representatives wrote in an email. Numerous individuals and institutions are currently showing their “proactive” eagerness and enthusiasm for the censorship drive. In many cases, they don’t even have to be asked.

As for Roma, known for decades for his explorations of Brooklyn neighborhoods, *Artnet News* reports that the photographer “recently retired from his post as a professor at New York’s Columbia University after five former students spoke to the *New York Times* earlier this month about his alleged sexual misconduct. He stands accused of repeatedly pursuing sexual relationships with students. Roma has disputed the accusations. In a statement, his lawyer said the women’s accounts are ‘replete with inaccuracies and falsehoods.’”

One could go on. There is the hounding of Garrison Keillor and Aziz Ansari, the concerted effort to prevent Woody Allen from making further films, the preposterous attempts to blacken the names of Mark Twain, Robert Burns and other literary figures, and so on …

The #MeToo campaign is a movement of the selfish upper-middle class. It is a thousand miles from the life of the working class, female and male. It has nothing to do with “workplace safety.” What about the 5,000 workers who are killed on the job every year in the US, 90 percent of them male? Nor can these people spare a thought for the vast number of victims—men, women and children—of American imperialism in Iraq, Afghanistan, Libya, Syria and Yemen. Hollywood liberals and feminists enthusiastically endorsed Barack Obama, the president of “kill lists” and 540 illegal drone strikes.

Ronan Farrow, who helped launch the current campaign with his exposé of Harvey Weinstein in the *New Yorker*, personifies the nexus between middle class moralizing, the Democratic Party and high-level state operations. The son of Mia Farrow and Woody Allen, Farrow began working “in some unspecified capacity” (*Politico*) for US diplomat (and Democrat) Richard Holbrooke when he was a teenager. At one point, Farrow served as a speechwriter for Holbrooke, who, as the WSWS noted in a 2010 obituary, was “a man steeped in the commission and cover-up of bloody crimes” from Vietnam to the Balkans, Afghanistan, Pakistan and beyond.

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Farrow joined the Obama administration in 2009 as special adviser for humanitarian and NGO affairs in the Office of the Special Representative for Afghanistan and Pakistan. This was intelligence-propaganda work on behalf of US imperialism. In the *Guardian* in 2013, Farrow offered the following revealing comment, "As an official in the first Obama administration, I worked in jobs requiring top secret clearance. I know firsthand how essential secrecy can be to effecting policy goals and how devastating leaks can be. I navigated diplomatic relationships threatened by the indiscriminate release of WikiLeaks documents, and volunteered on the taskforce that sifted through them, piecing together the damage done."

Farrow later served as Hillary Clinton's "special adviser for global youth issues" (*New York Times*). Now, he has moved on from participating in (or covering up) the crimes of the US government and military to become one of the leading moral lights in the drive to uncover "sexual predators" in Hollywood.

As the Spacey, Franco and Close episodes demonstrate graphically and directly, this campaign has a right-wing trajectory, toward censorship and repression.

Where is this coming from?

Intense economic and political crisis afflicts American capitalism. Wide layers of the population face miserable conditions and the "real economy" is in shambles, while a handful of billionaire parasites accumulate unimaginable wealth. The turmoil in Washington is unlike anything in modern US history. The Trump administration is hated by tens of millions, but the Democratic Party opposes its actions along thoroughly right-wing lines, including the anti-Russia campaign and the sexual misconduct hysteria. The latter are unfolding in the midst of escalating efforts by large corporations and the government to censor the Internet.

The stage is set for an explosion of the class struggle, in the US and around the globe. Every social layer is propelled into motion. The affluent middle class resents those above and fears the working class below. Historically impotent and incapable of reorganizing society in a progressive fashion, this social grouping aspires to changes that "will make the existing society as tolerable and comfortable for themselves as possible." (Marx)

The #MeToo movement, like Black Lives Matter, emanates from this layer. It represents one portion of the upper-middle class. There are certainly some powerful men who will lose out if this movement has its way. However, they are mere "collateral damage" in the eyes of more farsighted sections of the ruling elite, including leading Democrats, the *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, etc., who recognize the value of the sexual misconduct campaign in strengthening identity politics and generally distracting attention from the cancerous social inequality, the danger of dictatorship and the drive to war.

In that large sense, the sexual witch-hunt is a confused, reactionary, manipulated response to the present turbulent situation and part of the effort to block the development of a politically conscious, socialist, working class solution to the immense crisis.

The moralizing of well-heeled pundits and academics is repulsive. Jessica Valenti in the *Guardian* defends the foul attack on Aziz Ansari: "But this movement cannot be simply about what is legal or illegal... This is about what's right." The self-absorption and bottomless self-pity of individuals with six-figure incomes (or more), utterly indifferent to the exploitation of the working class and the brutality of its conditions, is almost unbearable.

What would films created on the basis of the purging of all "misbehavior" and "impure thoughts" look like? The only thing worse than the current condition would be a Hollywood guided by the neo-Puritan "morality" of Ashley Judd, Farrow, Valenti, the *New York Times* editorial board and company.

Already, the effects of the current crusade are being felt. The *Hollywood Reporter* notes ("How the #MeToo Movement Could Kill Some Sexy Hollywood Movies") that "one of the first casualties" of "the #MeToo landscape... appears to be big-screen erotica. In the wake of the Harvey Weinstein scandal, studios are steering clear of sex...

"The pendulum is swinging so far, some fear, that it will create artistic repercussions. 'There may be a concern in this zero tolerance climate that creativity and creative opportunity could be restrained because individuals may become unwilling to put themselves in situations that could be misinterpreted or misconstrued in the creative process,' says Marc Simon, an entertainment attorney."

Of course, much of the treatment of sexuality in the commercial film world in recent decades has been exploitive and gratuitous. However, the prospect of American studio films transforming themselves "from steamy to something far more chaste" (*Hollywood Reporter*) is a wretched prospect. Forward to the... 1950s!

Indeed, to the extent that "Scoundrel Time II" has a specific agenda, it is the overthrow of the sexual openness in cinema that was one of the legacies of the 1960s. European sensibilities, with their greater sexual and psychological realism, contributed to this process, which was also a significant element of the reaction against McCarthyism. The current inquisition inevitably seeks to impose a new form of stultifying conformity, acceptable to the strictures of this perverse form of right-wing feminist identity politics, in which a broad swath of sexual activity is branded as criminal.

Leon Trotsky once observed that long political experience had taught him that "whenever a petty-bourgeois professor or journalist begins talking about high moral standards it is necessary to keep a firm hand on one's pocketbook."

The recourse to piety is not new in US history. Perhaps because of America's Puritan roots in part, efforts by the powers that be to suppress, forestall or derail social unrest have often begun or been pursued in high-minded moral guise.

One has only to recall the history of Anthony Comstock and his New York Society for the Suppression of Vice, established in 1873. On the eve of the post-Civil War explosion of the class struggle, Comstock, a US postal inspector, set about to combat sin and depravity, "pornography" in art and any discussion of abortion and birth control, and generally to determine the country's morals.

In her biography of Comstock (*Weeder in the Garden of the Lord*, 1995), Anna Louise Bates points to the fear that the development of the new industrial working class bred in the minds of such figures. Comstock, she writes, was "molded from childhood by the teachings of Evangelical Protestantism and paid by some of the wealthiest men in America" (including J.P. Morgan, Samuel Colgate and financier Morris Ketchum Jesup). Comstock and other anti-"obscenity" and anti-birth control zealots, in Bates's forceful words, "worked as henchmen and hired guns to terrorize people for engaging in practices deemed undesirable by the bourgeoisie in American cities."

The postal inspector and would-be grand inquisitor hated "Free-lovers, socialists and anarchists," and all those who opposed the moral status quo. "The Christian family was the core unit of capitalism to Comstock," Bates writes. She adds later that the self-appointed guardian of American morals "goes down in history as a repressive individual who acted on behalf of the most exploitive social classes. He did more than any other individual to restrict free speech in the United States."

Comstock never directly addressed political questions, including the growth of the labor movement and socialism. But his obsession with order, as laid out in his book, *Morals Versus Art*, published in 1887, the same tumultuous year as the execution of the Haymarket martyrs, makes clear his overall orientation and concerns.

At one point in his work, Comstock cites approvingly a British legal decision from 1726: "Peace includes good order and government, and that

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peace may be broken in any instances without an actual force ... If it be an act against the Constitution or civil government ... If it be against religion ... If against morality." Immorality, he continues quoting, destroys "the peace of government; for government is no more than public order, which is morality."

Like the present-day censors of Chuck Close and others, Comstock had no time for artists with wicked, prurient thoughts and desires.

"Pure morals are of first importance. They are protected by law; while art, if unclean, is not," he wrote.

"In the guise of art, this foe of moral purity comes in its most insidious, fascinating and seductive form. Obscenity may be produced by the pen of the ready writer in prose; it may come upon the flowery wing of poetry; or, as in this instance, by the gilded touch of the brush of the man of genius in art...

"The world is open to the artist. He may represent objects and subjects in whatever colors he may see fit to adopt, but his methods must commend themselves to the morality of the people. He must see to it that they do not invade the law of public morals, and, according to some writers, endanger the public peace." Art that accepts these conditions of course condemns itself to insignificance in advance.

At the end of his wretched book, Comstock tallies up what he proudly terms his "Grand Total to Date": "1,232 persons arrested. 738 persons convicted. 263 years, 7 months, 25 days of imprisonment imposed. $85,215.95 fines inflicted, and $71,700 bail bonds forfeited, making a total to the public treasury of $156,915.95 [$3.9 million in 2017 dollars]... And more than 49 tons of matters seized."

A commentator notes, "In 1902, he drove a woman to suicide—not his first victim, nor his last. Before his own death, Comstock boasted of 15 suicides and 4,000 arrests as a result of his work."

A later era of social upheaval also generated its share of moral guardians. The Wall Street Crash coincided with the advent of talking films. The existence of a medium that appealed to wide audiences under conditions of economic disaster for millions was perceived as a genuine threat.

The Motion Picture Producers and Distributors of America (MPPDA), founded in 1922, was concerned with this problem from its earliest days. Its first chairman was Will H. Hays, former chairman of the Republican National Committee and US postmaster general. Hays and the film studios initially reached a "gentleman's agreement" on 13 points to be avoided on screen. They included ridiculing public officials and offending religious beliefs.

In 1929, Martin Quigley, a devout Irish Catholic and editor and publisher of a film trade weekly, and Rev. Daniel A. Lord, a Jesuit priest, authored the first version of what was to become the infamous Motion Picture Production Code, which held sway until the 1960s.

Thomas Doherty, in *Hollywood's Censor: Joseph I. Breen and the Production Code Administration*, writes that the "Quigley-Lord Code would not merely chisel a list of thou-shalt-nots onto stone tablets; it would articulate the tenets of a religio-filmic philosophy. A true motion picture code 'must make morality attractive, and the sense of responsibility of the movies to its public [must be] clear and unmistakable,' Lord believed. 'It must be a matter of general principles and their immediate relationship to the practical plots and situations of a film.'"

The Motion Picture Production Code, adopted by film producers and distributors in 1930 and strictly enforced as of July 1, 1934, makes astonishing reading. The extent of its repressiveness and worship of conformism and the existing state of things can fully be captured only by a reading of the entire document. However, certain passages may at least provide something of its flavor.

The film studios, the Code asserted, "recognize their responsibility to the public because ... entertainment and art are important influences in the life of a nation." While recognizing motion pictures primarily as entertainment, movie producers "know that the motion picture within its own field of entertainment may be directly responsible for spiritual or moral progress, for higher types of social life, and for much correct thinking."

"No picture shall be produced that will lower the moral standards of those who see it. Hence the sympathy of the audience should never be thrown to the side of crime, wrongdoing, evil or sin ... Correct standards of life, subject only to the requirements of drama and entertainment, shall be presented ... Law, natural or human, shall not be ridiculed, nor shall sympathy be created for its violation."

"Scenes of Passion ... should not be introduced when not essential to the plot ... Excessive and lustful kissing, lustful embraces, suggestive postures and gestures, are not to be shown ... In general, passion should so be treated that these scenes do not stimulate the lower and baser element."

Needless to say, "Miscegenation (sex relationships between the white and black races) is forbidden."

"No film or episode may throw ridicule on any religious faith ... Ministers of religion in their character as ministers of religion should not be used as comic characters or as villains."

The Production Code singles out, as one of the considerable dangers posed by motion pictures, the fact that this art form "appeals at once to every class, mature, immature, developed, undeveloped, law abiding, criminal." Film, combining as it does "the two fundamental appeals of looking at a picture and listening to a story, at once reaches every class of society." Moreover, due to the technology itself ("the mobility of film and the ease of picture distribution, and ... the possibility of duplicating positives in large quantities") this art "reaches places unpenetrated by other forms of art."

The concerns of the present-day censors of the Internet, in other words, are not entirely novel.

Joseph Breen, formerly an assistant to the president of the Chicago-based Peabody Coal Company, took charge of the Production Code Administration (PCA) in 1934 and spent the next several decades supervising the film industry's diligent self-censoring operations. Doherty notes, "Breen had been an ardent anticommunist since the Bolshevik revolution. In the 1920s, both as the editor of the *National Catholic Welfare Council Bulletin* and as an essayist for *America*, he had warned of the menace of communism and chronicled its anti-Catholic depredations."

Thousands of film scripts and projects were manhandled and mangled by Breen ("a Victorian Irish Catholic") and his associates. "In the early days," according to Doherty's book, Breen pored "over some one thousand scripts per year." His office demanded changes in many, some never saw the light of day. As Doherty explains, "The Breen Office files are full of plots rejected as too politically controversial or commercially inconvenient. Motion picture versions of Sinclair Lewis's inflammatory novel *It Can't Happen Here* or Herman J. Mankiewicz's anti-Hitler screenplay *The Mad Dog of Europe* were condemned properties in Breen's Hollywood.

"The Code not only smothered worthy studio projects but its stranglehold on independent production and affiliated theaters cut off the creative oxygen available for all cinema."

Again, there was not a single reference in this ferociously repressive code to explicitly political matters. However, the harsh conditions of the Great Depression were producing upheavals by 1934, the year of three widely supported strikes, led by left-wing Socialists, Trotskyists and Communist Party members—the Toledo Auto-Lite strike, Minneapolis truck drivers' and San Francisco dock workers' strike. They signaled the emergence of a potentially insurrectionary working class movement.

As we have noted before, "the imposition of the Production Code was *precisely one of the means* by which the film industry and its overseers made certain that the realities of the Depression would not find reflection

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on screen” and thus encourage social opposition.

The sexual witch-hunt and its censorship efforts in our day need to be seen in this historical framework, as means by which the American establishment is seeking to blunt or divert popular opposition to social polarization, sow as much confusion as possible, reinforce conformism, smear and exclude sexual and other kinds of “heretics,” and build up or consolidate a reactionary constituency within the petty bourgeoisie that will ultimately be aimed against the working class and its rights and conditions.

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