

# The foul role of *Spiked* in the demonization of Julian Assange

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WikiLeaks founder and editor Julian Assange is in increasing danger of being expelled from the Ecuadorian embassy in London and turned over to US authorities, at whose benevolent hands he could face decades in prison or even the death penalty.

Assange has been denied use of communications for nearly three months on the order of the Ecuadorean government, in response to pressure from the US. On Wednesday, Ecuadorian foreign minister Jose Valencia warned that Assange could not claim asylum in the embassy indefinitely.

Assange's plight demonstrates the extent to which basic democratic rights have been eviscerated by the imperialist powers.

For Britain's *Spiked* magazine, however, whose writers advance themselves as the foremost humanist and, on occasion, even "Marxist" defenders of democratic freedoms and the rights of the individual against the state, the situation has not warranted comment for over a year.

This is not an oversight. Before lapsing into silence, *Spiked* helped prepare the conditions for Assange's isolation, as one of the most vindictive participants in the campaign against WikiLeaks. While styling itself the embodiment of contrarian radicalism, the publication nonetheless followed virtually word for word the British government's attack on Assange's rights and character. Here we have a supposedly libertarian tendency that is slavish in its support for the state.

The essential points of *Spiked's* position were set out in their last comment on Assange, "Why Assange should stand trial," by law editor Luke Gittos. This was published on May 25, 2017—a week after Swedish prosecutors had dropped trumped-up sexual assault allegations against Assange.

Gittos made reference to these events only to dismiss them. "We could all speculate," he remarked, "on the veracity of the [Swedish] case." And further: Assange "feels no need to make himself accountable for allegations related to his private life."

This is disingenuous. Assange had no case to answer in Sweden and Gittos knew it. His invitation to "speculate"

was a blatant attempt to muddy the waters over a settled question.

When Gittos wrote that "It's time [Assange] was held to account for these leaks and for the Swedish allegations," it was not the (dismissed) frame-up allegations that really enraged him.

His article made clear that in demanding Assange should be "held up to the judgement of the public," *Spiked's* desire was to see the WikiLeaks editor hauled in front of the one jury still out on his case: the US federal grand jury considering charges against him under the Espionage Act. Empowered in 2010, the judgement of this panel could well lead to the death penalty. It was in order to resist plans to extradite him to the US that Assange took refuge in the Ecuadorian embassy six years ago.

As *Spiked* knew and knows perfectly well, the political persecution of the WikiLeaks founder had been pursued through a #MeToo-style witch-hunt—using accusations of sexual assault to vilify, criminalise and silence him. *Spiked* ordinarily rails against such campaigns. Gittos himself authored a work entitled *Why Rape Culture is a Dangerous Myth: From Steubenville to Ched Evans* (2015). The publication has posted numerous articles denouncing #MeToo as an attack on presumption of innocence, including most recently, by its associate editor, Joanna Williams.

Under the headline, "Weinstein: Heading for a #MeToo mistrial?" Williams observed, "#MeToo's proponents argue that women making claims of sexual abuse must always be believed. Any hint of questioning, the tiniest slither of doubt, the remotest claim of innocent until proven guilty, is considered an act of treachery. The accuser is holy now. When evidence is no longer needed in order to find someone guilty, when allegations alone are enough, the more accusations that are made against a person the more guilty they are assumed to be." *Spiked* does not demonstrate the same outrage over the abuse of due process in Assange's case.

Similarly, for several years, *Spiked* has run a campaign in

universities denouncing “political correctness” as an attack on free speech. Yet again, when it comes to Assange, its defence of free speech no longer applies.

The online magazine has posted a host of false and ridiculous comments about Assange, including the claims that WikiLeaks has revealed nothing new, has engaged in a “competition of victimhoods” (according to a 2010 article by editor Brendan O’Neill) and has undermined investigative journalism (!). But *Spiked’s* central criticism of Assange is that he has irresponsibly placed individuals at risk through the release of information.

Gittos complained in his May 2017 article that Assange had been involved in “dump[ing] vast quantities of material online, with little thought for the impact.” His article specifically cited the “Saudi Cables,” which supposedly revealed “among other personal data, the details of a Saudi man arrested for being gay, and, in two cases, the identities of teenage rape victims.”

Gittos and *Spiked* were simply regurgitating here the spurious arguments of the bourgeois media. The wretched *Guardian* and other major media outlets used such claims to justify throwing Assange to the wolves in 2012, having previously helped and profited from publishing his material.

The newspapers attacking Assange on the basis of the cables cited by *Spiked*, in addition to the *Guardian*, included the *Independent*, the *Daily Mail*, the *Australian* and the *New York Times*. There is no evidence that the information leaked in the Saudi Cables resulted in any harm.

In any case, such “sensitivity” on the part of the pro-imperialist media, propaganda outlets for bloody colonial wars throughout the Middle East, was a smokescreen. Their real concern was not with the “privacy” of individual citizens, but with that of the British security forces. Assange’s crime in their view was his cutting across and exposing the hand-in-glove relationship between the military-intelligence apparatus and the official media.

In 2010, the *Guardian* prefaced its release of some of the WikiLeaks files with an editorial discussing the paper’s responsibility to control the political fallout of the information, exercising extreme discretion in the “editing, contextualising, explanation and redaction” of the documents.

Gittos’ criticisms of Assange for exercising “absolutely no editorial judgement” echoed the same fraudulent concerns. So too did the *Spiked* columnist’s call for Assange to be “held accountable” in a court of law for publishing leaks with “the potential to harm.” For his part, O’Neill, has attacked Assange for being the centre of the “cult of the whistleblower” which he described as elitist and snobbish at least in part because its key figures “tend, inevitably, to be white, middle-class and well-connected.”

The *Spiked*ose withignment the of government and military-intelligence apparatus is no accident. Its leading figures are closely integrated into the British establishment. O’Neill writes for the *Spectator*, the house paper of the Tory right, and is a keynote speaker for the pro-Israeli government lobby StandWithUs. Regular writers James Heartfield, Patrick West, Nathalie Rothschild and Tom Slater, among others, also contribute regularly to the *Guardian*, *Telegraph*, the *Times* and the *Independent*. Many of them have published books with followings on the fringes of the Conservative Party. *Spiked’s* guru, Frank Furedi—formerly founder and leader of the now defunct Revolutionary Communist Party—is an emeritus professor of sociology at the University of Kent.

However “free thinking” *Spiked* claims to be, its iconoclasm is of a consciously reactionary and cowardly character. Its practice consists of taking controversial stances, rooted in a selfish and individualistic ideology, on hot-button topics for the right-wing. That is why climate change, mental health, anti-racism and attacks on the “snowflake” generation are among their favoured topics.

The ultimate aim is to drum up support for right-wing ideas and forces. While *Spiked* denounced Assange, it rushed to the defence of figures like Nigel Farage and Marine Le Pen. Authority and the status quo are challenged by *Spiked’s* writers only so far as they stand in the way of policies advanced by such individuals.

As the WSWS wrote in a comment on *Spiked* in 2016, “*Spiked’s* opposition to identity politics is from the right, insofar as the latter employs the language of ‘anti-imperialism’ and selectively points to some of the historic crimes committed against the colonial peoples. Theirs is an attempt to rehabilitate the ideas of the far right, to promote the supposedly civilising mission of imperialism.”

And further: “In the hands of *Spiked*, invocations of ‘free speech’ are transformed into a justification for attacking broader democratic rights—above all genuine, vocal opposition to anti-democratic and reactionary forces and ideas.”

This analysis resounds with greater force today. The case of Julian Assange is the touchstone by which the right-wing, bourgeois politics of *Spiked*, like many such outfits around the globe, has been revealed.



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