

Revisiting the Central Park Five case in the #MeToo era

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“It’s more than anger... It’s hatred, and I want society to hate them.”—Donald Trump’s full-page advertisement in the New York Times and other newspapers, May 1, 1989

“A pack of teenagers rampages through Central Park... raping an innocent young woman... New Yorkers respond with unanimous fury: Those guilty of the atrocity deserve swift, stern punishment.”—New York Times, “The Jogger and the Wolf Pack,” April 26, 1989

“People just shouting, you know, ‘Rapist!’ ‘You animal!’ ‘You don’t deserve to be alive’... It just felt like the whole world hated us.”—Antron McCray, one of the Central Park Five

The release of *When They See Us*, the Netflix miniseries about the Central Park Jogger case directed by Ava Duvernay, has prompted a public reckoning with the 1989 police frame-up of five African-American teenagers known as the Central Park Five.

The series depicts in gut-wrenching detail how police officers, detectives and prosecutors intimidated and brutalized a group of adolescents into confessing to a crime they had not committed, and how a right-wing media witch hunt manipulated a jury into handing down a verdict that was a clear miscarriage of justice.

The case became the occasion for an outpouring from the American political establishment of law-and-order hysteria complemented by dog-whistle racism. In a *Washington Post* op-ed column titled “The Barbarians Are Winning,” the fascistic Republican ideologue Pat Buchanan wrote: “How does a civilized, self-confident people deal with enemies who gang-rape their women? Armies stand them up against a wall and shoot them; or we hang them.”

Buchanan continued, provocatively echoing the long tradition of lynch-mob “justice” in America, if “the eldest of that wolf pack were tried, convicted and hanged in Central Park, by June 1, and the 13- and 14-year-olds were stripped, horsewhipped, and sent to prison, the park might soon be safe again for women.”

Donald Trump, then a New York real estate mogul, took out full-page ads in four local newspapers, including the *New York Times*, bearing the headline, “BRING BACK THE DEATH PENALTY! BRING BACK OUR POLICE!” Trump viciously

announced, “I want to hate these muggers and murderers. They should be forced to suffer and, when they kill, they should be executed for their crimes... CIVIL LIBERTIES END WHEN AN ATTACK ON OUR SAFETY BEGINS!”

The release of *When They See Us* prompted a public outcry that has led Linda Fairstein, the lead prosecutor in the case, to resign from Vassar College’s board of trustees. Fairstein was dropped by her longtime publisher after a petition gathered over 100,000 signatures and the hashtag #CancelLindaFairstein trended on social media.

Writing in the *New York Times*, Sarah Burns lays the blame for the miscarriage of justice squarely at the feet of Trump. “Mr. Trump owes many people overdue apologies. At the top of his growing list should be Mr. McCray, Mr. Wise, Mr. Salaam, Mr. Santana and Mr. Richardson.”

But any serious, objective examination of the case reveals it is not just Trump and Fairstein who bear the blame. The entire establishment media, almost without exception, engaged in an orgy of vigilante hysteria not seen since the Jim Crow era.

The *Washington Post*, whose current motto is “Democracy dies in darkness,” instructed its readers in a full-page editorial to “Channel Your Outrage: Demand the Death Penalty” for the framed-up teenagers. “If New Yorkers want to be able to reclaim their city from the murderers and the thugs, they must restore the criminal justice system’s capacity to intimidate would-be criminals,” the newspaper declared.

Referring explicitly to the adolescents who were rounded up and abused by the police into signing confessions, the *Post* wrote, “The thugs who raped, stabbed and bludgeoned a 28-year-old woman jogger gave no thought to the possibility that they might be punished in a manner commensurate with their sadistic crime”—i.e., tortured and perhaps executed.

In a foul editorial published on April 26, 1989, “*The Jogger and the Wolf Pack*,” the *New York Times* enthusiastically joined the lynch mob. It wrote:

The news inspires horror and outrage: A pack of teenagers rampages through Central Park, harassing and assaulting several people, ultimately brutalizing and raping an innocent young woman who had been jogging

on a lonely path, leaving her for dead in the April mud. New Yorkers respond with unanimous fury: Those guilty of the atrocity deserve swift, stern punishment.

The editorial rambles on about the possible causes of the assault, musing whether “drugs,” “greed,” or the African-American youths’ alleged hatred of white people was the cause of their criminal act. In fact, *they did not commit*, and *could not have committed* the crime for which they were framed up and convicted.

The editorial concludes by pompously asking, “Are teenagers more prone to violence today than in the past because of abundant television and movie violence? Are even stable families failing to instill compassionate values? Or could this be just an extreme, isolated case of contagious adolescent barbarity?”

Entirely missing from the editorial, with its moralizing and its racist subtext, is any consideration of the most relevant question: Did the alleged perpetrators actually commit the crime of which they were accused?

In April 1989, one week after the incident, Arthur Ochs Sulzberger Sr.’s newspaper had already decided the teenagers were guilty, taking upon itself the role of judge and jury.

And this brings us to 2019. It has been 20 months since the *Times*, now run by Arthur Ochs Sulzberger Jr. (chairman) and his son, A. G. Sulzberger (publisher), helped launch the #MeToo movement with a series of salacious accusations against film producer Harvey Weinstein, a Jewish-American man.

The ongoing sexual witch-hunt has managed to damage or devastate the livelihoods, among others, of Louis C.K. (of Hungarian-Jewish and Mexican ancestry) and Kevin Spacey (who is bisexual), and has made Jewish-American comedian Woody Allen a blacklisted pariah, despite the fact that none of these individuals has been convicted of a crime.

As part of their #MeToo campaign, the *Times* and *Post* have pressed for the personal destruction of Polish filmmaker Roman Polanski, also Jewish and a Holocaust survivor, and libeled the African-American “king of pop” Michael Jackson, dead for nearly a decade.

Reprising its modus operandi in the Central Park Five case, the *Times* simply takes for granted that these individuals are guilty of “rape,” “sexual assault,” “sexual misconduct” or mere “creepiness”—and piously demands that they be punished, at the very least through the destruction of their careers. As *Times* film critic Manohla Dargis wrote of the gifted and popular Louis C.K., “I don’t feel bad for him or mourn a career that may be over. He’s rich and can crawl into a cushy hole.”

The *Times*, the *Post* and other media outlets have solicited and procured information they hoped would irrevocably turn the population against these individuals and drive them from public life, once again without posing the question they

neglected to ask in 1989: Are these men guilty of a crime?

“#MeToo has done what the law could not,” gloated Catharine A. MacKinnon in the *Times*. In other words, the sexual misconduct campaign has allowed for summary “justice” to be carried out without individuals being convicted, or in most cases, *even appearing* in a court of law. This is, in principle, no different than Buchanan’s demand that the Central Park five be “stood up against a wall.”

The *Times* and the *Post*, with the luxury afforded to the shameless, simply ignore their own roles in railroading the Central Park Five to prison—or selectively quote their own statements without comment. If their editors were forced to answer, they would perhaps argue that the period was different, the facts were unclear and their cruel statements reflected past and long-abandoned prejudices or insensitivities.

However, the *Bulletin* newspaper, the forerunner of the *World Socialist Web Site*, was clear in 1989 as to what their violent, law-and-order positions represented. The newspaper of the world socialist movement in the US condemned the *Times*’ “vicious anti-working class sensationalism in connection with the recent Central Park rape,” declaring that its campaign aimed to “channel support behind the buildup of the repressive powers of the capitalist state, to be used against the working class.”

We conclude with a reaffirmation of what we said in 1989, what we said at the time of the launching of #MeToo in 2017 and what we say to this day: the presumption of innocence serves the weak against the strong, the minority against the majority, the outsiders against the establishment and workers against the capitalist government. All those who call for strengthening the “bodies of armed men” known as the state have nothing in common with the struggle for social equality, the cause of social progress or the defense of democratic rights.

Prosecuting “what the law could not” is called lynch law. Workers must beware of middle-class witch-hunters and law-and-order hysterics who say otherwise.



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