

Macron government, #MeToo witch-hunters step up campaign against Roman Polanski after César award for *J'accuse*

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In the wake of the February 28 César film awards in Paris, at which Roman Polanski's *J'accuse* (*An Officer and A Spy*) won three prizes, the Macron government and representatives of the #MeToo campaign have intensified their campaign to vilify the French-Polish director.

J'accuse is an extraordinary work that treats the Dreyfus Affair, a major episode in the history of France and the international workers' movement. It was awarded for best director, best adaptation of a literary work and best costume design. The César awards are decided by anonymous vote of more than 4,000 professionals in the French film and entertainment industry, who rejected a months-long campaign against Polanski by the government and media.

Sibeth Ndiaye, the spokeswoman for the Macron presidency, declared on Monday following the awards that, like actress Adèle Haenel, she too would have stormed out of the ceremony when the winner of the best director prize was announced. Nor had she even seen *J'accuse*, she said, calling Roman Polanski "a personality who has not faced his responsibilities for crimes, including verified, confirmed crimes, because there is still the case pending in the United States."

Frank Riester, the culture minister, condemned the award in an interview with the *Parisian* yesterday, labelling it a "bad signal," which would be "perceived, by a large part of the population, in France and beyond, if not as an insult, at least an expression of indifference at the suffering of all the women victims of sexual and sexist violence."

On March 1, Marlène Schiappa, the Minister of Equality for Men and Women, published an opinion piece in *Libération*. "If you would prefer that the cinema remain just a party, then do not rape, do not touch women's backsides, breasts and thighs when they have not expressed their consent," she wrote.

Who are these people to lecture the population about morality, "facing responsibility" and protecting women? The very night after the Césars, the government announced it would use a constitutional clause to ram through cuts to pension entitlements, despite more than 70 percent of the population opposing the new law. Hundreds of thousands of older men and women will work years longer, will be pushed further into poverty and/or die younger as a result.

In the mass "yellow vest" protests and strikes over the past two years in France, women were among the thousands of peaceful demonstrators beaten with police truncheons, tear gassed, insulted and injured by police forces. The Macron government awarded the officers with medals, including the chief of the squad that fired a tear gas canister into the head of the octogenarian Zineb Redouane, killing her.

And the Macron administration leaves thousands of refugees, many of them women and children, languishing on city streets and condemns hundreds more to drown every year off its southern shore.

Whenever such people raise their voices about "morality," it should give pause to any thinking person about the real motivations and interests behind their campaign. Naturally, none of the #MeToo anti-Polanski fanatics have raised their voice in defense of these women and children—victims of French imperialism and police brutality.

Their presentation of Polanski, however, as a moral outcast, "monster," and "rapist" is obscene. In 1977, almost half a century ago, Polanski pled guilty to unlawful sex with a minor, Samantha Geimer (then Gailey), when she was 13. Based on an examination of the facts and circumstances—among them Polanski's own tragic past, which included his childhood and near-death in a ghetto in Krakow, Poland, the murder of his mother at Auschwitz and near-death of his father in another Nazi camp, as well as the murder of his pregnant wife, Sharon Tate, in 1969—the defense, prosecution and judge agreed in a plea deal that a 90-day sentence of compulsory psychiatric examination at a state prison was an appropriate outcome.

After serving this term, Polanski learned from a friend that the judge, apparently guilty of gross misconduct and self-promotion in the case, intended to renege on the plea deal and hand down a long prison term. Polanski fled the country, giving rise to the arrest warrant that stands to this day.

Geimer, a victim in this entire sad affair, has spoken out repeatedly to oppose the witch-hunt of Polanski. In a recent, powerful interview with the French-language edition of *Slate*, Geimer said she "completely disagreed" with the statements of Adèle Haenel last week that voting for Polanski in the Césars was like "spitting in the faces" of rape victims. Geimer commented: "A victim has the right to leave the past behind her, and an aggressor also has the right to rehabilitate and redeem himself, above all when he has admitted his mistakes and apologized."

Geimer added that she would "not stop drawing attention to the wrongs committed by the court, because we cannot let it pass. When a judicial system malfunctions to that degree, we are all in danger." She added that she was "very happy that Roman took the decision" to flee. He "remains a victim of a corrupt system and an immoral judge," she said.

In the more recent atmosphere of #MeToo, which has seen artistic figures disappeared due to anonymous or unsubstantiated accusations alone, more accusers have stepped forward against Polanski. Every one of these accusations relates to an alleged incident that occurred

between 44 and 51 years ago, therefore beyond the statute of limitations, and cannot be subjected to any examination or substantiation, or refutation. The media in France and internationally have nonetheless largely presented them as fact. Six of the accusations have been made anonymously, and all of them have been steadfastly denied by Polanski.

The Macron government's involvement in the campaign against Polanski has several interconnected and reactionary aims. First, to provide the government with a "progressive" veneer and mobilize the affluent petty bourgeois on the basis of the politics of personal identity, as it carries out an offensive against the working class, attacks refugees, Muslims and immigrants, and expands the powers of the police.

Second, to provide a justification for censorship, criminalization of artistic and political dissent, and a further expansion of police powers. This element of the campaign against Polanski was made most explicit by Schiappa, who in the weeks leading up to the Césars, announced that in addition to opposing any award for Polanski, said she saw "no difference" between doing so and honoring Ladj Ly, the director of *Les Misérables*, a film that concentrates on inequality and police violence in France—ostensibly because the latter had previously served a one-year prison sentence after allegedly being involved in a friend's domestic dispute. Schiappa was essentially arguing clearly that anyone with a criminal conviction should be barred from receiving an artistic award. The award to *Les Misérables* for best film was yet another deserved rebuke to the Macron government.

Third, the claim that the main dividing line in French society is between men and women, under conditions of historically unprecedented levels of social inequality, is aimed at dividing the working class along lines of personal identity and opposing the growth of working-class struggle in France and across Europe.

One of the more remarkable elements of the furor against Polanski and *J'accuse* is that virtually no mention is made by its proponents of the actual substance of the film. From both an aesthetic and historical standpoint, the film is a remarkable work. More than 1 million people have seen the film in France, along with tens of thousands in Israel, Germany, Poland, and elsewhere, though shamefully, the film has not been picked up by any distributors in the United States, Canada and Britain.

J'accuse's depiction of the conspiracy in the French ruling class to railroad Alfred Dreyfus to prison and whip up anti-Semitic hysteria, moreover, is both moving and intensely contemporary, under conditions where Julian Assange is rotting in Belmarsh prison and threatened with extradition to the United States for exposing war crimes, and where governments around the world, including in France, are promoting anti-Muslim and anti-immigrant chauvinism to divert from rising class tensions.

Those supporting the hysteria against Polanski are aligning themselves with right-wing forces that remain bitterly hostile to the outcome of the Dreyfus case and to Polanski's film. This under conditions where Macron hailed Marshal Pétain, the head of the fascist collaborationist Vichy regime, as a "great soldier." It is not insignificant that Polanski himself is Jewish.

The academy vote for Polanski reflected a principled and democratic opposition to the #MeToo hysteria in the French artistic world. A number of actors have come forward this week in Polanski's defense. Fanny Ardant, who won the César prize for best supporting actress in *La belle époque*, said she was very happy that Polanski had won the award. "I love Roman Polanski a lot, so I am very happy for him. You

have to understand that not everyone agrees, but long live liberty." She added that "I would follow someone to the guillotine, and I hate condemnation."

Along similar lines, in an interview with *France 2*, actress Isabelle Huppert cited William Faulkner to warn that "lynching is a form of pornography."

Actor Lambert Wilson attacked those who "dare to speak about a director in these terms. ... And what's more, what will be remembered about the life of these people with respect to the enormity of the myth of Polanski? Who are these people? They are minuscule."

Jean Dujardin, who stars as Colonel Georges-Marie Piquart in *J'accuse*, posted: "I would simply like to remind everyone that *J'accuse* is the title of a fairly famous article by Emile Zola—I hope that does not bother anyone? Good night!" In the week prior to the Césars, the actor announced that he had to leave France for a holiday because "it stinks here."

The #MeToo movement is mobilizing sections of the upper middle class whose aim is to leverage elements of personal identity, including gender, sexual orientation and skin color, for positions in the top 10 percent of income in the academic, artistic, political and corporate world. There is nothing remotely progressive about it. If all of their demands were satisfied, and various identities were assigned privilege in accordance with their prescribed formula, the conditions of life for the great mass of the population—men and women, white and black—would not change by one iota.

Their right-wing and selfish concerns were expressed by Aïssa Maïga, who stopped her speech during the César award ceremony to count the number of black faces present in the audience, and said hello to individual actors who were black, declaring, "Every time I find myself in a big meeting of the profession such as this, I can't help but count the number of black faces in the room." These positions have far more in common with those of the fascist right than with the left.

In the working class, however, the central and growing political concerns driving millions into struggle are poverty, social inequality, and war.



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