

Five years of #MeToo: *New York Times* complains not enough damage has been done

David Walsh
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On Monday, the *New York Times* posted an article by Hollywood correspondent Brooks Barnes ("After #MeToo Reckoning, a Fear Hollywood Is Regressing") bemoaning the lack of damage that the sexual misconduct campaign has done—and calling for more.

Five years of the sexual conduct witch-hunt have destroyed scores of lives and careers in film, music and the media. The campaign has weakened democratic rights, including the presumption of innocence, and created an atmosphere where intimidation and self-censorship rule.

A handful of already privileged women and African Americans have no doubt improved their financial position through gaining access to a portion of the film industry spoils. Meanwhile, due to economic processes sharply accelerated by the pandemic, the overall quality of Hollywood filmmaking has fallen to a new low. The "blockbuster" phenomenon prevails as never before. Such "independent" voices as there were have been marginalized more than ever.

The #MeToo campaign, "earthshaking" in Barnes' eyes, has done nothing for the vast majority of women. Income inequality *among* women, which has skyrocketed since the 1970s, continues to grow, a process that will only be intensified by soaring inflation and the attack on abortion rights.

What whets Barnes and the *Times*' appetite are the new trial in Los Angeles of producer Harvey Weinstein, the upcoming release of *She Said*, about the origins of the #MeToo effort in 2017, and the "strong ticket sales" for *The Woman King*, an absurd falsification of history in the interests of identity politics.

Barnes' article, no doubt intended in part to bolster support within the Democratic Party base in the upper middle class on the eve of the November election,

worries about processes that may block the unhindered enrichment of these layers the *Times* speaks to and for.

This crowd's selfishness is exemplified by Barnes' approach. "New problems ... have become a higher priority" than "diversity, equity and inclusion," he complains. Those problems include "widespread cost-cutting as the box office continues to struggle." There is always the danger that the newly "included" might find themselves excluded as economic conditions worsen. (Tellingly, in this regard, Barnes cites one film executive, "a white male," as observing that "For three years, we hired nothing but women and people of color.")

The danger of war, the threat of fascism, the systematic attacks on democratic rights and living standards—none of these enter into Barnes' calculations. However, unnamed "women who were hired for big jobs and held up as triumphant examples of a new era have been pushed aside, while some of the men who were sidelined by misconduct accusations are working again."

Developing the latter theme, Barnes later laments that there is "no longer across-the-board banishment for men who have been accused of misconduct." What a repulsive comment, worthy of the era of anti-communist purging in the 1950s! Individuals who are merely accused are no longer "banished" without further ado. In fact, juries in recent court cases involving actors Johnny Depp and Kevin Spacey have shown serious concern for facts, not the inflammatory and generally unsubstantiated "allegations" indulged in by the *Times* and the rest of the US media.

The *Times* correspondent refers unhappily to the circumstances surrounding Depp, who "largely won a court case in which his former spouse, the actress Amber Heard, accused him of sexual and domestic

violence.” Yes, and Depp accused Heard of abuse, and the jury believed *him*. Now, writes Barnes, Depp is “directing a film.”

James Franco’s “acting career imploded in 2018 amid sexual misconduct allegations,” of the vaguest kind. Four years later, Barnes continues, “after a \$2.2 million settlement in which he admitted no wrongdoing, he has at least three movies lined up.” Neither Depp nor Franco was charged with any crime, let alone convicted of one. But the pair have not been appropriately “banished.”

The *Times* piece inevitably takes for granted that gender and race form the social axis around which everything revolves. The notion that Hollywood filmmaking, which once produced *Modern Times*, *The Grapes of Wrath*, *Citizen Kane* and *The Best Years of Our Lives*, might speak to the conditions and concerns of the great working majority of the population is not something that even comes up for consideration.

Instead, “progressive” filmmaking is identified with “films like *Bros*, the first gay rom-com from a major studio,” “*Easter Sunday*, a comedy positioned as a watershed moment for Filipino representation” and “*Ms. Marvel*, a critically adored Disney+ series about a teenage Muslim superhero.” Barnes clearly does not object to the descent of American studio filmmaking to the level of the comic book, he simply wants it done with the proper identity politics ornamentation (and remuneration).

And, in any case, if “some movies and shows that overtly showcase diversity and inclusion have either struggled in the marketplace or failed to get off the runway,” no general conclusions should be drawn—“nobody looks at poor ticket sales for a Brad Pitt movie and concludes that no one wants to see older white men onscreen.” This sickening racism pervades the *Times* piece.

Barnes worries that the wrong kind of movie might come back into fashion, remarkably referring to the fact that studios “have also started to take more risks with content,” i.e., dared to produce works that might offend the race and gender-obsessed. He points to the Netflix drama about Marilyn Monroe, *Blonde*, “that has been derided by critics as exploitative and misogynistic,” and “a live-action musical comedy about slave trade reparations” from Trey Parker and Matt Stone, “the politically incorrect creative forces behind *South*

Park and *The Book of Mormon*” (actually, rapper Kendrick Lamar is also involved).

Censorship and self-censorship are on the order of the day. Barnes wants to nip in the bud any idea that an “over-correction,” as one of his interviewees suggests, occurred in 2017 and beyond. He cites with obvious disapproval the comment of one anonymous executive that at the outset of the sexual misconduct campaign, “we all lived in complete fear … That fear remains, but it has lessened. There is more room for gray and more benefit of the doubt and a bit of cringing about the rush-to-judgment that went on at the height of #MeToo.” The *Times* is at war with such conceptions.

Barnes and the *Times* falsely portray sexual abuse in Hollywood, the “casting couch” and related phenomena, as the product of the dominance of “white men.”

As we noted in October 2017, “this sort of extortion of sexual favors is not simply part of Hollywood, it’s part of the American business and corporate culture as a whole, part of the brutality of social relations in the US.” This is the reality of capitalism. We argued that sexual assault or coercion was “vastly under-reported … in all the countless situations in America where the weak find themselves at the mercy of the powerful.”

The WSWs also warned back in 2017 that sex scandals had invariably been the province of the far right. “Nothing remotely progressive will come out of this,” we wrote. “A revived Production Code, a clampdown on ‘licentiousness’ in films and filmmaking (which is always accompanied by the suppression of oppositional views), more powers to the censors, appointed and self-appointed—this is what’s likely to emerge at the other end of this miserable process. The dominance of power and wealth, the source of the real abuses and crimes, goes untouched.”

Five years on, nothing in that prognosis needs to be changed.



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