

# The politics of the Harvey Weinstein scandal

By David Walsh  
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The scandal surrounding American film producer Harvey Weinstein continues to hold the film industry and a considerable portion of the media-political establishment in the US firmly in its grip.

On October 5, the *New York Times* published an article by Jodi Kantor and Megan Twohey alleging that Weinstein had sexually harassed a number of women over the course of several decades, including actress Ashley Judd. The article reported that the film producer had reached financial settlements with several alleged victims, including Judd and fellow actress Rose McGowan.

Ronan Farrow, the son of Mia Farrow and Woody Allen (from whom he is estranged), leveled further charges in a *New Yorker* magazine published five days later. Italian-born actress Asia Argento accused Weinstein of sexual assault, and several actresses alleged that the producer did what he could to damage their careers after they had rejected his advances.

Subsequently, numerous other female performers, including Gwyneth Paltrow, Angelina Jolie, Heather Graham and Romola Garai, charged Weinstein with aggressive or inappropriate behavior.

As a result, Weinstein was fired by the board of the Weinstein Company, his own film studio. The producer issued a statement, “The way I’ve behaved with colleagues in the past has caused a lot of pain, and I sincerely apologize for it.” The 65-year-old, responsible for producing a host of independent films, announced he was taking a leave of absence.

What is involved here? Setting aside the superficiality and frenzy of the media, what is the *politics* of the Weinstein scandal?

Unquestionably, something more is involved than simply Weinstein’s behavior. We hold no brief for the Hollywood producer, a renowned bully and abuser of his employees, if nothing else, nor vouch for his morality. If only a fraction of the sexual harassment allegations are true, his conduct has been repugnant and perhaps criminal.

Of course, boorishness and crudity are not illegal and the allegations of assault and rape remain just allegations at this juncture. Like everyone else, Weinstein has constitutional rights, including due process and the presumption of innocence. If there is evidence of criminality, he should be prosecuted.

However, when a lynch mob begins to gather, it is always wise not to jump in and participate. Everyone deserves a trial in which he or she can mount a self-defense.

On the basis of bitter experience, one certainly has the right, even *obligation*, to be suspicious of the *Times*, the *New Yorker* and the pressure-cooker atmosphere that has been almost instantaneously generated, or summoned up.

There is a lengthy history of sex scandals in America (and Hollywood—Charlie Chaplin and others), none of which has led in a progressive direction. The sex scandal is a mechanism through which *other* issues are resolved, often to the satisfaction of powerful economic interests and generally with the result that politics is pushed to the right. The Clinton-Lewinsky affair, manipulated by the right wing and a subservient media, took center stage in American political life for nearly two years and almost led, in what was an attempted coup d’état, to the removal of a twice-elected president.

The *Times* and the *New Yorker* went to some pains to pursue the

Weinstein issue. Farrow claims his article required ten months of investigation.

Rumors about Weinstein have apparently been circulating for decades. Veteran publicist Cari Ross, writing in *Variety*, confesses that “I can’t remember a time when I didn’t hear stories about Harvey and his behavior as a sexual predator.” If the charges against Weinstein are true, and such people knew about them, their present actions are all the more disreputable.

Why the decision to go after Weinstein now? Of course, if the accusations are true, it could be argued, we should simply be pleased that his conduct has come to light, whether this month or a decade ago. But, again, that would be to assume only the highest, most disinterested motives on the part of the *Times* and the media as a whole—a reckless assumption.

Those who have made accusations have the right to tell their stories. However, the demand being made by the media and certain prominent figures, that people who don’t know anything must issue denunciations, is simply foul.

Frankly, aside from the alleged victims, no one comes out of this looking well. Nearly everyone seems to be acting out of cold-blooded business calculations. Actress Meryl Streep, who once called Weinstein a “god,” has issued her mandatory verbal attack.

Even assuming that much of what has been alleged is true, one would have to have a heart of stone not to see an element of tragedy in this affair. It does not excuse anything, but to the extent that there has been any life in the mainstream American film industry in recent decades, Weinstein has had some hand in it. He hasn’t produced great films, but he has done some interesting work. Now he has been thrown to the wolves, by his own brother, by his wife ...

Let’s say he is guilty of reprehensible conduct—and there is still a line between harassment and rape—nonetheless the commentaries that have been published, the bloodthirsty comments, the ridiculous tirades against “men,” are all rather disgusting and even frightening to read.

And what about the role of the *Times*? As the world teeters on the brink of nuclear war, and a madman shoots and kills or wounds hundreds of people in Las Vegas, this is what the “newspaper of record” zeroes in on. The *Times* has thrown considerable resources into this investigation for reasons it has not explained.

The sanctimonious comments of Hillary Clinton, Barack Obama, the *Times* editorialists et al, expressing their outrage and amazement over Weinstein’s activities reek of hypocrisy. These are people responsible for, or who lost no sleep over, drone strikes, illegal bombings and assassinations and the murderous activities of the American military and CIA in every corner of the globe.

It is also not pleasant to read the comments, in the *Times*, of complacent petty bourgeois like Lena Dunham, the brains behind the television series *Girls*, moralizing about Weinstein. The latter may well be a first-class swine, but he is not a war criminal like Clinton, up to her elbows in the blood of thousands of Libyans, Syrians and other defenseless peoples, who Dunham vehemently supported in 2016.

In any event, it may not be possible for us to determine, at this point,

which particular accounts are being settled and whose interests are being advanced. It is not necessarily the case that such articles are written with a fully worked out plan, although the *Times* is unquestionably pushing its identity politics agenda. It is safe, however, to assume that the scandal will have consequences.

We would issue a warning: a process has been set in motion that some of those now piling on may live to regret. Predictably, the fascistic *Breitbart News*, a breeding ground for anti-Semites and other scoundrels, is making a meal of the Weinstein affair. “Liberal Hollywood” can still reap a whirlwind.

The hysterical atmosphere, the recriminations, the new opportunities for feuding and name-calling, have produced an intimidating climate in Hollywood.

And who is next?

It is not that difficult to envision a new round of Congressional hearings, this time on sexual practices or harassment in Hollywood, which has ‘polluted our culture’ and ‘corrupted the nation’s morals,’ instead of producing ‘healthy Christian films’—hearings run by the House Un-American Sexual Activities Committee. And writers, directors, producers and actors, sadly, would be too terrified not to testify.

The middle class moralists never stop to think about the convulsive political context in which the scandal has erupted, and which it has helped to deepen. The victory of Donald Trump—an enormous shock to the affluent upper echelons of the entertainment industry—has been followed by a series of vicious conflicts within the ruling elite itself over foreign policy, including the dishonest, malicious anti-Russia campaign (spearheaded by the *New York Times*). The phony drive against “fake news” has now become the pretext for escalated, McCarthyite attacks on dissent and freedom of speech.

The media obsesses about Weinstein, both because prurience is one of its staples and, more pressingly, because it has every interest in diverting the attention of the general public from the social crisis in America, the reactionary character of the Trump administration and the Democratic “opposition,” the hurricane calamities and a host of other social atrocities in the US. The heightened level of social tension and distress in America means that a sex scandal is *invariably* required.

One should not forget, either, that Hollywood, and the entertainment industry generally, are central, at this point, to American political life and the financing and boosting of the Democratic Party, in particular. In 2012, for instance, the television, movie and music industry contributed 81 percent of its cash to the Democrats. Four years later, the same industry contributed \$23.6 million to Hillary Clinton (compared to \$1.2 million to Bernie Sanders and only \$388,000 to Trump).

Weinstein is—or was—a major fundraiser for the Democrats. In 2012, he was one of the leading Democratic Party “bundlers” (individuals who turn to friends and associates and deliver their checks “in one big ‘bundle,’” according to *OpenSecrets.org*) on behalf of Obama. What will his banishment mean?

The fury over what the producer may or may not have done also speaks to the current febrile atmosphere in the well-to-do quasi-artistic layers in Hollywood, New York and elsewhere, who are in despair over Trump, disoriented, largely cut off and distant from the working population and its concerns, determined to avoid looking social reality in the face, self-involved but terribly fearful of being thought “insensitive” on gender and race questions.

The scandal tells us something about the industry itself, with its embalmed, self-congratulatory awards programs, its liberal, eco-conscious, vegan and tolerant surface, but underneath: much vicious infighting, exploitation, cruelty.

Nothing in this country brings about intelligent commentary. The very worst sentiments and emotions are summoned and played upon. The Weinstein affair is the scandal of the hour, until the next villain comes

along. He is treated as an individual, who deserves payback. Nothing is to be learned.

The real key to Weinstein’s behavior, assuming the accusations to be true, is wealth. The scandal is not about Weinstein personally and his psychological make-up. His is a widespread form of abuse. The common denominator is that the abuse is carried out by those with money and power. It is not about over-active hormones, but a brutal expression of the type of pressure placed upon people: if you want to keep your job, this is what you must do ...

The right of certain people to act like this, and get away with it, is bestowed upon them by money.

The extortion of sexual favors in exchange for employment or advancement was not discovered yesterday. The “casting couch” is one of those phrases, along with the “blacklist” and the “Production Code,” that points to the genuinely vile side of American film studio operations. As Orson Welles once remarked about Hollywood, “Well, the town is pretty terrible, you know.”

One observer of Hollywood in the 1930s took note of the vulnerable young people who “were car hops or worked behind soda fountains, that sort of thing. All thinking they were going to make it. It’s terrible. And, of course, the women particularly were manipulated by the men. No mercy. Some of those agents, ten percenters, were indescribable, terrible. Their capacity to use these young women with promises. ... It was a nasty place.”

But 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. How would the *New York Times* or any major enterprise hold up under scrutiny? Sexual assault or coercion is vastly under-reported in factories (where today union officials have joined supervisors as the guilty parties) and other work places, in the US armed forces, in the vast gulag of local, state and federal jails and prisons, among low-paid and immigrant workers and in all the countless situations in America where the weak find themselves at the mercy of the powerful.

It was perhaps Marx and Shakespeare who understood this process, and the role that wealth plays in it, the best. In his *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844*, inspired by Shakespeare’s *Timon of Athens* (gold “will make black white, foul fair, wrong right, base noble, old young, coward valiant ...), Marx wrote these brilliant words about “The Power of Money:”

“That which is for me through the medium of *money*—that for which I can pay (i.e., which money can buy)—that am *I myself*, the possessor of the money. The extent of the power of money is the extent of my power. Money’s properties are my—the possessor’s—properties and essential powers. Thus, what I *am* and *am capable of* is by no means determined by my individuality. I *am* ugly, but I can buy for myself the *most beautiful* of women. Therefore I am not *ugly*, for the effect of *ugliness*—its deterrent power—is nullified by money. ... I am bad, dishonest, unscrupulous, stupid; but money is honoured, and hence its possessor. Money is the supreme good, therefore its possessor is good. Money, besides, saves me the trouble of being dishonest: I am therefore presumed honest. I am *brainless*, but money is the *real brain* of all things and how then should its possessor be brainless? ... Does not my money, therefore, transform all my incapacities into their contrary?”

Money, continues Marx, is “the common whore, the common procurer of people and nations.” This is what is at issue here: the horrible abuses inevitably produced by class society.

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