

The Jussie Smollett controversy: Must all accusations be believed?

By Eric London
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Yesterday morning, 36-year-old actor Jussie Smollett turned himself in to police after being charged with filing a false police report, a felony.

On January 29, Smollett, who is African-American and gay, reported that two Trump supporters physically attacked him in downtown Chicago, called him derogatory racist and homophobic terms, and put a noose around his neck—the symbol of anti-black lynching.

Immediately, a host of politicians and public figures unquestioningly accepted Smollett's allegations, including Democratic presidential candidates Bernie Sanders, Cory Booker, and Kamala Harris, who called the attack a “modern day lynching.”

The *New York Times* and other Democratic Party-aligned publications quickly picked up the story, advancing it as proof that race, gender and sexuality are the fundamental social divisions in American society.

In one of several similar articles, the *Times* published an opinion piece on February 2 that noted, without using the words “alleged,” that “the actor Jussie Smollett was brutally attacked in what Chicago police are calling a possible hate crime... The attack on Mr. Smollett,” the article continued, shows that “being black and queer presents a unique challenge” because of “the hate that drives white supremacy.”

Smollett and his defenders said that asking for corroborating evidence was racist. In an interview on *Good Morning America*, Smollett said, “It feels like if I had said it was a Muslim, or a Mexican, or someone black, I feel like the doubters would have supported me much more.”

On February 13, Smollett's story was further undercut after police arrested two men who had been spotted on video walking away from the scene of the alleged crime. The men, who are Nigerian brothers and

personal acquaintances of Smollett, were released after police questioning. The brothers say Smollett paid them \$3,500 to help stage a false attack.

After police pivoted to investigate Smollett, the *Times* published a column on February 19 titled “Enough with the Hot Takes” by David Leonhardt. The article reads, “The Jussie Smollett case is the latest reminder: Don't be too eager to make pronouncements.”

Leonhardt writes: “Making sweeping pronouncements about unverified criminal allegations isn't a good idea—not now, not three weeks ago. It's especially problematic with matters involving race, gender and sexuality, which ignite particular political passions.”

The filthy *New York Times* gets the Pulitzer Prize for Hypocrisy! The paper has spent the last year and a half splashing in the gutter, publishing “unverified” allegations and “sweeping pronouncements” of sexual allegations against public figures like Kevin Spacey, Ryan Adams, Woody Allen and Geoffrey Rush. Careers have been ruined and individuals subject to ruthless social ostracism based on uncorroborated allegations that they are sexual predators.

Throughout the #MeToo campaign, the *Times* and the proponents of identity politics have advanced the line that all accusers “must be believed” and that anyone who demands corroboration before judgment is “victim blaming.”

Smollett's lie was only exposed because the “attack” took place in a public place where corroborative evidence should have been readily available. Most #MeToo allegations conveniently take place in private between two people—one accuser and one accused.

If the accuser is always to be believed, if a denial by the accused only serves as further proof of guilt, and if

no corroborating evidence is required, then the accused are in an impossible situation, like those accused of witchcraft at Salem. This repudiation of due process is antidemocratic and right-wing.

Smollett, like so many affluent #MeToo accusers, saw a career opportunity in this political climate and hoped he could advance himself by playing the “victim.”

This selfish opportunism has provided even more fodder for the extreme right-wing, which is blasting the case as proof that all warnings of right-wing attacks and fascist provocations are “left-wing hoaxes.”

Under conditions where fascist Trump supporters have carried out terrorist attacks against anti-Nazi protestors in Charlottesville and against Jewish worshippers in Pittsburgh, and where a fascist Coast Guard officer was arrested last week for plotting to massacre socialists, Smollett and all those who automatically accepted his allegations are strengthening the extreme right.

Smollett has the right to the presumption of innocence and the right to present his case before a jury. Worse than the lies themselves was how those lies became wind in the sails of the Democratic Party’s identity politics strategy.

As primary season begins, a new pattern is emerging: Every week, the Democratic Party and its backers in the corporate media pick a nonevent that is elevated to the level of a “national controversy” and presented as proof that identity—and not class—defines social relations.

Three weeks ago, Virginia Lt. Governor Justin Fairfax was pressured to resign based on unsubstantiated allegations of sexual assault. Two weeks ago Smollett was in the spotlight. This past week, Ryan Adams was the victim of the *Times*’ latest #MeToo takedown and his music is now being erased from the radio.

At its root, these media-created nonevents have definite political aims: to block growing interest in socialism and break the growth of the class struggle by dividing workers along racial, gender and sexuality lines. While the Democrats employ different methods and appeal to different social constituencies than Trump with his violent denunciations of socialism, all the warring factions of the ruling class agree that socialism is a threat and it must be stopped.

The proponents of identity politics are concerned that the collapse of Smollett’s story undermines their campaign. The denunciations of Smollett by erstwhile supporters will become increasingly ferocious. “Jussie the angelic victim” will be transformed by the media into “Jussie the lying monster.” The pronouncements of anathema will be as duplicitous as the earlier beatifications.

The real “monsters” are the corporate media executives, #MeToo proponents, Democratic politicians and *New York Times* publishers who created the conditions that made Smollett believe he would be unquestioningly believed. While Smollett faces jail time, those who profited off his lie will pick up right where they left off.

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