

A political farce, not a debate

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Wednesday's nationally televised encounter between Barack Obama and John McCain was less a debate than a ritualized episode of a peculiarly American form of political theater.

The two candidates, both multi-millionaire representatives of the upper crust of American society, shared the stage with another multi-millionaire, an aging TV anchorman who confined the subjects and questions to the banal and predictable, excluding anything that would call into question the overarching right-wing framework of the discussion. (Where in this debate, for instance, was there a question on the latest figures showing that 28 countries have a lower infant mortality rate than the US, or on the growth in the number of working poor, or on the plunge towards bankruptcy of state and local governments?)

The debate was broadcast simultaneously on all four television networks and three cable news networks, each with its own set of millionaire anchormen and pundits, who formed a media chorus proclaiming the significance of the event as the last and potentially defining contest of the presidential campaign.

This was bolstered by an elaborate apparatus of "expert" panels, focus groups and instant polls, all designed to give the impression that something of enormous historical significance was taking place. When the event was over, however, nothing but a few sound bites remained, and nothing at all of genuine political content.

The reason for the emptiness and hollowness of the exercise is not difficult to discern, although it remains an unmentionable in the mass media. The two parties, despite their feverish competition for political office, dominated by mudslinging and character assassination, represent the same class interests.

The Democrats and the Republicans comprise rival factions of the financial aristocracy that dominates American society and is responsible for the economic

catastrophe that has erupted over the past month. Accordingly, neither party wants a serious or critical examination of the causes of the financial collapse or the consequences that will inevitably befall the vast majority of the people—lost jobs, lost homes, lost incomes, lost futures for their children. In a word, economic and social ruin.

Thus the disorienting spectacle on Wednesday night, where the candidates devoted a grand total of nine minutes (out of 90) to what Obama conceded was "the worst financial crisis since the Great Depression." Neither candidate went beyond previous comments on the crisis, and both took the identical position—they had voted in the Senate for the initial \$700 billion bailout for Wall Street, and they now supported the second and even more massive handover of public funds in the form of capital injections into the major banks, announced by the Bush administration the day before the debate.

It seems to be a mathematical law of American bourgeois politics that the differences between the candidates are inversely proportional to the significance of the issue. The candidates placidly agreed that the federal treasury should be placed at the disposal of the same financial criminals who caused the crisis, and then turned to a bitter exchange over campaign tactics, followed by a restatement of familiar (and largely minor) differences over a range of domestic subjects from taxes to education.

The third Obama-McCain debate will be remembered mainly for McCain's insistence on insulting the intelligence of his audience with no less than 24 references to a Toledo, Ohio plumber, Joseph Wurzelbacher, whom he presented as the personification of the American small businessman about to be bankrupted by Obama's alleged addiction to high taxes. Within 24 hours of the debate, nearly every fact McCain asserted about "Joe the plumber" has been

called into question.

The main concern for Obama, with a wide lead in the polls and in state-by-state electoral vote projections, was to demonstrate again to the American ruling elite that he can be trusted to defend their interests. As in the previous debates, he refrained from any verbal lashing of the wealthy speculators whose parasitic operations brought about the market crash. It was left to McCain, the Republican, to declare the American people "innocent victims of greed and excess on Wall Street." Obama, by contrast, cited his billionaire supporter Warren Buffett, the richest man in America, as a key adviser on economic policy.

McCain's performance was incoherent and self-contradictory. He began with the reference to "greed and excess on Wall Street," then followed by denouncing Obama for allegedly advocating "class warfare" in his tax policy. He reiterated his support for the gargantuan federal bailout of the banks, then spent the rest of the debate accusing his opponent of advocating "big government" and "throwing money at the problem" when it came to such issues as health care, education, energy policy and job creation.

The most revealing episode in the 90-minute session was Obama's conclusion to the lengthy exchange on negative campaigning, and his relationship with former 1960s radical Bill Ayers. The Democratic candidate said, "The allegation that Senator McCain has continually made is that somehow my associations are troubling. Let me tell you who I associate with. On economic policy, I associate with Warren Buffett and former Fed Chairman Paul Volcker. If I'm interested in figuring out my foreign policy, I associate myself with my running mate, Joe Biden, or with Dick Lugar, the Republican ranking member on the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, or General Jim Jones, the former supreme allied commander of NATO. Those are the people, Democrats and Republicans, who have shaped my ideas and who will be surrounding me in the White House."

Republicans, billionaires, bankers, senators, generals—that sums up the "change we can believe in" that Obama represents. The Democratic candidate cites these pillars of the US political and corporate establishment as proof of his non-radicalism, as a guarantee that he will do nothing to challenge the wealth and power of the ruling elite.

There is a logic to politics. If, as appears likely, Obama takes office as US president on January 20, 2009, his administration will be committed from the very first day to imposing the burden of the global financial crisis on the backs of the American working class.

There was one further episode of importance. In the course of the discussion of negative campaigning, Obama made a reference to the fascistic tenor of elements attracted to Republican campaign rallies in recent weeks, particularly those for vice presidential candidate Sarah Palin, noting that some people "were shouting, when my name came up, things like 'terrorist' and 'kill him,' and that your running mate didn't mention, didn't stop, didn't say, 'Hold on a second, that's kind of out of line.'"

McCain, chillingly, did not condemn the death threats against Obama, declaring instead, "Let me just say categorically I'm proud of the people that come to our rallies."

Neither Obama nor moderator Bob Schieffer of CBS sought to press the issue. And when Schieffer gave Obama the opportunity to comment on Palin directly, asking him whether she was qualified for the presidency, Obama chose to avoid the issue entirely, and made no reference to Palin's connections to extreme-right groups like the Alaska Independence Party. In this too, Obama toes the line of the right-wing consensus: The growth of fascist tendencies within the Republican Party is not to be criticized, even when these elements directly threaten violence.



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