

The “Mommy wars” and media manipulation in the US election

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14 April 2012

The controversy over working women vs. stay-at-home mothers, which has dominated US media coverage for several days, is a stark demonstration of the manipulation of the 2012 presidential election through phony issues largely concocted by the media. Such episodes serve both to distract public attention from any serious evaluation of the right-wing policies offered by both the Democrats and Republicans and to push the official debate even further to the right.

The media frenzy began with remarks by Hilary Rosen, a former lobbyist, now a commentator on CNN, during the “Anderson Cooper 360” program Wednesday night. Referring to a claim by Republican presidential frontrunner Mitt Romney that he relied on his wife Ann to provide him with an insight into the problems of working women, Rosen said, “Guess what? His wife has actually never worked a day in her life. She’s never really dealt with the kinds of economic issues that a majority of the women in this country are facing in terms of how do we feed our kids, how do we send them to school, and how do we worry, why do we worry about their future.”

There is nothing particularly provocative or novel about this observation. Rosen was pointing, not to the social distinction between a working mother and a stay-at-home mother, but to the class distinction between the wife of a multi-millionaire and the vast majority of women who must work for a living to help support their families.

But her words were immediately distorted by the Republican Party, the ultra-right press and the media as a whole, and proclaimed to be a slur on that holy of holies, American motherhood. There was a universal outcry: Ann Romney bore and raised five sons. Who can deny that this constituted work?

The Romney campaign sent out a fundraising e-mail

to supporters, identifying Rosen as an “Obama adviser” and warning: “If you’re a stay-at-home mom, the Democrats have a message for you: you’ve never worked a day in your life.”

Rosen is not a spokeswoman for the Obama campaign. The former head of the Recording Industry Association of America (RIAA), a major lobbying group for the music and film industry, later chairwoman of the Human Rights Campaign, a well-financed lobby for gay rights, now a paid media pundit, she is a well-known figure in official Washington, aligned with the liberal wing of the political establishment but holding no office in the Democratic Party.

Why did an offhand remark by such a figure produce a media firestorm? There was a deliberate political choice involved. NBC News, for instance, chose to lead its evening news broadcast Thursday with a report of nearly five minutes on the so-called “Mommy wars,” elevating this episode as the most important event of the day.

Leading Democrats joined in the media pile-on against Rosen. Vice President Joseph Biden, appearing on MSNBC, called her comments “outrageous.” No one should question a woman’s decision to stay home and raise children, he said, although Rosen had done no such thing.

Obama campaign manager Jim Messina declared, “I could not disagree with Hilary Rosen any more strongly. Her comments were wrong and family should be off limits. She should apologize.” Campaign adviser David Axelrod called her remarks “inappropriate and offensive.”

The president and first lady chimed in as well. Michelle Obama tweeted: “Every mother works hard,

and every woman deserves to be respected.” Obama addressed the subject during an interview Thursday with KCRG-TV, a local station in Cedar Rapids, Iowa. He echoed the right-wing spin on Rosen’s words, saying, “When I think about what Michelle’s had to do, when I think about my own mom, a single mother raising me and my sister, that’s work. So anybody who would argue otherwise I think probably needs to rethink their statement.”

Obama’s reaction typifies his approach whenever the ultra-right whips up a furor, no matter how spurious: retreating, conciliating, abandoning his previous positions and backstabbing his own supporters. In this case, since Rosen had raised, however tangentially, the issue of social class, it was all the more necessary for the White House to get as far away from her as possible.

By Thursday, Rosen herself backed down, albeit with a bit more spine than her fellow Democrats. She said in a written statement: “Let’s put the faux ‘war against stay at home moms’ to rest once and for all. As a mom I know that raising children is the hardest job there is. As a pundit, I know my words on CNN last night were poorly chosen.”

“I apologize to Ann Romney and anyone else who was offended,” she concluded. “Let’s declare peace in this phony war and go back to focus on the substance.”

The background to this media flap was the effort by Romney to strike a posture of sympathy toward working women in a series of campaign events where he appeared with women owners of small businesses.

Romney was responding to a real problem for his campaign: the alienation of millions of working class and middle-class women from the Republican Party, at least in part due to the harshly right-wing character of the campaign for the Republican presidential nomination. Throughout the primaries and caucuses, the Republican candidates all sought to appeal to the Christian fundamentalist base of the party with hard-line positions against abortion rights, contraception and gay marriage, and on other “social” issues.

The result is that, according to a series of polls published last week, Romney trails President Obama nationally and in 12 key battleground states, in large measure because of huge margins for the Democratic Party among women voters. Romney led Obama narrowly among men, but trailed the incumbent by 18

points among women.

While the media makes much of this “gender gap,” it is in its own way a demonstration of the lack of any fundamental class differences between the Democratic and Republican parties. Both parties defend the interests of the super-rich and the most privileged stratum of the upper-middle class, and advocate policies that are profoundly inimical to the interests of working people, the vast majority of the American population.

In place of any discussion of the real issues of concern to the vast majority of Americans—unemployment, declining living standards, cuts in social programs, militarism and war—the Democrats and Republicans prefer to accentuate their differences on so-called “social” issues of greater or lesser importance, all of which, however, are secondary to the basic questions of class exploitation and the growth of social and economic inequality.

Rosen herself personifies the upper-middle class social layer that is the main social base of the Democratic Party. During her lucrative tenure as chief executive of the RIAA, from 1998 to 2003, she spearheaded the music industry’s effort to close down the music-sharing site Napster and strengthen enforcement of copyright laws.

After briefly heading the Human Rights Campaign she started a lobbying firm in Washington which did consulting work for Facebook, XM, Viacom and other corporate giants. She became political director of the *Huffington Post* web site, but left that organization in 2010 amid controversy over her role as a public relations consultant for British Petroleum during the oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico. She joined CNN as a paid commentator later that year.



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