

# The controversy surrounding the *Roseanne* television series

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Several episodes of a revived *Roseanne*, the US television comedy series that originally aired for nine seasons from 1988 to 1997, have attracted large audiences as well as considerable controversy.

The star of the program, comic and actress Roseanne Barr, once thought to be a “progressive,” voted for Donald Trump in 2016 and continues to support him. Moreover, she has recently expressed sympathy for various bizarre conspiracy theories associated with the extreme right, apparently including claims that high-ranking Democratic Party figures are involved in child sex-trafficking rings and that Trump is breaking them up.

Barr has also come under attack from reactionary identity politics circles for supposedly ignoring the rampant racism of “white working class” Trump voters in her new series.

There are a number of issues here to unravel.

*Roseanne* depicts the life of a disordered and economically hard-pressed family living in the fictional town of Lanford, Illinois. The title character, Roseanne Conner, played by Barr, is the mother of several now-grown children who have difficulties of their own. Her husband, Dan Conner (John Goodman), is a hard-working drywall contractor.

The first two episodes of the new season, broadcast on ABC back to back on March 27, were watched by more than 20 million people. The network has announced plans for an 11th season.

When it was launched nearly 30 years ago, the series struck a chord with the public in part because it offered a somewhat more authentic picture of the conditions of life for a good portion of the American population than was generally presented on major network television. *Roseanne* was the most watched television show from 1989 to 1990 and remained one of the four most popular shows for six of its nine seasons.

The essential premise of the series was that the Conners (and presumably millions like them) were the opposite of the American family as fantasized by the media-advertising apparatus. The parents, Dan and Roseanne, were overweight, crass, messy, in debt, struggling to keep their heads above water, frequently at odds with their children, doing the “wrong thing” more often than not, and so forth. And their attitude toward their conditions combined a certain social resentment, self-deprecation and sardonic, slightly depressed humor.

The revived *Roseanne* attempts to take up where the series left off in 1997. A number of the original cast members, including Barr, Goodman, Laurie Metcalf as Roseanne’s sister, and Sara Gilbert, Lecy Goranson and Michael Fishman as three of the Conner children, have returned.

The new series, like the old one, is a highly uneven affair. There are some amusing lines, there is also a good deal of facetiousness and

clumsiness. The situation comedy spins its wheels much of the time. The program is at its weakest when it plays up to or glorifies backwardness, although, in fairness, *Roseanne* on the whole has always presented its central characters as relatively intelligent and sensitive human beings.

Generally poor economic conditions still figure largely, including the lack of decent health care and decent employment. The issues are hardly explored in depth, but they are present. One daughter, Darlene (Gilbert), with two children, has lost her job and been obliged to go back and live at her parents’ house. The other daughter, Becky (Goranson), has arranged to carry another woman’s baby in exchange for \$50,000. “Mom,” she explains, “if I do this, I can pay off my credit cards, I could buy a new car, maybe put something down on a house.”

If the rejuvenated *Roseanne*, which has certainly lost much of its freshness, *continues* to strike a chord with the public, that is also something of a commentary on the generally awful character and quality of network television at present, dominated by zealous, humorless policemen, CIA and FBI agents and other representatives of law and order.

The controversy around the program, as noted above, has been stoked by Roseanne Barr’s political evolution and pronouncements.

In the years following the original series, Barr, born into a working-class Jewish family in Salt Lake City, was known for her generally anti-establishment, although wildly inconsistent, political views.

In 2008, she supported antiwar activist Cindy Sheehan in her campaign against Democrat and warmonger House Speaker Nancy Pelosi. At an event for Sheehan, Barr commented that if she ever met the congresswoman, “I will walk right up to Nancy Pelosi and slap her right across the face, as I will everybody else in this damn government.” Sheehan later commented that Barr was “bright, articulate, well-informed, even more progressive.” Barr was considered to be an opponent of the Iraq war.

In 2011, she appeared at the Occupy Wall Street protests. In an interview at the time, according to Fox News, Barr said “she would bring back the guillotine as a form of justice for Wall Street’s ‘worst of the worst of the guilty.’” The former stand-up comic went on, “I first would allow the guilty bankers to pay back anything over \$100 million in personal wealth because I believe in a maximum wage of \$100 million. If they’re unable to live on that amount then they should go to the reeducation camps, and if that doesn’t help, then [they should] be beheaded.”

In 2012, after losing the Green Party presidential nomination to Jill Stein, Barr announced she would vie for the Peace and Freedom Party nomination, with Sheehan as her running mate. After gaining the

nomination, Barr responded to the charge that she could take votes from Barack Obama: “The American people are sick and tired of this ‘lesser evil’ garbage they get fed every election year. Both the Democrats and the Republicans do the same evils once they’re in office.” However, she soon fell out with Sheehan over a series of issues, including her attack on Stein as a “Zionist.”

By early 2015, the comic-actress had turned around and become a “mega-Zionist,” in Sheehan’s words, and urged Israel to drop nuclear bombs on Iran.

Barr’s confusion and nationalist populism, along with her considerable wealth, propelled her at some point into the Donald Trump camp. In December 2017, explaining her vote for the Republican Party candidate, Barr tweeted, “4 those who wonder—back in the day when I was called a ‘liberal’ by journalists, I used to answer—I’m not a Liberal, I’m a radical’ & I still am—I voted Trump 2 shake up the status quo & the staid establishment.”

In January, she told the Associated Press, “I’ve always attempted to portray a realistic portrait of the American people and of working class people. And in fact it was working class people who elected Trump.” What, in fact, elected Trump was disillusionment and disgust with the Obama administration and the right-wing, anti-working class campaign of Hillary Clinton in 2016. The collapse in support for the wretched Democrats allowed the billionaire know-nothing Trump to win the White House, much to his surprise.

In any event, the new series is hardly a showcase for right-wing Trump values. In the first episode of the season, her sister Jackie (Metcalfe) accuses Roseanne and other Trump supporters (the president is never mentioned by name) of “wrapping yourselves up in the flag and clinging to your guns.” Jackie asks Roseanne at one point, “How could you have voted for him, Roseanne?!” The latter replies, “He talked about jobs, Jackie! He said he’d shake things up! I mean, this might come as a complete shock to you, but we almost lost our house, the way things are going.”

Aside from these exchanges between Roseanne and Jackie, who voted for Stein of the Green Party in 2016, there is little reference to the national political situation.

Moreover, Roseanne has one grandson who wears a dress to school and a black granddaughter, whose mother is off in the military. Wanda Sykes, the African-American comic who served as the consulting producer on the first episode of the new *Roseanne*, has commented, “The thing about the Conners is they were a Midwestern family who have limited means, and you don’t see that a lot on TV—except for black people. Black people are allowed to be poor on TV. [Laughs.] But when the Conners came on, it was like, ‘Here are real people talking about real problems.’”

Gilbert, who also serves as executive producer, told the media, “The Conners aren’t Trump supporters. Roseanne’s character is a Trump supporter—she’s the only one—and we never say his name, actually, in the show.” None of this, of course, has prevented Trump from claiming that the success of the program is proof of his popularity.

The new *Roseanne* has also provoked reactionary attacks from identity politics advocates who reject any suggestion that economic hardship was a factor in the 2016 election result. The “white working class” is simply racist to the core.

Speaking for this crowd, Jared Yates Sexton in an appalling piece for *Elle* magazine (“The New *Roseanne* Ignores the Very Real Racism of Many White Working-Class Families”), writes that “I wasn’t surprised” that the Conners “were Trump voters” (which, in fact, they are not as a whole), “but what shocked me was how much they

reflected an idealized version of Trump’s base instead of the reality of white, working-class America, where racism and bigotry is hardly contained.”

Sexton notes that the series has been praised for recapturing “the tone and timing of the original, iconic sitcom, and others have admired its depiction of working-class homes filled with political infighting... But the fights onscreen no longer resemble reality. The debates are all about ‘jobs’ and ‘healthcare’ and never once veer into the subjects of race or intolerance.” Incredibly, in this world turned upside down, anger at social grievances (“jobs” and “healthcare” in skeptical quotation marks), only palely reflected on *Roseanne*, is nothing more than disguised and refracted bigotry!

How much of an income must a media figure such as Sexton be raking in for him to be so removed from social reality as to put forward this foul view?

The “old economic anxiety” of the Conners and other white families is no longer legitimate, according to Sexton, a regular contributor to the *New York Times* and the *New Republic*, because “those fears of being left behind have been actively spun into a fear of being passed by groups that don’t look like them. This leads to racist, homophobic, and misogynistic rhetoric becoming nastier and more ubiquitous.”

Not stopping there, the *Elle* columnist claims that the “dark underbelly of the white, working class, the intolerance that permeates so much of their lives, is completely absent [from *Roseanne*], and that absence can serve a dangerous purpose: to reinforce the delusion that they’re actually supporting somebody like Donald Trump for honorable reasons.”

This is the voice of the complacent upper-middle class, a thousand miles from the economic suffering of millions, deeply hostile to those millions and incapable of imagining that this suffering is radicalizing and threatening to disrupt the political and economic status quo with which this privileged social layer fully identifies.

The new *Roseanne* series has had the peculiar effect of shedding further light on the extremely advanced state of economic and political tension in the US.



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