

The cancellation of Roseanne Barr's television series

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On Tuesday, ABC television abruptly cancelled the revived *Roseanne* television series after its star Roseanne Barr posted a racist tweet.

Barr's offending tweet made reference to Valerie Jarrett, an African American woman who was one of Barack Obama's advisers: "Muslim brotherhood & planet of the apes had a baby=vj." Barr deleted the tweet and later apologized to Jarrett and "all Americans." He statement continued, "I am truly sorry for making a bad joke about her politics and her looks. I should have known better. Forgive me—my joke was in bad taste." Barr said she was not a racist, "just an idiot."

Announcing the cancellation of *Roseanne*, ABC Entertainment president Channing Dungey piously commented in a statement, "Roseanne's Twitter statement is abhorrent, repugnant and inconsistent with our values, and we have decided to cancel her show." Robert Iger, Chairman and CEO of the Walt Disney Company, which owns ABC, asserted, "There was only one thing to do here, and that was the right thing."

The posturing of Iger—one of the best-paid executives in the US—and the rest of the ABC hierarchy as high-minded opponents of intolerance and advocates of universal brotherhood is absurd and monstrously hypocritical. A billion-dollar corporation, the television network, along with the rest of the American media, has the blood of masses of people in the Middle East and Central Asia on its hands. Warmongers like ABC News Chief Global Affairs Correspondent Martha Raddatz regularly pass on Pentagon misinformation and anti-Muslim propaganda as "news."

In any event, a controversy surrounding Barr comes as no great surprise. An opponent of the Iraq War, an outspoken supporter of Occupy Wall Street and a candidate for president for the pseudo-left Peace and

Freedom Party in 2012, the comedian-actress has descended in the more recent period into the universe of far-right conspiracy theories. She has promoted the claim, for example, that high-ranking Democratic Party figures are involved in child sex-trafficking rings and that Donald Trump is breaking them up.

Indeed, Barr made new headlines in 2016 when she revealed her support for Trump, later insisting that she was still "a radical" and had voted for Trump to "shake up the status quo & the staid establishment."

Barr's outburst May 29 came as one of a series of disoriented tweets she posted that inveighed against various figures in the Democratic Party and its orbit. She first claimed that Chelsea Clinton, daughter of the former president, was married to a nephew of Hungarian-American billionaire George Soros, a prominent Democratic donor (and one of the *bête noires* of the anti-Semitic ultra-right), which is not true. When Chelsea Clinton pointed out the error, Barr, who is Jewish, replied in a tweet, "Please forgive me! By the way, George Soros is a nazi who turned in his fellow Jews 2 be murdered in German concentration camps & stole their wealth—were you aware of that?"

Barr went on to suggest that Soros intended to "overthrow [the] us constitutional republic by buying/backing candidates 4 local district attorney races who will ignore US law & favor 'feelings' instead—and call everyone who is alarmed by that 'racist.'" When a correspondent made a reference to Valerie Jarrett helping to "hide a lot" during the Obama administration, Barr chimed in with her fateful comment, which she subsequently blamed on the sleeping drug Ambien.

Sara Gilbert, who played Barr's daughter on *Roseanne* and was one of the chief instigators of the program's revival, told the media that Barr's views

“do not reflect the beliefs of our cast and crew or anyone associated with our show.” She added, “I am disappointed in her actions to say the least. This is incredibly sad and difficult for all of us, as we’ve created a show that we believe in, are proud of, and that audiences love—one that is separate and apart from the opinions and words of one cast member.” Another performer, Michael Fishman, as well as showrunner Bruce Helford, offered similar remarks.

Trump inserted himself into the controversy Wednesday afternoon when he offered his own bizarre and egomaniacal tweet: “Bob Iger of ABC called Valerie Jarrett to let her know that ‘ABC does not tolerate comments like those’ made by Roseanne Barr. Gee, he never called President Donald J. Trump to apologize for the HORRIBLE statements made and said about me on ABC. Maybe I just didn’t get the call?”

Barr’s views and her connections to the extreme right are reprehensible, but, as noted above, there is nothing admirable or remotely progressive about Disney’s actions, which will only make her a martyr in the eyes of the paranoid ultra-right. Disney’s decision reaffirms the ability of giant corporations to terminate television programs and other forms of entertainment or news when the CEO and other executives disapprove of an individual’s political views. This may be used against right-wing opinions in this case, but the far greater likelihood is that the precedent will be turned against opponents of big business and war.

Aside from the wholesale McCarthyite purging of left-wing actors, writers and directors in the 1940s and 1950s, we have the more recent example, in 1982, of CBS’s closing down of the *Lou Grant* show. The popular drama series about a big city newspaper was taken off the air under pressure from corporate sponsors and the Reagan administration due to the left-wing views and activities of its star, Ed Asner. Asner had played a leading role in the Screen Actors Guild strike in 1980 and became president of the union in 1981. He was vocal in support of the PATCO air traffic controllers’ strike that same year and spoke out strongly against the policies of the Reagan White House, including its involvement in supporting vicious dictatorships throughout Latin America.

Asner’s participation in a fundraiser for El Salvadoran rebels was apparently the final straw. The

media and prominent Republicans such as Charlton Heston launched a smear campaign against the veteran actor. As one observer noted, “I’ve never seen anybody transformed so quickly from being everyone’s favorite uncle to a communist swine.” *Lou Grant* was taken off the air within weeks. Moreover, the star of *WKRP in Cincinnati*, Howard Hesseman, was also involved in the El Salvadoran event. *WKRP in Cincinnati* was canceled the same day as Asner’s program.

The abrupt rise and fall of the revived *Roseanne* involves a great deal that is sordid, and not simply the comedian’s crazed tweeting.

ABC executives no doubt thought they were being terribly clever, making use (in their own minds) of the “Trump phenomenon” and “white working class anger” when they put Barr’s show back on the air. In their stupidity and social obliviousness, they thought they could successfully navigate fraught, complex political waters through the medium of a situation comedy, that they’d have a profitable hit on their hands to boot and that, in any case, they had Barr under control.

Of course, Barr doesn’t represent working class anger, but a kind of diseased, wealthy-lumpen Hollywood element and she is definitely not under control. She remains a loose cannon even as she sinks into the right-wing swamp. Her comments and the explosion were entirely predictable.

It remains unclear what people like Gilbert, Laurie Metcalfe, John Goodman and some of the others (liberals and even identity politics types) were thinking. Perhaps it was economic opportunism, perhaps there was a fantasy of an alliance with “white populist anger.” But the entire unprincipled affair has now blown up in their faces, costing hundreds of people their jobs. In any event, ABC’s actions were cynical and reactionary from beginning to end, both in putting the show on and taking it off.



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