

DEMOCRATIC

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Gender, Race and Economic Justice

BY CHRISTINE R. RIDDIOUGH

The 1996 elections made it clear that economic security is a priority for Americans. Faced with the threat of corporate downsizing, pensions that don't allow people to make ends meet and an increasing gap between wealthy and middle income people, Americans are uncertain about their futures and distrustful of both government and corporations.

The response of the right to this situation has often been to try to drive a wedge between Americans. Ranging from Pat Buchanan's xenophobic, anti-immigrant campaign to racist and sexist descriptions of welfare 'queens' to anti-affirmative action initiatives, the right continually suggests that the problems 'average' Americans face are caused by people of color, new immigrants, women or gay men and lesbians.

For some on the left the proper response is simply to focus on economic security—income inequality between the rich and not-so-rich, wage stagnation, a decreased social safety net. Their analysis of polling data for 1996, for example, emphasizes the role of economic insecurity in guiding people's votes. For these advocates, issues of gender and race are 'divisive' and are likely to cause further defeats for the left.

I believe this perspective is both short-sighted and self-defeating. From both a pragmatic and principled perspective, ignoring gender and race in trying to rebuild the left is wrong. Pragmatically, try as one might, it is impossible not to notice that women and people of color were central to the defeat of Bob

Dole. More importantly from the point of view of strategy, we must recognize that gender and race issues won't simply go away—we will certainly have to face up to the relationship of racism and sexism to our economic justice work sometime.

And, of course, if our Campaign for Economic Justice is real, then, as a matter of principle, we must be for justice for everyone. That means recognizing that people of color and women are particularly vulnerable to setbacks in the economy. Women's wages are still only about three-fourths those of men, and wages for people of color are still significantly less than those of white men. Women and people of color are also a disproportionate share of those workers earning the minimum

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Female Genital Mutilation A Women's Rights/Cultural Conflict

BY JUDITH LORBER

The final platform statement of the 1995 Beijing Conference promised women sexual rights and protection from violence. It was supported by another far-reaching statement that said that when national and cultural traditions violate women's rights, women's rights must take precedence. The importance of this statement is underscored by the following analysis disseminated to a Beijing email discussion group by Indian feminists —

The Platform refers to particular cultural practices that are oppressive to women — infanticide, dowry, child marriage, female genital mutilation. But these customs also 'happen' in regions that are poor and among peoples who have had to most closely and jealously guard their national sovereignties against colonial and neo-colonial inroads from developed countries of the west. In this process, their 'national' and 'cultural' identities have become inextricably linked, and the perception of an international attack on 'national' cultures has evoked defensive strategies that compromise women's interests.

The conflict comes to a stark clash over female genital mutilation, which causes physical and psychological trauma, health risks, infertility, and diminished sexual functioning. In many countries where it is practiced, there are laws and campaigns against it, and women's groups and health practitioners have for many years worked directly with the people for whom it is a powerful cultural tradition to try to persuade them to stop the practice. Yet female genital mutilation has not abated. Since outside pressure can be helpful to resisters, as it was with apartheid in South Africa, Western writers and journalists have brought international attention to the issue. It is with this goal in mind that this article is written.

The Culturally Condoned Practices

For more than two thousand years, in a broad belt across the middle of Africa, clitoridectomies and infibulation (scarring of the labia to create adhesions that keep most of the vaginal opening closed until intercourse) have been used to ensure women's virginity until marriage and to

inhibit wives' appetites for sexual relations after marriage. Ironically, these mutilating practices do neither, but result in the infliction of pain and anal intercourse as part of normal sexuality. Childbirth is more dangerous because of tearing and hemorrhage, and the risks of abscesses, fistulas, and urinary tract infection throughout life are high.

The procedures range from mild sunna (removing the prepuce of the clitoris) to modified sunna (partial or total clitoridectomy) to infibulation or pharaonic circumcision, which involves clitoridectomy and excision of the labia minora and the inner layers of the labia majora, and suturing the raw edges together to form a bridge of scar tissue over the vaginal opening, leaving so small an opening that normal bladder emptying takes fifteen minutes and menstrual blood backs up. Many women have reinfibulation after childbirth and go through the process over and over again. In Arabic it is called *adlat el rujal* (men's circumcision) because it is designed to create greater sexual pleasure for men, not unlike the rationale for episiotomy and tight

suturing in Western obstetrical practice. Women report varying degrees of sexual pleasure during intercourse once the period of excruciatingly painful opening through penile penetration was over.

The procedures are usually done without anesthesia on girls who are 6 to 8 years old. When they are infibulated, all their external genitalia are excised. In order to create the proper adhesions after their scraped labia are sewn or pinned together with thorns, their legs are tied together at the ankles, knees, and thighs, and they must remain immobile for two weeks to more than a month. The immediate effects are pain and shock, with frequent hemorrhage and urinary infection, septicemia, and tetanus. Deaths have been estimated at 10 percent. One estimate for the number of girls and women in about twenty-four countries in Africa who have had clitoridectomy and infibulation is one hundred million.

The human rights of women include their right to have control over and decide freely and responsibly on matters related to their sexuality, including sexual and reproductive health, free of coercion, discrimination, and violence.

(Final Platform for Action, 1995 Beijing Conference on Women)



Muslim girls in high school in Kenya.

Normality and Invisibility

Yet despite these large numbers of involved women, female genital mutilation is in many ways a hidden phenomenon. It is not immediately visible, as were bound feet. Where it is an accepted practice, it is taken for granted culturally, and so is rarely debated or fought over locally. It is part of a code of modesty, fidelity, and women's obedience to fathers and husbands, and so it is not easily discussed with strangers. Its immediate and delayed health consequences, including venereal disease, AIDS, and maternal and infant mortality, are buried in the overall dismal statistics on illness and early death in the developing countries.

Another reason for the social invisibility of the issue is that women concur in it and carry it out, in private. Women family members decide when little girls will have the procedures done, and they help by holding down the child and singing to drown out her screams. Local practitioners earn a living by doing excisions and cutting open new brides whose husbands cannot penetrate them, and by re-infibulating wives after childbirth. These women are also midwives, so they see the physical trauma of the infibulations they themselves did years earlier, but the various aspects of their work are not in conflict. They are all part of a normal woman's life.

Normality is the key word. Footbinding was

eliminated in one generation in urban China from 1895 to 1912 because of an education campaign that stressed both the disadvantages and the fact that the rest of the world did not mutilate women's feet. However, modernization and development have in some countries brought about *expansion* of genital mutilation. Education campaigns that stress the health aspects have also had little effect, since it is believed that excision of the clitoris and labia and infibulation result in greater cleanliness and fertility. Even outlawing the procedures has not worked, because no one involved goes to the authorities. If a family refuses to succumb they are shunned and excluded from the local marriage market.

It is important to note that female genital mutilation is not an Islamic religious rite nor always accompanied by tribal puberty ceremonies. It is not confined to villages or poor women, but is practiced by educated urban women as well. Its purpose is to create a proper and marriageable woman. The right to marriage and children is also an internationally recognized human right. In that sense, even if some fathers did not insist on the practice for their daughters, the mothers might insist on it, if their daughters could not marry otherwise.

Campaigns of Eradication

Female genital mutilation is already a gender-specific human rights and health issue in many countries of Africa where the practice is widespread. Immigration and asylum seekers have brought these practices to the attention of Western countries. Some of the countries to which they have emigrated, including the United States, have made all the procedures illegal. It is also outlawed in several countries where it is traditionally practiced, but the laws are not always supported by those in power. African women have

held conferences addressing the cultural and health issues and mounted campaigns against it, but without much effect.

One effective method of eradicating footbinding in China was the formation of associations of fathers who pledged not to bind their daughters' feet nor to let their sons marry bound women. When there were enough men who took these pledges, a new marriage market was created that encouraged natural feet. These associations were formed under two auspices — conversion to Christianity and revolutionary republicanism. The question is, then, what kind of social, cultural, and political pressures can be successfully applied to the eradication of female genital mutilation? Are these pressures of any use when they come from outside, or can change come only from within? Should Western feminists take on this political issue or is it none of our business? If we do take it on, what can we do about it that is not being done by women in the countries concerned and in the UN and international health organizations?

If we believe in the right of a competent adult woman to consent to abortion, *in vitro* fertilization, cosmetic surgery, and transsexual operations, as I do, then we cannot condemn competent adult women who request or agree to removal of the clitoral hood, clitoridectomy, and even infibulation. But we can condemn any genital mutilation of girls, especially before the age of puberty. And we can, as feminists, join campaigns specifically geared to their protection, as part of the Beijing Platform for women's rights as human rights and the special emphasis on the girl child insisted on by women of the developing countries.

A campaign against genital mutilation of girls before they are old enough to comprehend the consequences and without their consent would not end conflict over the issue. There would certainly be debate and cultural clashes over the age of consent, and there would also be the question of parents' consent to male circumcision. There would also be a battle from parents who believe they have the right to determine every aspect of their children's fate without government interference. But it seems to me that an international campaign to protect the bodies and sexual and reproductive potential of little girls, combined with education of girls and boys on the advantages of natural female genitalia for marital sexual pleasure and fertility, has the best chance of success.

The campaigns against female genital mutilation have encouraged linkage with campaigns against penile circumcisions. They are not equivalent at all. Given the amount of excision and the resultant pain and life-long health problems, the male equivalent of female genital mutilation is castration and the creation of impotent eunuchs, a practice that disappeared in the West only about 100 years ago and in China around the same time as footbinding.

Want to Take Action?

Two US organizations are active in efforts to oppose female genital mutilation. If you want to get involved in this effort, you can contact them at:

Forward, USA

Mimi Ramsey, Director

2040 Forest Avenue

San Jose, CA 95126

(408) 298-3798, Fax: (408) 298-3893

Research, Action and Information Network for Bodily Integrity
of Women (RAINBOW)

915 Broadway, Suite 1603

New York, NY 10010-7108

(212) 477-3318

Want to Learn More?

If you want to find out more about this issue, please check out these resources:

- Abdalla, Raqiya Haji Dualeh. 1982. *Sisters in Affliction: Circumcision and Infibulation of Women in Africa*. London: Zed Books.
- El Dareer, Asma. 1982. *Woman, Why Do You Weep? Circumcision and its Consequences*. London: Zed Books.
- James, Stephen A. 1994. "Reconciling Human Rights and Cultural Relativism: The Case of Female Circumcision." *Bioethics* 8 (Nov. 1):1-26.
- Koso-Thomas, Olayinka. 1987. *The Circumcision of Women: A Strategy for Eradication*. London: Zed Books.
- Lightfoot-Klein, Hanny. 1989. *Prisoners of Ritual: An Odyssey into Female Circumcision in Africa*. New York: Harrington Park Press.
- Mackie, Gerry. 1996. "Ending Footbinding and Infibulation: A Convention Account." *American Sociological Review* 61:999-1017.
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- van der Kwaak, Anke. 1992. "Female Circumcision and Gender Identity: A Questionable Alliance?" *Social Science and Medicine* 35:777-87.
- Walker, Alice. 1992. *Possessing the Secret of Joy*. New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich.

Judith Lorber is an active member of the Feminist Branch of D.S.A. She is Professor Emerita of Sociology at Brooklyn College and The Graduate School, CUNY, and the author of *Paradoxes of Gender* (Yale, 1994) and *Gender and the Social Construction of Illness* (Sage, 1997).

Continued from page 1

wage. A clear analysis of many economic issues—from welfare to employment, from pensions to sweatshops—demonstrates that women and people of color face discrimination and oppression.

In recent years these issues have often fallen under the rubric of 'identity politics' as opposed to the more traditional 'class politics' of the left. Yet this nomenclature may reflect and reinforce the reluctance of some of the left to address these issues. Gender and race are not simply identities. Fighting for women's rights is not just about the ability to be a woman, to claim that 'identity' — it is a fight for justice and against oppression. The phrase 'identity politics' in some ways trivializes this fight and those of African Americans, Latinos, gays and lesbians, Asians and Native Americans. In the early days of the second wave of feminism, someone wrote a pamphlet entitled "I Don't Want to Have a Lifestyle, I Want to Have a Life." Substitute identity for lifestyle and you can see that we've not come as far as we might have hoped.

DSA's Campaign for Economic Justice will reflect this understanding of race and gender discrimination. This will happen not only by taking up issues specific to women, gays and lesbians, people of color, but also by ensuring that the gender and race dimensions of economic security and globalization are addressed. What are some of those issues?

- *Full Employment* — Unemployment and underemployment often result in a disproportionate number of women and people of color in low-paying jobs or on unemployment or welfare. Current fiscal and monetary policies are aimed at keeping inflation low, but also lead to high levels of unemployment.

- *Welfare* — The debate on welfare reform and the passage of the recent repeal of welfare programs has resulted in the propagation of negative stereotypes about women and people of color. Contrary to those myths half of all women who spend time on welfare also

work during that time and many others spend much of their time looking for work. The repeal of welfare for legal immigrants will especially impact members of the Hispanic and Asian communities. Real welfare reform fosters economic growth, reforms the low-wage labor market and preserves the social safety net.

- *Pay Equity* — People of color and women continue to be clustered in low-paying jobs. Their wages continue to be less than those of white men. Pay equity and comparable worth programs are one effort designed to reexamine pay scales in government and corporations and to increase pay in some job categories.

- *Affirmative Action* — Affirmative action is one way to ensure that women and people of color have an equal opportunity to be admitted to educational programs and to be hired and promoted in jobs.

- *Family and Medical Leave* — When women become pregnant, they may desire to return to positions they have held after some leave. When children are ill, when elderly parents need care, women are usually the caregivers and must take time off work to meet the needs of their families. All too often, employers replace women workers while they are on leave. Even with the family and medical leave laws in place, women lose pay and career advancement opportunities. Additional measures must address these issues.

- *Pension Reform* — Women live longer than men, and because of both their own work histories and the pension situation in the United States often live out their lives in poverty. Pension reform that takes into account women's work histories and the situations of their spouses is essential to ensuring that older women have access to a decent standard of living.

- *Globalization* — Women are frequently in the lowest paying jobs in developed nations and are often among the most exploited by corporations in developing countries. Women's work in the family is often not counted as part of a nation's gross national product and thus is not counted when assessing development programs. Plus the North-South divisions in the world economy, especially the increasing isolation of Africa, certainly are linked to race as well as economics.

As we work to develop solutions to these and other issues, we must be careful to ensure that race, class and gender are all factored into the solution—we must not assume that by addressing class we address race and gender, nor can we assume that the impacts of race and gender are identical.

Christine R. Riddiough is Political Director of DSA

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On International Women's Day

BY HON. AUDREY McLAUGHLIN

This issue of *Democratic Left* celebrates International Women's Day. It is a time for many activists to reflect on our achievements and those achievements yet to be made. Feminists do not have failures, just long time lines.

In September of 1996, I was elected President of Socialist International Women (SIW). SIW is affiliated with the Socialist International which is made up of representatives of 140 social democratic and labor political parties from all continents. SIW is the largest women's political network in the world and in its 90-year history has worked hard to promote women's equality in electoral politics and in all national and international organizations. At our 1996 Congress, which was held at the United Nations, it was exciting to meet women, many of whom were elected, some, like Gro Brundtland who were heads of state, and others who worked to further gender issues in their parties and in their countries.

I was asked recently why our organization was important and what role we could play on the international scene. A good question, since women are so often virtually absent in major policy-making situations. I say this, knowing that there are wonderful exceptions and I do not diminish their work, but rather take strength from it.

But the reality is that three years away from the year 2000, there are only a tiny minority of women in senior positions in the United Nations, at the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and at the World Bank.

Now, I have never believed that women have all the answers, but we surely do have at least half of them and without our presence, national and international policies related to the economy, human rights, social issues, the environment and peace will reflect only one half of life's experience.

Given that in virtually every country in the world men still are the vast majority in governments and legislatures, how do we make our voices heard? Some of us, like myself, have entered electoral politics, others work behind the scenes and a few have made it to senior policy-making positions. SIW represents one way to speak out. As we see greater globalization of financial markets, international feminist organizations, like SIW, are increasingly important for promoting the globalization of equity and justice.

In 1995 I attend the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing. I also participated in the NGO conference there. It was these two experiences which highlight for me why SIW is so important and also why all socialist and 'left wing' political parties are key. At the NGO conference, women were virtually unanimous in their opposition to the way in which structural adjustment programs had been carried out. They outlined in graphic detail the devastation that these policies had created. At the United Nations conference in which the official action plan was debated, poverty was discussed at some length but no country, including my own, suggested that poverty occurred, in part, as a result of the IMF and the World Bank policies. For me, the gulf between the experiences of the women represented at the NGO conference and the decisions made by governments at the United Nations conference was a stark example of the gap between experience and theory. It was the direct result of women's voices *not* being heard.

In my own political experience, the role of the women's committee of the Canadian New Democratic Party has been key to both policy development and party functioning. It is the women's committee that ensured that the party adopt a policy of gender equity on all executives and committees

History of International Women's Day

On March 8, 1857 hundreds of women workers in garment and textile factories in New York City staged a strike against low wages, long working hours and inhumane working conditions. On March 8, 1908, 15,000 women marched through New York City demanding shorter hours, better pay, voting rights and an end to child labor. They adopted the slogan "Bread and Roses", with bread symbolizing economic security and roses a better quality of life. In May of that year, the Socialist Party of America designated the last Sunday in February for the observance of National Women's Day. Two years later, in August 1910, Socialist International

Women decided to commemorate the strike by observing an annual International Women's Day. In March 1911 the Triangle Shirtwaist Fire in which many women sweatshop workers died further served to highlight the need to change the terrible conditions under which many women worked. In the years since, many countries have celebrated International Women's Day, but in the United States observance died out until the second wave of feminism in the 1970s once again began to commemorate the struggles of working women. In 1975, during International Women's Year, the United Nations began celebrating March 8 as International Women's Day.

and the policy of affirmative action in candidate selection. I believe that these actions directly assisted in seeing that our party elected, in 1989, the first woman as leader of a federal political party in North America and in 1995 the second.

In terms of policy I remember vividly ten years ago when my colleague Margaret Mitchell stood in the House of Commons and stated that one in ten women in Canada were victims of abuse. The male members of the House hooted and laughed and shouted her down. They don't do that anymore, but the continuous denial of women's experiences continues.

It is both a harmful assumption and a fallacy to think that all women think alike or that simply by having more women in politics we will change society. I think many readers would agree that the Margaret Thatchers of the world did not make life better for women or men. For me, the goal is not simply seeing more women in elected office or in senior positions, but more *feminist* women who are truly committed to equality.

The value, I feel, of women's organizations is that while the days of traditional 'consciousness-raising' may be gone or at least have taken a different form from that of the 1960s and 70s, it is absolutely essential that we formulate policy, whether economic, social or international, with 100 percent of the expertise available, not just 50 percent. North American culture still tends to see women as perpetually inadequate (if you don't believe me, go down to your local newsstand and see how many self-improvement magazines there are for women and how many for men). Our voices must be heard and we must draw strength from each other.

Anna Zeminski / Impact Visuals



I am reminded of a quote from Marilyn Waring's book, **If Women Counted: A New Feminist Economics**, in which she says: "Look *at* the water. It has no value. Now look *into* the water. The woman we see there counts for something. She can help change the world." And so we can!

Audrey McLaughlin is president of Socialist International Women, a member of the Canadian Parliament and the former leader of the New Democratic Party of Canada.

Women in the U.S. Workforce

Glass Ceilings and Sticky Floors

Women accounted for 46 percent of total U.S. Labor force participants in 1994. They are projected to comprise 48 percent by the year 2005. (U.S. Department of Labor, Women's Bureau)

Of the 57 million women employed in the U.S. in 1994, 41 million worked full-time (defined as 35 or more hours per week) while nearly 16 million worked part-time (less than 35 hours per week). Two-thirds of all part-time workers are women. (DOL, Women's Bureau)

More than half (56 percent) of women aged 20 and older who work for temporary help companies do so because it is all they could find or they hope it will lead to permanent employment. (DOL, Bureau of Labor Statistics, February 1995)

Many women who work part-time are multiple job holders. In 1994, 3.3 million women held

more than one job. (DOL, Women's Bureau)

Two-thirds of the minimum wage workforce are women; nearly 4 million women work at minimum wages. (Institute for Women's Policy Research)

More than half of women workers are employed in the services and retail sectors of the economy. (DOL)

In 1993, Latina women earned a median income of \$16,758; African-American women earned a median income of \$19,816; and white women earned a median income of \$22,023. White men earned a median income of \$31,089. (Institute for Women's Policy Research)

According to an analysis of the 1990 U.S. Census, African-American women with professional degrees in top management positions earn 60 percent of what white men in comparable positions earn. (The Federal Glass Ceiling Commission, Good for Business: Making Full Use of the Nation's Human Capital, 1995)

The ratio of women's 1994 median weekly earnings to men's is 76.4 percent. Even in traditionally female occupations, where women outnumber men, women still earn less than their male counterparts. (DOL, Women's Bureau)

Selected Traditionally Female Occupations 1994 MEDIAN WEEKLY EARNINGS

| OCCUPATION | EARNINGS | |
|------------------------------|----------|-------|
| | Women | Men |
| Registered nurses | \$680 | \$709 |
| Elementary school teachers | 621 | 650 |
| Cashiers | 220 | 264 |
| General office clerks | 367 | 403 |
| Health aides, except nursing | 271 | 301 |

Source: U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics, Employment and Earnings, January 1995.

Nearly 4.5 million families with female householders were below the poverty level in 1993. This figure represents 35.6 percent of all families with female householders. (DOL, Women's Bureau)

The most common jobs held by women with children who receive welfare are maids, cashiers, nursing aides, childcare workers, and waitresses. The top employers of these women are restaurants, nursing homes, private households, hotels and motels, department stores, and hospitals. (Institute for Women's Policy Research)

24 million working women—nearly 2 out of 3 working women—do not have pension plans. (DOL)

Compiled by Michele Rossi

DSA AMENDMENTS DEADLINE

In order to be considered by DSA's 1997 Convention, proposed amendments to DSA's Constitution and/or By-Laws must be submitted by October 7, 1997. Proposed resolutions should be submitted no later than October 23, 1997. Send proposed amendments and resolutions to the attention of Alan Charney at the DSA national office, 180 Varick Street, Floor 12, New York, NY 10014.

Croft Runs for DC Council

Washington, DC, local member Howard Croft is running for the City Council in a special election to be held this spring. Croft is a professor of criminal justice at the University of the District of Columbia. He is also a member of the DC Parole board. He has been

active in the community for many years and is currently president of Greater Washington Americans for Democratic Action. Croft is one of the leading candidates in a large field. His election would bring new progressive leadership to the city at a time when it is in crisis.

S A V E T H E D A T E

**1997 DSA
CONVENTION**
will be held
NOVEMBER 7-10
in Columbus, OH

More information will be available in upcoming issues of Democratic Left
or call Alan Charney at the DSA national office, (212) 727-8610.

Let's consider the influence of money in politics. What can be done to "level the playing field" so that the financial power of the corporations and the wealthy is severely restricted?

Progressives put forward one simple solution: public financing of all elections. There are many variations on this theme: from total public financing with no private contributions to matching public contributions with strict limits on private contributions and from limitations on the total expenditures to elimination of PACs. They are all virtuous proposals. In some places, like Maine, strict "clean elections" laws are now in place. Under the terms of the Maine Clean Elections Act, passed in a 1996 referendum, candidates who accept strict spending limits, give up all private contributions and agree to run shorter campaigns will receive a flat grant of public funding as the sole source of their elections contributions. Candidates qualify for the funding by gathering five-dollar qualifying checks from voters in their districts.

Now here's the down side. Direct contributions to candidates is only one of many ways that corporations and the wealthy use their financial power in the political arena. There are "soft money" contributions to party committees, independent campaign expenditures, direct lobbying expenses, "grassroots" lobbying expenditures, funding of various coalitions, issue campaigns, foundations, think-tanks, etc. It's a *reductio ad absurdum*. We can never get to the bottom of the money barrel. We limit, regulate or outlaw one type of political expenditure and the money just shows up somewhere else.

We all agree that the financial power of the corporations and the wealthy subverts the democratic process because it makes a mockery of political equality. In effect, money makes the voices of some people much more important and influ-

ential than the voices of many, many others. But, is limiting money in politics the best way to defend and enhance equal political participation?

The "crisis" — and I really mean "crisis" — of political participation cannot really be confronted by focusing primarily on what I call the "procedures" of participation. Indeed, the current fascination with "clean elections" campaigns reminds me of

Direct contributions to candidates is only one of many ways that corporations and the wealthy use their financial power . . . We limit, regulate or outlaw one type of political expenditure and the money just shows up somewhere else.

our previous fascination with voter registration. Fifteen years ago, many progressives began to focus on expanding the electorate by organizing voter registration campaigns and pushing for legislation promoting universal voter registration. This would greatly expand the electorate — particularly the under-represented bottom-third which would tend to vote progressive. So, two years ago we finally won Motor Voter, and in 1996 there was a voter turnout 5 points lower than 1992. Now don't get me wrong. Voter registration is extremely important. We must continue to make Motor Voter work, and push for same day registration. But, it just doesn't get to the core of the participation crisis.

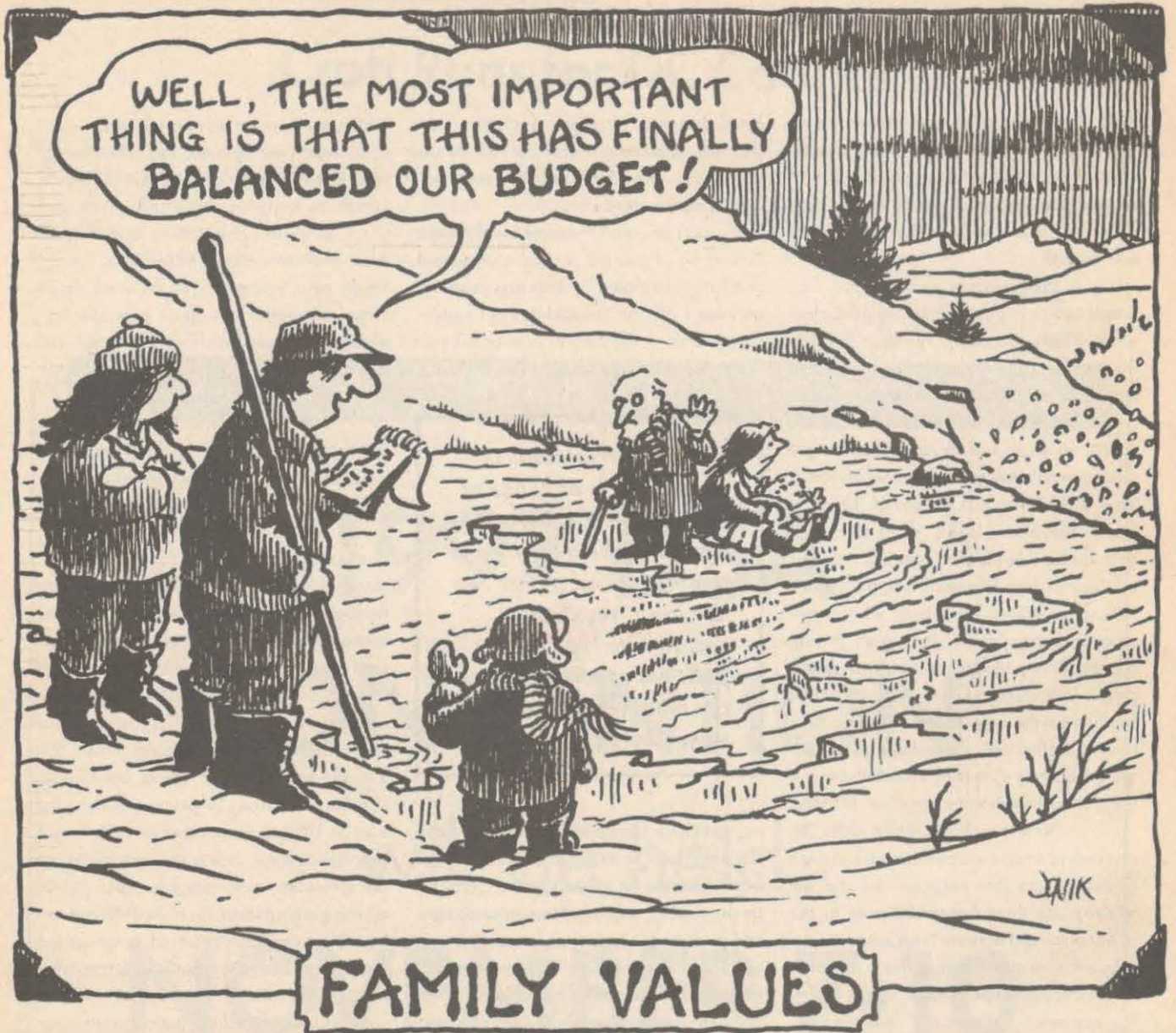
Instead of looking at the procedural barriers to participation, let's focus on the question of motivation and mobilization.

Today, we have an entrepreneurial model of political participation. Individual candidates use the media to motivate individual voters to support them (or, more and more, to vote against their opponents). And, the same thing holds with issues. Single issue groups try to motivate single voters to support or oppose particular legislation. This participation is isolating and passive. There's no mediation between the voter and "the political process."

But, there is another way. It's the institutional approach — the creation of voter solidarities based on shared common concerns. In 1996, the AFL-CIO embarked on an ambitious political campaign to mobilize its membership for the Congressional elections. The motivation was done through promoting a pro-worker political agenda. AFL-CIO members were encouraged to vote for candidates based upon their support for this agenda. The results were actually astounding. In 1996 voter turnout as a whole was down 5 percent from 1992. Yet, the percentage of voters from union families went from 19 percent of the total vote in 1992 to 23 percent in 1996 — a 4 percent increase. It was the only sector of the electorate over this four year period where participation increased! When we look at the candidate preferences we can see even more clearly the gigantic difference that institutions make in participation. If you were a unionized white, male worker, your chances of voting Democratic were nearly 2 to 1. Take away the union, and the chances of voting Democratic were nearly reversed.

Here is the beginning of a solution to our participation crisis. We have to revitalize our progressive institutions around a political program that really motivates the membership. But, more importantly, we have to expand the reach of these institutions to organize and "influence" millions of other voters. Institutions count. In fact, when it comes to progressive politics, they may count the most.

Parting Shot



John Jonik

FAMILY VALUES

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