

Letters

Cracked Logic

Salim Muwakkil needs to understand the motivation behind mainstream society not wanting poor drug addicts to have children ("Cracked Logic," Sept. 19). It's not racism—it's economics.

As a taxpayer, I do not want to pay for welfare and other services that will be needed to mitigate the problems of a mother's drug abuse. As a human, I am appalled that Muwakkil would support, even indirectly, addicts bringing more children into dysfunctional households. The tone of the article is squarely against using financial incentives to stop these women from having child after child. And it fails to address the social consequences of this reproductive nightmare. I don't want to see white, black, Hispanic or Asian babies born into households where their physical needs will be neglected and their lives put at needless risk as mom squanders the welfare money on drugs.

As a society, we have a duty to care for the less well-off members of our community. But that does not mean we have to tacitly approve or subsidize procreation by the most irresponsible members of our society. If CRACK (Children Requiring a Caring Kommunity) and others want to

pay addicts to be sterilized, and the addicts voluntarily agree to the treatment, I say more power to them. The marketplace can help solve some social problems.

Hugh Brower
Stamford, Conn.

philosophy of the wealthy. Real socialists, particularly Marxists, have always been at the forefront of the struggle for racial justice, and against elitism and eugenics.

Will Beatty
San Francisco

In an otherwise good analysis of the racist attitudes underlying efforts to get drug addicts to undergo sterilization, Salim Muwakkil makes two misleading references to socialism and Marxism.

He links "intellectual elites and political radicals—particularly socialists" to Malthusianism and Social Darwinism. Then, at the end of the article, in a reference to the eugenics movement and "utopians of all kinds," he claims that the "idea of a scientific fix for humanity's problems is at the very heart of Marxist ideology."

Karl Marx strongly opposed and ridiculed Malthus. Friedrich Engels, Marx's lifelong collaborator, wrote a pamphlet, *Socialism: Utopian and Scientific*, specifically to explain the differences between utopian thought and the historical materialism of Marx. And Social Darwinism, far from being "eagerly appropriated" by socialists, was a pseudo-

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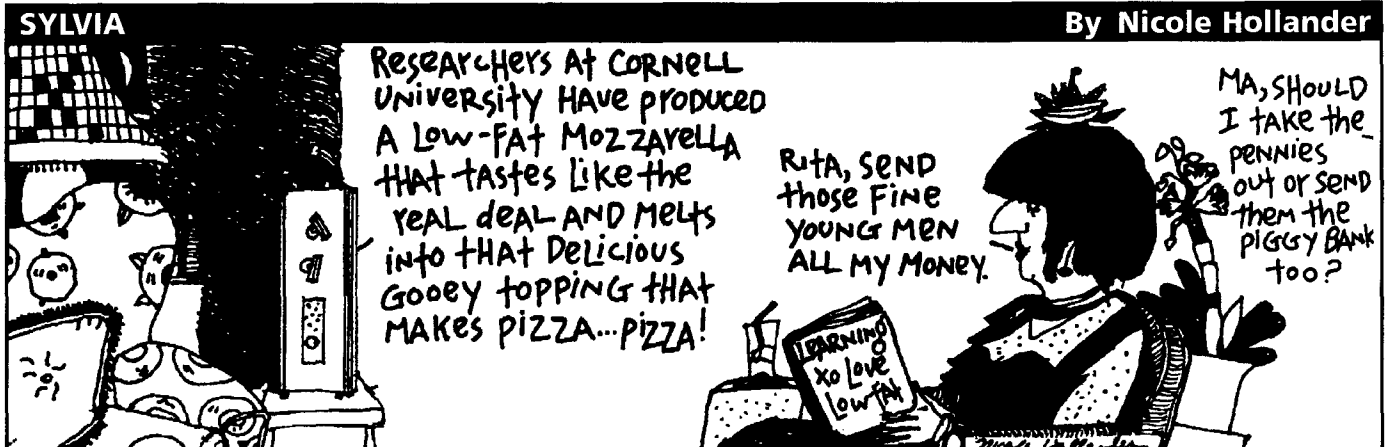
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Take Back the Fourth Estate

Why does an expression of commitment to egalitarian values make one feel like an alien in a land saturated with the rhetoric of free expression and democracy? How is it that a fundamentally unequal system of laissez-faire capitalism has become synonymous with democratic practice? Because we lack the vibrant noncommercial mass media outlets that might routinely expose and challenge the fault lines of capitalism and the consumer culture it has come to require.

For many of us, disgust over concentrated mass media ownership has been palpable since at least 1983, when Ben Bagdikian documented the stranglehold of 50 corporations that then constituted *The Media Monopoly*. We have nodded in horror as each successive edition of his seminal study reported such accelerating consolidation that, by its fifth release in 1997, only 10 corporations controlled "almost everything we see, hear and read."

Still, over the past decade, rampant commercialism brought unanticipated consequences: the phenomena of celebrity scandal-mongering masquerading as news and synergistic cross-marketing of media "brands." Sustainable development initiatives, living wage campaigns, anti-sweatshop actions and organized labor receive scant attention—while breathless accounts of advertising wars, HMO profit margins and cyberbusiness deals dominate the front of the business sections.

Think about it: What chance does a progressive agenda—including such goals as universal health care, family-supporting wages and a brake on global warming—have in the current political climate? How do we get Cokie Roberts and Tim Russert to spend Sunday morning discussing the fact that the average CEO now makes 419 times more than the average blue-collar worker rather than the Clintons' house-hunting trip to New York?

Meanwhile, independent publications teeter constantly on the brink of insolvency. Many fail. Feisty pirate radio stations are silenced. If the Pacifica board of directors can be seduced by Madison Avenue's sampling techniques to run roughshod over thousands of KPFA stalwarts, dare we presume that serious structural change is possible?

Robert McChesney still believes that it is. Frankly, if we hold out any hope for authentic democracy, we should take him at his word and act right away. Everybody complains about the media. McChesney has the audacity and imagination to insist that we might actually do something about it. In his most recent analysis of the media at century's end, Rich

Media, Poor Democracy: Communication Politics in Dubious Times, McChesney lays out a four-part agenda for media reform that can inspire, orient and help to organize the millions who long for a genuinely democratic fourth estate:

- **Building noncommercial media.** Give your money, time and creativity to strengthen fledgling or foundering efforts. McChesney exhorts foundations, labor organizations and others in the position to channel significant resources to bolster these efforts. Urge Congress to consider tax credits for donations to alternative media makers, such as the Independent Press Association and its dozens of member publications.
- **Genuinely public broadcasting.** Existing national, regional and local citizen organizations should take a leaf from the KPFA battle and advocate for democratic management and local control.

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- **Regulation.** The Steal This Radio project of the New York Free Media Alliance has begun to model this tactic. With the help of the Center for Constitutional Rights and the National Lawyers Guild, they have forced the FCC to consider licensing low-power "micro-radio" frequencies.
- **Antitrust action.** McChesney recommends specific new legislation, an antitrust statute directed at breaking up media conglomerates. Lively debates about similar initiatives are well underway in Australia and New Zealand.

Media restructuring, like recent parallel efforts to dismantle the corrupt campaign finance system, will not result organically just from accounts of mainstream media's consistently egregious behavior. Such evidence is necessary and—thanks to the excellent work of FAIR and the Institute for Public Accuracy, among others—available. But Rupert Murdoch, Sumner Redstone and Mickey Mouse will not be embarrassed into democratic transformation.

How do we proceed? McChesney's recommendations are straightforward, but they require self-conscious, dedicated action. Progressive political and community organizations need to adopt them and get to work.

Beth Schulman