

"Who Wants to Marry a Multi-Millionaire?": US television hits bottom, for now

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With the February 15 broadcast of "Who Wants to Marry a Multi-Millionaire?" on Fox, American network television unquestionably descended to a new low point. The 2-hour program in which a concealed "multimillionaire" chose a bride from a group of fifty women and married her in a civil ceremony, after the contestants paraded around in bathing suits and semifinalists answered questions (for example, how would they spend his money?), was a thoroughly degrading spectacle.

The Fox program was dedicated to the proposition that people will do anything for money, that, in fact, *money is everything*, and that those with money have the right to pick a mate like some potentate choosing a concubine.

In the short term, "Who Wants to Marry a Multi-Millionaire?" has proven something of a public relations embarrassment for Fox. First came the revelation that its millionaire groom, 42-year-old Rick Rockwell, was the subject of a restraining order in 1991 obtained by an ex-fiancée who accused him of assaulting and threatening her. (How surprising that the program attracted this social type!) This forced the network to cancel a rebroadcast of the original show and the production of further episodes.

Then the press reported that the couple—Rockwell and his bride, 34-year-old Darva Conger, an emergency room nurse in Santa Monica, California—never spent a moment alone together on their "chaperoned honeymoon" in Barbados and planned to annul their union. Conger told ABC's "Good Morning America", "I was not looking to marry anyone. I committed an error in judgment." About Rockwell, a onetime stand-up comic and bit actor (in *Attack of the Killer Tomatoes!*), real estate developer and publicity hound, she said, "He's not a person that I would ordinarily have a friendly relationship with. ... I'm just a girl who works in an emergency room who made a mistake." Conger received \$100,000 in prizes, including an Isuzu Trooper and a \$35,000, three-carat diamond ring; she has said she'll return the latter item.

In the days following the broadcast of "Who Wants to Marry a Multi-Millionaire?," newspaper editorialists and

columnists around the US weighed in against the program. It was denounced as televised prostitution and a "slave auction." One editorial compared the program to the 1993 film, *Indecent Proposal*, in which a wealthy high roller offers a couple one million dollars if he can sleep with the wife for one night. In general, much hand-wringing went on, not all of it insincere. The program no doubt evoked in many spontaneous feelings of revulsion.

The media coverage of the issues, however, was predictably superficial. To a certain extent, the revelations about Rockwell's past and Conger's act of public contrition have become a means of diverting attention from the most troubling question: what sort of society produces a television program like this?

Anyone who expects the television and entertainment industry, dominated by a handful of giant conglomerates, to reform itself because of the outcry over "Who Wants to Marry a Multi-Millionaire?" is deluding him or herself. There may be a sense, even in its boardrooms that Fox went too far this time, but that will pass. The program attracted 22.8 million viewers during its final half-hour. In the end, that number will speak louder than any outraged columnist. New low points are guaranteed.

In fact, they may already be in production. This summer CBS will air 13 episodes of "Survivor," a "*Lord of the Flies*-like" program in which 16 contestants will be stranded on a desert island. Each week the contestants will vote to expel one of their number. The last one remaining will win one million dollars. (In Sweden, where a version of the program first appeared, one contestant committed suicide after being eliminated from the show.) In "Big Brother," also on CBS, 10 strangers will be thrown together and filmed day and night. A syndicated program, "Wed at First Sight," which aspires to match and marry contestants in one day, will debut this autumn.

This television season has already seen an outburst of programs appealing to the viewers' worst instincts and illusions. ABC's "Who Wants To Be a Millionaire" is regularly drawing an audience of thirty million people. (For

the 1999-2000 television season, the program will generate some \$200 million in profits, according to *Newsweek*. Since late January, the magazine notes, the stock market has added some \$6 billion to the value of Disney, ABC's owner.)

Fox executive vice-president of special programming, Mike Darnell, the brains behind “Who Wants to Marry a Multi-Millionaire?,” admits to having been inspired by the ABC program: “I kept thinking, ‘How can I cash in on that?’ People are always interested in relationships. Combine that with the wish-fulfillment of ‘Millionaire’ and the spectacle of Miss America and it’s just an odd combination of events.” Darnell masterminded “When Animals Attack,” among other shows, and proposed last year that Fox crash an empty plane on live television, an idea turned down by network executives.

In response to “Who Wants To Be a Millionaire,” rival networks have launched their own imitations, “Twenty One” on NBC and “Greed” on Fox. This is from the latter’s official website: “Only Greed offers teammates the chance to eliminate one another in ruthless one-on-one battles for big bucks. Will one player hit the jackpot, or will a few greedy teammates split the dough? Each show offers millions of possibilities!”

No one who has seriously followed events in the US over the past two decades ought to be surprised by this phenomenon. In these programs one sees, in a relatively undiluted form, the logic inherent in official American ideology since the election of Ronald Reagan in particular. For twenty years, under Republicans and Democrats alike, every effort has been made to encourage selfishness, greed and ruthlessness and undermine concern for one’s fellow creatures. This ideological assault has helped produce the present situation in the US—an unprecedented stock market and profit boom, vast social inequality and feelings of deep alienation and helplessness within broad layers of the population.

It is not accidental that the swimsuit portion of “Who Wants to Marry a Multi-Millionaire?” had the character of a slave market, with contestants showing off their physical attributes. The marketplace has become the model for all spheres of human activity.

The social and moral circumstances that give rise to this sort of television program have their own momentum. The American ruling elite cannot suppress its own deepest urges, its own internal rot. Why the apparent fascination, not only with money, but with sex? The editorialists may bemoan Fox television’s excesses, but many of them were only too pleased to wallow in the muck of the Clinton-Lewinsky scandal, with all its lurid details, and they will leap to cover the next such affair. This determination to render pornographic all aspects of life does not flow from a

legitimate fascination with human sexuality, but from a prurient and self-serving interest in whatever activity degrades people. The goal of corporate chiefs like Fox’s Rupert Murdoch can only be to make the population as corrupt and foul as themselves.

At an earlier point in US history those in power, faced with the pressure represented by the labor, socialist and radical protest movements, felt they had to restrain themselves somewhat. Moreover, they had to demonstrate, in some fashion or other, a commitment to culture and enlightenment (in the middle of the 20th century, if only to show what “democracy” could produce as opposed to “totalitarianism” in the USSR). Now anything goes. One gets the sense of a society that has simply lost its head.

The general cultural and intellectual malaise finds an especially acute expression in American television. Between the screeching of the right-wing cable commentators, the cultivation of backwardness on the daytime talk shows, the high-speed chases and police operations on the “reality” programs, the non-stop reporting of stock market prices, the brutality and increasing pornography of wrestling, the braying of televangelists—television-watching becomes ever more difficult. Is there any reason to believe that some network executive has not proposed the live broadcast of executions? Certainly placing a camera at a particularly dangerous intersection, in hopes of capturing a serious auto accident on tape, seems the least one could do right away.

The cynical and nihilistic daily bombardment of great numbers of people is not without its effect. The glorification of violence and mindlessness, under increasingly difficult social conditions, will help foster reactionary and even fascistic moods.

The broadcast of “Who Wants to Marry a Multi-Millionaire?” is in its own repugnant way quite telling. It reveals something about the mentality and general outlook of those who produced it and the real danger that represents to the general population.



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