

USA: Debate This!

Tuesday 16 October 2012, by [POLLITT Katha](#) (Date first published: 10 October 2012).

One thing we can all agree on: no woman moderator could possibly match Jim Lehrer's masterful command of the first presidential debate. The sharp, wide-ranging questions! The shrewd follow-ups! The nimble way he kept the whole thing on track and moving right along! A woman would surely have been cowed (note that gendered verb) by the two masters of the universe rabbiting on up there and decided just to let them go at each other while she planned her next dinner party and wondered if TV was making her face look orange. I really worry about Candy Crowley, who will be the first woman to moderate a presidential debate in twenty years when she conducts a "town hall" later this month. How can she possibly measure up?

As has been noted, the word "women" was not uttered once the whole evening. There were anecdotes about the misfortunes of this woman or that encountered on the campaign trail, but no mention of abortion rights, the contraceptive coverage mandate, equal pay—the stuff of countless news stories in the months leading up to the debate—let alone the disproportionate effects on women of public sector job cuts, proposed Social Security cutbacks or Romney's promised overturn of the Affordable Care Act. This, after all those direct appeals to women voters, all that fuss over transvaginal ultrasounds, the Violence Against Women Act, Sandra Fluke and "legitimate rape." Both conventions played to the female vote, with lots of impressive women onstage and a virtual Homeric catalog of heroic mothers and grandmothers (what, no aunts?). The Democrats promoted their actual policies—go Lilly Ledbetter! Republicans, who couldn't do that, went with Ann Romney's "I love you, women!" But when it mattered, nada.

I can't begin to explain why Obama let slip away the opportunity to rally women voters on a night when 67 million Americans were tuning in, many for the first time. Never mind Lehrer's bland and overly general questions: how hard is it to point out in a discussion of the economy that women's ability to plan their families is an economic essential, not some "social" or "cultural" frill—one the Republicans want to destroy? What about Romney's promise to "get rid of Planned Parenthood"?

But women's rights and economic situation were not the only important issue inexplicably left out. Here are some questions I hope the next moderators will ask:

1. Poverty. It's growing and deepening—some 46 million people and counting. But the way the economic debate is framed, you would think that every single person in America either owned a small business or was looking to start one, and the only question was how much they should be taxed and regulated. It's as if we think we can hardware-store our way into a whole new wave of prosperity, one newly hired shop assistant at a time. Given that wages even for full-time work can be so low they leave one eligible for food stamps, what role do you see for government in ensuring a decent life for all?

2. Follow-up: millions of children—almost one in four—are growing up poor. According to UNICEF, of the thirty-five richest countries, only Romania (!) has a higher rate of relative child poverty (kids at less than 50 percent of median disposable income). Moreover, the United States does far less than other developed countries to ameliorate poverty and its effects. Canada and the United States, for example, start out with roughly equal percentages of kids in poverty, but Canadian government policies lift almost half of these children above the line. What is your program for ending child poverty in the next ten years?

3. The economic crisis has affected just about everyone, but it's hit black people much harder than whites. Unemployment for blacks is nearly twice that for whites. According to the National Urban League, the downturn has destroyed nearly all the economic progress black middle-class families made during the last thirty years. Twenty-four percent of black families have no assets other than a car (only 6 percent of white families are that poor). At the same time, study after study shows racism persists in hiring and promotion, in housing, in healthcare. Affirmative action, already minimized by court decisions, may be abolished by the Supreme Court this term. Schools are more segregated than before *Brown v. Board of Education*. What is your plan for achieving racial equality across the board in the next ten years?

4. The United States has the highest rate of imprisonment in the world: 743 people per 100,000. That's an astonishing seven in 100 Americans—including more than half of black men without a high school diploma. The cost to communities and families is enormous. Half of these people are imprisoned because of the "war on drugs"—which has, incidentally, raised the incarceration rate for women 800 percent. It doesn't look as if people are going to stop drug use anytime soon, so, really, what is the point of locking up all these people?

5. Civil liberties. Since 9/11 we have seen cherished civil liberties eroded in the name of fighting terrorism: people tried in military courts, held without formal charges, access to lawyers or due process. The president has taken on himself the right to assassinate people at will, including American citizens like Anwar al-Awlaki. Do you see a downside to any of this at all?

6. Separation of church and state. An immense amount of government money goes toward religious institutions for all sorts of social services. Churches more and more openly engage in politics in violation of their tax-exempt status, as when a bishop in Illinois told parishioners they would go to hell if they voted for President Obama. Where do you think the line should be?

7. Immigration? Your thoughts? Anyone?

8. Bonus question: Climate change. You do realize it's happening, don't you?... Don't you?... Don't you?...

Also in this week's issue, the editors say that outrageous GOP attacks on women could result in a repeat of the 1992 phenomenon of a "Year of the Woman," [1] which brought many new female members into Congress.

Katha Pollitt

P.S.

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Katha Pollitt

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Columnist

Katha Pollitt is well known for her wit and her keen sense of both the ridiculous and the sublime. Her “Subject to Debate” column, which debuted in 1995 and which the Washington Post called “the best place to go for original thinking on the left,” appears every other week in *The Nation*; it is frequently reprinted in newspapers across the country. In 2003, “Subject to Debate” won the National Magazine Award for Columns and Commentary. She is also a Puffin Foundation Writing Fellow at The Nation Institute.

Pollitt has been contributing to *The Nation* since 1980. Her 1992 essay on the culture wars, “Why We Read: Canon to the Right of Me...” won the National Magazine Award for essays and criticism, and she won a Whiting Foundation Writing Award the same year. In 1993 her essay “Why Do We Romanticize the Fetus?” won the Maggie Award from the Planned Parenthood Federation of America.

Many of Pollitt’s contributions to *The Nation* are compiled in three books: *Reasonable Creatures: Essays on Women and Feminism* (Knopf); *Subject to Debate: Sense and Dissents on Women, Politics, and Culture* (Modern Library); and *Virginity or Death! And Other Social and Political Issues of Our Time* (Random House). In 2007 Random House published her collection of personal essays, *Learning to Drive and Other Life Stories*. Two pieces from this book, “Learning to Drive” and its followup, “Webstalker,” originally appeared in *The New Yorker*. “Learning to Drive” is anthologized in *Best American Essays 2003*.

Pollitt has also written essays and book reviews for *The New Yorker*, *The Atlantic*, *The New Republic*, *Harper’s*, *Ms.*, *Glamour*, *Mother Jones*, *the New York Times*, and *the London Review of Books*. She has appeared on NPR’s *Fresh Air* and *All Things Considered*, *Charlie Rose*, *The McLaughlin Group*, *CNN*, *Dateline NBC* and the *BBC*. Her work has been republished in many anthologies and is taught in many university classes.

For her poetry, Pollitt has received a National Endowment for the Arts grant and a Guggenheim Fellowship. Her 1982 book *Antarctic Traveller* won the National Book Critics Circle Award. Her poems have been published in many magazines and are reprinted in many anthologies, most recently *The Oxford Book of American Poetry* (2006). Her second collection, *The Mind-Body Problem*, came out from Random House in 2009.

Born in New York City, she was educated at Harvard and the Columbia School of the Arts. She has lectured at dozens of colleges and universities, including Harvard, Yale, Princeton, Brooklyn College, UCLA, the University of Mississippi and Cornell. She has taught poetry at Princeton, Barnard and the 92nd Street Y, and women’s studies at the New School University.

Footnotes

[1] See: <http://www.thenation.com/article/170494/year-woman>