



GIVING SOMETHING TO THE "BAD" PEOPLE

Sunday, October 11, 2009

Every week CUIP's president Jacqueline Salit and strategist/philosopher Fred Newman watch the political talk shows and discuss them. Here are excerpts from their dialogues compiled on Sunday, October 11, 2009 after watching selections from "The Chris Matthews Show," "This Week with George Stephanopoulos," and "The NewsHour with Jim Lehrer."

Salit: We watched a piece on the Lehrer *NewsHour* about the government response to some extreme youth violence in Chicago. The Attorney General Eric Holder and Arne Duncan, the Secretary of Education who is originally from Chicago, were there. Mayor Daley was there, who, by the way, looks so much like his father now. He didn't used to when he was younger.

Newman: Well, he's the same age his father was in 1968 when the whole world was watching.

Salit: Exactly. Two weeks ago a black teenager, Derrion Albert, was clubbed to death by other kids outside a school in Chicago. The officials put forward a series of initiatives to respond to this. They are trying to establish what the "metrics" are for profiling kids who will potentially engage in, or be the victims of, this kind of violence. They want to target 10,000 kids who meet that profile and intervene on their lives with mentoring, with programs of different kinds, the hope being that it will be preventative. It's not a police action, but an intervention to try to put these kids on a good path. When you hear the talk about creating metrics so that you can identify the 10,000 kids most at risk and then intervene on their life path, how do you respond?

Newman: They already know who those kids are. So what's the study about? Wouldn't it be good to have a study of how come the vast sums of money that have already been spent on this has not produced significant gains? Shouldn't that be studied? And shouldn't they search out any programs which have been more effective and find out if those programs are being properly funded?

Salit: In this Chicago situation there are a number of other issues in the mix.

Newman: Like what?

Salit: One was that there's a controversy on the impact of some of the school closings. When Education Secretary Arne Duncan was running the school system in Chicago, he closed a number of schools which were underperforming and they moved the kids into

other neighborhoods to go to school. Some people are contending that they sent kids in one set of gangs into territory that's controlled by other gangs. And that inflamed the tensions on the street. But insufficient attention was paid to that. The other issue is that the recession has impacted, as it has everywhere, on these communities. And you're talking about communities that started out poor and they've gotten a lot poorer. The officials in Chicago seem to have come up with the idea that they're going to identify 10,000 kids and they're going to intervene with them.

Newman: With what? What are they going to intervene with?

Salit: They don't really spell that out. Maybe that's because they're in the process of figuring that out, but I presume they will intervene with a mix of remedial programs in school and after-school programs of one kind or another. In Chicago, the mayor's office has made a big investment in after-school programs, probably more than any other major urban center in the country.

Newman: Have they spoken to the gang leaders? I didn't see any of them at the press conference.

Salit: No, they weren't at the press conference. But I don't really know if they're talking to them.

Newman: Well, if Obama says he's willing to speak to Ahmadinejad, then why shouldn't somebody out there be ready to speak to the gang leaders?

Salit: That's a good point. The attack on Derrion Albert in Chicago was captured on videotape. And some parents said the fact that it happened to be captured on videotape means that some people are going to be forced to draw attention to it, but this has been going on for a long time.

Newman: That's probably not true.

Salit: What's not true?

Newman: That some people will be forced to pay attention to it because it's on videotape.

Salit: Maybe you're right. The press conference was the usual stuff about how we have to use this moment to go forward. Duncan gave the speech that we've heard a million times. 'This is a crossroads.' But, when you ask, 'Why don't they talk to the gang leaders?' it's a very deep question. Take as an example, Dr. Lenora Fulani's Operation Conversation: Cops and Kids program. There was a tragic incident in New York in which a young, unarmed African American man was killed by the police outside an after-hours club. There was a major uproar in response. And you and Dr. Fulani said, 'Here's what

we need to do. We need to have the cops and the kids sit in a room and talk together and create some kind of conversation. Yes, we can talk about programs and legislation and training and so on and so forth, but how about if we get the people who are actually in these situations on the streets together and start a dialogue about all of what goes on.' This program is now very highly commended by young people and the police for breaking down barriers between them. What makes it so hard to do those kinds of things?

Newman: That's a very hard question. Let's go back to the example of Obama and Ahmadinejad. There's an attitude in this country which says that you can't speak to an enemy, to Ahmadinejad, until he concedes all the things that are very important to him to not concede. That's a strange attitude. Now, Obama just won the Nobel Peace Prize, and I take that to be a recognition that there has to be a change in that attitude. That's what he's been doing, during his run for the presidency and since becoming president. There are a lot of influential forces who say, 'Don't give those criminals anything. Don't give those bad guys anything.' I think that's fundamental to what keeps this going on and on and on and on. That's why I think Obama is 1,000% right in saying we have to sit down with our enemies and talk to them. But it's not the fashion to sit down with your enemies. There's a posture that you're supposed to adopt towards people who are anti-social. I don't think that we should deny that they're anti-social. But you have to sit down with anti-social people and find out what the hell is going on. You have to find a way to do that. I don't think you'll get anywhere by identifying 10,000 kids who profile this way and giving them all a couple of ping pong racquets and a ping pong ball. That doesn't make a difference. I think you've got to sit down and genuinely discover, with a proper attitude – and it's hard to find people who can do this – what's bothering them. You have to sit down with them with an attitude that communicates we want to do something about this. Maybe they feel fine about being anti-social, but they are human beings and have other considerations in their lives and other needs in their lives. You can negotiate with them. You can talk to them. But in the poor communities, nobody's doing that. Instead, we're going to do a multi-million dollar study to identify the now and future troublemakers.

Salit: I'm sure if they went to the corner of 63rd and King Drive in Chicago, everyone on the street could give them the list right then and there.

Newman: Look, these bad kids are, in some way, gratified by being identified as bad kids. That's what they get. I think that's very ego gratifying. That seems understandable to me.

Salit: How does that work?

Newman: That's the power that they have. These are people who are basically impotent in a very poor culture. It's economically and socially poor. They don't see many opportunities for making it out. And people like to be influential. People like to

show you that their ideas, their activities make a difference. And these are the activities that give them a degree of social recognition. They gain that by exercising a kind of power at a very local level. That's got to be understood and looked at and, at a minimum, they have to be included in the culture as opposed to being excluded from the culture.

Now, is that hard? It's very hard. It's even dangerous. The person who walks into the lion's cage with angry lions has to know that the first thing you have to do is indicate that you want to be a friend. That doesn't mean that you're weak or that you're not prepared to do whatever you need to do to protect yourself. But if that's all you're going to do, you may as well stay out of the cage because you're not going to cool them out. People want recognition and they don't want recognition conditionally. They want recognition as who they are. You have to be able to make human contact with them, despite the fact that you disagree with them. You have to find a common denominator.

Salit: How does Dr. Fulani do that in the Cops and Kids program?

Newman: Part of what works in Fulani's Cops and Kids program is that they come together under her influence because there's trust. She's been there with the kids and with the cops and doesn't compromise the fact that she believes in different things than they might, both the cops and kids. And she says to them, 'We recognize you in this program. We need you both. Here's what we're going to do. We're going to find something in common.' What's in common? In common is that we're human. That's why when she has the cops and kids role-play a family buying a pet it's so effective. They perform together. They perform something silly. One thing that human beings can do together is make fools of ourselves. She starts the workshops with the police officers and kids doing slow motion theater exercises together. They make funny faces. And they discover they can do that together. So it starts out with that and she creates off of that very, very small thing. But it's not small, because the hard part was getting there, but they create a commonality, a sense of groupness. And relatively rapidly, it becomes possible for these people, not to make major changes in their world views, but to talk to each other.

If a kid says to the cop *Pig!* you think cops don't know what that means? Or what that kind of talk is? They know how to talk hostile because they're often pretty hostile people themselves. The cops say to the kids, *When I see you with your pants down like that, I want to smack you upside the head.* You think the kids don't understand that? Obviously, they understand it. But do they understand the attitude behind it? Of course they do. If you can transform these things into performances, when you see what people are saying as performances, then most people can start to understand each other. If you see things as designed to get you to be intimidated and to bow down, then people can't see it, can't hear it. But if you see it as just a performance in a play, then people can hear it.

Salit: It's more approachable.

Newman: Approachable. I don't know what you mean by approachable.

Salit: If you see it as a performance, it doesn't push you away in the same way.

Newman: It's not because it doesn't push you away. It's that you're now collectively doing the same thing. You're all performing together. So it's not a question of pushing away or not pushing away. That's a cognitive way of talking about it. This is just what we're doing. And we're doing it together, so now we have a new creation, in a very particularized fashion, of a new mode of connection by virtue of the species identification. You go to a ball game and Derek Jeter gets a hit at a critical time and suddenly you're standing up and cheering with the guy next to you who might be someone who, if you saw him in any other context, you'd be scared stiff of him or he'd want to punch you in the mouth because you're black or Puerto Rican or whatever. But in the context of performing this thing together you're suddenly on the same side. So, it's a kind of "on the same sideness." It's not even a matter of hearing something that someone else is saying. That's the reason why I'm objecting to the "approachable" term. You don't hear it any better. You don't think it's more acceptable. It's introducing into the picture a new mode, which is not cognitive, which is not filled with all the criteria of cognition and judgment, like "understanding better." It has nothing to do with understanding. When I hear people say things like that, what I hear them saying is, *For this to be comprehensible, we have to translate it into a cognitive mode. Otherwise, it's not comprehensible.* There's that instantaneous reduction to a traditional mode. I'm saying that if you do that, you're out of the ballgame. You're misunderstanding from the get-go. What's needed is a new mode of understanding and I think, in a way, that's what Obama was getting at when he said that we need to talk with Ahmadinejad. It's ironic. The most extreme Republicans and the most liberal Democrats talk about this sometimes when they say *I just liked Ted Kennedy. We got along.* John McCain can say that. There is something going on here that's important to understand. These two guys, you put them on the floor of the U.S. Senate and they want a throwdown. You take them out and put them in a local Irish pub, and they're hugging each other every 20 seconds. We don't do enough negotiating at the local pubs. These official environments are enormously over-determining of the performances that people do and as long as people do those performances, there's no understanding.

Salit: But how do you change those environments?

Newman: We have to go to something fundamental, to who we are as human beings. In some ways, the theater is of great help in this regard. The history of theater is one where you see people who have little in common come together and create theatrical performance together. They come to be exceedingly close and open to one another.

Performance doesn't change their cognitive view of the world, but it changes their capacity to hear even the most anti-social and divergent views of the world. It allows them to take a step further in the direction of transforming, if not the total world, at least some segment of it. There are iconic American stories of the good cop or the good social worker or the special teacher who does something like that. But, aside from recognizing them with an occasional award, what do we do with that? Why not study those people and take seriously what they do? In Operation Conversation and at the All Stars, we've tried to systemize something resembling that, with a theoretical understanding of how this could work.

Salit: When you were talking about meeting with the gang leaders, both taking that initiative and then what a posture would have to be in going to those meetings, how do you think about training people to be able to do those kinds of meetings? What do you have to teach people to be able to do what Fulani does with the cops and the kids, or do what a Chicago community organizer would have to do to sit in a room with gang leaders?

Newman: That impinges upon me to take another step in the direction of the cognitive.

Salit: Because?

Newman: Because the issue is not what we have to train them to do. It's training them how to do it. And how to do something is a whole different epistemological, social, moral posture and attitude. How to do something is different than training people what to do. I don't think it's the "what" of it that makes a huge difference.

Salit: It's the "how" of it.

Newman: Yes. If you want to look at that in a more complex matrix, you have to look at the totality of what Fulani stands for and how she got there. She's not easily seen as a lightweight, by either the tough kids or by the cops. She has a history. She's done something. When Al Sharpton and other black leaders were sitting inside someone's house in Crown Heights during the riots, trying to figure out how to respond, Fulani was in the streets, literally standing in between the cops and the kids, telling each side not to attack the other. And they didn't.

Salit: How do you teach people the "how?"

Newman: You have to change the total attitude of how the power institutions of our culture relate to the issues that they have to deal with. Otherwise, what will happen is the kids will get a few cookies, but there will be no back up. When the kids say, *I need more than cookies, I need you to support me in being included in your institutions* and

the answer is *Sorry. You're just the experimental guinea pig. Take care of yourself now. We didn't want to give you cookies in the first place.*

Salit: Going back to your point earlier about Obama interrupting the traditional culture of international diplomacy. I'm thinking of one of the big "flash points" in the Democratic primary between Obama and Hillary Clinton when the issue on the table was whether they would meet with this set of world leaders. And Hillary said, "Not without conditions." So what that was supposed to mean was that Obama was...

Newman: A softy.

Salit: ...a softy, yes. That the idea that he would do it without conditions meant that he would be giving something away to the bad people, and that we can't do that.

Newman: Well, if you're not willing to give something to the bad people, then they don't see you as a giver. At some level, they are asking for dollars and foreign aid of various kinds, of course. But it means something when they say they're asking for respect. It means that you have to do something by way of accepting them as co-inhabitants of our planet, as fellow human beings, even if you think that they're vile.

Salit: Going back to Chicago, they're talking about intercepting young people who, based on the metrics, are on a path to violence. They're designed to make them good kids rather than bad kids...

Newman: I wouldn't agree with that, even.

Salit: You wouldn't agree with what?

Newman: That they're setting up a pathway to...

Salit: ...make them good kids rather than bad kids.

Newman: They're just kids. The language that they're using invokes some kind of criteria, but it doesn't come from anywhere, other than from inhuman gods. They're just kids.

Salit: Yes. I know what you're saying about the language. I'm suggesting that this is how those kids are seen.

Newman: And?

Salit: The entire orientation of the field is to want to turn kids into good kids rather than bad kids. That's the plan, if you will.

Newman: And that's the problem. Let's both of us try harder at being empathic with the "bad kids." We know something about being identified with the bad kids.

Salit: Yes, we do.

Newman: Do you think any effort to turn us into "good kids" is going to do anything but re-enforce our desire to do the things that we identify with being "bad"?

Salit: No.

Newman: So, that's how these kids are. We don't want to be turned into good kids. In school, the good kids were jokes. In life, good kids are taken advantage of. Whatever language they use, I understand it. You're not going to change them in that way. Can we find a way of joining them and them joining us? That's the serious question. We know who these kids are. We know where these neighborhoods are. Can we join forces with them? I think that's what the All Stars is all about. Look, we're as good as the day is long. We sit down and we talk with the local Ahmadinejads. We talk with those kids.

I think about Joel Press a lot these days, a major supporter of the All Stars who passed away suddenly of a heart attack. It was very tragic, a huge loss. In some ways, he was the inspiration for Cops and Kids. Joel was always advocating for the All Stars to reach the toughest kids, the bad kids. Now, the Cops and Kids program reaches kids who are tougher and more hardened than many of the kids in the All Stars. It's interesting that the program that gets deepest into relating to those young people is the program which also brings in the cops. The transformation of these kids in All Stars and Cops and Kids is shockingly instantaneous, which is what these things are like. Reagan and Gorbachev, they sort of hit it off instantaneously. It didn't take 70 years of negotiations.

Salit: Of laying down conditions.

Newman: Performatory connectedness, and I hate the big words, is just this kind of tactile, human capacity to bond. Human beings are very quick to violence. But, if there is anything that they are, roughly speaking, as quick to as violence, it's love. Human beings fall in love at the drop of a hat. And that's nice. I don't subscribe to "all you need is love." But, I think it is true that you can use those performatory passions much better than cognitive mental acts, which I'm very suspicious of in the sense that I don't know if there's an ontological reality that corresponds to them. I trust in human emotions. Not in the sense that I think that that's all we have to do, but in the sense that there's a language there that has not been thoroughly used.

That's what All Stars is. That's why I've been so adamant in my refusal to turn All Stars into either a quantitative "scale-up" or into something which is going to be substantiated by cognitively-determined tests. I think that misses the whole point of what All Stars is about. Look at the response to Cops and Kids by the NYPD. It's been

positive. The police are frustrated with the hostilities between themselves and the communities. With good reason. In some ways, you have to give credit to their frustration.

Salit: They see the limits of policing as an approach to these issues. They are out there on the front line.

Newman: Everybody thought for a long time in this country that youth violence was going to be fundamentally transformed by schools, elementary schools and high schools and universities. And I think it's made a dent. I really do. But schools are much too bureaucratically structured, as well as everything else in this culture, to impact on the kids who are failing and left out.

Salit: Are you glad Obama won the Nobel Peace Prize?

Newman: Yes. Who else deserves it more for international peace? Despite the fact that he's now conducting one of the largest wars going on in the world today. I think he has a real feel for peace. Who else has a feel for peace? I think it should have been you or Barack Obama. And I don't think they were giving it to you.

Salit: I don't think I was on the list.

Newman: You certainly weren't on the short list.

Salit: Thanks, Fred.