



PARADIGM OR PAUSE?

Sunday, January 4, 2009

Every weekend CUIP's president Jacqueline Salit and strategist and philosopher Fred Newman watch the political talk shows and discuss them. Here are excerpts from their dialogue on Sunday, January 4, 2009 after watching selections from "The NewsHour with Jim Lehrer," "Hardball with Chris Matthews" and "The McLaughlin Group."

Salit: We watched Chris Matthews on *Hardball* asking a series of what you might call "big questions." The biggest big question was: As we go into the new year, as Obama takes office, are we experiencing a paradigm shift or a "pause"? Is the country about to redefine government policy relative to the economy and the business sector? Is this akin to 1932 and the Roosevelt New Deal or is it something other than, to use his term, a "pause?" Pat Buchanan says: 'Here are some things that it is. It's a rejection of neo-conservatism. It's a rejection of war. And it's a rejection of the economic policies that brought about the biggest collapse since 1929. That much we know. Other than that, we don't really know.' How do you answer that question? Should we expect a paradigm shift or a pause?

Newman: There's been a paradigm shift. It has taken place already. So I don't know what the question is supposed to mean. A pause? There will be a pause on certain issues and we'll move rapidly ahead on other issues. How does it read overall? It'll read as it reads. Why are we speculating whether a change is coming? Do I really need to be told that Obama's going to do something different than George Bush has done?

Salit: No. He already has.

Newman: Some people say now that he's president he has to move more toward the center. I would say that now that he's gotten a mandate from the American people, he'll move in whatever direction – I don't know that he can give it a label – that they're urging him to go in.

Salit: Maybe what Chris is asking – because I'm sure he would agree with what you just said – is something like this. When Franklin Roosevelt was elected, that began a period in which the way America functioned and how government operated was completely transformed. So his question is: *Is that what we can expect now?* I guess he's asking some combination of *Is that what it's going to take to resolve the problems that we have?* and *Is Obama going to be that radical a transformer?* But, how could anyone know because it hasn't happened?

Newman: I'm saying something else. I'm saying that you do know because it has happened. The election of Franklin Delano Roosevelt didn't begin the world as in "In the beginning there was FDR..." The New Deal era began with a huge economic collapse in

the country. That happened before there was a President Franklin Delano Roosevelt. And he responded to that because that's what was going on. As to what policies will derive from this situation, it will be a function of what happens domestically and internationally, things that haven't happened yet. If America is – as I've said again and again – fundamentally pragmatic, then you can't predict what it will do until you know what's going to happen. Because it's going to respond to what's happening.

Salit: That's America's ideology.

Newman: Yes, it is pragmatism. Is Matthews asking if Obama's going to be ideologically driven, in the manner of Mahatma Gandhi or V.I. Lenin or someone like that? Probably not. He seems driven by a progressive and humanistic orientation. But he seems equally driven by a need to be an effective and competent president. Mainly he's going to be responsive to what goes on in the world. And we don't know what that's going to be.

Salit: Howard Fineman said that Obama doesn't know what he's going to do and he said, 'Nor did Roosevelt, when Roosevelt took office.' I guess his point was that that's not a bad thing. And that Obama shouldn't get overly fixated on trying to figure out what that is. It's going to be a function of the circumstances when he takes office.

Newman: But that goes without saying. Lincoln didn't come into office ready to fight the Civil War. He fought the Civil War because the war had to be fought. The circumstances dictated it.

Salit: Katrina vanden Heuvel, editor of *The Nation* magazine and the voice of the official Left in this discussion, says: 'Here's what's happened. The old order collapsed. It's the end of the Reagan revolution. What emerges? A big part of what emerges is going to be determined by what happens on the ground, by the reality on the ground, by up-from-the-bottom movements. That's how the Roosevelt era was shaped. It wasn't just Roosevelt. It was the unions and the unemployed councils and so on and so forth. That's going to be equally true today.'

Newman: If she wants to say something that adds to the picture, she ought to try to say something about what is going on, on the ground. But nobody bothers to do that. It is just a platitude. "It's going to be shaped by what goes on, on the ground." But what is going on, on the ground? *Well, I don't have time to tell you.* So, what have we gathered from that statement? Not much.

Salit: When I first posed Chris Matthews' question to you – is this a paradigm shift or just a pause? – you said that the paradigm shift has already happened.

Newman: Yes.

Salit: So, what are the characteristics of that paradigm shift?

Newman: The world is not uni-polar or even bi-polar. It's multi-polar. There are a lot of powerful countries – China, India, Brazil, etc. And they're starting to relate differently. They're not relating to one common center or to a bi-polar power dynamic, like the U.S./Soviet Union. They're relating more directly to each other. In that kind of world, there's a pressing need to discover what shape things are going to take...economically, socially, politically, diplomatically. Countries all over the world are struggling with that, to figure out what they would like to see emerge and whether they can effect it. And, if they can't effect their ultimate design, then what can they effect? That's what's going on in the world.

Salit: How would you characterize the paradigm shift in American domestic politics? On the one hand, the Democratic Party has won the White House. It's in control of Congress. There's talk of a partisan realignment for generations to come. The Republican Party is in a very weak state. Independents were a very big factor in the election, both in the primaries and in the outcome of the general election, but they're just barely beginning to be an organized force. Still, there have been important changes in the character of the independent movement over the last 15 years, in terms of its having moved from being center-right to center-left.

Newman: This picture only lasts until the next national election. For now, the Republican Party's decades-long effort to reshape the country into one that is driven by conservative and nationalistic ideals, seems to have come to a less than glorious end for the Right. At the same time, I don't think there's has been a clear emergence of a left alternative, although I think there is the beginning of a more independent alternative. I think the independent movement has moved to the left. But I don't think that it has become the Left.

Salit: Yes.

Newman: These matters are all very much up in the air. Nobody quite knows how bad things are going to get. But, something has happened. It's important. But it's not clear what it is. That was also true of the so-called Reagan Revolution. Many of the expectations that people had when Reagan got into office in 1980 were never realized. Some were, but many weren't. That will be true with Obama also. Reagan had to deal with the world and domestic situation as it was in 1980 and he did. Was there a general shift in the country towards that kind of thinking?

Salit: Towards social conservative thinking?

Newman: Yes, there was. And that was manifest in all kinds of things, including who got elected in succeeding presidential elections. Will there be a more left coloration over the next batch of years, at least four and probably at least eight? I would think so.

There are two different questions. You can ask one question like: *Is there going to be a fairly dramatic shift in American policy, including foreign policy?* I think there is. And you can ask, *Is it still going to be recognizably American?* Yes. It's not going to go from social conservatism to Bolshevism.

Salit: That much I can guarantee you.

Newman: It's going to be characteristically American. And there are precedents for American-style liberalism or progressivism, whatever you want to call it. Will what happens resemble that? That's what you can expect. What will be the details? Who knows. That's going to depend on what the details have to be. That's not an insight into anything. That's just how the world works. Does capitalism come to dominate Soviet-style communism? Yes. That happened. It happened on the ground. Soviet Communism, such as it was, was effectively overthrown, on the ground. But is what came after that anything but Russian? No. It's entirely Russian.

Salit: Because it is Russian.

Newman: Because it is Russian, yes.

Salit: I know that these are the "end of the year" shows, so they like to reflect on big themes and big questions, paradigm shifts, and all of that. But sometimes when I hear this line of questioning, I think, maybe what is really being discussed is a very practical set of things. Like, for example, are we going to establish some kind of national health care system? That's something that we haven't been able to break through on, in spite of the fact that millions of Americans don't have health insurance, and we are the most advanced medical provider, in terms of our technological capacity. You know all the arguments for that. So, at least from Matthews' point of view, this would constitute a paradigm shift.

Newman: The chances of a national health plan being seriously considered are greater than they were under Bush. Will it happen? That will be, in part, a function of how the economic crisis unfolds. I don't want to sound conservative, but if you institute a national health plan, you're going to have to pay for it.

Salit: Yes.

Newman: So, who's going to pay for it? One the one hand, you can say, *Well, the government appears to be paying for everything else. Why wouldn't it pay for that?* Seems a sound argument. On the other hand, you're going to hear people say, *The government's paying for everything else, in the hope that the things that it pays for will wind up improving the economy.* Is a national health plan to be looked at as something which might improve the economy? Well, that's an open question. Although some people will say that it would because it would take that burden off of the business

sector, which is absorbing a lot of the costs of healthcare. All these things are going to be reconsidered in the light of Obama's mandate. We know for sure that this election was a clear rejection of Bush and Bush policies. You can have an opinion as to whether this worked or that worked. But obviously, the war didn't work. The war, taken as a whole, didn't work. Overall, unilateralism hasn't been effective for the country. So, changes in policies are being considered. What exactly will they be? That's difficult to say.

Salit: How can Obama reframe our position on the Middle East, particularly the perspective on Israel and the Palestinians?

Newman: He said he's going to try to pursue diplomacy and more humanitarian support, which probably can reasonably be interpreted as more humanitarian support for the Palestinians. I don't think he's saying that because he's more pro-Arab than he is pro-Israeli. But the Palestinians need more help and we couldn't do much more than we're currently doing for the Israelis. So if there is going to be change there, it's likely to be an improvement in support for the Palestinians. These changes, however, will be carried out in ways that are nuanced. He's not going to get up and say, *We've been much too cozy with the Israelis*. No, he's going to use diplomatic language and diplomatic means to see if that can impact on the situation over there. Can it? I don't know. Because once you inject American diplomacy and, therefore, water down or dilute the clarity of what you're actually trying to do, and then you throw in the complications on the Palestinian side and have it go through that machine, and then have all that go through the Israeli side, it's not clear that anything comes out of the process.

Salit: It's not clear whether you've actually moved the ball down the field or not.

Newman: Yes. And no matter what nuanced changes get made, the old conflicts ultimately tend to prevail. At some point in the broad history of civilization, the capacity to genuinely negotiate something will probably change. Will we be able to recognize the day it happened? Surely not. Thus, it might not be gratifying to the American mentality because Americans want to know the answer to those kinds of things. So, the question becomes how do you, in relatively sensuous ways, continue forward so that everyone can live with it? Concretely, I think there will be more humanitarian aid to the Palestinians. Though, the U.S. isn't going to give an unlimited amount of money. We're not living in the age of the Marshall Plan, where there was an open spigot, morning, noon, and night.

Salit: Thanks, Fred. And Happy New Year.