



YOU CAN'T GET THERE FROM HERE

Sunday, February 15, 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 dialogues compiled on Sunday, February 15, 2009 after watching selections from "The NewsHour with Jim Lehrer," "Hardball with Chris Matthews," "Meet the Press" and a Charlie Rose interview.

Salit: We'll start in contemporary America, work our way back to Abraham Lincoln and then overseas to the Middle East. So, in the here and now, the economic stimulus bill passed in the House and the Senate. President Obama will sign it this week. It's an \$800 billion package and there's controversy over what its impact is going to be and, to some degree, on the process of getting it passed. Some pundits are asking whether Obama put too much emphasis on bipartisanship. As one commentator said, 'The country sees Obama reaching out across the aisle to Republicans, and Americans feel good about that. They think that's the right thing to do. But,' they add, 'he got no return on that by and large.' The House vote was completely along party lines. Only three Senate Republicans voted for the package. So, as David Brooks said, in stylistic terms he did well because he reached out. But it didn't produce anything real, in terms of bipartisanship.

Newman: Well, let me bring Abe Lincoln in here.

Salit: OK.

Newman: The world will little note, nor long remember, that vote.

Salit: Well put.

Newman: What will be remembered is whether the package turns out to be at all successful. Everyone agrees that it's not going to happen overnight. It could be a year or two before we see any results.

Salit: OK.

Newman: So, do I think he focused too much on bipartisanship? I don't even know what that's supposed to mean. He tried to get all the votes he could get.

Salit: Exactly. David Axelrod told David Gregory on *Meet the Press* that they wanted 100 votes in the Senate.

Newman: And there were two different groups, one called the Democrats, one called the Republicans. He tried to get as many votes as possible and he got all that he could. It turned out to include three Republican Senators.

Salit: Since we're talking about how different things or people or entities come out of this process, how does the science of economics look right now? One of the things people

say is, we've had a capitalist system, we've had a free enterprise system for hundreds of years. Isn't there an answer to how you stimulate it if it hits a wall? If it runs into trouble? If growth slows? If segments of the economy unravel? Isn't economics a science? Why don't we know what to do?

Newman: There are a lot of assumptions in that question.

Salit: Such as?

Newman: I'm talking about the idea that science tells us what to do. Science doesn't tell us what to do. Science, at best, tells us what it thinks is going on. Then people have to decide what to do.

Salit: Yes.

Newman: People decide what to do, based on different things, one of them being science. In some ways economics is a science, but more fundamentally it's just a framework that describes certain aspects of a fluid situation. This has been true since there's been a science of economics. It's never told us what to do. But lots of things don't tell us what to do. Religion was supposed to be the most directly persuasive guide of what to do. But it never tells us what to do.

Salit: At the same time, though, there have been certain patterns, boom and bust, recession, inflation, stagflation, etc. Different events have occurred and there have been different kinds of interventions to try and put the economy on a growth course. Now, some people say that the current state of the global economy and the ramifications for the U.S. are different than anything that's happened before and that accounts for the uncertainty about what to do. Do you buy that?

Newman: The patterns, what we call boom/bust, etc., are all named after it's happened.

Salit: OK.

Newman: So, that doesn't tell us what to do. If anything, it tells us what was done. It tells us what happened. But what happened depends on human behavior, and human behavior is predictable in some ways and shockingly unpredictable in other sorts of ways, particularly mass human behavior. Not to be the least bit critical of what you're saying, but there's a problem in the question. Because the question rests on a certain assumption that we, human beings en masse, are going to be helped in figuring out what to do. But we're not. We're going to have to make decisions with some amount of information, some amount of analysis, some amount of faith and belief, some amount of serendipity, some amount of whatever and you mix them all together and people do what people do. People are now doing what people do. That's a continuation of the human process of decision-making. And, yes, there's been a continuous search within civilizations to discover the "right thing" to do, or the "right way" to do it. It's a grand search and I think it's a human search. If you will, it's a natural search. But there's no pot of gold. That's never going to be found, in my opinion.

Salit: The pot of gold being the “right thing to do.”

Newman: Yes. What will be “found” is what people do. Sometimes, after that, everyone gets together and decides to rationalize what they decided, so as to make it look like it was the “right thing” to do.

Salit: Yes.

Newman: I’m not suggesting that everything or everyone does equally well in this regard –some do better, some do worse. But in some ways all that’s decided after the fact, too. Science tries to market itself as having the greatest of predictive approaches. And in some areas, it does. And that’s grand. But in other areas its predictive capacity is very limited. Where it does exceedingly well varies.

Salit: Yes.

Newman: As I’ve written about, and others have written about, science tends to try to expand its claims to include other things. Generally speaking, and this is a very general statement, science does well in the hard sciences – as in physics and chemistry and related fields. But if you try to extend the boundaries of science to other areas like the social sciences, it starts to do less and less well.

Salit: There is a tendency, at least on the part of some people, to think of economics as a hard science.

Newman: It’s not a hard science.

Salit: It has so much to do with psychology, mass psychology, and other kinds of “soft” factors.

Newman: Well, let’s not forget that “hard science” isn’t a God-given category. People decide what a hard science is. But no, I don’t think of economics as a hard science at all. And, I agree with you that lots of people, for various reasons, including some which have little to do with coming up with scientific answers, want to identify it as a hard science. That’s more prestigious, you know.

Salit: Yes.

Newman: But I don’t think of economics as a hard science. Actually, I’ve always thought of it as a twin brother or twin sister of psychology, which is not a hard science. The two are real, and of social significance, indeed one might argue of enormous significance. One might argue that economics and psychology have, in the last 100 or 200 years, been of greater significance than anything else.

Salit: Yes.

Newman: But that doesn't make either a science. What's significant is not equivalent to what's scientific.

Salit: Well, back to your Lincoln reference at the top. This week marked the 200th anniversary of Lincoln's birth and there's been a lot of talk some of which is very interesting, about Lincoln. We watched one group of historians discuss him. Richard Norton Smith said that Lincoln is a historical figure who gets rediscovered every generation and that every generation projects onto him its own contemporary obsessions. And, what ends up happening is not that every successive generation necessarily learns more about Lincoln, but that we learn more about ourselves through that process of projecting.

Newman: Well, every generation projects onto everybody the issues that they're concerned with. Not just onto Lincoln, but onto everybody. Projecting is apparently the evolved way of understanding what's going on in the world. I'm not judging that as good or bad. I just think it's how it's done, isn't it?

Salit: Yes.

Newman: So, we've done it more with Lincoln because he's a more dominant figure. We project onto him more because nobody knows of Joe Schmoe from Topeka. But they do know of Abraham Lincoln. And, he was President of the United States during the Civil War. That's not nothing.

Salit: It's an auspicious place to be.

Newman: I'll say. Certainly more auspicious than fixing the plumbing in Topeka in 1832.

Salit: Alright. One historian described Lincoln as astonishingly contemporary. Now maybe that's a projection but do you think of him as unusually contemporary?

Newman: Maybe that's because the Civil War isn't over. Or maybe he seems contemporary because we keep having more and more presidents.

Salit: How does that make him contemporary?

Newman: Well, there's always another person of that kind who we can compare him to.

Salit: Certainly that's been true for Obama.

Newman: Yes. Presidents go on and on. Some categories persist, some don't. Are there still steamfitters? No, probably not.

Salit: But there is still a steamfitter's union.

Newman: Well, that's another question. But, there's always another president.

Salit: Yes.

Newman: But there's no president's union. But with people living longer, the past seems closer now than ever.

Salit: There are five living presidents.

Newman: Five is enough for a union.

Salit: Yes, I would think so. Another plus is they can all fit in one car. Once you get above five, you have to add a second car and it gets too complicated.

Newman: Right.

Salit: Here's one observation about Lincoln that interested me. Again, it was Richard Norton Smith. Lincoln never stopped growing and he grew beyond the racist culture that produced him and that's one of the enduring fascinations with him.

Newman: Yes. You grow as a function of the circumstances you find yourself in. That's one of the key factors to growth, not only for presidents, but for anybody.

Salit: Yes.

Newman: Millions of people in this world, indeed billions, have enormous potential. But they wind up in situations where there's not much need to exercise it. And so they don't. Lincoln was in a situation that required a great deal of growth and he responded. People say the same is true of George Washington and FDR, too. These people had certain capacities. But the growth comes, not just from having the capacity, but from the need to use it and to use it well. So, I think Lincoln grew in that sense of the word, and did so around the issue of race. Plainly, he began as a run-of-the-mill mid-19th century racist.

Salit: Yes.

Newman: Some people say, well, if he issued the Emancipation Proclamation for purely tactical or military reasons or economic reasons, then it doesn't really count. But we do things for all different kinds of reasons. I don't care whether that's the reason. People often want some notion of his having been purely anti-slavery. Well, some of the leading abolitionists of the time weren't purely anti-slavery. Everyone has varying, somewhat complex factors that feed into why they're doing what they're doing. Was he a supremacist? Yes. Did he also issue the Emancipation Proclamation? Yes. Would others have done the same, like Stephen Douglas? It seems a little bit doubtful, but who knows? Lincoln was complex, like everybody else. One thing to say about Lincoln, it seems to me, is that whatever the mixture, Lincoln was easy to write about. He was easy to draw. He was easy to photograph.

Salit: He was so tall, so striking. Do you think of Obama as somebody who has the capacity to grow?

Newman: Surely. He's bright, he's responsive, he listens, he's interested in a lot of things. He might turn out to be a great president. He also might turn out to be the most promising president who never fulfilled his promise. Which of those two, or a thousand other descriptions, will happen depends on what happens. That's what's mainly misunderstood in our culture.

Salit: What is?

Newman: The meaning of "happenings."

Salit: Meaning?

Newman: People still have, in my opinion, a much too teleological or theological, view of happenings. I don't think it comes close to what happenings actually are or how happenings actually happen. But that's what's evolved.

Salit: That understanding is what's evolved?

Newman: Yes. That understanding is what's evolved, for this species of ours, at this time. Frankly, I'm of the opinion that if that doesn't change via evolution or whatever, that the species is doomed. But it probably won't happen for seven million years, so no one is that concerned about it.

Salit: We watched a discussion about the Israeli elections on Charlie Rose.

Newman: Oy vey.

Salit: Oy vey, yes. Looks like the prospects are for a coalition government between Netanyahu and Livni, with, some greater influence by the new Right, less influence for the Labor Party.

Newman: It actually might turn out to have been a race between the new Right and the old Right.

Salit: Yes. Ambassador Samuel Lewis, who was U.S. Ambassador to Israel from 1977 to 1985, told Charlie Rose that he's never seen this level of anger, this kind of frustration and depression on the part of the Israeli people. Another discussant was former speaker of the Knesset, Avraham Burg, who's written a new book, "The Holocaust is Over: We Must Rise from Its Ashes."

Burg talked about the Israeli psyche today and how it is shaped more by 1948 than by 1967, that the rise of the new right wing's popularity is attached to that. He says the old style politicians frame things in terms of the borders established in 1967 and the occupation and so forth, but there are fundamental issues that have more to do with the founding of the State of Israel and the shaping of the Israeli psyche that need to be touched more deeply. So, Burg says the principle became "Never Again for Us" and that

that has warped the Israeli psyche. He says that the issue is “Never Again for Anyone” and that Israel has to find a way back to that.

Newman: Alright. What way? Is that the D train or the C train?

Salit: Are you saying you can’t get there from here?

Newman: Who’s gotten there in this world? Nobody. Why, suddenly, should Israel be told to be Superman? I know I sound like a right-winger here, but that position makes sense. The direction of the entire world, as far as I can tell, has been the opposite direction.

Salit: Away from a kind of universalism...

Newman: Towards an identity politic, towards nationalism.

Salit: That’s true.

Newman: So, why would Jews be any different? How will the situation in the Middle East be changed? Change the world. How do you do that? Beats the hell out of me. Some people have tried. But it hasn’t happened yet. The conflict between Israel and Gaza won’t be solved until then.

Salit: And to go back to Ambassador Lewis’ comment, when he said he’s never seen the Israeli people so angry and depressed, that situation can make you pretty angry and depressed.

Newman: Yes. I think the Israelis are angry and depressed because they’ve won all the battles and they’re losing the war.

Salit: Yes.

Newman: Over time, that makes you angry and depressed. It seems to me that the Israeli people are saying *We have beautiful cafes, we have beautiful tall buildings, we have universities and culture, and we still have bombs dropping down the block.* When will the bombs stop dropping? When working people stop making them. When will that happen? When the capitalists stop making big profits from people making them. Those are the real issues. Can you conduct a negotiation between Hamas and Israel that’s going to solve that problem? That’s ludicrous. They have very little to do with it.

Salit: OK, thanks.