



## UNTHINKABLE AND UNDECIDEABLE

Sunday, May 10, 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, May 10, 2009 after watching selections from "The NewsHour with Jim Lehrer," "The Chris Matthews Show," and a Charlie Rose interview.*

**Salit:** I want to start by asking you about some of the ideas that Charlie Rose discussed with Joshua Cooper Ramo, who wrote "The Age of the Unthinkable." Essentially Cooper Ramo focuses on the disconnect between what he calls old ways of thinking and the very significant changes that have occurred in the world. He underscores the dangers inherent in that disconnect. For example, he says the old way of thinking was to spread capitalism and democracy all over the world, creating a new set of circumstances from which problems could be solved. But, he says, it turns out that the spreading of capitalism has expanded the wealth gap. To use his terms, capitalism is the most inefficient system for creating equality ever. He gives other examples: There was a terrorist attack. We responded with a war on terrorism and our response has created more terrorists. One of the lessons we have to learn from this is that we have to focus on resilience, not deterrence and we have to learn to give away power. So, this kind of reframing is something that you have spent a great deal of time working on, thinking about and developing. How do you respond to his framing of that disconnect?

**Newman** I like it.

**Salit:** OK.

**Newman:** I mean, it's an old idea.

**Salit:** An old idea?

**Newman:** Well, it can be summed up as follows: Capitalism, variously understood, creates much more money. Democratic socialism, variously understood, distributes it better. That's what Ramo is picking up on – that's what I'm calling the "old idea."

**Salit:** That capitalism doesn't distribute wealth well.

**Newman:** Its distribution produces chaos. Competition and chaos.

**Salit:** And instability.

**Newman:** I think what Ramo said is very intelligent, very useful and very helpful. However, how you can have that length discussion with Charlie Rose about the crisis of capitalism without mentioning Marx is almost "unthinkable," no pun intended.

**Salit:** That's life. Or, more probably, that's marketing. He actually mentions Marx twice, though in passing, in the book.

**Newman:** But Ramo's a smart guy and he's right on the money. What he's saying is essentially right on the money.

**Salit:** Implicit, and even explicit, in what Ramo is saying is that we do have the capacity to get to a new way of thinking about things.

**Newman:** The capacity?

**Salit:** Yes. In fact, he says, 'Here are some new ways of thinking.'

**Newman:** He's saying more than "the capacity." He is saying by virtue of the fact that we have to, we are. If you want to call that capacity, feel free.

**Salit:** You're calling it "necessity."

**Newman:** It's closer to necessity.

**Salit:** Alright, there's a necessity to develop new ways of thinking, and so we are.

**Newman:** Right.

**Salit:** He's proposing a set of new paradigms or new ways of thinking.

**Newman:** OK, but that's not my language.

**Salit:** What's your language?

**Newman:** I think we have to move beyond paradigms.

**Salit:** When he says things like we have to focus on resilience not deterrence, what he means is you can't stop terrorism. You can respond to certain incidents and you can prevent certain incidents but terrorism is a fact of life. His argument is that there are certain facts of life in the modern era, and they include different forms of instability, and we should stop trying to make things stable because we can't. We should focus instead on developing new kinds of things, what he calls resilience or new ways of negotiating, and so forth.

**Newman:** Or new ways of looking at things.

**Salit:** OK, new ways of looking at things that are more suited to the actual circumstances as opposed to a set of wishful circumstances.

**Newman:** No. That are suited to resolving the problems that are created by the actual circumstances.

**Salit:** What are the new ways of looking at capitalism given the problems it has caused? It creates wealth but it creates inequality. So what are the new ways of looking at that?

**Newman:** How could you know?

**Salit:** How could you know what?

**Newman:** What the new ways of thinking about that are in advance of the actual building of what it is that we have to build to intervene on the problems that are happening. If something new or alternative which gives you a different vantage point hasn't been built, you can't know the answers. That's why I take the "knowing" issue to be fundamental to this whole thing. Because you have to abandon "knowing" and the traditional understanding of that conception as a condition for creating the changes.

**Salit:** What's the relationship between that and resiliency?

**Newman:** That's the essence of resiliency.

**Salit:** That's very interesting. So, necessity in itself doesn't create resiliency, doesn't create new ways of looking at things. It establishes a need for that. Then there's the issue of what you do, what you've got to build in order to be able to see things differently. Yes?

**Newman:** Yes, although I think that language is a little bit modernist, the notion of "then you discover what you have to do." I'm not so sure that's the proper description for an emergent process. I'm not so sure you know what you have to do. It's that you do what you do absent any notion of knowing, in the traditional modernist sense, what you have to do.

**Salit:** Ramo talked a little bit about chaos theory and looking to chaos theory for some ways of seeing the world differently. And he uses the sand pile metaphor – that even while a sand pile appears to be a stable formation, it is actually volatile. And a single grain of sand, added to the pile, can cause an avalanche. To Ramo, the contemporary world is like a sand pile. Capitalism appears stable. And yet, with the world becoming more and more complex, with millions of factors, including a huge inequality that has been created by unleashing the forces of capitalism, things are becoming more and more complex and more and more complicated and the seemingly smallest of factors can cause a disruption. If I were to combine what you and Ramo are saying, I'd say the world, as we "know" it, is incomprehensible.

**Newman:** Right. I'd call it "undecidable" as in Gödel's undecidability.

**Salit:** So Ramo says we're not having a financial crisis, we're having an existential crisis.

**Newman:** Right.

**Salit:** So you agree with that?

**Newman:** I couldn't agree more. In some sense, it's inevitable that this would have happened. I don't even know if it's a crisis at all.

**Salit:** And why are you saying inevitable? What's inevitable about it?

**Newman:** Well, perhaps it's more accurate to say it's simply the way things are. To call it a crisis suggests it's outside of what one expected to happen. I just think it's what happened.

**Salit:** Let me ask you about the connection between all of this and the debate over charter schools as it was depicted in the Lehrer *NewsHour* segment that we watched. Obviously, one of the things that happened in New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina, in which the entire physical infrastructure of the city was demolished, is that some people were smart enough to figure out that you could take advantage of that to introduce some reforms, to build some new infrastructure, including in the school system.

**Newman:** Right.

**Salit:** So in the education movement some enterprising people figure out now we can come in here and advance a charter school movement at a much more rapid rate than we've been able to do anywhere else in the country because of the resistance of the institutional players is gone, for the moment.

**Newman:** Well, Katrina leveled everything.

**Salit:** Exactly. OK. So, the charter school movement comes in and it makes a big push and develops all these charter schools. Meanwhile, the public school infrastructure is still there and still operating. It gets refurbished.

**Newman:** Right.

**Salit:** So, now they're having a fight. What is the fight would you say? Is it just a fight over funding?

**Newman:** That's part of it certainly. But, the charter schools can do things that the traditional schools can't.

**Salit:** So, it's a fight between old forces and new forces, between old ways of looking at the education system and new ways.

**Newman:** Between centralization and de-centralization.

**Salit:** OK. That connects to the discussion about new ways of thinking about the world, because that's also an issue. Centralization vs. decentralization.

**Newman:** Yes. As you saw, for example, Ramo described the debate going on in China about how to reform the Chinese Communist Party.

**Salit:** Yes. Everyone recognizes it needs to be reformed. But how? How centralized can its power be while still allowing it to connect to changes on the ground. But, as Ramo said, when he talks to his friends in China about the future of China, they agree that China always has been and always will be a great power. They say, well, out of the last ten centuries, China has had the biggest GDP for nine of them or something like that.

**Newman:** And if you look towards the next 10, they'll have it for all 10.

**Salit:** Exactly. We just have a couple of minutes left. I want to ask you about the specter of Specter.

**Newman:** Specter is obviously a somewhat authoritarian loose cannon.

**Salit:** Yes. I was talking to some independent leaders in Pennsylvania last week and they're having some discussions about open primaries with Specter's team. We were talking about the decision that the Senate Democratic Caucus made to strip Specter of his seniority, and his contention basically was, 'I was elected to the Senate in 1980 by the voters, and my seniority derives from the fact that I've been in the Senate for 30 years. That's why I have seniority.' And basically the Democratic Party said, 'Oh no, your seniority is tied to your position relative to the party, not relative to the government and not relative to your contract with the voters, and we're going to assert that, and basically now you're at the bottom of the ladder. You're going to have to work your way back up.' And this is interesting. As I said to the folks in Pennsylvania yesterday, this is about an issue that independents care about a lot, which is the too-cozy-relationship between government and parties, the conflict between representing the people and representing the interests of the parties. It's just very, very embedded in the Washington culture.

**Newman:** Yes. And if Specter wanted to make that argument, and followed it consistently, he wouldn't have become a Democrat. He would become an independent.

**Salit:** Exactly.

**Newman:** If you're playing their game...

**Salit:** You play by their rules.

**Newman:** You play by their rules.

**Salit:** Thank you.