



THE ANT AND THE GRASSHOPPER REVISITED

Sunday, August 16, 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, August 16, 2009 after watching selections from "The NewsHour with Jim Lehrer," "Hardball with Chris Matthews," and several Charlie Rose interviews.

Salit: Here's what was offered on *Charlie Rose* as a metaphor for the two sides of the American personality by Kurt Andersen, author of a new book called "Reset": The ant stores food during spring and summer so that when the weather turns cold, the ant has something to eat and the grasshopper is an irresponsible partygoer who does nothing to protect himself for the future and then...

Newman: The grasshopper doesn't have to. He eats the ant.

Salit: Aha! The untold part of Aesop's story!

Newman: There you go.

Salit: I see. Basically, this was a cover up by Aesop because he doesn't reveal how the grasshopper survives. I was going to ask you, assuming (perhaps foolishly) a continuum from Aesop to Andersen, whether you thought the fable captures something about the American psyche, the so-called two sides of the American personality.

Newman: Sure it captures something. Everything captures something. But I don't think the issue is the American personality.

Salit: OK.

Newman: The issue is the character and nature of history and Andersen doesn't understand it. You can tell that from his "reset" metaphor.

Salit: Say more.

Newman: You can't reset history. History happens. And it remains permanently present in what comes next. You can't make all of that go away by a "reset," by starting all over again. It sounds nice. It's a nice civil kind of conservatism to suggest that we can just go back to the good old days and start all over again.

Salit: The first principles of our country, as he says.

Newman: But you can't. You can't go back to the good old days. You have to deal with the days that are here and that includes the complex history that we've been through to get here. So the issue is what we move on to and how we most effectively move on to it. That's illustrated, in my opinion, by the intensity of the debate around health care. This

is an oversimplification, but nonetheless I've always felt that the long term debate over health care is the societal form of the "socialism or capitalism" debate. That's what it's meant. That's writ large in the current circumstance and Obama is bearing the brunt of that debate right now, while trying to lead the way forward, without using the language of socialism, and almost certainly overworking the language of capitalism. That's what the raw emotions are about. The right wing is aghast, not by how much money we're spending. I think that's ludicrous. Nobody worries about how much money we're spending, as long as it's not their money.

Salit: Right.

Newman: The tax rate is not going to go up dramatically. It can't. It's so high already. How much could it go up? No, the most right wing voices are saying in their appeal to a base: *We don't want to have any or more or all of our money spent on poor people.* It's not more complicated than that.

Salit: You know, there's never any outcry from the right about the idea that government spends a fortune of money on the Pentagon and the defense budget and no one says *Get the government out of my self-defense!* I'm not trying to make the classical argument that we shouldn't spend money on war, we should spend money on peace, the old "guns or butter" argument. But the argument that you can't trust the government to run anything for us, which is part of the argument put forth against health care, is not an argument that people really believe.

Newman: The government runs virtually everything.

Salit: Exactly, including the defense and national security of our country. We spend billions of dollars to defend the homeland and no one says that everybody should just figure out how to defend themselves against terrorists on their own.

Newman: But things much closer to home are run by the government. The government decides whether we can drive a car or not.

Salit: Or sell liquor or give someone a manicure.

Newman: There's enormous government involvement. The controversy is fundamentally about what our values are. But no one's allowed to talk about that. You've got to talk about concrete, practical things.

Salit: Andersen says you don't have to have a debate about socialism vs. capitalism. It's not about that. It's about pragmatism. Americans are pragmatists and the positives coming out of the current crisis include that pragmatism is more acceptable now, that it's not about solutions that are tethered to one or another ideology. It's about what works.

Newman: But that's an over-simplification of pragmatism.

Salit: How?

Newman: Being a pragmatist doesn't mean you don't make choices. You still have to make choices, you still have to make decisions, even as a pragmatist. Some of them are small, some of them are middle-sized, and some of them are large. But you still have to make decisions.

Salit: But isn't he saying that decision-making doesn't have to express ideology? If there's a reset going on, going back to his "reset" metaphor, that's what the reset is ultimately about, from his point of view.

Newman: But that's what Obama is saying. He's not, after all, calling for socialism. He's calling for health care reform.

Salit: A certain kind of health care reform.

Newman: He's calling for a reorganization of health care, via specific concrete things. But, at some level, there's a recognition that if you keep calling for those kinds of things, de facto you're calling for socialism. So forget whether you're using the language or not, it doesn't make a difference. That's what's going on. You're calling for a change of attitude.

Salit: About the distribution or re-distribution of wealth.

Newman: Exactly. And some people say, *I don't want you to take more money away from me to take care of poor people, who don't have as much as I do, who are unemployed. I don't want to give up what I have for those people.* So, there you go. Where's your ant and grasshopper metaphor now?

Salit: The journalists debate what's going on at these town hall meetings, asking "is this genuine or is this manufactured?"

Newman: They're debating what's happening?

Salit: Yes.

Newman: What's happening is manufactured, but it's genuinely happening. Not surprisingly, the right seized this opportunity to do some grassroots organizing of its own and the Obama people, apparently, took some time off at the grassroots level. That's part of what happens when you get into power. You get busy trying to enact what you're looking to enact now that you're in power. So your attention turns away from doing the grassroots work.

Salit: And the right gets a little opening. Organizing for America, Obama's grassroots network, has either been quiet or on vacation or they've been ambivalent about whether to go to their base for legislative mobilization. They held back on that with the stimulus

package and, at least based on newspaper accounts, are having difficulty fully engaging that base on health care. They left an opening there and the right moved into that.

Newman: Not surprisingly. Obama won. The grassroots spoke. The left spoke. Now they're in power. And the right's trying to find its voice. The left didn't win by so much of a landslide that there's no longer a right. The right is very much alive. They're just not in power. Some people say the town halls are a healthy debate. To me it looks like a bad family gathering.

Salit: It does. But sometimes you have to get through the bad and unproductive part of a conversation to get to a better conversation. I'm not so horrified by these meetings. People who believe in civil discourse – and I happen to be one of them – are horrified by what they're seeing at the town hall meetings. I'm not horrified by it. It is manufactured, in the sense that it's organized. But also people are getting up and they're talking. They're saying things. And they're saying some things that are objectionable and some things that are nasty, whatever. But they're talking. To me, that's not a problem.

Newman: I see what you're saying and I'm similarly disposed. What makes me concerned, though, is that I think this could be an opportunity to have a developmental debate. If it includes the kinds of things we're seeing at the town hall meetings as a stage or a part of it, fine. But is there any real development in this process? That's difficult in the absence of the recognition, as I was saying before, that history moves, not necessarily forward or backward or sideways, but it does move. And it carries with it its past, if you will. Are we going to progress off of this? That's the issue of concern to me. Not whether someone's yelling and screaming or putting a Hitler mustache on Obama. That's bad art, but it's not the end of civilization.

Salit: That's important what you're saying. How does that developmental debate happen?

Newman: You need some leaders, who are not partisan, but who are intelligent enough to understand history and progressive enough to understand what it means to create something new out of the only material available, namely something that's already happened in history. Is Obama going to be that kind of leader? He's got 2½ strikes against him, from day one.

Salit: Which are?

Newman: What are the 2½ strikes? He's a progressive. He's black. And the half is that he's a Democrat.

Salit: Meaning those are strikes against him relative to being able to be heard by 40 to 45, maybe even 50 percent of the country? Maybe more? Is that what you mean?

Newman: I wouldn't put it just in terms of being heard. It's about whether he can convey that he's not doing any of this to be a part of either the crazy debates taking place at the grassroots or the crazier debates taking place in Congress.

Salit: OK.

Newman: He wants to stand above that and move forward with history, but it's very difficult to project that in America. This is a country without public philosophers. This is a country where that voice is often ruled out, even before it speaks. Is he able to project that as a Democratic president of the United States, at this point in time? I don't know. History makes us wait and see.

Salit: It's very hard to do that. And it's very hard, even if you do that, for people to understand that that's what you're doing because everything is so immediately translated into the other kind of thing. It gets politicized, commodified, whatever you want to call it.

Newman: You can make out a case that only two people, it seems to me, have ever done that successfully in the history of this country. George Washington and Franklin D. Roosevelt and both did so under very unusual circumstances. In one case, the people said to George Washington, *You won the war for us. You've created us. Whatever you say, goes.* And in the other case, they said to Roosevelt, *We're up against international fascism. That's really scary. That's real. There it is. It's right at our doorstep. So, we'll go along with whatever you think is best.* Even Lincoln didn't do that successfully, meaning that all he got for trying was to get shot.

Salit: Right.

Newman: There's not a history of that being something you can do in this country. Obama is a good man, a decent man. I think he's trying to be responsive to the American people. But are the American people going to do this? I don't know.

Salit: It's so hard to find ways to do that and to express that. This is a fairly trivial or small example. As you know, we've been working through our national independent networks on this issue of the composition of the FEC, the Federal Election Commission. We're putting a proposition in front of the White House this week that President Obama appoint one or more independents to the commission, which currently has three vacancies. This is an idea that is gaining a tiny, tiny bit of currency. McCain and Feingold just introduced a bill in the Senate calling for a re-structuring of the FEC to have three members, all from different parties and political persuasions. And, by the way, they're the only two sponsors of the bill. I talked with the President of Common Cause about this issue last week and the leaders of Rock the Debates, the Transpartisan Alliance and others, including some former state election officials. The argument I make on behalf of independents is that we are 40% of the electorate and should have representation on the body that regulates elections. And part of my argument to Obama is that this would be an important reform, it's the right thing to do, it's the democratic thing to do. But I also say were he to do this, it would be a way of his

sending a signal to the American people and to the political class that he's willing to step outside of the partisan box on a process issue. Making such an appointment would have a force, a weight above and beyond having an independent on the FEC. The political buzz saw in Washington is so extreme that it's not clear, in a day to day way, that it would make "a huge difference," other than it would prevent the 3-3 deadlock on the FEC, which is the current situation. But Obama's got to find ways to signal the American people that he's not doing the things he's doing because he's power hungry or because he's a Democrat or because he's...

Newman: That's very hard to do when you are a Democrat.

Salit: Yes.

Newman: And that's the fundamental argument for electing an independent.

Salit: Well, Roosevelt was a Democrat, but the political climate in the country was different. First of all, as you say, the issue on the table was international fascism. That was the issue on the table and it was transcendent. So the fact that Roosevelt was a Democrat was a minor detail.

Newman: Yes, I agree with that. Actually, Bush and the neo-cons hoped that the fear of terrorism would be so transcendent that the American people would give them carte blanche. Bush's idea was to terrify the American people around this. Terrorism is certainly scary. But it's not terrifying in the same way that fascist rule by the Japanese, Italians, and Germans was in the '30s and '40s.

Salit: Back to what we were saying about pragmatism and ideology and Kurt Andersen's "reset." You said that his presentation of pragmatism is highly oversimplified. Is there such a thing as pragmatism that isn't expressive of ideology?

Newman: Yes. All I said about it is that it doesn't mean that you don't have to make decisions. Actually, it's ideologically-driven points of view that mean that you don't have to make a decision. All you do is follow the ideology.

Salit: OK.

Newman: Pragmatism makes a tremendous demand on intelligent decision-making.

Salit: What's the relationship between the rise of pragmatism or the appeal of pragmatism, on the one hand...

Newman: I don't think it's a rise or an appeal. I never said that. That's not how history works. There's no rise in history. History simply is what it is.

Salit: So, if the strategic debate is between capitalism and socialism...is that a fair characterization?

Newman: I would rather not call it “strategic,” but “underlying.”

Salit: If the underlying debate is between capitalism and socialism, is that pragmatic or is it...

Newman: Is what pragmatic? The debate?

Salit: That debate. Or is it ideological? People say it’s ideological. If you ask most people about an underlying debate between capitalism and socialism, they would say that’s an ideological debate.

Newman: I don’t think so. That’s not an ideological debate. Why is that ideological?

Salit: I don’t think it is, but it is positioned that way in the marketplace of ideas.

Newman: I quite agree.

Salit: OK. But it isn’t that. So if it isn’t that, what is it?

Newman: What is that debate, how would I characterize it?

Salit: Yes.

Newman: It’s a moral debate.

Salit: And the moral debate is over whether a society, a world, a people, a community has the responsibility for all members of that community.

Newman: That’s the debate.

Salit: So then capitalism and socialism are pragmatic approaches to organizing the world which are expressive of different moral views on that question?

Newman: What has to be shown – and I think that we are, in some ways, objectively closer to showing it and subjectively more distant from being able to show it than ever before – given modern technology and other extraordinary advances, is this: Is it possible to take care of everybody and still have ways in which those who do more, or have more, can continue to have more, though perhaps not as much more? Are we in a place where that can be accomplished so as to pragmatically resolve that contradiction? Now, some people think that we are. And some people feel adamantly that we’re not.

Salit: That’s what the people at the town hall meetings are saying.

Newman: Yes. They feel that the gain of reforming health care is going to be their direct loss. I think they act out in crazy ways sometimes, but so does the left wing. But I think they honestly feel that way.

Salit: I do, too.

Newman: And, I think the Republicans who represent them honestly feel that way. The bottom line argument is that this is going to represent, no matter how you play it, a loss for the people who currently have more. Ironically, what Obama and his people who are leading this current fight for health care forgot to accentuate is the issue of health. If people are unhealthy, the whole country, the whole society is less healthy, in a very concrete kind of way, in a very material kind of way. Sickness doesn't recognize boundaries. I don't think that's been sufficiently emphasized in this whole thing. It's been treated so bureaucratically. In some strange sense, Obama has presented this whole issue too politically. I think he contributed to making it political. It's relatively easy to go after the insurance companies. The insurance companies are – whatever terms you use for bad people – use it here and you'll be right. But that's not the issue. I think the issue is how healthy – or unhealthy – we all are. He would have done better to focus – and this might sound utterly bizarre – if he focused the whole campaign to reform health care on obesity. I think that would have played much better tactically. Say, *This country is too damn fat and we have to do something about fatness. And fatness is not the specialty of poor people. There are fat bankers and fat stock market analysts and fat nurses and, as a country, we have to take this seriously.* I think that if he had crafted a campaign where that was the focus, what's the right wing going to say about that? *No, we're not too fat,* or something of that sort. He had to go out of the box. I know that's not the traditional way to do a campaign of this kind, but I think you've got to step out of the box to have a real chance of winning this. Step out of the box into being a leader of a certain magnitude that you can win that fight and go down in history as the man who made American thinner.

Salit: And healthier.

Newman: But, he gave it to Congress. In part what that means is that he gave it to the people who are almost certainly going to do it in the "political way," instead of taking it for himself and saying, *I'm going to go around this country and say to the American people: You're too fat. We're all too fat. And I'm the President of the United States and I see this as one of my missions. I'm going to make us thinner and healthier.*

Salit: And we'll design a health care system that gives everybody access to what they need to be able to do that.

Newman: Exactly.

Salit: Thanks, Fred.