



A (WARMER) WORLD OF END-ISM

Sunday, August 23, 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 23, 2009 after watching selections from "The NewsHour with Jim Lehrer," "Hardball with Chris Matthews," "This Week with George Stephanopoulos," and several Charlie Rose interviews.

Salit: Here's something I was thinking about while we were watching several interviews. Freeman Dyson, the noted physicist, protested to Charlie Rose about the media, in this case the *New York Times*. Dyson talked about a colleague of his, a fellow physicist. They have divergent views on global warming, apparently, but they're also good friends. The *New York Times* wrote an article about them that painted them as mortal enemies. New York Governor David Paterson made a number of remarks this week about how the media is painting him as a failure even though he's having certain successes, and the story of his successes aren't coming through. And we watched a Chris Matthews segment where he talked about the impact of these town hall meetings around health care and the process in Congress. Chris was very worked up about the whole thing. He made the point that you have to be careful about how you respond because television is selective, meaning that the tabloid news, cable news, whatever you want to call it, can focus on a single incident that occurs at one meeting in Scranton, and film it, and put it on television, and it becomes "what's happening," a total reality. Now, these are all very different situations obviously, but they got me thinking about "Truth," about an environment in which – here's one way to describe it – it's so hard to tell what's going on. We read an interview that Charlie Rose did with economist Robert Shiller, where Shiller refutes the idea that what drives the economy is markets. He argues that what really drives the economy, if you will, is human subjectivity. He calls it the "animal spirits," how people feel about the state of things, about a set of investments, that the issue is confidence and whether you can quantify that. Anyway, Fred, I was thinking about each of these situations and I think of them as connected to issues that you've been working on for a lifetime, what you call "The End of Knowing," the impact of knowing, the impact of not knowing...

Newman: Even the end of the impact of knowing.

Salit: I'm tempted to say, what a crazy time to be alive, meaning that the world is a very crazy place. Now, you might say *What do you mean by crazy?*

Newman: I wouldn't say that.

Salit: There's a certain kind of craziness that comes from not knowing what's going on or it being impossible to know what's going on. I'm wondering if this picture that I'm painting holds together for you.

Newman: Well, one thought is it's a time when we need to have a rational understanding of irrationality or an irrational understanding of rationality.

Salit: I'll buy that.

Newman: Or, alternatively, what I've tried to write about is that we have paradigms for everything, but we don't have a paradigm for what a paradigm is. So, we are very informed but we know nothing. Which is not necessarily bad. Maybe we're undoing the Enlightenment.

Salit: We're undoing the Enlightenment. In what sense do you mean?

Newman: Well, we're not so much enlightened as we are believers that we are enlightened.

Salit: Uh huh.

Newman: It makes me think of the work of the psychologist Leon Festinger who was at Stanford, where I went to graduate school.

Salit: What was his work?

Newman: Something he called cognitive dissonance. Among other things, Festinger studied small groups, who are now called cults – I don't think he called them cults – small groups of people living in the hills of northern California near the Pacific Ocean, who all had cataclysmic views of the end of the world.

Salit: The End is Coming.

Newman: Yes. I don't know how his studies were carried out or exactly what they did, behaviorally speaking. But, the core finding was that when the date that the group had set for the end of the world didn't happen, remarkably, they quickly went back to doing everything they had done before that time had come and passed. But, even if they went right back to doing what they were doing, it had to have had an effect on them. The world, in general, might be living under those circumstances.

Salit: The circumstances being that a set of things that one believed in and organized one's life around don't come to pass, but you still go on?

Newman: The circumstances being not just any old circumstances, though. The ending of the world.

Salit: But, generally speaking, people don't think the world is ending.

Newman: That's not clear.

Salit: Say more.

Newman: Part of the message of the radical Muslims is an end of the world position. It might be the word of a handful of people. But millions of Muslims believe that.

Salit: True.

Newman: The 60-year movement to control nuclear armaments is based on end of the world thinking, namely that if we don't put controls on this, we're going to blow the world up.

Salit: Action movies based on end of the world scenarios that are narrowly averted are very popular.

Newman: I think there is a more and more pervasive environment of "end of-ism." "This is the end of capitalism as we know it," that's been the mantra. And yet we go to sleep and tomorrow comes.

Salit: Yes.

Newman: Where is it? Where is the end-of? Well, on the one hand, you wouldn't know about it. If it happens, you wouldn't be here.

Salit: Right, you would have been ended.

Newman: But maybe all endings are not bad. In a way, that's what Dyson was saying about global warming.

Salit: He says the world has been getting warmer for 12,000 years.

Newman: Yes. And he visited Greenland, which is kind of ground zero for global warming. And the people there told him they were glad it was getting warmer!

Salit: Yes, and meanwhile the environmental movement is *Oh my god, the world is getting warmer!*

Newman: Yes, but in Greenland they're saying, *Haven't we been cold long enough?*

Salit: Well, Dyson says the planet is getting warmer, but it's not clear that that's a function of what human beings are doing. He said it's not clear scientifically how much that's contributing. He's saying the world is getting warmer and that's also a good thing.

Newman: It could be.

Salit: It could be a good thing.

Newman: My feeling is that it could be a good thing but more than that, it could be that it's just the thing that's happening – neither good nor bad. It's just the planet going through continuous changes. It began as molten lava and cooled down for a while – as in billions of years – and what we're picking up on now is just another stage in the long continuous history of the earth.

Salit: You could say this is simply a scientific debate like many other scientific debates that have come before and will come later and that's what it is. But it does seem – and maybe this is what Dyson's arguing against – it does seem to have a kind of cataclysmic or end of the world hysteria to it.

Newman: Exactly. Maybe that's what's leading science astray.

Salit: How so?

Newman: Because science is typically quite levelheaded about these matters.

Salit: Right.

Newman: But if what's dominating international culture, what's beginning to dominate it is this kind of end-ism, then maybe that's impacting on science.

Salit: On levelheaded, truth-based, entirely objective, science.

Newman: There you go.

Salit: Do you think science has gone astray?

Newman: I don't know if it's gone astray. But I think science is as much a part of the culture as anything, so it's influenced by other factors from the culture, it seems to me. As opposed to how it likes to think of itself – as above and beyond culture.

Salit: Yes, it does like to think of itself that way. I guess that's the scientific definition of truth, that there is an objectivity which transcends environment, culture, etc.

Newman: Yes, but that rests on what I take to be a contradiction, meaning that in order to have any understanding of that, according to scientific criteria, you have to be able to view two things: the object directly and its transformation.

Salit: Right.

Newman: But there aren't two things. There's one thing. It's it/us. Or as Plato put it and Donald Davidson preached, I think quite informatively, in order to see whether or not one thing is an image of another thing, you'd have to have still a third thing. "A" is like "B" and "B" is like "C," but you can't directly compare "A" and "C."

Salit: Which means?

Newman: You have to have a third thing. But to show that “B” is like “C” you’d have to have something – “D” – which “B” is like and “C” is like. And this leads to an infinite regress.

Salit: Got it.

Newman: We don’t have all those things. What we seem to have is one thing.

Salit: A totality.

Newman: Not “A” totality, because that reifies totality. But it is a totality.

Salit: I was having a conversation with a friend earlier this week about social change and performance.

Newman: Yes?

Salit: And about the question “Can performance change the world?” We were talking about Lenora Fulani’s program, Operation Conversation: Cops and Kids and the use of performance in these programs. Police officers in uniform and young people from the poor communities get together in these workshops and they do theater exercises together. Then they do an improvisational performance together and then they have a conversation about what goes on between them in the streets. Part of what you see in the workshop is that their conversations and ability to talk to each other and relate to one another is changed by what they’ve done together, more specifically by their performance together. So, this led to a discussion about what happens when they leave the workshop. Can the claim be made that change occurs in the room and that this change is lasting?

Newman: It doesn’t have to be lasting. If there’s a change, there’s a change.

Salit: OK, so this gets to the question I wanted to ask you. My friend would agree with you. She said, ‘If change happens in the room, change has happened.’ And she referred to certain laws of physics that say when two particles – I hope I’m using the right terms here – when two particles meet, collide, whatever, then separate, they’re still intertwined because the fact that they met and interacted never goes away.

Newman: Yes.

Salit: That’s a part of who they are forever.

Newman: At least for a long time.

Salit: For a long time. OK. So, her suggestion was that what happens with the cops and kids is analogous to the particles, that the laws of physics apply here because these things that happen are always a part of what happened.

Newman: I'd say it's not a law of physics. It's a law of history. As I say to people in my therapy groups when they sometimes say, *Well, this is a very positive experience, but what does it mean outside of the room?* And, I ask them, *Well, where is it going to go?*

Salit: Thanks, Fred.