



## TRAGIC FIGURES

Sunday, December 14, 2008

*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, December 14, 2008 after watching "The Chris Matthews Show," "This Week with George Stephanopoulos," "The NewsHour with Jim Lehrer" and several Charlie Rose interviews.*

**Salit:** Let's start with the auto companies.

**Newman:** Alright. The auto companies.

**Salit:** And the Detroit bailout. The Senate failed to reach an agreement, so the deal fell apart in Congress. The White House is going to make some kind of move. On the Lehrer *NewsHour*, David Brooks and Mark Shields got into a more heated fight than they typically do.

**Newman:** The class war.

**Salit:** Exactly. The class war. Shields says, 'The big financial companies come down to Congress hat in hand. No one says "boo" about the fact that the CEO of Merrill Lynch made \$240 million in 2007. There are no conditions put on the money. But then when the auto industry comes and it's about the deal for Detroit, suddenly there's an inquisition into whether "the guys with the lunch pails" – to use his term – 'are making too much money.' And Brooks says, 'Oh, don't try that old class warfare stuff. It doesn't hold up.' What do you think about the "old class warfare" stuff?

**Newman:** What is there to think about? There is a basic lack of fairness within our economic system and our social system. We all live with that. That's how the system, how the economy is set up. If you are ready to go along with that and not fight that at the systemic level, then I don't know what either the whimpering or the anti-whimpering is about. That's what America is. There's a hierarchy. This illusion that everybody is equal is nonsense. People get paid what they can get paid for the particular job that they do. Are we going to start complaining about how much Barbra Streisand gets paid at the Barbra Streisand concert? If you don't like that Barbra Streisand gets paid that much, don't go to the concert. But, if you want to work on changing the fundamental inequalities of the system, which are multiple and many – it wasn't just slavery and if it was just slavery, it's also wage slavery – then let's go to work on that. But otherwise, what are they talking about? I know that it's unfair. I've spent my life working on trying to deal with some of the deepest inequalities. But do we live within them and, therefore, by them? Of course we do.

**Salit:** Do you think that the current economic crisis and the varied responses, including the bailouts, are exposing the unfairness more?

**Newman:** Who didn't know? You didn't know?

**Salit:** No, of course I know.

**Newman:** Everyone knows. It's insulting to think that the guy who carries a lunch pail to work is too dumb to realize that the people who run the company don't carry lunch pails.

**Salit:** No, they carry credit cards.

**Newman:** Yes. And the workers who carry lunch pails are more than bright enough to realize that, despite an inadequate educational system. You learn that fact of life outside of school.

**Salit:** Does it make any kind of difference that the unfairness is being talked about more?

**Newman:** It's been talked about before, again and again, during a hundred different eras, in a million different ways. I guess I'm protesting your question. And here's why. I'm not going to get caught up in using the occasion of what's going on now, which is bad and causes hardship for many people, for me to get up on a soapbox and preach Marxism, as in Aha! The class struggle! And it's not because I don't think Marxism is profoundly correct. It is. But it's opportunistic to get up on a soapbox now and preach it because somebody on national television says the workers are being mistreated. Based on my own ethical view, I won't do it. At its best, capitalism stinks. It creates wealth, but it doesn't eliminate poverty and suffering. When it unravels are there issues of how to put it back to where everybody agrees it's good enough to go on? Yes. Those are real issues. But I don't think it should be used as an opportunity by anyone to get on a soapbox and talk "class warfare."

**Salit:** Alright. On your point about getting on a soapbox, let's turn to the Blagojevich story.

**Newman:** Blagojevich. The thing about Chicago is that they have those memorable names. Vrdolyak. Blagojevich.

**Salit:** I'm going to give an alternative description to what the high-pitched mainstream commentary is. Here's my commentary. You have a politician, who seems to be corrupt...

**Newman:** Hello? Isn't that definitionally true?

**Salit:** ...who seems to be using his public powers for personal gain. The FBI's been investigating him. They catch him, they arrest him, and they indict him. To me that seems to be a situation where something worked. The financial system isn't working. The bailouts don't seem to be working. The auto companies aren't working. But here's a

situation where you had a guy who talked about selling a Senate seat and the Feds moved in to stop it. Now, it's not clear that he has broken the law yet. What he did so far was have a bunch of tough guy conversations in which he indicated that he was planning to use a pay-to-play litmus test for appointing someone to Obama's Senate seat.

**Newman:** What he did was to be dumb. But, so far as I know, that's not a violation of any state or federal laws.

**Salit:** Exactly. So, you have a U.S. Attorney who moved in expeditiously to prevent a corrupt appointment from taking place. So, there you have it. Now, to the politics. Is this episode a problem for Obama? Is it an opportunity for Obama, in some way?

**Newman:** It doesn't go either way. Obama recognizes that if you're the president and there are charges of corruption, you have to deal with them and disclose anything and everything your team might know.

**Salit:** When he was in the U.S. Senate, Obama introduced and the Senate passed an ethics reform package. It was one of the ways he identified himself as a political reformer. Does this scandal help him pursue that kind of agenda?

**Newman:** I guess what I'm trying to say is that I think it's of no value, one way or the other. It's just status quo. Look, people talk as if these procedures couldn't be easily changed. But, they could. How about filling vacant Senate seats with special elections? Then you don't have corrupt appointments because you don't have appointments, period.

**Salit:** The 17<sup>th</sup> Amendment, which gave the voters the right to elect Senators, as opposed to having the legislatures appoint them, was set up specifically to get rid of this problem, because there was so much political wheeling and dealing around who the legislators chose.

**Newman:** And obviously, they've found ways to get around the 17<sup>th</sup> Amendment. But you could make filling a vacancy a "mechanical" process – i.e. a special election – which is not a bad thing. You might even call it more representative, because you involve the people, the voters. Or, in a vacancy situation, you could have voters rank choices and then let the governor pick from among the top three. Americans are more than bright enough to realize that there is a way to deal with this. They deal with rankings perfectly well on the tote board at the racetrack. But the establishment doesn't want to.

**Salit:** Exactly. As one Chicago reporter observed, before this thing broke with Blagojevich, the position of everyone in the political class was "Don't call a special election, make an appointment." Then as soon as the thing breaks, everyone is shouting "We've got to have a special election!"

**Newman:** Well, that's the mantra for this week. And, the next time someone says to you how the transitions in American government are smooth and lawful, without problems, remind them that they're not that easy. This is the kind of stuff that does go on. Someone in a position of power says, *Can I gain some additional mileage from horse trading, or from accusing someone else of horse trading.* So this guy Blagojevich is a good scapegoat. Is he dumb? Is he a crook? Probably all of the above. But I don't want to jump on this bandwagon. If he broke the law, he should go to jail. That's the beginning, middle and end of it.

**Salit:** Shifting gears slightly, we looked at a Charlie Rose interview of Frank Langella, who plays Richard Nixon in the new movie "Frost/Nixon." And the movie centers on Nixon's corruption in office – with Watergate, of course – and how he made certain admissions about it in an interview with David Frost after he left office. I had the opportunity to see Langella in this part on Broadway, and he was spectacular. Let me ask you a couple of questions about the real-life character, Richard Nixon, who was forced to resign from the Oval Office because of his corruption. Langella said that, as an actor, he connected with Nixon's pain and the tragedy of his situation. How do you think of Richard Nixon? Is he a tragic figure?

**Newman:** We're all tragic figures, if you allow a Shakespearean view.

**Salit:** Of the human condition.

**Newman:** Yes. Shakespeare was a great writer and I think he identifies an interesting component of the human condition. There is something fundamentally tragic about our lives, all of our lives. I would characterize the tragedy of human existence as something like this: We're up against forces which we're thought to be smarter than and more powerful than but which, in fact, we're not smarter or more powerful than at all. That's our tragedy. We, meaning human beings, believe we are supposed to be in control – of nature, of the world. But we're not, as we're discovering. Can we do things better? Yes. Do we? Sometimes. The tragedy is that it's an assigned task which we can't ever accomplish. That's tragedy. That's why so many of Shakespeare's plays are about kings. "You're the King. You should be able to control all of this." "But," says the King, "I can't."

**Salit:** Something's going on that's bigger than I am.

**Newman:** Call it "human nature." Call it tragedy. It doesn't make a difference. It's just a word, to paraphrase the Bard.

**Salit:** Charlie Rose played a segment from the actual interview that Frost did with Nixon, on which the play is based, and Nixon says, 'I did a lot of the big things right. I did a little thing,' – referring to Watergate – 'that turned into a big thing, wrong.'

**Newman:** Little things have a way of doing that.

**Salit:** Yes. Little things have a way of doing that. And that was part of the tragedy.

**Newman:** Plays are plays. They're not the world, even if they can help you see things about the world. I think Langella is a good actor. He said some very smart things about acting, mainly having to do with how you have to throw out all the junk that you're thinking about and remember that who you really are is a vessel for the writer.

**Salit:** Spoken as a true writer. I was thinking about you as a writer/director who has written many plays based on the lives of historical figures.

**Newman:** That's true of almost all of my plays.

**Salit:** When you take a historical figure and create a play that's based on their life but that isn't a representation of their life, what's the key for you in moving beyond just a recitation of what they did and how they lived?

**Newman:** In the case of the last play that I wrote called "Backstage" for example, the one about Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony, I wanted to say something about where I thought contemporary feminism was at within the overall political system that has emerged since the early part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. I think the women's movement is a very important movement, a significant movement, that's not lived up to a lot of its ideals. And I wanted to explore that by raising the question of what their relationship was really like, insofar as you can say that about any relationship. I'm able to see them from this point in time and from my point of view, as a man, a man who lived 100 years later. Contemporary Americans, when hearing about Stanton and Anthony, and their travels together and their intimacy, are going to ask *Well, were they lovers?* I don't make a whole thing out of that in the play, but it's raising those kinds of questions. What would this look like to the average American man or woman today?

If you're going to write that kind of play or discuss this issue in that way, you're going to get into trouble. That's kind of a given. No matter what I write, I get in trouble. In fact, I'm writing in order to get in trouble. But if you can get in trouble in the name of some degree of honesty, then it's worthwhile getting in trouble. If you're doing it for other purposes, to be sensationalistic, or whatever, that would violate my ethics. I think the play explores their lives in a sensitive way. It has a great deal of respect for them. I respect them as women. I respect them as people. And, I also respect them as political leaders. I know something about being a political leader. Being a political leader is hard, even if you're a minor political leader. And they weren't minor political leaders. They were major political leaders. I'm a very minor political leader. But it's still hard. There are always stories being created about you. There are a variety of characteristics attributed to me that have nothing to do with me. They're just not even close to who I am.

**Salit:** No.

**Newman:** But that's what it is. If you can't stand the heat, get out of the kitchen. And I bring that with me into the process that I go through as a creative artist.

**Salit:** We watched John McCain on the Stephanopoulos show.

**Newman:** Yes. He looked rested.

**Salit:** He's a much more appealing political leader when he's not running for office, particularly as a conservative Republican.

**Newman:** Yes. He seemed like a man with a sense that history passed him by.

**Salit:** Thanks.