



AMERICA'S ANGRY. BUT DOES THAT BRING CHANGE?

Sunday, January 24, 2010

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, January 24, 2010 after watching selections from "The Charlie Rose Show," "PBS NewsHour" and "The Chris Matthews Show."

Salit: In the Charlie Rose discussion about rebuilding Haiti, Pamela Cox from the World Bank said a number of things that I thought had a subtext. Though it was contained in a "forward looking" perspective – how the World Bank and other key financial institutions are mobilizing to help Haiti – the subtext was "I don't know if we can do anything about this." She talked about how the world community mobilizes, money comes pouring in, aid comes pouring in, and then she says, 'But you have to ask: six months down the line, where is the sustained interest? We've been here before. There have been crises in Haiti before. The world community has responded before.' She calls Haiti a "fragile state." She says, 'The question is: how do we pay for development? How do we cover the cost of development for Haiti if we constantly have to go back in to rebuild because, essentially, the infrastructure keeps collapsing for one reason or another?' She and the World Bank don't want to say *We can't get anywhere in Haiti*. But I thought that was what she was saying.

Newman: I agree.

Salit: And then Ray Kelly, who is currently the New York City Police Commissioner and who has spent time in Haiti...he was sent down in the mid-1990s as Director of an International Police force responsible for ending human rights abuses and establishing an interim police force during the political transitions there, spoke concretely about some of the challenges. His argument was that Haiti has to become economically "self-sufficient." Ultimately, Kelly argues, referencing the kinds of corruption in Haiti, that Haiti has to take responsibility for itself. Maybe what I'm reflecting on here, and I would ask you to do the same, is that a terrible tragedy happens, it tears the country apart and tears the people apart. At one level, the world community says, "We have to help. We have to help." And it does, in the most immediate sense. But very quickly you get to the issue of whether we can we do anything developmental here. They don't seem to be saying, "Yes." They seem to be saying the opposite.

Newman: I agree with you completely, that's their subtext. And it pointed me in a particular direction, and Ray Kelly came closest to saying it directly when he brought up the issue of corruption. It's the old Latin American problem, or at least one understanding of the Latin American problem, that the corruption is so entrenched and the capacity for development so weak that the "developers" can never get their hands on enough money to buy off or compete with the "corrupters." So things remain fundamentally corrupt. How do you deal with that? One way that's been attempted and met with some success is through ideological revolutions, though it's a mixed record.

Salit: In Cuba, the revolution threw out the mob, the gangsters and their cronies. But other revolutionary forces in Latin America turned to drug dealing to finance their cause and then became common criminals.

Newman: Yes, ideological revolutions have come closest to cleaning out the corruption, but I don't know what the evaluation of that process would be today. Has Cuba done away with corruption or is Cuba the corruption that's not been done away with? Not surprisingly, there is a debate about that. But, can anything be done about corruption in the long run? I'm not convinced. In a worldwide system which is grounded so heavily in varying degrees of corruption, it almost follows logically that one of the most corrupt places would be Haiti. It's almost a logical truth that you'd have the most pronounced and unadorned version of the thing that permeates Western culture in the most "fragile" states. It also seems to me to be a logical point that the only way to deal with that is to change the world.

Salit: That's a terrible and tragic situation for the Haitian people, if what you're saying is accurate. Because what it really comes to is things are not going to get any better for those living in the poorest and most corrupt sections of the world until the world has changed.

Newman: And who's ready to change the world? Hard to say.

Salit: Hard to say.

Newman: I'm ready.

Salit: Maybe that takes us into the latest rounds of discussion of American politics and the mandate for change coming off the 2008 election. Here are some things that struck me watching the analysts talk about the results in Massachusetts. On the *PBS Newshour* Gwen Ifill says, trying to distill the dynamics down to the simplest form, 'Americans are angry. The country isn't working. People are angry. It was that anger that swept Obama into office in 2008. It's the continuation of that anger that sweeps Brown into office in

Massachusetts.' She turns to the panelists and asks, 'Is that right?' So, the first thing that happens in this conversation is that the Republican state chairwoman from Massachusetts answers, 'Here's why Brown won. He talked about the right issues: terror, taxes, spending, jobs.' Immediately, she's into the Republican spin on the results: *People are angry. The Republican Party has the answers.* I know that she's the head of the Republican Party and her job is to sell it. But, to me as an independent and also as a longtime builder of the independent movement, I was struck by how quickly the conversation about this thing that's going on in the country resolved to a partisan pitch. *What is it about? Answer: the Republicans know what to do.* Of course, if you talked to a Democrat...

Newman: You get the mirror image of that.

Salit: Exactly. You get the mirror image of that. So you have: Things aren't working, people are angry, Republican answer, Democrat answer, and it's all roughly within the standard paradigm, which is connected, obviously, to why people are angry. What an incredible manipulation.

Newman: I'll say.

Salit: I guess my bottom line here is how difficult it is to have the conversation about anger and change without it plugging right back into the old ways, the old language, the old alignments.

Newman: I think there's a serious misunderstanding here in the whole way this situation is talked about, a serious and deep psychological, social and political misunderstanding. Of course, the American people are angry. You don't have to be a genius to figure that one out. If they weren't angry, they'd be dead. But anger – by itself – is not usable to understand events – be it for individuals or for states or for worlds. What's required to understand how all of that operates and gets translated into various forms of action is the combination of anger and the vehicles, psychological or social or whatever, for giving expression to anger. And that's left out. So they make it seem as if anger, boom, a Republican is elected. Anger, boom, a black man is elected. Anger, boom, an election ends in a tie. That's not how it happens. What's most frustrating is the anger, on the one hand, combined with the modest means by which the American people, in this case, or an individual, in those cases, can give expression to the anger. That produces stalemate, frustration, and so on. Anger expressed within the existing forms for expressing anger in this country leads to paralysis because the things that you do to express the anger within our two-party system move us a little bit this way and then, as soon as that happens, and it fails, we move a little bit that way. Going this way and that way is not adequate. These efforts, from the tea party bellow to the outcry against the banks, are inadequate for getting to any kind of transformation. That's because of the absence, not of another paradigm,

but of other ways in which one can give expression to anger. And that's true across the political spectrum.

Salit: Yes.

Newman: For me, it's that mistaken understanding of how this works, of how anger works, that leads to shallow analysis. It's generally true of all emotions. Emotions cannot be fully understood unless you understand emotions as in a relational situation with the existing – either personal or social – means for giving expression to those emotions. That's what an emotion is. Although you can speak of them, and people frequently do within this culture, as having an independent existence, but they don't. Or, probably more accurately, they do, but that level of emotional existence or presence is profoundly non-developmental. And can lead to all kinds of things best called, to use a popular term, either personal or social neurosis.

Salit: The inability to give expression...

Newman: ...to emotions in ways which are developmental...

Salit: ...leads to neurosis. Yes. I did an interview with a reporter in Florida the other day which he conducted in front of a live audience. He asked to interview me after he read the statement that we put out about the Massachusetts results, which strongly admonished the Obama team for its inattentiveness to the independent movement and its political dynamics and, in some sense, for its supposition that independents having aligned with Obama in 2008 meant that independents were permanently affixed with the Democrats. Then they woke up the morning after the Massachusetts election and discovered that that's not true, and there are a lot of reasons why that's the case. This reporter asked me about Massachusetts, but quickly the discussion got to how do you bring independents together, since they're so diverse. This question comes up all the time when you talk to people about organizing an independent movement, organizing independents to participate as a cohesive force. How do you bring them together given that they're so different? I answer in the way that I typically answer – which is to talk about what we do, which has been successful – namely, that you bring independents together because of and by emphasizing their concern with the way the process works, the way the process operates. I discussed various political reforms and restructurings of the political process that independents want. The interviewer, and some members of the audience, were up in arms about this. Essentially their argument was: *That's not real. The issues are the issues. We know what the issues are. You can't participate in the political process of what's going on in this country unless you're dealing with issues and, if you're dealing with issues, you'll be divided.* The conversation was my going up against their insistence that what's going on in the world is the issues. And the idea that,

to use your term, the mechanisms for political expression are inadequate to the anger...whether you're on the left, whether you're on the right, wherever you are, was provocative to them. There's not a lot of disagreement about the fact that the American people are angry. But, the pushback in this context was very pointed, that the process issues, the mechanism issues, aren't real. *What's real? Issues. And we're divided on the issues.* So, the conclusion was that *Whatever it is that you're doing, Ms. Salit, trying to build an independent movement, you call yourself a progressive, presumably you believe in certain kinds of things...whatever it is you're trying to do, you're not going to be able to do it. Because the issues are the issues and the people are divided on the issues.*

Newman: More divided than our country was on the issue of slavery for the first 80 years of our history do you think?

Salit: No. They'd be hard pressed to say that.

Newman: What moved that situation forward, for the better part of a half a century? Decisions on the process.

Salit: I see what you're saying. Yes, the debate about slavery was for decades a debate about the process. Should we discuss slavery in Congress or not? Should states come into the union, slave or free?

Newman: Are some people morally offended by that? Yes, myself included. But, did it move the conflict forward for that period of time? I would argue it did. The claim that process and issues have no relationship to one another is simply historical ignorance.

Salit: I think of it as some combination of ignorance, and, as you were saying earlier, the neurosis.

Newman: Yes, exactly.

Salit: Those two seem very connected right now in American politics.

Newman: Exactly. The people who are saying, "the issues, the issues, the issues, we have to come up with solutions to the issues" are, by virtue of their neuroses, contributing to the problem. Their neuroses are rooted, as far as I'm concerned, in the failure to have created a system which gives full and democratic expression to the people. Not having that makes the people frustrated.

Salit: It does.

Newman: So, if I were being interviewed on these matters, I'd say *Let me ask you this question, now that I've dispelled your argument that there is no connection between process and the issues. Which would you think is more important: to resolve the issue of abortion once and for all (whatever that might mean) or to pass an amendment which allows for the direct election of the president and vice president of the United States? Which of those two is more important?* One is a process, one is a so-called issue. Which is more important?

Salit: It's such a great question because if you go down that road and have that discussion, you not only are addressing the connection and the fact that process issues are paramount, but you're also addressing the fact that there are so many barriers, there are so many mediating institutions, so many mediators along the way that the American people can't get through to express themselves.

Newman: Right.

Salit: There's the primaries, there's the parties, there's...

Newman: ...the money.

Salit: There's the money. Exactly. There are so many things and they're so deeply rooted in American political culture.

Newman: The Constitution of the United States handles a number of things directly and then says, 'All the things not covered by this Constitution are in the hands of the people.' Sounds good. But here's a practical question: how are people to deal with those matters? Through what mechanism? We, the people, are influenced to a very large degree by those factors, the money, the parties, the pundits. They determine how the people will speak. How is that a democracy? If the people are not allowed to determine how they are going to speak, how can we speak about having a democracy? I'm aware that the counter argument is *Well, we have to have stability*. I agree that we have to have stability, but not at the price of democracy. Not at the price of development.

Salit: If stability turns to paralysis, you're in trouble.

Newman: If you're constructing a system in a social science laboratory, there are variables that you have to take into account in creating a good system. You can't construct a system that is so strong on one side that it rules out other things which are equally important. That's not a good system.

Salit: We watched a pundit discussion about Obama's first year framed as "expectations vs. reality." It's a funny framing, because it makes it seem as if expectations aren't a part of reality. But, that aside, the point to be made, is that

Obama said to the American people, 'I can make this system work for you. I can do it. We can come together and...'

Newman: And frustrated Americans said, 'Let's take a shot.'

Salit: Yes, people said, 'Let's take a shot.' Now, we're a year down the road and I think part of what's going on is that the American people – including the president himself – are experiencing the difficulty in that.

Newman: Well, I don't think Obama fully realized how difficult it would be to achieve even an approximation of his ideal in a system so over-determined by existing institutions; for example, the Democratic Party.

Salit: Yes, absolutely.

Newman: Obama never really ran as a Democrat. What I mean by that rather extraordinary remark is that it was virtually a foregone conclusion that the Democrat was going to win the 2008 election almost no matter who the Democrats put up. So Obama ran as a popular figure, with all the support that he got from independents, not to mention all the support that he got from pissed off Republicans, not to mention the support he got from everybody else, because everybody was so frustrated that people were really quite open to interpreting him and what he stood for as an emancipation from the narrow restrictions of the party system.

Salit: So he didn't really run as a Democrat.

Newman: He didn't really run as a Democrat but once in Washington, he was a Democrat.

Salit: The Democrats came knockin', alright!

Newman: Hello, hello! And he didn't recognize that they had to come to him, not him to them, and he played that weakly.

Salit: Yes, he did.

Newman: He didn't have to go on some ultra-left tear.

Salit: He just had to stay independent.

Newman: He just had to maintain that position and say, *I'm not a Democrat. I'm not a Republican. I'm not a leftist. I'm not a rightist. I'm the President of the United States.* And just keep reminding everybody of that.

Salit: Exactly.

Newman: Does that mean he would have gotten everything he wanted? No. But he'd have had a better chance than he's given himself to date.

Salit: Yes. Thank you.