



HOW SHOULD BLACK LEADERS RELATE TO A BLACK PRESIDENT? A CONTROVERSY.

Sunday, April 4, 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, April 4, 2010 after watching selections from "Fox News," "CNN," CSPAN's coverage of "We Count! The Black Agenda is the American Agenda" and "This Week with George Stephanopoulos."

Salit: Fred, over the last month or so, there's been a more edgy public debate within black political circles. Let me give you my characterization of that debate. Barack Obama is President of the United States. What should that mean for black people? And how should black leaders position themselves in relation to Obama?

The discussion begins with criticism of remarks made by Rev. Al Sharpton that the president doesn't need to embrace a black agenda, but needs to embrace an American agenda. Some black leaders said that's not a healthy position for a black leader to take or for the black community to take. They said that if you take that position, it means you're telling Black America to be quiet, and Black America has many needs and concerns and we want those addressed. So, Tavis Smiley hosted a national leadership round table on the Black Agenda to promote a discussion and a debate about tactics relative to Obama and the Obama administration. It's also a debate about Black America's larger political strategy. Those things are related, obviously. Would you characterize the debate in the terms I just did?

Newman: I respect your characterization. I have no objections to that.

Salit: OK.

Newman: I do have a response to what you're sharing with me this morning. Within the logic of their formulation, I'm not sure why the debate which you showed me on TV with Tavis Smiley doesn't include white people. That's the only confusion I have.

Salit: I'm assuming that Smiley and other people who are participants in the debate would say, *Well, that's because this is fundamentally a "black issue"* – this idea is often repeated in black politics. The black community has to get its perspective and viewpoint together before it can interact with, exchange views with, consider issues with others.

Newman: What if the others are, could be, want to be, have a contribution to make to, that process?

Salit: Some black leaders argue that black people have the power to move things forward themselves. They simply have to exercise it. For example, Minister Farrakhan was part of this round-table discussion. He concluded his remarks by talking about the history of the demand for jobs and justice going back to A. Phillip Randolph through Dr.

King through Jesse Jackson through to today, where the demand is still jobs and justice. And then he said to the audience, when are we going to stop asking others for things that we can get by ourselves, on our own, through our own independent action? In other words, his answer to your question might be *Well it's not helpful to the process. Historically, it hasn't been helpful to the process.*

Newman: Well, I don't know. I don't want to reduce this discussion to statistics, but, for example, certainly unionized black workers do a whole lot better than non-unionized black workers.

Salit: Yes.

Newman: And that probably has something to do with the fact that within the union movement, black folks get the benefit of strategizing and exercising power with others. One might argue, that those in the unions . black and white . who benefited from this did so at the expense of poorer blacks and whites, but that doesn't negate what I'm arguing, or add to what they're arguing. It seems to me that it's undeniable that there have been great improvements in the black community from working with others. Especially on the issues of jobs and justice.

Salit: Yes.

Newman: What substantial improvements there have been for the black community, have come through blacks and others, particularly whites, working together. So, if these issues are being raised from the point of view of whether the entire problem of inequality has been solved by the continued use of an integrated strategy, what you're really saying, in my opinion, is that the entire problem isn't solved, period.

Salit: Fair enough.

Newman: And I agree with that, certainly. Poverty and misery are still very present for Black America. But, insofar as there have been improvements, that's by and large where they've come from. So, the strategy, or whatever you wish to call it, of working separately has had no significant success that I can see. And the strategy of working in an appropriately integrated manner, as over the last 100 years, has produced the most progressive changes that we know of.

Salit: Then let me frame their discussion in a slightly different direction. In 1972 the National Black Political Convention chose a political strategy for empowerment.

Newman: In Gary, Indiana.

Salit: Yes. In Gary, Indiana.

Newman: OK.

Salit: They debated a number of things, but specifically they debated whether to pursue a political strategy inside the Democratic Party or to create a multiracial black-led

independent political party. They chose the Democratic Party strategy. So, the orientation was to get the maximum numbers of African Americans elected to office. As Ron Walters said at the Tavis Smiley round table, the paradigm is the aggregation of black votes that you cash in for jobs and services for the community. So that has been the primary strategy for black empowerment since 1972. And by now, pretty much every district in every legislative body in the country that's majority black or Latino is represented by either a black or Latino elected official. And then, in 2008, in a cross-racial coalition, a black person gets elected President of the United States. So, in effect, the black leadership is now saying, *Well, what's the cash value of the Obama presidency for Black America?*

Newman: Yes.

Salit: But some in the black community are saying, *That's not the right way to frame the question.* Sharpton is one of the people saying that. And, that has caused some controversy. The response is *Wait a second, we always framed it that way, and we're not going to stop now just because there's a black president.*

Newman: Well, in all fairness to them, they're also saying that whatever the increase in the number of black elected officials at the local levels achieved, it was not everything for black people.

Salit: Right.

Newman: They've had some success in achieving more things for black people. So presumably Obama will achieve more things for Black America. But, he won't achieve everything for Black America, which is the underlying separatist view of some of the people on that panel.

Salit: Yes.

Newman: And they have a right to that perspective, but to justify it by the interpretation of history that many of them are offering, is a misread of history. That's what I'm saying.

Salit: The interpretation being when black people act alone on behalf of black people

Newman: they accomplish more than when they work with other people, selected other people.

Salit: Another part of the discussion was *We shouldn't protect Barack Obama. We elected Barack Obama. We shouldn't protect him.*

Newman: I agree.

Salit: But that still leaves open the question of what basis he should be pressured on.

Newman: Because he's black? No. Because he's left open the possibility of his taking a more class-wide perspective and the black community is an important part of the

working class community? Yes. Black leaders should be pressuring him, but I would argue, they best do that in the way that is how they've most succeeded, namely from a class vantage point, not from a separatist vantage point. Some participants in the panel said that, if not directly, at least implicitly.

Salit: Cornell West and Jesse Jackson in particular. Tavis Smiley asked everyone to define the Black Agenda: what does the Black Agenda mean today and how do we strive for it? And, Cornell and Jesse both linked the Black Agenda to the history of the struggle for democracy in America. Cornell made the point that the black agenda is not just good for black people, it's the best agenda for America. How is it the best agenda? He focused on its emancipatory characteristics. It emancipated democracy, to use his term.

Newman: Right. And Cornell West is a socialist.

Salit: And Jesse Jackson said "What did we do? We . . . black people . . . have had to democratize democracy. That's what we've been doing all this time." Very true. Then after saying that, Jackson made the point "Ours is not a left agenda." He's anticipating or responding to a nationalist critique of class politics. So he says, "Ours is not a left agenda. Ours is the moral center." He's playing with words here obviously, but the moral center is the force that's always fought for democracy, for a level playing field. For the fairness of the rules. If the rules are fair, Black America will do fine, Jackson argued.

Newman: Jesse Jackson is a revolutionary. Not a socialist, but a revolutionary, and not surprisingly, he's an American revolutionary. And, Jesse's position has always been the centerpiece of American democracy, so he's right, it is the moral center. What's the relationship between that and socialism? Well, that depends on how you read Karl Marx and how you read American history. But they're close. They've always been close. The Republican minority leader John Boehner seems to have recently discovered there is a connection.

Salit: And he's pretty worked up about it, I might add.

Newman: But that's always been true. There is more in Marx about democracy than even people who have read Marx know, because they haven't read him fully. And there is more socialism in American democracy than is often discussed, because it lost. Capitalism won. But the connection didn't just start with Barack Obama. They have an historical connection to one another.

Salit: Tell me your thoughts about the politics of this event. This conference was preceded by some public disagreements between Tavis Smiley and Al Sharpton, some of which occurred on the air. Differences over a posture towards Obama. Let me add something else here. Minister Farrakhan opened a section of his remarks talking about the David Dinkins experience in New York. (David Dinkins was elected the first black mayor of New York City in 1989.) Farrakhan said he believed that what black people in New York wanted was a black mayor, and he wanted to support the black community in having that, so consequently, he didn't defend himself when Dinkins attacked him.

Newman: I think Farrakhan is a great speaker. But, with all due respect, that's a silly remark. Black people want to shop at Macys. The evidence of that is overwhelming. I don't see him withholding his rhetoric about buying from black businesses.

Salit: His point, I thought, was to send a message to Obama: *Barack Obama, if the black leadership in this country decided to take you down, we could.* That's why I thought he told that story. It was kind of a political parable.

Newman: I don't know if that story makes sense. And I don't know if it's anything resembling true. But with regard to your question about the politics of all this, I don't live inside of Al Sharpton's head, but I know Al pretty well. He's a bright guy. My bet is that he stayed away from the Tavis Smiley conference because he thinks it would be silly to be there. You can't not pay attention to white people within our culture. It's a dominantly white culture.

Salit: And certainly, of all of them, Sharpton is the person who is closest to Obama.

Newman: I guess. That's what he says and I have no reason not to believe him.

Salit: Closest as in most influential. I'm saying that in a positive sense.

Newman: Yes, although I think that this particular debate, as framed, was more about who was closest to Sharpton, not who was closest to Obama.

Salit: Interesting.

Newman: Which is another remarkable accomplishment for Al Sharpton. I think that's what he was trying to accentuate by not being there.

Salit: How do you think Obama thinks about his obligation to Black America?

Newman: Oh, I don't know that he thinks about it at all.

Salit: OK.

Newman: Nor do I think he feels any obligation to be a socialist. He's a left Democrat, and while some left Democrats have been socialists, I don't think all left Democrats are. Obama feels as if he has as much of a right to be a left Democrat without being a socialist as any white American.

Salit: Fair enough.

Newman: That seems fair, yes.

Salit: Thanks, Fred.