



DETERMINISM RUN AMOK

Sunday, May 30, 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, May 30, 2010 after watching selections from "Hardball with Chris Matthews," "PBS NewsHour," "This Week" and "The McLaughlin Group."

Salit: Let's talk about David Axelrod's conversation with Chris Matthews about the oil disaster in the Gulf.

Newman: Yes.

Salit: There's been a massive oil spill. There's been a mobilization by BP and private industry and the scientific community under the auspices of the government to try to stop the leak. And, it seems to me the nub of the exchange between Axelrod and Matthews was this. Chris asked whether BP "can be trusted" to carry out this recovery effort, a question that comes complete with a whole set of negative political positions about the oil industry. They go back and forth. Finally, Axelrod says to him, 'What would BP's motivation be for not trying to solve this problem? They do not have a motivation for that.' Chris doesn't really have an answer. What he does say is 'Well, what they had was a profit motive to go beyond their safety capability, to drill down 13,000 feet because their profit motive is the motive here. But they didn't have the capacity to deal with what might go wrong.' So Chris' point is *BP created a problem that they couldn't handle and that's what's wrong with this situation*. I guess the axiom that follows from that is *We should never create problems that we can't handle*.

Newman: And what if we do?

Salit: Well, that's where we are, because we did.

Newman: It's a very important lesson for the world to learn because I think there's probably good reason to believe that it's not the only instance in which we did that.

Salit: That seems characteristic of a lot of things.

Newman: What do you mean?

Salit: Well, things I'd put in that category are the Middle East situation. And intractable poverty and underdevelopment. There is literally not enough money in the world to address them.

Newman: So, what's the point?

Salit: The point is if you're getting into territory where that's going to be the case or that's potentially the case, don't go there.

Newman: Well, that's preposterous.

Salit: The *Don't go there?*

Newman: What if you accepted for a long time that the sun is the center of the universe?

Salit: OK.

Newman: And then someone discovers that it's not. What do you say? *Don't let the sun stop being the center of the universe!?* There are empirical facts, new discoveries, and there's no way to refute them because they're true. So, you have to figure out what to do given that you were wrong.

Salit: You do.

Newman: That's life.

Salit: Here's what Axelrod is saying. Axelrod is in the unfortunate position of being the representative of the president, i.e. the White House, i.e. the place that is supposed to be able to produce the answer.

Newman: Well, I'm not critical of you because you're trying to get to the bottom of this. But, there is no bottom of this. What Matthews is trying to say is *What's the answer to this?* And the answer is, *There is no answer.* I don't think it's Axelrod's problem. It's a profound and systemic problem of our entire culture. We live in a broad international culture where people can't accept that there is no answer. They have to have an answer for everything.

Salit: True.

Newman: But there is no answer. Now, this goes on all the time, with mothers raising children who have to find answers to what they're dealing with in raising kids. Sometimes, there isn't any answer. Mothers deal with it every day of the week.

Salit: Yes.

Newman: But, this situation is very exposing, it seems to me. I thought some of the reporters who discussed this crisis were crazed.

Salit: Yes, they were.

Newman: I don't even agree with you that it's Axelrod who is in the unfortunate position. I think they're in the unfortunate position.

Salit: Because?

Newman: Because they have to somehow or another convey that there is no answer, to a world which doesn't want to have that conveyed to them. That can make you crazy. Axelrod is saying the plausible thing. 'We're doing everything we can do.'

Salit: Yes.

Newman: Well, what happens if you can't do it?

Salit: Then, it can't be done.

Newman: One possibility is it won't be done. And we'll just have a lot less oil.

Salit: And a lot of dirty and contaminated places. That could be what happens here.

Newman: That could be the world that we're living in from now on because this thing happened.

Salit: Yes.

Newman: Even the sports world has picked up this piece of madness. Sports commentators, nowadays, have a favorite thing. If someone misses a shot in some kind of crucial situation, they've taken to saying – it's really a fascinating cultural sub-phenomenon – they've taken to saying, *You can't miss that shot.*

Salit: But...

Newman: ...the person just did. I know they're using it metaphorically. But it derives from this other piece of philo-pathology, if you will.

Salit: The philo-pathology is a craving for certainty?

Newman: No, they're saying *You can't miss that shot* and what they're trying to suggest is that's the kind of shot that must be made. But it's not absolutely certain that it must be made, because in point of fact, the occasion on which that expression is used is when the person hasn't made it.

Salit: Yes.

Newman: Once again, the point being that there's a pathological bind. People find it hard to accept that there are things that don't happen. Things don't happen, even though everything tells you that they should happen. It would be very good if they did happen. It seems almost inconceivable that they wouldn't happen.

Salit: There's a lot of this kind of talk in connection with global warming, isn't there?

Newman: And some people are saying, well, that's all an exaggeration. Well, what is an exaggeration? An exaggeration is when something happens which is so unexpected that you call it an exaggeration.

Salit: Yes.

Newman: That's now how the world is and there's a deep-rooted philosophical issue here that has a popular manifestation.

Salit: - This thing we're talking about now, you're identifying it among other things as a philosophical issue – is about how the modern era, also known maybe as the 20th century – the Age of Enlightenment...

Newman: They used to call it the 19th...

Salit: OK, 19th and 20th centuries, the ascendance of Reason and Science, suggests there is a way to handle everything.

Newman: That's a different issue.

Salit: It is?

Newman: I think so. You still have to handle things, no matter what.

Salit: OK. "Handling" isn't equivalent to "solving."

Newman: This is Determinism. What I'm describing is Determinism run amok.

Salit: OK.

Newman: It is people being willing to say *Everything that has happened, has to have happened.*

Salit: Right.

Newman: So, in the broader sense, that would mean that nothing could happen which is fundamentally unexpected. But unexpected things are as much a part of life, and always have been, it seems to me, for a very long time.

Salit: So if you drill down 13,000 feet below the ocean floor, and you're drawing oil out through these pipes, and something goes wrong with that system of extraction...

Newman: Which could mean something like one person forgot to make one turn on one screw that might be what you're talking about.

Salit: So this thing happens, some combination of mechanical failure and human error, even of the most simple kind that you just described, and it produces this cataclysmic event, and on one hand, that's enormously distressing – I mean people were killed in this explosion and now, this accident has pumped hundreds of millions of gallons of oil into the Gulf...

Newman: I'm not condoning it.

Salit: I know. These terrible things happen. Everybody's very upset about this. And Axelrod says 'We're working on a solution. We've mobilized all the great scientists from everywhere in the world.'

Newman: That's at least a lie, but surely an exaggeration.

Salit: OK, at a minimum, we've mobilized some Nobel scientists. And, he says, 'We're working on this and we haven't gotten to the solution yet.'

Newman: Right. And Matthews, in his typical provocative and sometimes dumb way says: 'What happens if you don't find one?'

Salit: And the answer is?

Newman: *Then, we'll fail.*

Salit: We'll fail, yes.

Newman: People have failed before.

Salit: Right.

Newman: What happens if the ship doesn't make it across the Atlantic?

Salit: America won't be discovered by the Europeans. Not at that time, anyway. I think this is what we're trying to talk about here. Matthew's is not just saying *Well, that would be a bad thing*. He's saying something more than that.

Newman: Right.

Salit: He's saying *That can't be*.

Newman: Right. But he's wrong. It can be.

Salit: So, what's going on with that? I'm trying to understand the point you're making about the culture of the whole society. I mean, people know that things fail. Is it the size of this thing? The size of this thing, quantitatively speaking, is enormous.

Newman: I don't think it's just the size of it.

Salit: OK.

Newman: I think it's the fundamentality of it.

Salit: OK.

Newman: The world has come to a point where all kinds of things will happen that are very complex. Science and technology have created miracles. And, we've come to a mindset in popular culture when people say, some things are so disruptive that we're

going to look at them as impossible, as unable to happen. But they're not. Because human disruption is not the criteria by which the things that happen in the world happen.

Salit: I guess this is another version of "If there's a God." "If there is a God, how could he let this child die?" That is a very anguished question that people have asked for millennia. If there is a God, how can these terrible things happen?

Newman: Well, there's an answer to those people within a religious framework.

Salit: Which is?

Newman: Namely, *Who are you to think that you could know the thinking of God?* And there's also a non-religious answer. Which is, *Nothing can happen that we don't know what to do about.* That's what Chris Matthews was sort of saying.

Salit: Yes.

Newman: And if so and so doesn't know what to do, like BP, then get the person who does know how to fix it, damn it! But what if nobody knows how to do it?

Salit: OK.

Newman: In fact, what if there's nothing to be done? Well, we'll go on. The world will go forward. As big as this is. Well, where are we going to get our oil from? There was a time when there was no oil extraction, remember?

Salit: Yes.

Newman: I mean, remember before oil was discovered? Now, if you want practical answers, we shouldn't be having this discussion. But this discussion is not an unimportant discussion because there is a mindset, a way of looking at the world, which has become so ingrained as to make these kinds of questions almost unspeakable. But the crisis is so extreme that these questions have now made it to popular culture, to the talk shows. These questions are special kinds of questions. They're unique to our species. I don't imagine there was an actual scene where one dinosaur said to another, *You know, I bet we don't exist in 50 years.*

Salit: I'm sure you're right.

Newman: Because they didn't do that kind of thing. We reflect in that kind of way. Humans have certain characteristics, our species does, which are not better than, but are distinct from animal species, including dinosaurs. We're so used to this being an all-knowing culture that we find it hard to even accept the answer, we don't know.

Salit: But, we say, we have to find out. The oil spill is going to cover the east coast of the United States!

Newman: No, we don't *have* to find out.

Salit: And that's what you're calling Determinism Run Amok.

Newman: Culturally speaking. "We have to know." No, we don't have to know. We don't even have to know the answers to the very small riddles that we, human beings, have created. Is it possible that we're creating more riddles than we have ways of solving? Yes. I would venture, it's not only possible, it's not only probable, it's not only likely, it's the case.

Salit: Yes.

Newman: And why shouldn't it be the case? Bob Dylan writes this song and one of the lines goes something like this. *What you're powerful enough to get today, you might not be able to hold tomorrow.* Right on, Robert.

Salit: Thanks, Fred.