



DIFFICULTIES IN THE PURSUIT OF HAPPINESS

Sunday, June 6, 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, June 6, 2010 after watching selections from "PBS NewsHour," "The Chris Matthews Show" and "This Week."

Salit: What did you think of the discussion, the interview with Derek and Sissela Bok about happiness? They've both written books about happiness.*

Newman: I thought it was interesting. Obviously, the centerpiece of the discussion was that no matter that in the history of Western civilization happiness is treated as the object towards which everything moves, as Aristotle observed, there is still little money, little effort, and few resources given to the achievement of happiness in our culture. It's interesting to speculate as to why that would be so.

Salit: As to why it's elusive?

Newman: No, as to why, in a society founded on the pursuit of happiness, so little is done to pursue happiness. Or, perhaps more precisely, you could make out a case that in the United States, the population often chooses to pursue happiness in ways that create obstacles to happiness.

Salit: How do we do that?

Newman: We eat too much bad food. Obviously, eating that food is done in the pursuit of happiness. But it makes people sick when they're older. We spend too much money and get into debt. However, take "life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness." If you take a look at those terms carefully, they're at least two and probably three different kinds of terms. There's a logical difference among the three terms, meaning the logic of what the terms mean. First, you're either alive or dead. That's clear. You can make out a case that you're either free or not free, although that's a little more ambiguous. But the pursuit of happiness goes all over the map. You can be happy one minute and then not so happy from what you did that last minute. I don't intuitively have a sense of what the measure would be of how well you pursued happiness, but I take it that's what the Boks are looking at.

Salit: I guess they ask people if they're happy. That's one thing that they do. They do surveys.

* "Exploring Happiness: From Aristotle to Brain Science" by Sissela Bok and "The Politics of Happiness: What Government Can Learn from the New Research on Well-Being" by Derek Bok

Newman: I guess. But the answers would depend a whole lot on when it was that you asked them.

Salit: I guess so.

Newman: How do you deal with that variable? You don't have to ask people whether they're dead or alive. You pretty much know the answer before you ask.

Salit: There was something almost delightfully weird about part of it.

Newman: Part of what?

Salit: The discussion with the Boks. It seemed, in some strange way, so disconnected, in a materialistic sense, except that it isn't. Maybe it was that contradiction that was part of what was appealing about the story. Derek Bok says, and here he's being very concrete, that studies have shown that there are three health issues that Americans are most distressed over. You lose a leg, you have heart trouble. Serious things. People get over them. But chronic depression, chronic pain and chronic sleeplessness, he says, are the three things that more Americans say deprive them of happiness. So, he says, what if the government took initiatives to help the American people with those problems. That would make the country a happier place. And Jeffrey Brown, the interviewer, asked in a somewhat incredulous voice, 'Would you really want to do that in the context of there being a whole fight over health care and how much the government should be involved?' Derek Bok says, 'Oh, yeah, I think it would be a good idea.'

Newman: What are you saying about that?

Salit: I couldn't tell whether his answer was terribly sophisticated, terribly naive or some combination of the two. He seemed delightfully unconcerned with the politics of the thing.

Newman: In a way, Bok is saying that if you're just going to keep people happy, they'll like their government.

Salit: It would seem to follow from that, wouldn't it? That if the government did those kinds of things that people would like the government more.

Newman: Well, but there's a slippery slope there, I think. What about fascism? Presumably, there are arguments and some empirical evidence to show that many Germans were elated by Hitler.

Salit: That's a downer to put it mildly, since we're talking about happiness, but you do have a point, Fred. Let me switch topics here to the confrontation between the Israelis and the flotilla bound for Gaza. Right after it happened, I read a quote from a U.S.

government official who said that what the U.S. had to do is to figure out a way to help Israel "come back" from this. An uncharacteristic remark in the context of the official statements by the president being very measured. But, I was struck by that remark because...how do they come back? It does seem to underscore a deeper level of Israeli isolation, which I find upsetting.

Newman: Israel's been an isolated country for a very long time. Is it different with this incident? You might be right.

Salit: To me it has a somewhat different quality to it, maybe more out of my sense of romanticism and tragic irony than anything else. I am a Jew, a progressive Jew. So are you. And, there is the history of boats of Jewish refugees from Europe trying to get to Israel and having to break a British blockade to do so. And so, it is especially painful. But you're right, of course. Israel has been isolated for a long time.

Newman: Yes.

Salit: Maybe what I'm saying here is really just an expression of the idealistic notion that, even given the level of hatred on both sides and the complex security issues on both sides, I still want to think that everybody's going to come to the table at some point. And, as we all know, there have been endless efforts to do that, some in good faith, some in not so good faith.

Newman: And people have come to the table.

Salit: Yes.

Newman: And people have left the table.

Salit: Right. But, here we are. And maybe there won't be a resolution, because there isn't one to be had. Maybe this is what it means to be hard-line.

Newman: What do you mean by that?

Salit: Well, for starters, the Israelis are taking a hard-line position in exercising control over Gaza. That's their justification for boarding the flotilla. And the justification is that they're deciding what is and isn't allowed into Gaza. They're going to be the arbiters of that. Period. The flotilla tactic was both a humanitarian effort and a tactic, presumably to either force the Israelis to back down or to expose how hard-line they are. I don't know exactly what you get off of that exposé. I'm not criticizing the tactic, but I'm literally saying I don't know what you get off of that. Maybe this goes back to the question you asked about whether this is different, because Israel's been isolated for a long time? Does it heighten the perception of isolation or the fact of the isolation? I don't know.

Newman: Look, the Israelis, with some justification, feel that no other sovereign power in the world gets related to as the Israelis do by a significant portion of the world, namely as not having a right to exist. Their point is that it puts them in a very unusual circumstance. And so the techniques that they have used to maintain their sovereignty are going to seem out of line with the rest of the world, but that's because their situation is out of line with the rest of the world. I don't find that argument absurd. And the situation is so intertwined, both ideologically and historically, with the issue of anti-semitism. There might be no apparent way out of it.

Salit: No chance for happiness here, I guess. Thanks, Fred.