



## WHAT THE OUTSIDERS SEE

Sunday, November 15, 2009

*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, November 15, 2009 after watching selections from "The Charlie Rose Show," "Meet the Press" and "The McLaughlin Group."*

**Salit:** We watched Charlie Rose interview the...

**Newman:** Whiz kids.

**Salit:** Whiz kids. Thank you. Steven Levitt and Stephen Dubner, who wrote "Freakonomics" and "SuperFreakonomics," and Malcolm Gladwell, author of "The Tipping Point," "Outliers" and "Blink." His latest book is called "What The Dog Saw." All three are cultural commentators who are exploring aspects of the ways that we see and understand different phenomena. They're trying to go up against some conventional wisdom.

**Newman:** I see them as going up against paradigmism.

**Salit:** OK. Going up against paradigmism.

**Newman:** That's what I find interesting about them.

**Salit:** In both interviews, they talked about the importance of asking the right questions.

**Newman:** Who was the first guy who spoke?

**Salit:** Levitt.

**Newman:** The curly-haired guy?

**Salit:** The curly-haired guy was Dubner. The solo interview was Gladwell, who also has curly hair.

**Newman:** Dubner was the one I was especially struck by. But I think they're all three very interesting.

**Salit:** They all said that asking the right questions is absolutely fundamental. One of them – I think it was Dubner – said that breakthroughs and creativity in science are tied to asking the right questions.

**Newman:** I think that's the case.

**Salit:** And that there's an art to asking questions. Certainly, it's being smart. It's being interested in pursuing something. But it's also an art.

**Newman:** Related to this notion of asking the right questions is also an attitude towards political correctness that one of them made note of.

**Salit:** It was Levitt.

**Newman:** To ask the right questions, you have to be very willing to say the wrong thing, which is not at all easy. Those things seem very connected to me.

**Salit:** Connected how?

**Newman:** Saying the non-politically correct thing, in the broadest cultural sense of that term, is not only saying the wrong thing. If you're not willing to say the wrong thing, you rule out a vast number of questions you might ask. Personally, I go through a process – this happens a lot in therapy, but also in teaching, in giving lectures – where I'll get to a certain point and then I'll be aware of the right thing to say next. And – whatever these words mean – I'll self-consciously tell myself, *No, don't stop there. Go further. Try to think of the wrong thing to say.*

**Salit:** The wrong thing to say?

**Newman:** That's the process which sometimes, though not always, results in discovering an interesting question to ask. I do this fairly self-consciously. With the focus on "conscious" not "self."

**Salit:** You're in a therapy group and there's a discussion going on and people are talking about different things and you get to a point and you have an instinct about what the right next thing is to say, but you reject that...

**Newman:** Right. Often I reject it with the help of the group, because they're busy doing it.

**Salit:** They're busy doing the right thing, so you can do the wrong thing.

**Newman:** I'll give you a concrete example from a recent group. I won't mention names. Someone in the group says, 'I can't stay where I am. I want to leave the situation I'm in. I feel trapped.'

**Salit:** In other words, I'm very unhappy.

**Newman:** Yes. And the group goes to 'What makes you unhappy? What's wrong? What's the problem?' And on and on and on we go. So I think about it and I think that those seem like reasonable things to ask. But I am also thinking, 'No, there's something more here.' But, it's not something esoteric. And it occurs to me that the wrong next question – although I think ultimately the right next question as it turned out – was the

one I asked: 'Where do you want to be?' It's simple enough, but it's not a question that you'd normally ask.

**Salit:** It's not even quite politically correct to ask that question.

**Newman:** That turned the whole group around. I was silent for 15, 20 minutes before I said that. But then I said, 'Where do you want to be?' Because when a person says, in this therapeutic context "I'm feeling trapped," in some existential sense they're being disingenuous.

**Salit:** Disingenuous because they can pick up and go, if they want?

**Newman:** Right. After all, millions upon millions of people leave when they're feeling that way. This person hasn't. And, I think you want to find a way, not provocatively, but caringly, challengingly pushing them to go to, not a deeper reality, but to a less proscribed formulation of what they're "plight" is. In this case, at a minimum, what we discovered off of my question is that she didn't want to be anywhere else.

**Salit:** She didn't want to be anywhere else.

**Newman:** Right, although she felt thoroughly trapped. And both of those were honest formulations. I think that's often the state of mind that people can get themselves into.

**Salit:** So, if you come to that discovery, does that change the way you approach feeling trapped? Or, am I asking the wrong, as in really wrong, question?

**Newman:** I think the problem with your question is its assumption, namely when you speak of "coming to that discovery." I don't think it's a discovery in the sense that this light flashes and now you know this. It's more mundane than that. It's getting into another discussion, another conversation. And this new conversation is more liberating than the other one. No matter how many questions the group asked – and they were trying to be helpful – asking why do you feel this way?, etc. it further entraps this person. Not cognitively, but because of the practical need to answer those kinds of questions. It's like putting more nails in your own coffin. To help people, you've got to give them a road out. For me, that's the essence of helping people. You've got to give them a road out. That doesn't mean they'll take it. But you've got to give them one.

**Salit:** Is the road out talking about their situation, or whatever, in a different way? What is the road out?

**Newman:** I don't think it's just purely behavioral, in the sense of talking about it. It's almost like you've got to give them an injection of possibility into the paralyzed state of actuality that they've managed to lock themselves into. Do you know what I mean?

**Salit:** Yes.

**Newman:** It's not so much another way of talking. It's both bigger and smaller than that. It's closer to *Oh, there's another way of living for me. I can think about life differently.* I think that makes a big difference.

**Salit:** One of the things that Gladwell said which interested me was, 'It takes an outsider to see what's beautiful or interesting in somebody's life.'

**Newman:** Absolutely. How many times have I said that?

**Salit:** A gazillion. Talk to me about that. It takes an outsider to see.

**Newman:** I think it takes a collection of outsiders. I think it takes a group. It takes the group that you're in, who come to know who you are in a way that you could never know yourself. I've been in an ongoing diatribe with the Greeks, for a very long time, about this "know thyself" business. You can't know thyself. Thyself is unknowable.

**Salit:** But others can know you.

**Newman:** Yes, others can know you vastly better...well, it has to be vastly better. They have greater access to who you are than you do by virtue of the limitations on your capacity to know who you are.

**Salit:** What is it about self-knowledge that is so undependable?

**Newman:** Well, it's "self."

**Salit:** Is it just egocentricity?

**Newman:** I don't think it's egocentricity at all. I think it's a fact of life that to understand something, there has to be some kind of comparative or relational analysis. And there is no comparative to self, virtually by definition. Where a great deal of Western culture has gone with that is to say, *Well, there's a deeper kind of understanding. It's a direct understanding. It's like the understanding of sense datum. There's no intermediary.* But the fact that there's no intermediary makes it impossible to understand it at all, because that's how we understand. I don't believe in this notion of direct...

**Salit:** ...perception...

**Newman:** ...of whatever it is that is the object of your attempt to understand. I don't think we can ever get so close to it that we have a special kind of understanding of it, whatever it is. It's quite the contrary. And I don't think it's a question simply of getting further distance from it, since "self" is not something you can get distance from, unless you want to check in to the local asylum. What that takes me to is the notion of how others can know you vastly better than you know you, in ways that are profoundly insightful, not just behavioral. We're not just talking about how they can see the look on your face in a way that you can't without a mirror, although that's a part of it. I think it's more of a logical issue. Logic embodies a truth that's very fascinating to me.

**Salit:** Which is?

**Newman:** Good question. Which is that empiricism is not the be all and end all of understanding. There's something more going on and I think you can discover it in logic. In logic, there is this "truth," that's always fascinated me.

**Salit:** That something else is going on, other than empirics.

**Newman:** I would say the human mind has a capacity greater than, other than, different than the reading of reality by the use of empirics. We have a greater capacity. I keep saying "greater," although I mean to be saying "another." Probably, I really mean "greater." I think it is, in some ways, greater because empirics are profoundly limiting, because of this logical feature of the world. The way to understand reality, if you could really understand it, would be to compare it to something else. But there isn't anything else. All we have is the one thing. It's that old Platonic point. I think he's wrong about much, but I think Plato's right about that. From my study, it's contained most profoundly in *The Theaetetus*, which is one of his best dialogues. There are a lot of other dialogues where he effectively denies that understanding. But there, it seems to me, he understands something very special.

**Salit:** Stepping away from Plato, perhaps, Gladwell talked about not being interested in the gifted and talented. As he said, there are people out there who are enormously gifted and talented and...so what? What fascinates him is the process of what it takes to learn something, to become proficient at something, to become outstanding at something, which is more of a work process, a creative process, than a gift.

**Newman:** Where I go to, in not being interested in the gifted – and I'm equally not interested in the gifted – is what I think of as a more radical step than the one he's taking. I go to the collective. That's where I distance myself from the gifted, because the gifted is always an individual. I'm much more interested in the study of and the understanding of the group and what the group can do that the individual, gifted or otherwise, can't do.

**Salit:** Gladwell said he was interested in failure, also. It was an interesting moment in the interview because Charlie Rose said, 'Well, you've written so much about success. Your book "Outliers" is all about success.' Charlie seemed averse to failure, as in, who wants to talk about failure? But then he caught himself.

**Newman:** I'm big on failure.

**Salit:** Yes, I know. Deeply so. And after the topic of failure was introduced, Gladwell went to big failures, famous failures. Maybe that's a response to a commercial demand, as in, your editor says, *If you insist on writing about failure, at least write about big failures, failures of famous people*. And Gladwell does. He uses them to illustrate the difference between two different kinds of failure – the difference between choking and panicking. Panicking is when you find yourself in a situation where you don't have the

skills to handle what's going on. Example: JFK, Jr. flying the plane to Hyannis where he loses the horizon and the plane goes out of control and he doesn't have the skill to adjust. The plane crashes and everyone onboard dies. For choking, the example he gave was Greg Norman in 1996 at the Masters tournament. Golfer at the top of his game, best player in the world, falls apart in the fourth round, starts to play like he's a 12-year-old. That's choking.

**Newman:** When Tiger starts to play like a 12-year-old, he wins by seven strokes.

**Salit:** Right. That shows you how the game has changed.

**Newman:** No, it shows you how different Tiger is.

**Salit:** I meant to say it shows you how much Tiger has changed the game. Anyway, the stories were interesting and I did find his distinction between panicking and choking, in some ways, insightful. But, I was also thinking about little failures, the little failures of life that go on, that accumulate, that are more like what most of us have to deal with. How you incorporate that into your day or your sense of yourself.

**Newman:** Most of us neither die in a plane crash nor lose the Masters.

**Salit:** Exactly. The rest of us are just mere mortals whose marriages fail, or who don't have nourishing careers, or who gain weight over the holidays. I don't know if you would say that you love failure, but I know for you, failure is a creative building block.

**Newman:** I've always been in love with that famous quote from Karl Marx when he says that the road to successful revolution involves failing and failing and failing and failing, until you win. That's a generalized picture of the struggle.

**Salit:** Do you think that revolutionaries know how to fail both at a social level and also at an individual level and if you have a way to respond to failure, you can continue to build? Some people are very depressed by failure, very demoralized by failure, and so forth. But there are different ways to respond to failure.

**Newman:** In the case of revolution, which I think is what is really being talked about here, you can't, in some ultimate sense, succeed because to "succeed" is so over-determined by the definitions of what you're trying to overthrow. So you always have to fail in some way. But then ultimately that's what produces a paradigmatic or what I prefer to call a post-paradigmatic totalistic transformation. In the case of revolution, you're sort of doomed to that being the case. But I also think it expresses itself in all things. I don't think that you can fully succeed, even at the most mundane things, if your perception of the smallest of things doesn't include a proper understanding of the relationship between it and the total scheme of things, because the transformation of the total scheme of things, which is revolutionary, changes your way of understanding everything. So as long as you haven't overthrown, overcome, gotten beyond that, you're still going to be stuck in seeing even the very littlest of things in accordance with the

existing way of looking at things. In that sense, there's always going to be a failure, or mistake, component in even the smallest of perceptions of our actions.

**Salit:** There's always going to be a mistake component because?

**Newman:** Because whatever it is that you've done hasn't succeeded in transforming the totality. In a way, it goes back to what I think of as a Leibnizian conception, from the philosopher Leibniz, this notion that there is no such thing as an isolated particular. The particular is comprehensible in the infinitude of the totality and connected to it. Unless you deal with the infinitude of the totality, you're never really engaging the particular. The unit of the particular is the smallest element you can imagine or perceive or whatever. You can't engage it fully unless you engage it totalistically. It is incomprehensible independent of the total framework in which you see it or relate to it or perceive it.

**Salit:** This reminds me of a conversation I had earlier this week with someone who is part of this new generation of new paradigm thinkers.

**Newman:** The new intellectuals.

**Salit:** Yes. We were talking about the independent political movement, and about the issues that come up for independents in different fights that we're involved in around the country.

**Newman:** And?

**Salit:** He asked about what kinds of reforms independents are interested in. He said, 'What's the one issue that, if you could popularize that issue and win it, would meet your goal?' I said that at this stage of the process, there isn't one. That what there is, is building a base; that's what we have to do. Tactically, the movement is sometimes focused on a national campaign, for example, our leadership in independents' support for Obama in 2008. But, I told him, much of the work at the grassroots is building a base around things that, at one level, seem either highly technical or very, very small.

**Newman:** Or particularized.

**Salit:** Very particularized, exactly. So I told him about the fight in Colorado in response to the requirement that if you leave a major party and become an independent, you have to wait 18 months to run for office. You can hardly get more granular than that. But that one tiny issue is expressive of a total cultural and structural bias that pervades the entire system. And we engage in those fights on that basis to build a base.

**Newman:** I think everything you're saying is tactically right on the money. But I have an answer to that question.

**Salit:** To his question, that if we could pick one issue, one cause, that achieves our goal...

**Newman:** I don't know that I'd call it an "issue," but I call it a slogan. If I had one slogan that I'd like us to have, it would be *He or she who writes the rules, rules*. That's my one slogan. And I'd properly footnote Douglas Muzzio and Omar Ali.\*

**Salit:** Yes, exactly.

**Newman:** Who writes the rules, rules. And who has to write the rules, in my opinion? The American people. But that's not the situation we're living in right now. I think it's our strategic perspective. Yours is our tactical perspective.

**Salit:** This is a ridiculous question, in a way, but nonetheless...

**Newman:** That's good. I'll give you a ridiculous answer.

**Salit:** What's the difference, in your view, between searching for new paradigms and being anti-paradigm?

**Newman:** Paradigms, in a way, are utilitarian. They help us to get a glimpse of totalities. But I'm looking for something more than a glimpse of totalities. Following Marx, I'm not looking to interpret the world, I'm looking to change it. That's the difference. If you want to change the world, you have to go beyond paradigms because paradigmatic understanding is still an interpretation. Changing it is an activity. For all his brilliance, I've discovered only in my later years, Donald Davidson, my mentor in philosophy at Stanford, was interested in giving a perfect interpretation of reality. That's the difference between him and me. I'm not looking to give an interpretation of any kind, including even the perfect one. I'm looking to change reality. Indeed, not even quite to change it, but as I've come to understand it, to develop it. Davidson held on to philosophy. He did it extraordinarily well in the belief that he could use it to come up, if not with a perfect interpretation, with a near-perfect interpretation. And, true to his word, he spent his life trying to do it and, in my opinion, came rather close. Came rather close, at least in the areas of reality that he was dealing with: actions and causes, intentionality and subjective human behavior. It's a very, very sophisticated interpretation that Donald has written. Yet, the body of his work, extraordinary as it is, is still an interpretation.

**Salit:** Thank you, Fred.

**Newman:** You're welcome. Thank you.

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\* Douglas Muzzio, professor of public policy at Baruch College in New York City, stated "He who makes the rules, rules" in an article by Diane Cardwell in the *New York Times* entitled "Political Party of Outsiders Has Come in From the Cold," August 27, 2002. Omar Ali, professor of history at Towson University in Baltimore, wrote an article entitled "Those Who Make the Rules, Rule" which was published in BlackElectorate.com on October 14, 2002.