



Socialism! Help Me!
Sunday, September 28, 2008

Every Sunday CUIP's president Jacqueline Salit and strategist and philosopher Fred Newman watch the political talk shows and discuss them. Here are excerpts from their dialogue on Sunday, September 28, 2008 after watching "The Chris Matthews Show," "Meet the Press," "The McLaughlin Group" and "This Week with George Stephanopoulos."

Salit: I want to start with Bill Clinton, interviewed by Tom Brokaw, in the midst of Clinton doing his Global Initiative Project. Brokaw asks him, is the economic crisis and the response to it a political game changer? And Clinton says, 'Yes, it could be.' How so? It changes the political culture. It changes the conversation. It changes the imperative for both parties to work together, for Congress and the White House to work together. Do you agree?

Newman: Well, I don't know about that. That's just speculative. We'll see. But, what it has done, it seems to me, is it has introduced the word "socialism" back into the American lexicon. Potentially, even as a good guy. Does that change the behavior patterns of the antagonists who are gathered in Washington? It probably intensifies it, if anything.

Salit: It comes back in, but at the moment it's as a "bailout" that the American people are very suspicious of.

Newman: Yes, the American people are, in general, opposed to the package, and justifiably so. I think that opposition is best understood as a reaction to the hypocrisy of this free market Republican government, which has been in power for some time, suddenly saying, *Socialism, quick, help me out!* It's a reaction to that. But, in the long term, the awareness that socialism has its place, will change the political scene somewhat. Not dramatically. After all, in Western Europe they've had a mix of socialism and capitalism for a long time. That has been the driving force behind nationalized healthcare systems in Europe, and I think it might influence the direction here in this country, too. I can see the American people saying, *If we're going to bail out Wall Street, why don't we bail out this wasteful and misdeveloped healthcare system, too?*

Salit: For example.

Newman: *Why don't we bail out a whole lot of things?* It could lead, I think, to greater public support for nationalization. Not rampant nationalization, but nationalization in sectors where the country would benefit as a result. Which might refocus the debate.

Salit: That would be welcome.

Newman: So, I don't think Clinton's correct when he says that it's going to increase the civility of what goes on with the political class. I wish that were true. I think we'll have to get rid of political parties in order to do that.

Salit: Since we're talking about introducing the word "socialism" into the public lexicon, I was struck by the range of reactions on *The McLaughlin Group*. McLaughlin asks Monica Crowley, the Wall Street conservative, about the bailout. 'Is this socialism?' he says. She's for it and she responds. But she doesn't use the word "socialism." Instead, she gives a description of the intervention. Then, a few minutes later, McLaughlin asks Mort Zuckerman, 'Is this socialism?' Zuckerman won't use the word either. He gives another description of the intervention. Finally, Rich Lowry of *The National Review* says, 'Hey, it's a socialistic style intervention to save capitalism.'

Newman: I'm always cautious about agreeing with something in which the key phrase to characterize the something is a "style." I don't think it's a style. And it's not as if the U.S. government hasn't been a major financial player in other situations, not to mention the extent to which that's true internationally. Socialism is a real thing. So, of course, is capitalism. The problem, from my point of view, lies in the fact that most everybody insists that those two things have to be understood as virtual opposites. And they're not, given the size of the world, the nature of the world, the shape of the world. Financially, as well as in all other regards. It's clear that both are present. So, I think that's a silly debate. Lowry is right to put it that way, but I also think that whole framework is ultimately silly.

Salit: I guess the more political question, as we talked about last week, is how a society or a world or a country or a community decides to choose when to use pieces of one and when to use pieces of the other.

Newman: I think there would be some agreement that in the best of all possible worlds, you use each when that benefits the society. I don't find that a very difficult question.

Salit: A lot of talk about the Friday night debate between Obama and McCain.

Newman: Yes.

Salit: There was the debate. There was the post-debate. There was the post-post-debate. I guess we were in post-post debate today. *Meet the Press* had David Axelrod and Steve Schmidt, the two chief campaign strategists, today.

Newman: Yes.

Salit: The post-post-debate can perhaps be boiled down to the use of language, to who used what words and who didn't use what words. The Obama campaign put out a commercial right after the debate about the fact that in 90 minutes of discussion, John

McCain didn't use the term "middle class" once. That's supposed to prove that McCain is out of touch with ordinary people. OK. Steve Schmidt says Barack Obama talks about Iraq, but he never uses the word "victory." That's supposed to mean he's not a patriot. Tell me, what do you see in that debate about vocabulary?

Newman: Notice that in the formulation of this question, you never reported the use of the word "idea."

Salit: Fair enough, Fred.

Newman: It would be nice if some people could talk about ideas, creative ideas, new ideas, etc.

Salit: Yes.

Newman: But, I guess we have to thank all kinds of complex factors, including the so-called "linguistic turn," which gets everybody talking about words and not about ideas. That's what disappoints me. But, given the context, both McCain and Obama see it as a close election. And no one wants to get anything wrong. So, if you don't want to get anything wrong, it's hard to talk ideas, especially interesting or new or creative ideas. Because the risk of talking about new ideas is that you can be all wrong. But, you could also be developmental and forward-moving. So, in the context of what's going on, the debates are colossally uninteresting and somewhat irrelevant. There are big things going on. What if the debate was about socialism vs. capitalism, or putting socialism and capitalism together?

Salit: Could anybody run the risk of having that debate? No.

Newman: So Obama doesn't use the word "victory." Well, one reason he doesn't use the word victory is he doesn't think there is a victory to be had in Iraq.

Salit: Then, why would he use it?

Newman: And, McCain doesn't use the term "middle class." Well, it's ludicrous to say that John McCain has no connection to middle class Americans. That's positively preposterous. What about the close to 50% of the middle class that plans, right at this moment, to vote for him?

Salit: Presumably that's a connection.

Newman: But insisting that you're only going to use language, and at that, only language that runs the least possible set of risks, as opposed to talking ideas and proposals and plans, just leads to a kind of emptiness.

Salit: Yes.

Newman: I didn't watch the debate. But, I didn't want to watch it because I was absolutely certain that it was going to wind up as it did, as you described it to me, a draw between two heavyweights. As we've been saying for a long time, the only thing to look forward to in this election is the election.

Salit: It seems to be played out, all played out.

Newman: The circumstances in the country have only changed 180 degrees. But none of the language in the debates changes.

Salit: Exactly.

Newman: It almost makes you think that if aliens invaded and took over the planet, John McCain would still be saying, *But you're not a patriot*. Hello! And Barack Obama would be saying *You have no connection to the middle class*.

Salit: Just to stay on the language thing for a moment, two references struck me. David Axelrod described McCain's relationship with the conservative Republicans as a "Faustian bargain." You don't hear that phrase a lot on the talk shows. And then John McCain described the choice that he and other legislators have when they have to vote for a bill but there are earmarks included as a "Hobson's Choice." Perhaps a small point, but I was interested that Faust and Hobson made it into the presidential debate. Of course, I had no real idea who Hobson was until I looked the term up in the Oxford English Dictionary. Tobias Hobson was a horse seller in Cambridge, in the early 1700s, who let horses out for viewing – one at a time. The prospective buyer had to either buy that horse or none. Thus Hobson's Choice.

Newman: Well, it's sort of a lesser of two evils, where in order to get one thing done, you have to also accept something that may be antithetical to what you want.

Salit: I guess in that sense, it's sort of like a Faustian bargain.

Newman: Except the Faustian bargain suggests that you did that by way of cutting a deal with the devil.

Salit: True.

Newman: The other is just the nature of the situation.

Salit: Alright, back to Bill Clinton. Brokaw pursued the record of the positive things that Bill Clinton has said about John McCain over the years. He had called him "great" at one point. And Brokaw seemed to be trying to needle him, 'Would you say the same about Barack Obama?' Ultimately, Clinton says the thing to see about Barack Obama is that 'He had a sense and a vision of what was coming, he had a sense of the political

calendar,' how things were going to unfold and he didn't just mean the dates of the primaries. He meant the motion that unfolded during the primary season. Obama has a sense of that change and a vision for the future, said Bill Clinton, and that is what ultimately qualifies him for the presidency.

Newman: You see Clinton had a Hobson's Choice.

Salit: Yes?

Newman: In this sense. Being great is a combination of a circumstance and how you respond to it. It's not just what you do. It's a synthesis of those two.

Salit: Yes.

Newman: And the only close-to-great thing that Barack Obama has done so far is to beat his wife in the primary.

Salit: Yes.

Newman: So, it's a little touchy.

Salit: I would say so. I thought he handled it well.

Newman: Clinton handles most everything well.

Salit: Good politician. Clinton pointed out that the one place in the world where America's popularity is high is in Africa where, as he said, America is seen through the prism of the Bush initiative on AIDS, the Gates initiative on malaria, his global initiative on pharmaceuticals and various other kinds of things that are being done. Clinton's point is that it's the one part of the world where America is seen as a helper and not a hurter. In other words, America is not competing for resources, geo-strategic advantage, military position, for control of wealth, and so forth. I thought that was an interesting observation, and presumably what he's arguing is that an Obama administration brings more of that kind of sensibility into the White House, rebuilding America's position in the world off of doing good things for countries as opposed to bad things.

Newman: I agree with you at one level. But, there's a touch of cynicism in your characterization.

Salit: Do you think?

Newman: I don't know that it has to be there. I think that for a long time, the world – including the United States – was irresponsibly insensitive to the plight of many of the African countries. I think that has been somewhat turned around, largely by the

philanthropic sector, but also to some extent by Bush policy. I think we would do well to chalk it up to recognizing the severity of the particular health crises – AIDS and malaria – and so on. It seems to me – maybe I’m being naïve in this, but in some respects, it rises above politics on some level. That’s good. The drug companies changed their position rather dramatically relative to pricing treatments for these diseases, for example.

Salit: Yes.

Newman: So, you can do a self-interest argument. But I don’t feel a need to be cynical about it. The nations of Africa were being ill-treated. And now they are being somewhat better treated.

Salit: True.

Newman: And I’m willing to chalk it up to Bono and Gates and Clinton and religious groups and ordinary people and the little bit of work that we and other small charities have done there. It’s the size of and nature of the disaster which I think is most motivating the transformation of the world’s posture towards Africa. The mortality statistics are ghastly. So yes, Clinton correctly points out that that’s not all that’s happening in different countries in Africa and he’s right. He’s right to point that out. But, it’s happening in a lot of countries in Africa.

Salit: One final piece off the Clinton discussion. Here’s how Clinton summarized where the presidential campaign is at. The undecideds, who tend to be independent and populist in their views, have a natural, according to Clinton, gravitation towards McCain-Palin, because of their ability to express a certain kind of independence and populism. But, ultimately the question that many of those voters are going to have to confront and deal with, is whether they feel comfortable with the level of social conservatism that comes along with that. That, he says, is ultimately going to seep in. And people will choose what they choose on that.

Newman: I certainly agree with the last part – that ultimately people will choose.

Salit: Yes.

Newman: And I don’t know what choice they’re going to make. I think the election is going to be closer than some people think. But, not that close. We’ll see. I think Obama has brought a brand of populism into this presidential as well. I guess it comes down to who you want to get your populism from. An old white guy who you kind of like, or a young black guy who you kind of like.

Salit: OK. Thanks, Fred.