

Just War, Humanitarian Intervention and Equal Regard: An Interview with Jean Bethke Elshtain

Jean Bethke Elshtain is the Laura Spelman Rockefeller Professor of Social and Political Ethics at the University of Chicago. Among her books are *Just War Against Terror: The Burden of American Power in a Violent World* (Basic Books, 2003), *Jane Addams and the Dream of American Democracy* (Basic Books, 2001), *Women and War* (Basic Books, 1987) and *Democracy on Trial* (Basic Books, 1995), which Michael Walzer called 'the work of a truly independent, deeply serious, politically engaged, and wonderfully provocative political theorist.' The interview was conducted on 1 September 2005.

Alan Johnson: Unusually for a political philosopher you have been willing to discuss the personal and familial background to your work. You have sought a voice 'through which to traverse ...particular loves and loyalties and public duties.' Can you say something about your upbringing, as my mother would have called it, and your influences, and how these have helped to form the characteristic concerns of your political philosophy?

Jean Bethke Elshtain: Well, my mother would have called it the same thing, so our mothers' probably shared a good deal. There is always a confluence of forces at work in the ideas that animate us but upbringing is critical. In my own case this involved a very hard working, down to earth, religious, Lutheran family background. I grew up in a little village of about 180 people where everybody pretty much knew everybody else. You learn to appreciate the good and bad aspects of that. There is a tremendous sense of security but you realise that sometimes people are too nosy and poke into your business. Very early on I got the sense that one has to negotiate certain things, such as what you want to be public and what you don't. I had to work out the complexities of what I was being taught as part of Christian morality, which has a very strong ethic of self-giving, while at the same time recognising that there are all kinds of shortcomings, tragedies, and evils in the world that can't be avoided. I suspect what taught me that lesson in a big way was when I got Polio at the age of 10. I was part of the last batch of Polio kids, the last big epidemic before the Salk vaccine came in. And if you are a very active athletic child, as I was, and a tomboy, and all of a sudden you are flat on your back and you can't walk, well, it does

JOHNSON | An interview with Jean Bethke Elshtain

something to you. In my case I had to reflect on the fact that things can suddenly go awry and that there are events that are outside your control and always will be. The questions become how we meet those challenges and how human beings endure.

All this is working in the background when I think about issues. For instance when I have been involved in debates about the family it is very hard for me to think of an abstract family. I think of my sisters and my brothers and my immigrant grandparents and my Aunt Martha and Aunt Mary. These are real people with their own personalities and you don't get to pick them. You are born into this world and the question is how you negotiate this and remain in relationship even if you might have some profound disagreements, at points in time. I have long appreciated the 'givenness' of a lot of what life is all about. We can't manoeuvre things just the way we want, and nor can we achieve perfection. We can make things less bad. The dictum, 'do no harm and help whenever you can' sums up the Augustinian ethic.

I had a book in my hand all the time. My mother thought some of my reading habits were very peculiar. She was not happy about some of them. I'd be walking around as a seven year old with all these books about war and sports heroes, not the kind of reading that you normally associate with little girls, at least not in that time and place.

As you get older you begin questioning your upbringing and religious background. I believed at one point that I had removed myself from it but then I realised that I had not. Then the question becomes how one reappropriates that which one has been given in an adult way, to see what can be redeemed (I think this is the way we avoid a certain bitterness and a recriminatory attitude towards our own past). I came to realise that I was very fortunate in having this very strong cast of characters in my family background. There was a lot of friction. It's the sort of thing that either helps to chisel out your own form or you get submerged. In the case of my family what seems to have happened is that a whole lot of strong characters have emerged out of this background. It worked out in a way that I know my mother self-consciously thought about. She was a person without an education. She had to quit school after the eighth grade to try to save this little bit of land that they had acquired during the great depression. And she felt the sting of that lack of education. But she certainly saw herself as someone who knowingly creating a strong family heritage for her children and grandchildren. I would say all this was part of a 'deal' and has geared me in a certain way towards the topics I take up.

The Just War Tradition

Alan Johnson: Your work has recommended the Just War tradition as a form of reflection on questions of war and violence that can guide us today as an alternative to realism and pacifism. Can you say why you find this tradition so useful?

Jean Bethke Elshtain: In a way, the question contains my response. I value the just war tradition precisely because it is an alternative to ‘realism,’ as it has come to be called, and pacifism.

Just war is a form of reflection on political life that acknowledges the realities of coercive force and, at certain times, the ethical need to deploy it to certain ends and purposes. The tradition understands, with realists of the classical sort, that the world is not simply going to yield to our good intentions. At times statesmen and stateswomen will have to reflect long and hard on bringing force to bear. The just war tradition is flexible. It emerged out of a great moral tradition that Pascal helped to give a bad name to. In casuistry you have some strong norms and principles and these are brought to bear in concrete cases. For example just war theory will strive to determine whether or not, in a particular instance, a particular norm might, given certain necessities, be temporarily overridden. Just war forces one to think through dilemmas. Do you, for example, in fighting an utterly ruthless foe like Nazi Germany, temporarily suspend that part of the just war tradition that involves the means deployed in pursuit of a war, in order to defeat the foe? It does not mean you abandon the norm, but you may knowingly and temporarily violate it. And those occasions do occur. Just war, as a tradition, is very aware of the terrible conflicts and tragedies – and they are tragic – that can face people in concrete situations. But, at the same time, just war offers an alternative to modern realism in so far as it forces us to think not just about interests but also about justice, and the rights and dignity of persons. The ethical focus is held constant.

With pacifism the differences are clear. For the pacifist there is no occasion that justifies the use of coercive force. That is a good reason (there may also be some bad ones) why pacifists do not tend to rise to the level of heads of state. Augustine would argue that to be a pacifist and to permit one’s own people to be overrun and sold into slavery is actually a terrible dereliction of the duty and vocation of the statesperson. For Augustine, there are two levels. I am not permitted to use violent force against you in the case of a conflict between us. There is a very strong ‘thou shalt not’ when you are dealing with individual persons. But on the level of states

JOHNSON | An interview with Jean Bethke Elshtain

there is a reversal. What's forbidden to the individual is reluctantly made available to the statesperson given the nature of his or her responsibilities.

The just war tradition makes available these two big categories of *jus ad bellum* [justice of going to war] and *jus in bello* [law during war]. One assesses not only the occasion for the use of force and whether it is justified, but also you have the ethical and analytical means to ongoingly evaluate what is being done in pursuit of a just war. It's really that complexity that is so useful in the just war tradition. It permits you to think about what we might call universal goods but always within the context of concrete, real world dilemmas. There is never a presupposition that you can simply abstract from a concrete situation and set up a deontological world of Kantian norms that pertain no matter what. That is just not the world we live in.

Alan Johnson: You have argued for a form of just-war thinking that is 'tethered to Augustinian realism' and which emphasizes not only moral considerations but pragmatic, prudential, 'real-world' considerations. Stressing 'human finitude, tragic contingency, the ironies of political action generally and the need for humility and patience in all – or nearly all – things' you remain wary of 'a kind of generic internationalist sentimentalism' and associated efforts to assimilate the just war tradition to cosmopolitanism and 'sentimental humanitarianism.' In your eyes the just war tradition should not be turned into 'a set of Kantian categorical imperatives.' Can I ask some questions related to these ideas? First, what does it actually mean, in practice, to tether just war thinking to Augustinian realism?

Jean Bethke Elshtain: It simply means that one keeps before oneself not an ideal of perfection as regards what one can attempt to achieve in this world but an ideal of minimally decent institutional arrangements, minimally decent states, knowing that this will never be a world of perpetual peace. But nor is it a world of perpetual war. The way Kant set it up, it's one or the other. What the just war tradition, tethered to Augustinian realism, helps one to understand is that all institutional arrangements, whether domestic or international, are provisional. Of course they are not arbitrary. Nor are they going to change on a whim. There is a lot of sturdiness in the ways people organise their lives. But you can't simply freeze the world and say 'that's it, now things are never going to change.' We have a tendency to want things to stay the way they are (or to want everything to change, once and for all, in line with an ideal that we have, and then to be frozen). Augustinian realism teaches us is that this is simply not possible.

Also, while a lot of international relations people imagine that everything is determined at a rarified structural level, Augustinianism teaches us that profound consequences flow from whether a state is a liberal constitutional state or a fascist state. And propound consequences also flow from the fact that human beings are creatures of a certain kind who have never created pacific worlds as an enduring achievement. So, the just war tradition seeks to bring ethical guidelines to bear in full recognition of just how fragile even our greatest achievements really are.

Alan Johnson: You are clearly sceptical about the possibility of building a universal culture of Kantian republics. But, this is a narrower question, do you worry that the very effort to build such a universal culture is, or can be, dangerous?

Jean Bethke Elshtain: Absolutely. This does not make me particularly popular in certain quarters. One effect of endorsing things at a certain terribly abstract level is that one is absolved from the responsibility to spell out the concrete criteria for the kind of world that could sustain those universal goods and norms, or to spell out how to reach that world. What sort of constitutions, institutions and relationships could play the role that the Kantians believe is necessary given that we live in a world characterised by ethnic revisionists, one-party dictatorships, child soldiering, murderous Jihadists, human trafficking, genocide, corruption and exploitation? You have got to confront those things on the ground and the practical ways that human beings do so are made to look puny and small by these huge meta-aspirations to build universal cultures of Kantian republics. The humanly possible work, the arduous tasks, of diplomatists, statespeople, and civil society groups – who do not accept the view that you can actually achieve this utopian vision of perpetual peace and sustain it, but who do know that there are human beings in desperate need, right now, and we have got to do something – is also minimised. The Kantian aspiration tends to minimise the importance of statecraft and the role of practical reason by human beings in sorting out their relationships. It ignores the fact that much of the dignity and purpose of human beings has been derived from their location in particular communities that have particular histories, traditions, cultures and languages. When one makes the automatic assumption that the abstract trumps the concrete, (rather than the ongoing dialectic between them) and when one discusses everything at the abstract level, and says ‘that’s what we need,’ well, then the discussion of how one could possibly get there, and how one could sustain things once one got there, is always so thin that it is entirely unpersuasive.

JOHNSON | An interview with Jean Bethke Elshtain

Alan Johnson: I think one of the most interesting and important aspects of your writing is your critical probing of the contemporary meaning, use, and mis-use of the just war tradition. You have identified a series of standing dangers that we will face when we use the just war tradition, dangers that can ‘lull our critical faculties to sleep.’ In the face of these dangers you have stressed ‘the somber realities of intervention including rueful recognition of unintended consequences and limits to what our power can accomplish.’ I’ve given three of these dangers the names ‘hauling and shelving,’ ‘triumphalism,’ and ‘blundering.’ I would like to invite you to say something about each in turn.

You have been critical of ‘hauling and shelving.’ For instance, you wrote ‘If just war thinkers are serious about justice, this tradition of thought should not be hauled out on various rhetorical or ceremonial occasions and then shelved once the rhetorical or political moment has passed.’ Noting the ‘health catastrophes faced by the Iraqi public,’ you have written ‘If just war is evoked, then those evoking it should stay within the framework they have endorsed.’ And you noted that during the 1991 Persian Gulf War ‘just war considerations fell off the radar screen once hostilities ceased.’ So, how serious is this problem of hauling and shelving and what can we do about it?

Jean Bethke Elshtain: This is an ongoing problem. There are many examples one could give when the just war tradition has either been ‘hauled out’ or ‘shelved.’ We really have to hold people to account when they employ just war criteria at the beginning of a conflict but then, during the course of the conflict, allow those criteria to fade into the background. Whether true or not, this ‘hauling and shelving’ gives the impression that the invocation of the just war criteria was, in the first place, a rhetorical ploy. You have a responsibility to ongoingly evaluate what’s going on during the conflict in light of the framework that you used to justify the use of force. So, to take the Persian Gulf War of 1991, the first President Bush talked clearly about issues of justice at the beginning of the conflict. I do believe that during the conflict there were moments when just war criteria were applied, such as the stopping altogether of the strafing of fleeing Iraqis, at the end of the conflict, when they were not in a position to fight back. Fine, that’s good. But then there was an immediate reversion to plain old-fashioned national interest. As soon as the military operation ceased you had the uprising of the Shia in the South and the terrible plight of the Kurds. Though we did provide some assistance to the Kurds it was under the rubric of our ‘national interest.’ And it was said that in light of that national interest we could not provide active assistance to the Shia, a tormented

community under Saddam, Well, the price paid by the Iraqi Shia was horrible. I don't think anyone knows for sure how many were slaughtered by Saddam in the aftermath of the Persian Gulf War (estimates run from 150,000 to 250,000). That's the sort of thing I'm talking about. You incur a very serious responsibility when you intervene. People place their hopes and aspirations in your hands, as the Shia and the Kurds did. You have a responsibility to at least try to explain to them within the framework you have invoked in the first instance, why it is that you can't do what they would like you to do in that particular circumstance, if you don't believe you can do it.

Now, within the just war tradition, there are certainly provisions for pragmatic considerations. If we decide we are going to do this (provide active military assistance to the Shia rebellion) we will ask ourselves 'is there a probability of success?' There is a hard-line practical dimension. After all, you might blunder into a situation and make it worse rather than better. But, minimally, government officials had a responsibility of saying 'look, justice is on their side against this murderous thug, but we don't see how we can move into this situation without doing the following,' and then list the possible dire outcomes or worst case scenarios. And this should be done not as an excuse but as hard-core considerations of the limits to your own ability to transform that situation. 'Hauling and shelving,' as you are putting it, is deeply problematic.

Alan Johnson: You have written that during the 1991 Persian Gulf War 'the rhetoric of justification veered dangerously close toward a crusade and in the direction of moral triumphalism, with Hussein called a Hitler for our time ... this rhetorical upping of the ante points to a temptation in, or related to, the just war tradition, namely, the way in which it slides over into crusades at one end of a continuum...' Now, obviously, at that time the word 'crusade' did not carry the meaning...

Jean Bethke Elshtain: The word did not have the same valence, no. I meant a moral crusade, not the historic crusades, of course. One really reads that differently now, doesn't one? When General Eisenhower wrote 'Crusade in Europe,' he meant a moral crusade against fascism. Clearly, when President Bush let slip "crusade" in response to a question, very soon after 9/11, he meant a crusade of that sort against fanatical Islamism. But that got taken to mean the Crusades and then all the historic pent-up stuff – after 1000 years! – kicked in. I imagine in my book a group of Christians justifying something, whether negative or positive, on the grounds that it is "just like" something that happened 1000 years ago. We would regard that

JOHNSON | An interview with Jean Bethke Elshtain

as a bit off, to put it mildly. But given the context in which we are living, one does have to pay attention as even the most benign references can be twisted to mean something sinister.

Alan Johnson: Absolutely. Do you think that sliding over into triumphalism remains a danger?

Jean Bethke Elshtain: I think it always is. I may have overdone some of my own rhetoric in talking about the rhetoric used in 1991 but what worried me about the reference to Saddam as Hitler is that the war against Nazism was a total war and, clearly, in 1991 there was no need to fight anything like a total war. I worried that the analogy invited a totalistic response which was not what was needed, or intended. Rhetoric often gives us an unwarranted sense of our own capacity to manipulate things in the direction we desire, as if our power had such undeniable efficacy that we can do pretty much anything we want. I do believe that is an ongoing danger. Politicians who lead us into a war for, let's assume good reasons, also have to alert us to the fact that lives are going to be lost and that events may not turn out exactly the way we want them to. They should alert us to the very real limits and dangers.

Alan Johnson: Do you think that when President Bush declared 'mission accomplished' on the aircraft carrier USS Abraham Lincoln – even accepting the legitimate joy at the fall of Saddam and the Ba'ath – there was an element of triumphalism about it? And maybe an element of believing in the 'undeniable efficacy' of our power?

Jean Bethke Elshtain: Yes. I'm quite sure that the administration, looking back, rather rue the fact that they were premature, at best. Perhaps, as they argued subsequently, when this became controversial, the men and women on that particular ship had accomplished their mission. If you listen to that speech, which I did (it was a moving occasion with all those young men and women lined up on that ship to hear the commander in chief speak) then 'mission accomplished' meant 'we did the job and the worst is over.' But we now know that the worst was not over. You should not proclaim victory too soon. One reason people were tempted to do that was the ease with which the US and its allies moved through the desert and into Baghdad and sealed the fate of Saddam. That ease gave way to a moment of elation that was unwarranted. Within the just war tradition there is always this warning voice that says 'don't assume a fixed achievement.' The aftermath of an intervention is often more difficult than the intervention itself.

Alan Johnson: You have written that ‘The just war tradition adds a cautionary note about overreach. Be certain before you intervene, even in a just cause, that you have a reasonable chance of success. Don’t barge in and make a bad situation worse.’ About Kosovo you wrote ‘We blundered into a strategy without much consideration of the likely reaction to our bombs, namely a deepening of terror and expulsions. Hence there was no preparation for the influx of desperate humanity to neighbouring countries and regions, their plight made doubly desperate by lack of food, water, medicine, and shelter at their points of departure.’ Of the intervention in Somalia you wrote ‘the tragedy was that the American commitment was not sufficient to restore minimal civic peace.’ Many commentators, including many inside the State Department, whose *Iraq Plan* was shelved, have – even while acknowledging the terrible difficulties created by the ex-Saddamist and Islamists – despaired at the pre-invasion planning and post-invasion reconstruction in Iraq. Why does the west do so much ‘blundering?’

Jean Bethke Elshtain: I suspect that it’s not just the West that blunders but human beings that blunder. But you have hit on something that we in the West need to spend more time reflecting on. Many – including some of the scholars who are in opposition to the current policy of the Bush administration, but who nevertheless place their hopes along these lines – believe that through the achievement of some kind of constitutional government in places that have not known such, one could achieve a situation in which less of the horrible stuff that I identified earlier goes on. They see that good end, and believe that there is a universal yearning for the dignity that comes with freedom (don’t get me wrong, that has been one of our great gifts to humankind, one of our great achievements, and I would never downplay nor be cynical about that). And, well, all this may lead to a tendency to blunder, as I’ve called it, and you’ve called it. In this frame of mind one can tend to think that the response of others will be so positive to, for instance, getting rid of a Saddam, that one imagines post-war problems bring smoothed out by human beings spontaneously engaging one another and working out their new and better institutional arrangements. Well, it’s a lot more difficult than that. A lot of people have pointed out how long and hard was the occupation in Germany after the war. And in Japan. Our blundering is related to an impatience. We want this Good Thing and believe it Should Happen. And then when it doesn’t happen immediately we start to engage in recriminations and become more cynical about what was going on in the first place. There is a western ethos about good intentions carrying the day

JOHNSON | An interview with Jean Bethke Elshtain

that invites an insufficient conjuring with the more mordant possibilities once you have committed yourself to the use of force.

Clinton and Kosovo

Alan Johnson: Many in Europe look to the Kosovo intervention as the exemplar of humanitarian interventionism. By contrast you have been sharply critical from a just war perspective, of ‘the Clinton doctrine’ as it was applied in Kosovo, saying it was ‘no way to run a foreign policy’ (‘Just War and Humanitarian Intervention,’ *Ideas* Vol.8, no.2, 2003). Can you say something about why you were so critical of the Clinton policy in Kosovo?

Jean Bethke Elshtain: There were really two reasons. One, during the Clinton years there was a tendency to lurch from problem to problem without coherence. Problems were taken up seriatim. Two, with regard to Kosovo, what troubled me was that the Clinton folks seemed to have discovered a new norm of ‘combatant immunity’ rather than non-combatant immunity. President Clinton made it very clear he wanted a zero casualty war. No US soldiers were to die. And that was why we committed ourselves, through NATO, to a strategy that involved reliance on air power. Talk about naïve good intentions! The view inside the Clinton administration was that Milošević would fold in three days, or five days, a week, tops. They were stunned when that didn’t happen. And then they were desperately searching around for new targets for the air campaign.

President Clinton said in advance that we would not put any boots on the ground in Kosovo. That troubled me very much because one of the things that the just war tradition teaches us is that if this is a worthwhile cause, justified because the outcome of this war will be at least a marginally more just world than pertained before the intervention, then you have got to bear costs that are not just monetary. You must be prepared to risk your own blood. We know of course that the bombing campaign was not effective in any way in stopping the Serb paramilitaries on the ground and that the expulsions really proceeded apace. To signal in advance that we would not field soldiers was a terrible mistake, politically and ethically. We were more concerned about our combatants than about their non-combatants and that is a strong violation of one of the most important *jus in bello* requirements. I didn’t see too many people expressing this concern, even within the just war camp, and that bothered me too. Many took the view that, as this was an intrinsically worthwhile thing to do, we should just be quiet about any misgivings.

Alan Johnson: You were critical also of the rhetoric used by President Clinton in explaining the war to the American public and the likely settlement that would result. You seem very impatient with this kind of rhetoric.

Jean Bethke Elshtain: He imagined an instant multinational well-functioning democracy in which problems would be sorted out with relative ease. But, as we know, there are still folks on the ground trying to enforce this very delicate 'peace.' One of the after-effects was that the Kosovars engaged in some of their own ethnic cleansing. Once again we were not prepared for that either. Assuming a template (in this case the US, with its really extraordinary pluralism and diversity) could be plunked down there was way too much to expect in the immediate aftermath, especially after the kind of campaign that we conducted. The US has had over 200 years to work on that template.

The principle of equal regard

Alan Johnson: You have suggested the principle of *caritas* or 'equal regard' as the basis for international justice, as a 'goad to action' and as 'one part of a more complex set of reasons to act.' (see 'International Justice as Equal Regard and the Use of Force,' *Ethics & International Affairs*, Volume 17, No. 2). Could you say something about equal regard: what you mean by it, the ways in which it might form the basis for international justice, and how it might impact on policy?

Jean Bethke Elshtain: One of the things that hit me when I was writing *Just War Against Terror* was the inaction in Rwanda. Some horrible situations in which people are being tormented and tortured and killed, rise to the level of our attention, while others – one thinks of the ongoing tragedy in Darfur – do not. I was pondering why that was so. In the process I decided that we don't seem to be applying with the moral force that we should the principle of equal regard for persons as such. This sounds very Kantian but the way I seek to work it out is not in a strong deontological way, but in the far more messy way that you and I have been talking about.

Beginning with that principle of equal regard, faced with a terrible situation, an enormity, one is obliged to think about what is happening, and to conclude that the people dying are human beings and as such equal in moral regard to us. So we are then obliged to consider this horrible situation and think about whether there is something we can do to stop it. Would the use of force make a difference in this

JOHNSON | An interview with Jean Bethke Elshtain

situation? Minimally you are obliged to do that. Perhaps the use of force would not. But one must not just evade the question. Another minimal requirement is that if you have decided that you can't intervene you are obliged to explain why that is, in light of the principle of equal moral regard.

So, think about the Rwandan situation. I've talked to Tony Lake, someone I know rather well, and who was President Clinton's foreign policy advisor. He says the thing he most regrets was what they didn't do. Former President Clinton has said the same thing. By refusing to even use the word genocide, even though it was an appropriate word, and by describing what was going on in Rwanda as just one of those tribal conflicts that they have in Africa all the time, the moral issue was never really engaged. We all know the result of that. Now, I am not claiming that, had the principle of equal moral regard been in place, the United States and its allies could have effectively intervened. I am saying that that is something that should have been considered very seriously and explicitly. That was not done.

Alan Johnson: Is there not a danger that the principle of equal moral regard, when it is combined with America's power and responsibility in the world, could produce what David Rieff has called 'perpetual wars of altruism?'

Jean Bethke Elshtain: Well, I don't think there is any doubt that it's a danger. But there are ways to guard against it. If the principle is functioning in the way I am arguing it should, then it would force those who can bring force to bear with some degree of efficacy – like the US – to consider how else (given we are involved in other places and we are stretched thin) to meet its responsibilities. What diplomatic power or 'soft power' can be used? How can we catalyse other forces, agencies, and institutions to be more effective and develop their capacity to deal with what's happening? How can we hone their ability to do so? The principle of equal moral regard makes one think about what effective ways are available to prevent the worst from happening.

There are always going to be low-level conflicts in which lives will be lost, and I am not thinking about these when I talk of intervention. I am thinking about catastrophes that violate in the most extreme way the principle of equal moral regard. When the big principles are at stake – the ones we were supposed to have made a universal commitment to in the aftermath of World War Two, such that people are not to be slaughtered simply because of who they are – then in order to maintain some commitment to a world of minimally decent states one is obliged

to evaluate what can be done in those circumstances. While we can't do it in this interview, I would say that it would be reasonable to ask me to spell out the criteria for what counts as 'minimally decent' and what threshold conditions obtain such that armed intervention becomes necessary to uphold equal moral regard. That would be a real challenge to my argument and it's one that I hope to take up in the future.

Seeing Islamism Plain

Alan Johnson: Perhaps the most important claim of *Just War Against Terror*, as I read it, was that many responses to 9/11 were simply (this is my term) ignorant. As you put it, the threat is chronically misdescribed. What is the nature of the threat?

Jean Bethke Elshtain: The threat – and this is one reason why it is mis-described – flows from a particularly virulent form of Islam. That is why we call it Islamism. The threat does not come from those who have embraced the religion as faithful practitioners. Islamism is a totalising ideology in the same way that Stalinism and Nazism were totalising ideologies. The Islamists mean it! They are not simply 'using' the language of Jihad. When they say that all Americans and Jews must be slaughtered whenever you find them they believe this. The ideology is an animating force. One form of misdescription occurs when people say 'well, that is what they are saying, but what is really going on is the following...' and then they go on to ignore completely the self-understanding of the Islamist terrorists. If one is convinced, as I am, that what drives the Islamist terrorists is a virulent fanatical reading of a religious tradition, a turning of that tradition into an instrument that justifies any slaughter, including slaughter of non-combatants, to achieve a particular utopian end (the restoration of the Caliphate) then one has to take that as seriously as, belatedly, we took Nazi ideology.

Paul Berman's book (*Terror and Liberalism*, 2003) in which he shows the connection between Islamism, and its early origins in the Muslim Brotherhood, and the totalitarian European ideologies of the 20th century, is very persuasive. Any characterisation of Islamist terrorism that does not come to terms with that is really a misdescription. But, unfortunately, many on the left have become accustomed to describing the driving force of history as primarily a cluster of economic considerations. Justice and injustice are lodged in that place, rather than in some of the other issues that I have been taking about. Hence, their culpable naivety about these issues. Of course one could agree with my description of the

JOHNSON | An interview with Jean Bethke Elshtain

threat but disagree with particular aspects of the war on terrorism. That's clearly the case. But what I have been very vexed by is the widespread and extraordinary insouciance concerning the nature of the threat itself.

Responses on the Left

Alan Johnson: You have been very critical of some of the responses on the left, broadly defined, to 9/11. When you claimed some of those responses were akin to the behaviour of the 'Humanists of Oran,' who appear in Albert Camus's novel, *The Plague*, what are you getting at?

Jean Bethke Elshtain: I have loved Camus since I was 17 or 18 and I think *The Plague* is one of the great novels that came out of World War Two. What struck me was Camus's far more Augustinian vision (he had written a masters thesis on Augustine, spent a lot of time struggling with Augustine, and I suspect that formed part of the backdrop of his own vision). The 'humanists' of Oran, in the novel, are those who can step on a plague-ridden rat that is dying at their feet and still says 'there are no rats here.' Today, while a deadly threat comes from a murderous ideology we hear the same response: 'there are no rats here.' Actually we hear 'If there is a rat, it's America.' The idea is that our foreign policy is producing blowback and if our foreign policy changed this would stop. For Camus the 'humanists' of Oran are people who refuse to peer into the heart of darkness.

Alan Johnson: If, in the last question, we dealt with denial, this one concerns retreat. When you urged people to spurn the 'the sanctuary of private virtuousness' and embrace the model of Bonhoeffer's 'Dirty Hands' what were you getting at?

Jean Bethke Elshtain: Bonhoeffer was the brilliant young German Lutheran theologian who became part of the anti-Nazi resistance and of the conspiracy to assassinate Hitler. This was a very difficult thing for him to do because it is the intentional taking of a human life. But he finally made the determination that one is obliged to ask the question 'what is to come' and act in light of the answer. One can't only focus on your own goodness but one is obliged to focus on the concrete situation and ask 'what is to come?' And he had seen enough evidence of what the Nazi regime represented and that what was to come was even worse. So he decided one had to get out of the sanctuary of private virtuousness and beyond a [purely] internal resistance in which one wraps oneself in a cocoon of one's own moral purity. And I fear that kind of response – virtuous people who retreat into a sanctuary

where they are morally pure and others are morally impure – can be seen today. Bonhoeffer's recognition of 'dirty hands' is the recognition that one is always going to be stained by the world And those who retreat into the sanctuary of private virtuousness are, despite what they may believe, culpable. There is a culpability of non-action. It is better for people to try to do something to stop a horrible thing. Perhaps they will blunder at it, and not get the job done. But far better that than personal retreat.

Alan Johnson: To take this further, can I quote something you said before 9/11 (at a Nation symposium on the public intellectual) and ask whether or not you think that what you discussed there is implicated in some of the left responses to 9/11. I should say this is not the dominant tone in which you have discussed responses to 9/11, but I think it is present. You bemoaned "...the triumph of the therapeutic culture, with its celebration of a self that views the world solely through the prism of the self, and much of the time a pretty "icky" self at that. It's a quivering sentimental self that gets uncomfortable very quickly, because this self has to feel good about itself all the time. Such selves do not make arguments, they validate one another." Do you think that this self is implicated in some of the left responses to 9/11?

Jean Bethke Elshtain: Yes, unfortunately I do. Let me give you an example, one which makes me particularly unhappy. Liberal Protestantism uses a rhetoric that is laced through with this goopy good will. There is a lot of breast beating about 'we are the ones who have done this.' A lot of the talk is of us 'getting right with ourselves.' That therapeutic dimension has crept into our religious discourse. The upshot of that is that you have absolute agreement among all these religious groups – Presbyterian Church USA, Methodists – on pretty much every serious political issue, and it begins from this notion of the all-importance of 'feeling right with ourselves,' feeling our own goodness.

There has been an infusion of the therapeutic culture into our political life. There was an example during the Clinton scandal. Whatever one's view of that, the language that came forth from some of the President's defenders concerning, shall we say, his somewhat predatory way with women, was of this kind: 'we need to give him space within which he can become more mature about these things.' I was in a discussion with a very important Protestant ethicist who viewed Clinton's behaviour as a matter of private goodness or badness. The American people, he said, needed to give President Clinton a 'chance to grow up' and, you know, cease to be a 16 year-old boy. I replied that it was not my impression that we elect Presidents

JOHNSON | An interview with Jean Bethke Elshtain

in order to watch them get out of adolescence. There is a particular office that they hold. There are responsibilities of that office.

The inability of the liberal-left Protestant institutions to think of political issues as anything other than as a private saga of internal well-being was overwhelmingly striking to me. This leads to sentimentalism and the over-personalisation of political issues. It also leads to the valorisation of the victim. Rather than thinking concretely about situations on the ground one is invited to immediately identify one set of people as 'victims' and another set of people as 'victimisers,' and to treat this latter group as pure. But nobody can claim that kind of purity. Sometimes victims are capable of doing horrible things. This is really not the way the issue needs to be joined. One can try to stop situations of victimisation without locating in the victim some saving principle that will redeem everything. The therapeutic culture can be seen at work in American political discourse at just about every level. It's quite striking.

Iraq

Alan Johnson: Do you think the invasion of Iraq was justifiable within the terms of just war theory? I am thinking of your 2001 article 'Just War and Humanitarian Intervention' which argued that though the invasion and brutalization of Kuwait did justify intervention, 'the injustices of Saddam's reign in and of themselves did not constitute grounds for forceful intervention, not within the just war framework.' Do you think 9/11 changed that, or, more precisely, that the threat of the coming together of al-Qaeda with WMD via failing or rogue states changed that?

Jean Bethke Elshtain: Clearly my view altered about whether the threshold had been reached at which intervention to deal with the injustices of Saddam and the Ba'athist regime would be justifiable. There were two considerations. One, of course, you have very astutely identified. 9/11 changed the context. And in the just war tradition one has to take account of alterations in context. You can't just say 'I've got my categorical imperative and I'm going to hold to it even if the heavens fall.' Two, I started to pay a lot more attention to what was going on in Saddam's Iraq. It had not been the primary focus of my attention and I started to study it, read a lot and I had the opportunity to talk to some Iraqis in exile and learn more about what they have suffered and about the extent of the horrific treatment of groups of people in Iraq. All of that came together in my thinking about the threat represented by the Saddam Hussein regime.

Also, rogue and failed states are clearly a problem in a world threatened by determined terrorists. First, because of the advantage that these entities can take of failed states. Second, because of the direct aid and comfort they can receive from rogue states, the dynamic is altered. And I believed, as did the CIA and the intelligence agencies of the western countries, that there really was a problem with WMD. Saddam had not accounted for them. He was stiffing the United Nations. Maybe the full story of WMD has not been told. Maybe it never will be. I now think that Saddam was probably keeping up the pretence – a very dangerous game – that Iraq did have WMD in reserve. This was more for the purpose of internal control than anything else. Finally his bluff was called.

Alan Johnson: What is your view of developments in Iraq since the invasion? St Augustine wrote ‘Peace and War had a competition in cruelty. And peace won the prize.’ In the case of Iraq could it be said that ‘war won the prize?’ Have developments caused you to doubt whether the invasion was justified?

Jean Bethke Elshtain: Obviously, along with others who believe the invasion was justified along just war lines, I am saddened and horrified by the nature of the insurgency, and the determination of these people – who include former Ba’athists and Jihadists coming in from outside Iraq – to prevent the emergence of anything like a minimal decent state in post-Saddam Iraq. It makes the story a more difficult one and more poignant. Think of those millions of Iraqis who braved the threat of death to vote and express their desire for the minimally decent state I have been talking about. War has perhaps temporarily won the prize but I don’t believe it will over the long run.

Let me say also that I am really struck by the different perceptions one gets depending on whether your exclusive source of information is the mass media – TV and newspapers – or whether you have some independent sources of information available to you, I am fortunate in that serving on the board of the National Endowment for Democracy, every three months we get briefings from people who are on the ground and are going back and forth to Baghdad. They describe the labour union effort, the women’s groups, the rebuilding of schools, the rise of a free press. The tragedy is that people continue to work for these good ends in a terrible security environment, especially in the so-called ‘Sunni triangle.’ I have not changed my mind about whether the invasion was justified. I believe that more good than ill has already come from the invasion and more will certainly come when the dust has settled completely.

JOHNSON | An interview with Jean Bethke Elshtain

I regret that more folks have not signed on to help out in this cause. I thought that perhaps the powerful sight of all those Iraqis lining up to vote would soften some hearts and people would say ‘boy, we’ve got to give these people a chance.’ But the election seems not to have done that. I see a resentment at work among some intellectuals in the US and Europe. It’s not just that they are indifferent, or that they feel the invasion was not justified, but that they are really hoping for a calamity. They want the US to fail. They want a catastrophe in order to say ‘we told you so’ and in order to justify their demonic view of George Bush and Tony Blair. There is a sickly undercurrent there: looking for and revelling in failure. That is grotesque. And it is a denial of the very principle of equal moral regard. If you have some sense of equal moral regard you have got to take seriously what happened on January 30. The Jihadists put out the message that they were going to blow up voters at polling stations. What stories of courage there are! One voter puts on his best clothes and does all his prayers because he figures there is a pretty good chance he will die today. But he was determined to go and vote. The ink-stained finger was a mark of human dignity and for people to be incapable of responding to that – whatever they thought of the invasion – is reprehensible.

American power and American responsibility

Alan Johnson: You have argued that in light of the USA’s commitment to moral dignity and political equality – embodied in founding documents, jurisprudence and political institutions – and in light of the status of the US as the sole superpower, and in light of the nature of the threat, the US ‘must become the leading guarantor of a structure of stability and order in a violent world.’ You proposed a new paradigm of ‘interdiction and intervention.’ What is the role of America in the world?

Jean Bethke Elshtain: Let me tell you a story. Someone argued that I had embraced the ‘Spiderman ethic,’ meaning that I have cast the US as a Superhero and that this is to take away all moral ambiguity. I wrote back that, with all due respect, he doesn’t know anything about Spiderman! Spidey, in fact, is a morally conflicted hero. Does his loyalty to his family and his girlfriend take precedence over his duty to protect the innocent from harm? How can he handle his multiple responsibilities? Spidey is always in danger of stretching himself too thin. He is always a little exhausted. He is always worried about whether he is doing the right thing. I chose Spiderman rather than Superman precisely because I wanted to get at that aspect of difficulty and torment attached to power and responsibility.

The US plays a certain role by default at this point in time. It's not a question of whether we are a superpower or not. It's a question of what kind of superpower we are. And that's just a matter of fact. I am not assuming this will be the shape of the world for ever, but it is right now. The issue is what are the responsibilities of the United States in light of our power, and in light of the fact that we can play a role that others, at this point in time, cannot? What are the criteria that might be brought to bear to guide the use of that power? Do we say 'well, we stand for one thing domestically but internationally its hard core realpolitik all the way?' Or do we fall into a messianic mode, a strong Wilsonianism, and try to remake the world and create perpetual peace? Or do we try to struggle with some posture that is neither overreach nor withdrawal?

Just War Against Terror: replying to critics

Alan Johnson: It has been said by Edward Wittman (H-Peace, H-Net Reviews, Jan.2004) that your book *Just War Against Terror* did not exhibit enough suspicion of US geopolitical motives and intentions. How do you respond to that charge? And Douglas M. Brattebo (Journal of Military Ethics, Vol.4, No.1, 2005) has claimed that you have been distinctly cool about the role the UN or NGOs could play in the war on terror and that this is a rather serious error as a multilateral approach would be much more likely to succeed. Can you comment?

Jean Bethke Elshtain: I don't think I have to belabour further my criticisms of the UN and its inefficacy (and, as we are learning more and more, its corruptness). Does representation and transparency pertain in some of these international bodies? How do we hold them accountable? I have nothing against multilateralism but what kind of multilateralism, under what sort of rubric, to what ends? Tough questions are rarely raised of the UN and NGOs in the same way that they are raised – and rightly so – in reference to states. People really should be more critical of the failures of multilateralism. I mean you have been asking me a lot about the weaknesses of my approach, probing the possible dangers inherent in it, and those questions are entirely appropriate. But somehow there is the view in some circles that when someone says 'the UN' or 'NGOs' then we are supposed to stand up and cheer! Critical acuity stops at that point. That is one reason I am cool, as you put it, about some of the easy evocation of multilateralism and universalism as an alternative to states, and particularly to the action of the United States. The UN has not proved to be effective at all in situations of crimes against humanity. It has failed to prevent them ripening and it has failed to prevent the horrors when they break out into the open.

JOHNSON | An interview with Jean Bethke Elshtain

Alan Johnson: Nicholas Rengger (“Just a war against terror? Jean Bethke Elshtain’s burden and American power,” *International Affairs*, 80, 1, 2004) suggests that you have implicitly reversed some of your positions on just war and the limits of politics. In some of your pre 9/11 work you stressed the limits of all politics, pointed out that the use of force risks bringing all kinds of strife in its train, and worried about ‘the seductive lure of imperial grandiosity.’ Rengger argues that *Just War Against Terror* has ‘more than a touch of “imperial grandiosity” about it.’ He claims all power corrupts, that the US can be no different, and so to adopt a self-identity as an indispensable nation charged with looking after global stability and order – ‘the permanent agent of the global common good’ is how he characterises your view – is virtually to guarantee bad old imperialism. In an arresting image he suggests you are inviting the USA / Gandalf to pick up the ring of power when you should be urging it to give it to Frodo to cast into the fires of Mordor. You are unwittingly helping Sauron, the Dark Lord, seems to be the charge! Can you comment?

Jean Bethke Elshtain: I love *Lord of the Rings* but unfortunately the Ring of Power is never going to be cast into the fires of Mordor. It may be at the end-time, at some eschatological point, but not before. And I don’t believe anyone can just seize the ring and hold it. Power circulates. No one permanently has superordinate power. It just does not work like that in this world. Look, my approach is very historical. At this point in time the US can’t help but be a superpower. The question is how one exercises that power. Do we exercise it with restraint and responsibility? Do we try to hoard it, letting the world go to hell while looking after ourselves? Or do we spread it too thin? And so on. As powerful as the Lord of the Rings image is it is not apt because it assumes that which can never be, i.e. the getting rid of the Ring of Power permanently, and the arrival at a new Age of the King, as Tolkien has it, with centuries of peace and generosity, and all the rest. Would it were so! But, again, that is just not the world that we live in.

To the extent that I have not been careful enough to bring some of my previous writings into *Just War Against Terror* I could plead guilty. I guess I was assuming that readers had some sense of the deep background arguments. I’ll try to be more careful in future to indicate that although I do believe that the United States can be a force for justice, and that to try is part of its responsibility, at this point, I also know that there are always dangers in overreach. I am not assuming that one hundred years from now the United States will still be in this position. But for an American citizen, especially, the question has to be ‘what kind of superpower are we,’ not whether we are.

On religion and 'democratic dispositions'

Alan Johnson: The dominant liberal European view is that religion, in the USA particularly, is a force for, and of, the right. Your work, for me, is very interesting in its inversion of that notion. You find Christianity sustaining certain 'habits of the heart,' certain 'democratic dispositions' that are one basis of 'democratic civil society.' Can you explain?

Jean Bethke Elshtain: The reference point for 'habits of the heart' is, of course, Alexis de Tocqueville and his observation in *Democracy in America* (1835-40) that the strong religiosity he found in the United States fed into civic instincts and fuelled an intense engagement in civic life. He offers strong examples of the direct conduit from one to the other. And we continue to see this. Empirical social science has shown us that people in the US who are regular church-goers are more likely to be involved in civic activities of all sorts. This does not surprise me one bit. There is a constant hammering of the principle that you are your brothers' and sisters' keeper and that you are obliged to give of yourself. Not just to write cheques but to get out there and put your shoulders to the wheel in a variety of ways.

Many liberal Europeans – this strikes me every time I am in Europe – have a strange view about what's going on over here with religion. I was at a meeting at which someone had written a paper claiming Timothy McVeigh was a 'Christian Terrorist.' Where on earth did the person get that idea? McVeigh was a lapsed Catholic who spurned Christianity, thinking it fuelled weakness. He had adopted a libertarian militia attitude which has nothing to do with religion. His last will and testament was to repeat a really awful poem, *Invictus* by William Ernest Henley, which I had to read in high school. 'I am the master of my fate / I am the captain of my soul, blah, blah, blah.' It's an anti-Christian poem. McVeigh wrote it out in hand as his last will and testament. He became a 'Christian terrorist' because he was right wing and because, to some, right wing equals Christian.

There is an extraordinary level of plain ignorance about the variety of forms of religion in America. The representation of Evangelical Christians as ignorant southern bumpkins, barely out of the Neanderthal stage, is wrong. In fact when you look at studies of Evangelicals they are on average better educated than the average American. And since the last election there have been people calling for the mobilization of left-wingers who identify with religion. Of course if you try to use religion instrumentally it's not going to work very well, but the fact remains that

JOHNSON | An interview with Jean Bethke Elshtain

for all the mainline churches in American their politics are to the left. The story of American religion is pretty darn complicated.

Judging

Alan Johnson: Unfashionably, perhaps, your work stresses the importance of acts of discernment, distinguishing these from acts of prejudice or malice. You have called ‘the capacity to make judgements’ an ‘ethical issue of the gravest sort’ and have criticised the ‘Oprah Winfreyization of American life’ (and of parts of the academy), saying that judging is now ‘at a nadir among us.’ In fact you have written of ‘the wholesale – or nearly so – abandonment of the faculty of judging or discerning at work in late 20th century America.’ As I read your work a certain kind of judging, or an ‘authentic moment of judging,’ lies ‘at the heart of what it means to be a self-respecting human subject in a community of other equally self-respecting subjects.’ Can you say something about what you take authentic judging to be, what it involves, the differences between it and prejudice, and talk about why you think authentic judging is so important for politics, (and perhaps particularly for how we respond to terrorism?)

Jean Bethke Elshtain: First, I relate this abandonment of judging to the therapeutisation that we talked of earlier, for which the main thing is to validate one another and feel good about yourself rather than to engage in certain discernments and articulate them (which, of course, may not make you the most popular person on the block, or in the department, by the way). For me, authentic judging is our capacity to consider alternatives, to analyse what these alternatives involve, to ask whether there is a moral dimension involved, what it is, and then to make a determination. The kinds of determination we are called upon to make will vary depending on the office we hold. If I am a teacher I am surely obliged to make discernments of all sorts in my classroom. If I am a political leader or a human rights activist, similarly. For instance, is this a case of genocide or a ‘typical African tribal conflict?’ Judging, Arendt argues, is absolutely central to politics because politics involves practical reason and the weighing of alternatives.

In the response to terrorism, clearly what is at stake is our judgment of the threat, what it represents, and how we can best respond to it. In some of the maudlin, self-flagellating reactions of some Americans to terrorism we see a failure to judge. The mea culpa is a refusal to judge. And this refusal to judge with an appropriate seriousness is a problem in every area of American life. Take American families.

Democratiya 1 | Summer 2005

There is a vast literature now that talks about the generation of kids raised by parents who thought that there was no way to vindicate and teach certain moral norms. The upshot has not been a pretty one as far as what has happened to the kids. Today's parents are far more willing to insist on articulating certain limits, holding children to them, and to insist on consequences. This not to stifle the kids but precisely in order that they can grow up to be adults with the capacity for decent self-realisation.

Judging becomes most important when it pertains to a way of life in common, with what's happening to a whole people, with what's happening inside the country and with what the country is doing outside its borders.

Alan Johnson: Much modern culture takes a pride in expunging shame. But, contrarily, you worry about shamelessness. You have written that 'knowing shame and being capable of judgement are central to, indeed constitutive of, a democratic capacity for self-governance.' Why?

Jean Bethke Elshtain: The notion of shame has to do with discernment and limits: what should be displayed in a public way and what should not? Can we really cross every border with impunity? Milan Kundera has a wonderful segment in *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting* pointing out that we do so at our peril. Some of our best writers have written precisely about what happens to human beings when they decide that everything can be shown, everything can be said, and that all boundaries and borders are part of an old repressive regime to be striped away. It can lead to terrible cruelties.

Also there was a kind of shamelessness about some of the horrific regimes of the 20th century. What people may have been thinking in private, about, say, the Jews, was done in public. It shows you what happens when that which we feel somewhat ashamed of no longer inspires a certain reticence and caution. The avatars of shamelessness say 'I'm getting rid of all this old weak stuff. It's all going to be out there and I will parade it for all to see.' In American culture, and perhaps in much of European culture, there is the idea that there is no longer any boundary or border that we need to fret about. This fuels all kinds of terrible developments, such as the spread of violent forms of pornography.

JOHNSON | An interview with Jean Bethke Elshtain

Evil, Limits and Hope

Alan Johnson: Can we talk about evil, limits and hope? In *Just War Against Terror* you talk of ‘our condition of fallibility and imperfection’ and you have agreed with the late Christopher Lasch’s insistence on ‘limits.’ You insist that ‘estrangement, conflict and tragedy are constant features of the human condition.’ While some see you, accordingly, as a conservative thinker, for myself I (now) see these truths as essential to any future democratic left and as sober acknowledgements of the terrible enormities of which human beings are capable. Norman Geras, writing about the Holocaust, has meditated on those ‘common vices and human failings that can become in another setting or combination, suddenly exorbitant.’ But my questions are how can hope be sustained once we let in the fact of evil and of limits? And how, as we are talking about doing politics, once we refuse to evade the tragic, once we insist on limits, still inspire?

Jean Bethke Elshtain: These are terribly important questions. Geras sounds like a rather wise man to me. It puts me in mind of one person in the audience at Oxford University who, after I had given a talk on CS Lewis and his essay ‘The Abolition of Man’ asked how I kept myself from despair in light of some of these mordant recognitions. I said ‘Well, hope is certainly one of the theological virtues, and a great human virtue, and it is something we can more robustly keep alive if we recognise the realities of evil, the pervasiveness of tragedy as part of the human condition, and limits. There is a big difference between decent hope and unrestrained optimism. Much of the politics of the left, historically, has ushered in an unrestrained optimism. Certainly one finds in Marxism, and more generally in left wing politics, a race for definitive transformation of this or that. When that turns out not to work what sets in is cynicism or a tendency toward conspiracy theories.

If one started out with hope rather than unrestrained optimism then it would help to sustain efforts over time. It would be more durable than utopianism. I’ve heard people argue that we need utopianism even to accomplish small things. I think the opposite is the case. Utopianism undermines our capacity to deal with the smaller things. It undermines our capacity to minimally transform our communities into places that are better for every citizen because it makes those minimal transformations look like not very much in light of the utopian vision.

I have a hunch that whether one can respond to this notion of realistic hope, as I have called it, is almost constitutional. Certain human beings have a certain

upbringing and they tend to think in a certain way. But, having said that, I don't think this attitude is unavailable to those whose own story might be one of horror or bliss. Again, my work tends to seek ways to steer between certain extremes of cynicism or optimism, despair or utopianism.

The Public Intellectual

Alan Johnson: You have a much wider audience than the academy and you are often called, and call yourself, a 'public intellectual.' What do you think one of those is? What are the tasks of a public intellectual? What are the dangers of being one? And why do we have so very few these days?

Jean Bethke Elshtain: The danger for the public intellectual of course lies in becoming more and more public and less and less intellectual! If you pop up like a jack in the box on every occasion to say something you don't have as much time for critical reflection. One should not become an intellectual for hire, guaranteed to rush to the TV studio at a moments notice. In my mind the role is about having an understanding of ones work as inherently historical, as having to do with concrete lived situations, and as very dialogic. There should be a lot of back and forth between you and the reactions to what you are saying. It's a pedagogical process. If one loses that dimension it's just you with your views, popping up as a talking head.

As to why we have so few, I have a hunch that it is to do with the capture of our intellectual life by our universities. For various reasons there has been a perimeter put around intellectual and scholarly activities. There are very few independent scholars out there. It's a very hard thing to be. You don't have the institutional arrangements that help to make your life possible. And inside the academy there are other disincentives. The public intellectual can be looked down upon as not a real scholar. Being called 'popular' can be a deadly criticism! We have lots of celebrity, quasi-intellectuals but that's rather different to what you and I are talking about.

I once framed the choice facing public intellectuals as Sartre versus Camus. One model is to see oneself as leading the forward march into some glorious historic transformation, and to have a total plan for overthrowing the old and bringing in the new. This intellectual rarely pays much of a price for their advocacy. This came home to me all those years ago when I read Sartre's introduction to Fanon's book in which he says that killing a European kills two birds with one stone. I thought, Monsieur Sartre, it must be a nice job to sit in a café on the west bank surrounded

JOHNSON | An interview with Jean Bethke Elshtain

by adoring devotees and call for bloodshed without limits in this way. The more concrete and even anguished engagement with one's world is embodied in Albert Camus's life and work. His struggle with the complexity of Algeria almost killed him. He put himself in physical danger. He sought a more complex view, fair both to the French people who had made Algeria home for a century, and to the Arab Algerians. He hoped that somehow they could live in peace in a pluralistic constitutional order. But there was no way to even talk about that in the polarised context in which Sartre was the leader of the 'kick them out, kill the French' faction.

One faces a choice if one wants to be engaged in public life. To see oneself as having a plan, as knowing a lot more than other people, and to be ruthless in the advocacy of definitive social change. Or to be more modest and more troubled about what it is you are doing. Obviously I'm on the side of being more modest and more troubled.

Alan Johnson: What did you mean when you said "Public intellectuals, much of the time at least, should be party poopers?"

Jean Bethke Elshtain: If you are doing your job well you are going to find yourself criticised by pretty much every ideological camp. I've been accused of being a Marxist, a religious fanatic and a neo-conservative. I am no way comparing myself to Camus but I do take comfort that he went through the same thing. It does not kill you. You can live with it and accept that you don't have much control over it. The bad part about being labelled is that certain outlets are closed to you. It's true for me at the present moment. Some liberal outlets can take the view that 'well, we can't permit her in here, she's not one of us anymore.' The gatekeepers start slamming the doors shut. But you just have to put up with that. It's the sort of thing that's going to happen when people can't comfortably place you in one slot because you are no longer entirely predictable. That is the price one pays for a certain independence and that, I should have thought, is what public intellectuals are supposed to be.

Alan Johnson: What are you working on now?

Jean Bethke Elshtain: I am working on my Gifford Lectures for delivery in Edinburgh in February 2006. The theme is sovereignties. I will look at the sovereignty of God, the sovereignty of the state, and the sovereignty of man or the human being, and the presuppositions that underscore these sovereignties, or alleged sovereignties. Whether you are a believer or not I think it is illuminating

to look at the different historic understandings of God's sovereignty because they do shift. Is God the apogee of love and reason, a relational Triune God as was true for the medieval theology. Or, with the shift to nominalism, is God instead the terrifying site of sovereign and even capricious will. That leads to all kinds of questions about, for instance, whether God's sovereignty is bound or not bound. It's my hunch that those sorts of theological debates form the background for the early modern debates about state sovereignty: what one presumes it to be, the ways in which it is bound or unbound. My further suggestion will be that these images of state sovereignty fuel modern conceptions, or pretensions, of self-sovereignty that are, to my mind, deeply problematic. I hope to make this trajectory intelligible and, along the way, to persuade people that thinking about these sovereignties in relation to each other can be illuminating.

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