

Realism, Ethics and U.S. Foreign Policy

A Conversation with Jean Bethke Elshtain
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BOSTON COLLEGE, CHESTNUT HILL, MASSACHUSETTS
FEBRUARY 18, 2009

ERIK OWENS: There's a wide assumption that realism and foreign policy in international relations is aggressively amoral or at least attempts to be so. Could you say a word about how accurate that description is and in what sense you consider yourself a realist?

JEAN BETHKE ELSHTAIN: Well, your description of the attempt is very accurate. Certainly the way I was taught international relations in graduate school was precisely that a nation's foreign policy could not be assessed according to ethical criteria of the sort we usually think of when we think of ethics. Rather that there was an inner sort of ethos in the conduct of international relations that was driven solely by power considerations and the articulation of something like national interest. Once you start to probe deeply into these issues, you discover that it's really not so easy to separate out normative concerns of a certain kind, ethical and moral values, from the conduct of foreign policy.

If you look at the United States, you can see that very clearly – whether it's the World War I era or the World War II era, even Vietnam and certainly Iraq. You have the articulation of certain moral norms, very high ideals that are considered to be or are claimed to be in play. So one has to assess the activity, the policies, in light of some of those moral norms. How much are the moral norms really driving this, or are they kind of layered on when you'd already decided to do something anyway for strategic reasons? So those are all assessments that one has to make, but you can't make them unless you acknowledge that you can't just sever ethical considerations from international relations.

As to what kind of realist I might be, there's a tradition called Christian realism, associated in the United States, with Reinhold Niebuhr, the public theologian. It holds that you cannot make that split. At the same time, one of the lessons of political realism is that there are limits to power as well. That is, a high moral norm can never be fully achieved in the affairs of this earth. There can never be a perfect link between the moral norm and the policy and the outcome. So if you try to bring moral norms to complete fruition in international relations, you're going to wind up with a moralistic endeavor and something that may invite overreach and triumphalism and some other deep problems. The Christian realist position consists

of different forms of realism, but it doesn't dispense altogether with political realism.

EO: You've argued in many different places against utopianism of multiple types in foreign policy. Could you say a bit about the dangers of utopianism and where we see it in actual foreign policy practice?

JBE: Well, I think we see it in a couple of different modes. One very common one, nowadays, is simply the arguments being made by people – some in international relations, some in peace study, some in law – that we can somehow wind up with a world where we have reduced conflict to the vanishing point. We can somehow overcome this hangup with the nation state and rise to some universal or collective level of decision-making. These are really, in a way, fantasies concocted by people out of their own heads that have very little connection to political reality at all. The problem with these kinds of utopianisms, is that it makes the humanly possible work look like nothing at all. The hard work that diplomats do and the hard work that various international organizations do to try to ameliorate conditions, to try to stop the worst stuff from happening, that all looks really second rate when measured up against this utopian grandeur.

To the extent that these people have an influence on decision-making, which is the other conduit for utopianism, I think it invites what I warned against already, which is this grandiosity and a kind of moralism. "I embody the moral approach and therefore I can't be wrong. This is the moral approach and everybody who criticizes me is somehow immoral or amoral." So I think you get those kinds of dangers in a utopian approach, whether it's on a level of argument or on the level of policy.

On the level of policy, you're never going to get someone to say this is utopian. However, when you look back and assess it you can see it. We could take for example Woodrow Wilson's plan after the conclusion of World War I. He thought you could divide up the old Austro-Hungarian Empire into perfect little states with national self-determination, where you had a congruence of the border of a state with a type of linguistic community. Theoretically that was supposed to ease the tensions and the conflicts in Europe. Of course, it had quite the opposite effect because you have these small, relatively vulnerable states where you always have minorities who don't fit in the ideal of what counts as the nation. You just set the stage for many of the conflicts that led up to World War II. When people want to issue a cautionary note, they always go back to that and say, this is what happens when you get a strong moral vision, and you're not taking account of the actual conditions on the ground.

EO: Would you argue that the impulse to democratize the Middle East is a utopian impulse? Furthermore, how does it relate to this model?

JBE: That's an interesting question, and it's a bit of a tough one. Inside all of the countries in the Middle East, there are people pushing democracy and pushing

human rights, often very brave people who pay a pretty heavy price for doing that. The question is how do we respond to those who see themselves as democratizing forces in each of these countries and societies? It's right and it's the good thing to do to support them to the extent that we can.

That seems to me rather different from the notion that there is one model of democracy that can be superimposed on a culture that has no experience of that kind of society. There is a careful line to walk between a kind of superimposition of a certain understanding of democracy by contrast to working with human rights groups, democratizing groups, on the ground, who are struggling under difficult circumstances to get a more responsible, accountable, transparent democratic society. So that makes that situation rather different from the end of World War I, where you didn't have these human rights forces and democracy forces unleashed on the world as we do now.

Certainly, as an aspiration, democratic states in the Middle East would be a great thing if it could happen, by contrast to autocratic orders, which human rights being violated systematically. That has to come, if it will come, over time and in ways that we cannot foresee now but that are also consistent with the culture. It has to be derived from that culture too. So that makes it very, very complicated. How much do you stand back and watch? How much do you intervene? That's a delicate business, to say the least.

EO: With regard to your comments about international organizations and the utopians who think that they can flatten out conflict through the use of international organizations, your most recent book is a massive study on the concept of sovereignty – theological, political and psychological. Could you say a bit about whether you think the nation state is an inevitable or a natural political arrangement? If not, what would be an appropriate relationship between person and state, because this relates back to several of the issues you've talked about with regards to states in the international community?

JBE: Certainly there's very little that's inevitable, as you know, in the world of human affairs. The nation state as we know it grew out of a particular configuration of historic forces in Europe, but it has been universalized. It is now the universal form that organized politics takes, so that the United Nations consists of sovereign states, and you must have a recognized sovereignty to be a member. So you've got this tension at the heart of the U.N., because to be a sovereign state means you are the judge of your own case. You can make the determination whether to go to war or not. You do not need U.N. approval. You might want it, but you don't require it. And so you set the basis for the policy of your own country.

Many have obviously lamented that and have said that the state form may have emerged, but again it's not inevitable. It could be something that historically has a certain lifespan, and that lifespan has now run its course, and we need to move to some other type of organization. Nobody has figured out what that might look like.

I have to say it's difficult for me to conjure what that might look like too because even something like regional agreements between a number of states still require states to come to agreement. The more you remove from the citizen the source of power under which the citizen labors, the more difficult it is for ordinary citizens to have any say in what's going on. As difficult as it is on the level of the nation state for people to make their voices heard, imagine if you had some vague sort of worldwide entity doing something. How on earth could you connect to that or relate to that? It just seems to me completely implausible, and it's hard to imagine, what form this might take.

EO: Is the proper movement then downward in scale as opposed to upward in scale? Searching back for a Rousseauian ideal size of a republic?

JBE: I think that you could have some downward in scale stuff, certainly. It's sometimes called devolution, where a good bit of what happens that's of importance in a community or in multiple communities is stuff over which they have some decent measure of say or of control. Once again, we're talking about the state delegating power to other entities, and that seems possible to me.

In the United States, it would take the form of a rejuvenation of federalism, so that being in a state, whether it's Massachusetts or Illinois or any other, would really mean something. As a citizen of Illinois, you really have some say in the affairs of Illinois. Our states are, for the most part, pretty weak in relation to the national government, and I don't see that course changing any time soon. But theoretically, it's certainly possible.

So it strikes me that the extremes of a certain kind of localism, multiple localisms or overarching universalism are what we want to avoid. Then what's that in-between? How do you work that in-between so people have some sense that they're part of something? That they have some say? That their voice matters? The nation state is the best thing we've come up with thus far to try to make that possible, if not guarantee it.

EO: Much of your work over the years has been committed to the concept of civil society and in particular on smaller scales, but to some degree thinking about larger forms of civil society. Could you say a bit about the concept of global civil society as it relates to state boundaries? It seems to be a principled basis for challenging sovereignty. Also whether or not this global civil society/cosmopolitan ideal is utopian-trending, or whether it's more appropriately grounded in a non-state manner?

JBE: It's interesting that people are talking about global civil society now because civil society historically has been a concept having to do with all the many associations that dot the landscape of democratic cultures and do a lot of the hard work of democracy. It used to be called volunteer activity, those who put their shoulders to the wheel, do all kinds of things. I think of this every time I go to vote, because you

have all those volunteers who are handling the election, who are election poll officers. If you think of it nationwide, it's an enormous number of people putting in these long hours. It's quite remarkable. I think there's a lot that's remarkable about this country, and one of them is that people are still prepared to do that. The idea of a global civil society, as it's been advanced by a number of folks, is that you could connect people to one another outside the rubric of the state. If the state doesn't dominate this activity, the state is not the controller of this activity, and you could connect people who have a shared concern across boundaries. International human rights groups would be an example or Doctors Without Borders. I think it's a good idea, because you get more connections between people across states and across those boundaries, and certainly the new technologies make it more possible for people to connect to one another than ever before.

How solid these connections will be or will remain in a time of crisis is hard to tell. But it's an important development. I'm not sure if it will have the effect of ameliorating or taming sovereignty over the long run. I think it could in certain settings where you have more regionalism developing or a kind of transnational identity emerging, which was the ideal of the European community. That identity has run into considerable trouble, not just because the euro, as currency, is shaky at the moment and a number of the members of the European community would like to go off it rather than stay on it, but also because the constitution for it has been rejected by France and by the Dutch. It's not so easy for people to feel that they're going to relinquish more and more control to an anonymous bureaucracy in Brussels where the headquarters are. You've got the little local cheese maker in some small village in France, and he will ask, "Why should I have to do what they tell me to do?" Better to have the cheese makers organize across all Europe, so they have a say in something. I think that's good.

There's been a huge debate in international relations for a long time as to whether international relations between states take place in what's called an anarchic arena, where there's no order of any kind, or whether in fact there's something like a society where states are tied together in all kinds of ways. Even states that are in conflict can have areas of agreement that are conflict free. So all the years of the Cold War, the U.S. and the U.S.S.R. were a party to the Antarctic Agreement, for example, to make sure that the Antarctic stayed demilitarized, and no one violated it.

This gets complicated because you've got these connections that the standard notion of realism can't account for, but there they are. That's not quite global civil society, but it shows you that there are thick connections of all sorts that we often don't think about.

EO: President Obama has called for a joining of principle and pragmatism in his inaugural address with regard to foreign policy, which seems to be a time-honored theme in American foreign policy. Do you see the Obama administration as

diverting paths from the recent past? What do you see as ahead with regard to morality in foreign policy?

JBE: President Obama is someone who's well aware of the moral voice. I take him at his word when he says he's a devout Christian, and he gave himself to Jesus Christ 20 or 25 years ago. I believe him when he says that. I don't think that's just fooling around. It's hard to be African-American and not to have that voice when you saw how powerful it was in the Civil Rights Era with Martin Luther King, where you had the fusion of political and moral imperatives. It's a powerful combination. Obama is aware of that, but probably also appropriately wary of that being a kind of unmediated voice in foreign affairs. If we take him at his word that he's read Reinhold Niebuhr carefully and is aware of what Niebuhr called the strange ironies of American history, it means that these are where you start out with a very fine goal, but cast it in language that's too grandiose and too inflexible, and then you get a result that runs contrary to what you hoped to achieve in the first place.

I have a sense that that's what President Obama is talking about. You have principles, but to be pragmatic about their application. If he can steer that course, which is a course not unique to him, it would be a very good course to stay on. It's going to be a challenge. Also, I've noticed throughout the last few weeks that the Obama administration is holding on to a good many of the policies put in place under executive privilege during the previous administration. I'm assuming that's because once you get in there, and you receive all the threat assessments and all that information, it has a very sobering influence about the threats we're up against. I suspect you'll see a mixed picture from the Obama administration. It will be interesting to see this played out.