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“SPEAKING JUSTICE TO POWER”:  
EVERETT MENDELSON AS AN  
INTERNATIONAL PUBLIC INTELLECTUAL

ABSTRACT

The international public intellectual functions as an outsider deriving authority in given local situations from faith in universal moral principles that are expected to impose some limits on the actions of states, nations and individuals. As such an international public intellectual, Everett Mendelsohn has negotiated between conflicting forces and ideologies both in the United States (in protests against the Vietnam War) and in the Middle East (in the protracted Israeli-Palestinian conflict). A “moral realist”, Everett has been particularly effective in buttressing moral arguments with supportive facts. His faith and hope in human beings became a major contribution to discussions between opposing sides in the international public sphere.

Unlike national public intellectuals, international intellectuals are basically outsiders who derive their authority from faith in the existence of some universal, moral principles which are expected to impose limits on the actions of states, nations and individuals everywhere. Since this belief in universal moral principles and their superior authority over particular values such as national greatness, political hegemony, economic interests and the like, is not universal, those who claim to represent such principles and insist on their application in any particular context, are likely to be exposed, resisted, abused, insulted or ignored. In addition to their other skills, therefore, such international intellectuals must have a kind of stubbornness and toughness which allows them to persist in pursuing their goals under fire.

Unlike national intellectuals, international intellectuals do not usually try to operate directly as actors in the domestic political arena of the countries they scrutinize or criticize. Although they may try to alert citizens to the consequences of violations of universal, moral principles by their own governments, they usually try to deploy their influence in the international arena where nations and governments struggle to win the support of world public opinion. Characteristically, these international public intellectuals attempt to ally themselves

with local cosmopolitans who can translate their fear of international censorship into domestic political pressures on politicians, generals and other national leaders involved in actual or potential violations of international norms. Often, of course, the court of international public opinion is merely an idealized projection of a desirable frame whose actual institutional and behavioral embodiments are fragmentary, elusive and unstable. The prospects for the development of such an internationally shared civic culture of moral discipline are, of course, a matter of wide disagreements. In my opinion, they are neither very good nor negligible. In any case, in the absence of a sufficiently stable support system, international public intellectuals depend even more upon their unique skills in promoting the application of these principles via a host of strategies, programs or roles, and on their ability to navigate among conflicting interests and perspectives in order to decide judiciously when to keep a low profile and when to approach the mass media.

Everett Mendelsohn belongs to this very special class of often lonely, self-charged, international intellectuals working as mediators or facilitators in foreign lands. Although many years ago Everett worked on the Middle East conflict within the framework of the Quakers' Friends Committee, he has for decades since operated as a lone, single, peace entrepreneur, travelling extensively between regional adversaries and sometimes talking to involved American officials in the pursuit of viable alternatives to the use of violence, the frequency of which has been a characteristic of the Middle East.

Any attempt to briefly characterize Everett's extensive, long-standing involvement as a mediator, facilitator or "mitigator" in the Arab-Israeli conflict is likely to distort an enormously rich and complex network of activities. But, if I were pressed to give such a characterization, at the risk of simplification, I would say that common to his activities is the desire to empower lay publics and leaders "to speak justice to power", to advance and reinforce moral considerations in an arena usually dominated by national, if not nationalistic, strategic, military and political interests.

The moral-intellectual critique of power has, of course, marked Everett's work not only in the Middle East but also as a professor of the history of science and a scholar working on the relations between science, politics and society. Much of his scholarly work and his record as a teacher has been devoted to unearthing and exposing to intellectual and normative scrutiny, the often-hidden links between knowledge, political and military powers and economic interests. Very early, perhaps earlier than most scholars and observers in this field, Everett discerned and called attention to the abuse of the enlightenment vision of the role of science and its mission in the service of democratization. Instead of augmenting the powers of laymen to hold their governments accountable and influence public policy-making, science and technology, according to Everett, were all too often enlisted in the service of the national state and its clerks. Only rarely supporting lay critics of arbitrary power and failed government actions, the knowledge and authority of experts were used most frequently to rationalize government actions and win the trust and sacrifices of credulous citizens.

Everett Mendelsohn's work in the Middle East is related to his long-standing critique of the modern nation-state, its cynical use of science and technology to disempower lay opposition or criticism, to enhance its military power and consequently also destabilize the international order. In the particular context of the Middle East, Everett's concern was, for a long time, largely directed to the role of the big powers in seeking to augment their influence by arming the adversaries with increasingly more advanced weapons. Eventually he directed more attention to the direct relations between the adversaries themselves.

Everett's moral authority in the Arab-Israeli context has gained from his record during the 1960s as a critic of his own government's policies in Vietnam. In both the domestic American and the Middle East contexts, Everett was particularly effective in exposing the fragile grounds on the basis of which experts were used by clerks to exclude laymen as participants or critics. Everett often noted in these contexts that technical training is not a substitute for moral education and that instrumental criteria conceal rather than discard the relevance of ethical choices. He characteristically targeted the special affinities between the arrogance of power and the arrogance of expert knowledge, including in the Middle East context of professional "orientalists". He could bring many examples of how the arrogance of experts led them to believe for decades that intellectually certified knowledge almost automatically embodies public values. Everett, moreover, brought with him to the profoundly fatalistic cultures of the Middle East, the insight that what is regarded as inevitable or inexorable is not independent of shared beliefs and that in politics Darwinian notions of human conflicts draw on vulgar and usually untenable notions of scientific theories.

Considering the scope and diversity of his skills and insights, Everett's attention to the Middle East has been a very special gift to both Arabs and Jews. In numerous meetings (some of which I had attended) held especially during the 1980s and 1990s, Everett played a major role in facilitating contacts and communications across deeply entrenched suspicions and pyramids of sacrifice.

As a former student of Everett's, I could not fail to notice how his extraordinary skills as an inspiring teacher and his qualities as a listener in the classroom were converted in these charged political and emotional situations into assets of mediation and moderation. Beyond these skills, Everett introduced into this conflict situation the particular approach of the moral realist. By moral realism, I do not mean the approach which tempers moral idealism by pragmatic considerations. In the case of Everett Mendelsohn, moral realism means mostly the desire and capacity to buttress moral arguments by supportive facts and by realistic analysis of what is politically feasible. On many occasions I witnessed Everett carefully and painstakingly constructing a diagnosis of which forces and trends could be enlisted, or counted on, in advancing a more just solution to the Arab-Israeli conflict.

At an international Arab-Israeli conference held in Europe following the Gulf War, in the course of which Palestinian support for Sadaam Hussein produced a deep crisis in the Israeli peace movement, Everett characteristically

defended Palestinian self-determination as both an historically unconditional moral imperative and a politically expedient move to defuse the kind of frustrations and humiliations which make Palestinians vulnerable to the most extreme fundamentalist or nationalist influences. In the same speech, Everett presented a realistic analysis of domestic Israeli political forces discussing the elements which already before the rise of Rabin to power, and the breakthrough achieved in the secret Oslo talks, indicated to him the trend which later, in fact, would soften rigid Israeli attitudes and policies cultivated during Shamir's Likud government. "By contrast to Israel's governmental reluctance" he observed, "public opinion polls show significant support in Israel for joining a peace process and ultimately for making some territorial compromises in return for a durable and secure peace". This, of course, was the trend in Israeli public opinion which later allowed Rabin and Peres to embark on difficult and risky peace negotiations with the Arabs.

Following this observation, Everett moved on to insist on the importance of "delineating a clear role for Israel within the Middle East [breaking] the stereotypical views that have long been held that the Arabs are reluctant partners to agreements, and that Israel can ultimately rely on American backing independent of what position it adopts in the peace process. The current situation", he concluded, "is fluid, and with some insightful help and rigorous action, solutions may be achieved". In his concluding remarks, Everett again took the high ground of a concerned international participant observer discerning a harmony between realism and ethical concerns, between the morality and the political necessity of Palestinian self-determination. In the above, as in many other speeches and interventions made by Everett while addressing groups and audiences of all shapes and sizes, the common drive has been to explore, examine and where possible exploit the diverse, mostly latent, potential resources for the politics of peace. The groups consisting of Arabs and Jews who met in Europe, the Middle East and the U.S., in order to discuss the conflict informally, often came to depend on Everett's remarkable ability to show sympathy and to simultaneously respond to the fears, anxieties and concerns of both sides.

Sometimes, no doubt, Everett's positions appeared overly naive or rationalistic to one side or the other. Among the deeply fatalistic and pessimistic Middle Easterners, his optimism and respect for good moral and political arguments was bound to sometimes appear "too American", floating above the realities of suffering, displacements, humiliations and existential fears experienced by both Arabs and Jews. Yet it is precisely such experiences which produce "realism" as a self-paralyzing frame of mind, and it is precisely such "innocent" optimism which, by contrast, produces the very expectations which can lead to change. Everett has been able to function as an agent of the best that the American democratic spirit could offer to us in the Middle East, a tradition of faith and hope in human beings which, at certain moments of historical grace, can turn into a self-fulfilling prophecy.

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