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Jean Elshtain: Why Augustine and Arendt?

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Jean Elshtain appeared in my life at a fortuitous moment in the early 1980s as I ventured into unexplored academic terrain — the vexed question of what Hannah Arendt intended by engaging with Christian political

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thought, particularly the work of the fifth-century bishop and theologian Aurelius Augustine. She was already a notoriously maverick Jewish writer on the Holocaust. What could be made of Arendt's regard for her "old friend" Augustine? A previous discovery — the fact that she had written her dissertation on the theme of love (*caritas*) as the binding agent in civil society — had led me to the Library of Congress in 1983 where the original 1929 German manuscript is housed, together with the English translation Arendt had begun in New York in 1958. Neither had been published. I proposed a paper on the subject for the APSA meeting in Washington in 1984, fully expecting a negative response, given the deviation from the norm of Arendt scholarship it entailed. Instead I was contacted directly by Elshtain who let me know that she found this new aspect of Arendt's writing very significant and wanted to hear more about it on the Arendt-themed panel that she was organizing and chairing. I knew her work but had never met or corresponded with her. I was, needless to say, surprised and grateful.

Yet the symmetry of Elshtain's offer was not that surprising after all. I remembered that from the beginning in *Public Man, Private Woman* Elshtain had larded her writing with references to both Arendt and Augustine. The timing of our encounter, and her enthusiasm for my project, gave me the courage to continue on the path I had begun. She later generously opened important doors for me. It was clear that throughout the 1980s Elshtain was mining both Augustine and Arendt as she set to work on her central research question: how to validate plural identities within moral communities of choice that choose to engage in "action" while remaining outside institutionalized politics. The question could not have been more current, in view of the still unmastered American past of the anti-Vietnam War and civil rights movements and the flowering of countercultural artistic, musical, gender, ethnic, and racial communities. Arendt's work on Augustine provided Elshtain with an additional perspective on both the fracturing of cultural consensus and the rise of hypernationalism in America.

At the same time, however, Elshtain's growing emphasis on religion, family, and the panoply of what might be construed as conservative social theory, did not appeal to me in 1984 or, indeed, in the decades to come. We would never discuss her dogged insistence on using Augustinian "Just War" theory as a moral fig leaf for the post-9/11 wars of George W. Bush or her willing cooptation as an official spokesperson for Bush's religious forums in Washington — for example, her *Just War Against Terror* (2003). To her, the post-2001 American wars were

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justified because there was "massive and … sufficient evidence of … crimes against humanity perpetuated on the bodies of the Iraqi people" (189). Even more controversially, Elshtain asserted that "the claims made by the Bush administration to justify war against Iraq provided evidence of right intention based on just war criteria" (2003, 49–57). Not content with ticking off her list of criteria for justified warfare, Elshtain dismissed the "dark murmurings about lying and deceit" in the press. She "saw nothing in the way the war has been conducted" that substantiated them. (189)

Today, in retrospect, it seems obvious that Elshtain's new rhetorical style reflected her choice to insert herself in a very heated public discourse beyond the university. Ironically, like Arendt after *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil*, Elshtain had become a fearless and controversial figure in and beyond our discipline. For example, in the 1990s, while serving on the APSA Nominating Committee, I added her name to the list of eminent female scholars being considered for APSA president; our organization was long overdue for gender diversity. Of all the names on our list, hers was the most "out there." Yet Elshtain's name never rose to the top of the list, or even advanced to discussion. Our other female nominee, Theda Skocpol, did get an APSA endorsement. Later as president of the Women's Caucus for Political Science, I again forwarded Elshtain's name as a candidate for APSA president. She was reluctant, but went ahead anyway. Again it came to nothing.

I felt then, and continue to do so now, that even after the troubling shift in her thinking from feminism to an apparent ultra-American moralism after 2001, Elshtain's public persona was secondary to her ongoing work as a scholar of civil society. In effect, she was becoming a journalist as well as a noted scholar as she shape-shifted into a public intellectual very much in demand, who felt obliged to organize a dramatic narrative of America in crisis with a wide readership in mind. All the while, Elshtain nonetheless continued to pursue her major project as a thinker — exploring civil society in war and peace. For the latter, the new perspective on the Arendt-Augustine connection was a core influence. Displaying her liberal side, Elshtain was not put off by the fact that Arendt had insisted on a "non-theological" (i.e., not specifically Christian) reading of Augustine or that Arendt never published the English translation as she had planned to do in 1961 once her own journalistic debut in *The New Yorker* with articles on the Eichmann trial ignited a firestorm of criticism around the world. Perhaps Elshtain saw herself stepping into Arendt's public role and taking the heat. Like her,

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Elshtain would learn how fierce the "blow-back" from enraged intellectuals can be, particularly when a woman writes for broad rhetorical, as well as intellectual, effect (see Galston 2013; Judt 2006; Vitello 2013).

And so it happened that I went to Washington, D.C., in the Orwellian year of 1984 to meet Elshtain for the first time on our panel. Not realizing how loaded my presentation would be to this audience of Arendt scholars, I argued that she had not simply been engaged in a classicist revival project throughout her career, hurling the "social realm" of real life "necessity" into oblivion. Arendt instead had reinvented herself, incorporating her academic beginnings but also making a new beginning of her own. She was writing on the cusp of postmodernism and in the midst of enthusiasm for existentialism in America in the 1950s and 1960s, using Arendt and Augustine to find and validate social complexity ("plurality" and "natality") amid the wreckage of ideologies and empires.

In this revisionist reading, which intrigued Elshtain at the panel, Arendt's "social realm" was not an exclusively destructive cesspool of capitalist competition and state-imposed controls, but rather a much larger and more nuanced concept of 20th-century life that included a positive model of civil society as communities of shared discourse, values, and action located outside institutionalized politics. Arendt's dilemma was the post-World War II challenge of understanding what had happened in the real world, just as Elshtain's challenge was the new world after 9/11 and the turn of the 21st century. Arendt's quest was a response to the violent transition between an age of 19th-century empire and its fracturing in the mid-20th century along regional, racial, religious, and economic fault lines, despite the equally violent integrative efforts of totalitarian ideologies and economic systems.

Elshtain saw a comparable paradigm shift in Augustine's work as well. As she would write in *Augustine and the Limits of Politics* (1995), he was caught in the transition to a new, unknown world. The future "saint" was also a public administrator — a bishop with the attendant demands of Roman leadership at the Roman Imperial periphery of North Africa. The latter, however, did not erase his pastoral commitment to an otherworldly Christian life that empowered individual conscience, including resistance to the state. In this second focus, Augustine spoke of civil society as networks of indirect relationships based on shared commitments to the Christian God and resistance to violence. Pulling Augustine into the 20th century, Arendt helped him along by enhancing her original 1929 text with late 1950s Cold War era revisions. One could

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argue Elshtain did the same. A reader in the middle and later decades of the 20th century might be forgiven for seeing both Arendt's and Elshtain's Augustine as more like Albert Camus than a fifth-century bishop — an existentialist social ethicist who never challenged the imperative of obedience to political authority among the citizens of the *civitas terrena*, but also emphasized freedom of conscience, resistance, and love of neighbor as intersecting imperatives. The latter relationships, unlike the hierarchy of the Roman citizen to the emperor, were characterized by interpersonal equality and care. As Arendt stated the problem, the saint "never denied the factual character" of human interdependence and obligation. Yet they were a "perplexity" given the abstract, otherworldly "Christian relationship with the world." How could neighborly love be "integrated" with this the goal of an "absolute future" in salvation? The "impossibility of perfection in the present" led him back to the "actual problem of how to live in this world" (Arent 1998, 41).

At least at this point in Elshtain's thinking, triumphalist Just War theory as a rationale for the enforcement of universal human rights was not her primary concern. Just two years after the publication of *Public Man, Private Woman*, Elshtain was still exploring the contested space between explicitly political action and the shifting interspaces between "private and public" life. She found Augustine to be a worldly philosopher, in a literal sense, who operated on the assumption that neighborly love and love of God spring from the same rich soil of human experience, which is prior to politics. Neither theological rigor nor Roman imperial injunction, but rather human life in situ was the space where past and future met. Citizens of civil society may be alienated from the "world" of materialism and violence, but "that does not simply cancel out togetherness," Arendt wrote in her commentary on Augustine (Arent 1998, 105–12). The shared past is determinative, preserved in memory, remaining at work in the "... impossibility of complete isolation for the believer who cannot act by himself only with others or against them" (Arent 1998, 105–12).

For Elshtain, building on both Augustine and Arendt, estrangement is the natural state for the thinker/believer who by definition strives for release from the world's turmoils and the burden of memory. Religion, paradoxically, becomes a story of return to the world, a positive undergirding of civil society against the wrenching tensions fragmenting the Roman Empire. The term Augustine uses to express the binding force of the social, which Arendt appropriates and Elshtain reconfigures, is "neighborly love" (*caritas*) (Scott and Stark, 105–12).

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All of this was, I think, the most compelling aspect of Augustine's work for Elshtain and was enhanced by looking at the fifth-century Roman through the lens of a 20th-century interpretation, especially that of Arendt whose work was already at the heart of Elshtain's writing. This is reflected in Elshtain's lectures on Augustine given at Notre Dame and published as *Augustine and the Limits of Politics* (1995). The limit situation she posits is the necessary boundary line between civil *caritas*, institutionalized political processes, and abstract moral constructs. Given its early date, this study does not, of course, answer the question of where Elshtain herself finally stood in the last years before her death. Did she lean toward a new imperium of "universal human rights" enforced by war against "Islamo-Fascism," or for a finely textured focus on the specificity of human communities and their moral genealogy located in the non-State, nonprivate, nonpolitical world of civil society? Or possibly both?

Her last major work, written after her 2003 *Just War Against Terror*, and in response to her many critics in print media, was *Jane Addams and the Dream of American Democracy* (2002). Here Elshtain returns to a laserlike focus on civil society and the changes possible when an upper-middle-class woman leaves her natural habitat in the American Protestant establishment and immerses herself in Chicago's largely Catholic and Jewish immigrant communities of the late 19th and early 20th centuries. In Elshtain's narrative, Addams is a radical nonconforming Christian, her Hull House settlement movement a real world model "offer [ing] a shelter from the storm and a new way of being in the world … a place of civic education." The goal of this model of "welfare" is decidedly not state-sponsored delivery of services "to clients rather than creating citizens." Addams, according to Elshtain, is "creating identities" while feeding, educating, and befriending immigrant women and children (2002, 150–53). Significantly, Arendt simply notes, but does not endorse, Addams' pacifism and opposition to World War I, which Addams proclaimed loudly in print and on the lecture circuit. Nor does she critique the fact that Addams used her vantage point as the most visible woman public intellectual in America to launch an international antiwar movement. Addams founded and led the Women's Peace Party, went to Europe many times, talked to soldiers in hospitals, and reported on them as individual victims of an unstoppable war machine. All this is written by Elshtain in the mode of a neutral reporter.

There is more than a little irony in the fact that Elshtain's words as a public intellectual in the midst of war also brought down upon her a

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torrent of public criticism from inside and outside academe. Her mode of discourse in writing about 9/11 and its aftermath was couched in the most abstract and morally absolutist of arguments justifying both targeted military reprisals, civilian collateral deaths, and universal moral crusades for human rights and against evil. Was this her Samuel Huntington moment? Had she chosen the Manichean dualism, which, earlier, she had praised Augustine for rejecting? Had she in fact taken the very step she had also praised Addams for avoiding? Elshtain had approvingly cited Addams as the voice of sanity against the absolutist imperatives of Luther and Kant. What she had particularly praised was Addams insistence that "no social abstraction has authenticity," and truly ethical judgment must "resist claims couched in universal abstractions" (Elshtain 1986, 79). In her work on Augustine, Elshtain revisited the same subject by denouncing the claims of imperium, which were driven less by the love of justice than the lust of *imperium dominandi*. Here is Elshtain extrapolating from Augustine:

> Augustine's complex discourse on peace begins with his devastating send-up of the pretensions of the Roman Empire. He anticipates modern critical strategies when he strips "off the deceptive veils," removes the "whitewash of illusion," and subjects the facts to a "strict inspection." Take away the screens of "the splendid titles of "honor" and "victory" … and what one find are crimes … great evils to vex and exhaust the whole human race (Elshtain 1995, 105.)

Ironically, after the shock of 9/11 Elshtain's voice seemed to change, in effect bifurcating into public and private/academic modes. There is her study of Addams, but there is also her *Just War on Terror* in its various iterations, and her public advocacy for the Bush administration. The updated *Just War* text includes a petition written by Elshtain in the first person plural voice, signed by many eminent Americans, and titled "Letter from America." Here Elshtain is writing in her ideological and exhortative voice, defending what she determines to be transcendent "American values" equated with "universal human rights." As she states it, "we assert … fundamental truths which pertain to all people without distinction" (Elshtain 2004, 193). In long disquisitions on the depredations of life under Sharia law and the "evil" of 9/11 — all fulfilling the requirements of Augustinian "Just War" theory — Elshtain blesses both the Afghanistan and Iraq wars. No Hull House refuge is extended to Arab/Muslim outsiders in our midst. No right of resistance against the national security state is offered as a legitimate response.

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Instead, Elshtain seems to occupy the bunker of her own resistance to "liberal academic" critics and scolds them for dominating public discourse. Indeed, in the acknowledgements for *Just War* (xi), Elshtain treats the colleagues to whom she sent the manuscript for review as if they were in a self-selected witness protection program, requiring strict anonymity. She writes, "I do not wish to associate anyone else with my argument … they did not sign on to take the heat, as I did when I proposed writing this book … but they know who they are."

Elshtain was caught in an Augustinian dilemma. Augustine, ever the fifth-century "realist," had counseled both obedience to established political authorities and the obligation to maintain a stance of resistance against the great sin of cupidity — the lust for power. The generals who wrote to him from the fronts of imperial wars were told to resist if their consciences demanded it, knowing the punishment would be death. Arendt's dissertation did not hesitate to highlight the saint's ambiguities, and even celebrated them. She acknowledged that Augustine was "not a systematic thinker," but also said she found that a strength, and not a weakness. This pillar of Western civilization believed that the need to fight against worldly values is, indeed, a universal, abstract imperative. On the other hand, he insisted with equal vehemence that moral resistance to immoral orders can only originate in the intensely personal, internal struggles of the soul and community. Most important, his ideal typology of cities of God and Man is not meant to be identified with particular rulers, religions, or cultural practices. "Extend your love [*caritas*] over the whole earth if you love Christ," he had sermonized, as Elshtain duly noted (1995, 107).

For Augustine, "the neighbor's relevance is not tied to Christianity" or to a specific cultural identity, warns Arendt. Amazingly, the "binding power" of faith is "secondary" (Scott and Stark, 1996/98). All are part of civic society, Arendt wrote, extrapolating from Augustine. The reason for the foundational nature of human society is not religious in origin. It originates from the fact that "this historic world, the *saeculum*, is the one that we all have inherited and in which we all live together as a matter of course." Plurality of values and practices is inherent in this fact. Moreover, it means that the moral imperatives (American or otherwise) that states codify are always grounded in this "pre-political" shared experience of individualism and collectivity (Scott and Stark, 1996/98). Would Elshtain agree? Perhaps. Yet, it is hard to say because if a survey of her work proves nothing else, it demonstrates that she, like both Augustine and Arendt, was "not a systematic thinker." She wrote in

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various voices at various times. Perhaps because she did, Elshtain was able to break the glass ceiling separating academic discourse from public rhetoric and strong-worded women from a truly worldwide audience. My professional life and that of countless others have been enriched by all of Elshtain's voices, even if we found ourselves in dissent from at least one of them.

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Contending with Women and War

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The late Jean Bethke Elshtain was a difficult feminist, a public intellectual and scholar who drew on feminist thinking but interpreted or applied it so idiosyncratically that many feminists disavowed her. Elshtain's early works encapsulated the best hopes of 1980s' feminists to bring women and gender to the fore across many academic fields. She was influential in political

I wish to thank the University of Chicago for inviting me to speak at its Engaged Mind Conference on Elshtain, October 2103; the members of the Bethke-Elshtain family I met at that conference (especially Errol and Eric); and Nancy Hirschmann for organizing a tribute panel at the APSA conference, September 2014.

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