SYMPOSIUM

Reflections of a Sometime-Public Intellectual

Amitai Etzioni

This article draws on Etzioni's book My Brother's Keeper: A Memoir and a Message *(Rowman & Littlefield, 2003).*

At least once a month, I receive an e-mail, phone call, or question from one of my colleagues—how do you get an op-ed into the *New York Times*? It seems that a great number of my colleagues have at least one public intellectual (PI) bone in their body that they are keen to display. They hold, often for good reason, that they have something to say that will serve the president, the American people, or even the world. Although I have no answer to the immediate question—it is easier to win a lottery than to get into the *New York Times*—I do have a few thoughts about the greater question: how can an academic, especially a political scientist, gain a public voice? Here, then, follow the lessons of fifty years of trying to speak in that voice, drawing on both my experiences and those of my colleagues.

SPEAK TRUTH TO POWER

Perhaps because I did my undergraduate studies in Jerusalem, I have long held a biblical view of the role of PIs—namely, as a modern equivalent of the prophets. As a student, I had an image of standing in the public square and denouncing the king for his plans to go to war, his neglect of the poor, or whatever was the cause of the day. I was very taken with Zola's "*J'accuse*" and later with C. Wright Mills's *Listen, Yankee*. They called it the way they saw it, did not mince words, and did not worry about their careers. Such a stance sounded both very gratifying and very worthwhile.

When I tried years later, after settling in the United States, to follow in their footsteps, I found that often the king simply was not listening. Time and time again, whatever critical lines I—and my co-critics—wrote tended to slide off the back of those we rallied against. It took eight years of teach-ins, demonstrations, op-eds—and a tremendous loss of life—before Washington ended the war in Vietnam. Moreover, none of us could even begin to measure how much of this change in policy could be attributed to us.

Thirty years ago, I wrote *The Moondoggle*, a brief against NASA's decision to heavily invest in manned missions instead of using much less costly and much safer robots, as well as its focus on deep space, when most gains were to be found in near space. I returned to these subjects whenever I got a chance. NASA and its supporters in Congress and the private sector—and researchers receiving grants from it on the campuses—were hardly moved.

Particularly painful was the year I spent in the White House. Although my desk was indeed very close to the seat of power, it might as well have been on the dark side of the moon. President Carter was not to be moved on these—or most other—issues either, and certainly not by whatever I had to suggest.

So, lesson number one: if you have the urge to become a PI, especially of the critical type (and all PIs should be, at least to some extent, critical), first lie down and see if the urge will go away. And if you are still committed to this goal, be prepared for frustrations, disappointment, and inattention. The achievement of glory on this road is rare; failure to be heard is all too common. Therefore, lesson number two: becoming a PI takes a boatload of stamina, perseverance, and an inner voice that makes you continue even when the road ahead is steep and slippery.

On those rare occasions that I did have an impact, the experience was not unalloyed fun either. In 1990, I started writing about communitarian ideas. The reason that my voice carried a bit further this time was not due to my efforts, skills, or hard work—whatever I had in these departments, I had during previous engagements in my self-appointed role as a PI. My somewhat greater effect was largely due to the fact that the time was ripe. After a decade of Reaganism and Thatcherism, characterized by the celebration of Numero Uno and the unfettered aggrandizement of self-interest, there were growing signs that the common good and the community at large were suffering. Americans (and others in the West) sensed a growing need for a course correction—a point well-documented by Robert Bellah and his associates in *Habits of the Heart*. Hence, the thesis that my fellow communitarians and I raised—that individual rights were paramount, but so were social responsibilities—was rather well received by the public.

Bill Clinton made such ideas a central part of his first election campaign. However, the extent to which Clinton drew these ideas from the New Democrats, communitarians, or some other source is far from clear. The influence was clearer during my meeting with Tony Blair, who embraced communitarian ideas openly. Community, responsibility, and opportunity

Amitai Etzioni *is a University Professor at The George Washington University. He taught at Columbia, Harvard, and Berkeley. His most recent books include* Security First: For a Muscular, Moral Foreign Policy. *He can be reached at etzioni@gwu.edu.*

doi:10.1017/S1049096510001319

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1049096510001319 Published online by Cambridge University Press

became the keystones of his election campaign, and communitarian text replaced the old Clause IV—a tale from which we can learn much.

In mid-1994, the British press started to refer to me as someone whose ideas had influenced Tony Blair. The *Observer* flatly stated that I was the "Father of Tony Blair's Big Idea." An influential columnist, Melanie Phillips, told her readers,

> Well before Labour's leadership campaign, Tony Blair had begun to set out a vision of community as a key feature of his redefinition of socialism. Now he is a leader, he has to say what he means. Hovering over this enterprise is the shadow of an American sociologist and a new philosophical movement. Etzioni, professor of sociology at George Washington University, appears to advocate a new politics. (Phillips 1994)

The column then proceeded to spell out communitarian ideas. Shortly afterwards, the *Guardian* followed with a huge profile of this American who was said to influence Blair, accompanied by a sketch that made me look like a cross between a nut and a prophet. Other members of the media, including the *London Times* and the BBC, soon followed suit.

I was flattered but also keenly worried. If I learned anything in Washington, it was that if you succeed in getting a politician to buy into your ideas, the last thing you want is for the press to report that you are the source. John Gardner put it well when he said, "You must say it over and over again until people think they knew it all the time—and then you do not get any credit for it." Luckily, the *Sunday Times* quoted me as saying, in reference to the communitarian message, "It is not my own influence, but an idea whose time has come. People have come to this in their own way and all we can do is hold each other's hands and cheer each other on" (Baxter 1995). I repeated this point whenever I had a chance. The issue might have been dropped, had it not been for Clause IV.

During this era, Blair was fighting to change the Labour Party. A major bone of contention was the clause that called for nationalizing everything that moved if Labour ever returned to power. Every time that Labour seemed close to winning an election, the Tories would point to this clause (as well as the fact that the party members called each other "comrade" and that the party was Socialist), which sufficed to deny Labour a majority vote. Blair succeeded in dropping this wording—replacing it with a communitarian text that stated: "The Labour Party . . . believes that by the strength of our common endeavor we achieve more than we achieve alone . . . The rights we enjoy reflect the duties we owe, and where we live together, freely, in a spirit of solidarity, tolerance and respect."

The *Sunday Times* called the clause a "communitarian document" and added: "The new clause 4, with its emphasis on rights and duties, sounds remarkably Etzioni-ite" (Baxter 1995). Other papers followed suit, claiming that Blair had fallen under the spell of an American sociologist. A long time passed before I was again invited to meet with Labour leaders.

Lesson number three: the more impact you have, the lower you should keep your profile and the less credit you should expect.

TENURE HELPS

Some assert that you can be a PI any time, any place, and that you do not have to be an academic or hold a campus perch. Look at E. J. Dionne and David Brooks. Their voices are heard, even though they make their living as columnists. This is true enough. However, I found that not having to worry about pleasing my employer or being able to pay the next month's rent freed me to hitch my wagon to whatever star I believed I was called to follow.

I learned this lesson when I was challenged while teaching as a young assistant professor of sociology at Columbia University. I had written a review of the movie *Hiroshima Mon Amour*. I used this platform to argue for ideas I was trying to advance as a member of the anti-(nuclear) bomb peace movement. I was called to the chair's office and told in no uncertain terms that Columbia was fighting to have sociology recognized as a science, and that writing movie reviews—especially with a normative political slant!—did not fit this mission one bit. I did not exactly keep mum after that meeting, but only after I gained tenure did I feel free to combine my scholarly work with raising my public voice when I believed it was necessary.

Lesson number four: you can be a PI any time, any place, especially if your rich uncle left you a trust fund or you do not mind waiting tables if all else fails. Otherwise, think tenure. It provides a strong underpinning for that which must be done.

EVERYONE IS A PUBLISHER, BUT ARE THERE READERS?

One of the clichés of the brave new cyberworld is that everyone is a publisher. You have been told that you no longer need to convince the ever-tighter publishers to issue your book, nor the editors to accept your article in one of their shrinking magazines for your ideas to see the light of day months, if not years, later. Now, we are told, you can just start a Web page and say all that you want, as often as you want, without delay, at next to no cost. Just blog.

The bitter truth that has somehow escaped the cyberspace champions is that there are now so many "publishers" online, that many of them have very few readers. Given that the whole purpose of the PI is not just to speak, but also to be heard, it is important to note that blogging often will not get you much of a hearing.

You can have more of an effect if you join one of the established forums that have a developed readership, such as Talking Points Memo and Politico Arena. Here, too, you soon will find that some people are much more widely read than others, and you will need to figure out what brings eyeballs to your text, and—if you are willing to do what it takes to gain attention for what you believe needs to be said.

Some years ago, I wrote an essay for *Time* magazine. When I met with the editor, he told me that he wanted "a forehead-slapping piece." When I meekly replied that I did not know what this meant, he explained that he wanted the reader to exclaim, "Wow, why did I not think about that?!" The editor was less keen to determine whether the idea could be well supported. This conversation came to mind when I read an article in a recent issue of the new *Newsweek*—which has gone to extremes to build circulation—by Jonathan Tepperman.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1049096510001319 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Mr. Tepperman announced that we are all dead wrong: "Nuclear weapons may not, in fact, make the world more dangerous." Wait, wait, Mr. Tepperman is just warming up. "The bomb may actually make us safer," he claims. Mr. Tepperman finds that more nuclear-armed states are not dangerous, and that they are, in effect, "agents of peace" (Tepperman 2009). The *Newsweek* journalist modestly refers to this revelation as "the truth" and claims that his conclusion is based on a "growing and compelling body of research." However, on reading further, it becomes clear that there is no research—let alone *compelling* research—to support this forehead-slapping claim.

I flatter myself to believe that one reason that the reach of my public voice was more limited than the reach of some others' voices is that I tried to take facts into account, as well as to see both sides of the issue at hand, and sometimes more than two.

Lesson number five: Whatever course you follow, you had best figure out how far you are willing to go to gain an audience and, beyond that, a following.

DEVELOP A VOICE

Often, before I am invited to participate in a program on NPR or some other radio or TV program, I am pre-interviewed by someone who resembles one of my younger and less-prepared students. For instance, I was recently asked to speak about communitarianism on a radio program called "The Philosophy Hour." However, I must have failed the pre-interview. After I was asked some preliminary questions over the phone, the promised call to set a date for taping the show never materialized. It felt like going out on a blind date and never being called again.

One major reason for failing such pre-interviews—or for not being invited to interview in the first place—is that the media tolerated more than two voices or had a special interest in a communitarian subject.

Lesson number six: choose your position and determine not merely whether you seek to be labeled "left" or "right," but also whether you are willing to be pigeonholed in the first place.

SPECIALIZE

At first, this suggestion may seem an odd one. Scholars are said to specialize, but PIs are, almost by definition, people who generalize. However, if you look around, you will see that one effective way to be heard is to find a place in the Rolodexes (or their digital equivalent) of the media, which are by and large organized by topic. Thus, if journalists seek a quote or producers need to place someone on the *Diane Rehm Show*, they quickly look for PIs who specialize in the hot issue of the day. For instance, they are likely to turn to Larry Sabato (University of Virginia) for election results in general and Virginia in particular; Shibley Telhami (University of Maryland) for Israel-Palestine relations; Norman Orenstein and Tom Mann for comments on Congress, and so on. True, all these PIs have a broader expertise and are occasionally consulted on a variety of subjects. Nevertheless, they are most likely to be called upon to speak on their established areas of specialization.

Indeed, I was removed from quite a few Rolodexes when *Time* magazine scoffed at my reluctance to specialize. I had shifted the focus of my attention several times, from arguing in favor of rolling back the nuclear arms race, to arguing against the war in Vietnam, shifting major public investments from lunar visitations to domestic social programs and near space, and addressing issues of bioethics. *Time* pointed to my "bustling omnipresence" in a profile published on my forty-sixth birthday entitled "The Everything Expert" (*Time* 1975). *Time*

The media tends to look for either one conservative and one liberal voice, or one voice in favor and one opposed to the issue on the table, such as gay marriage. Typically, Jim Lehrer's NewsHour *casts Mark Shields as the liberal and David Brooks as the conservative representative. FOX uses conservatives, MSNBC uses liberals, and so on. Hence, if you take an intermediary position or are a dove on some issues and a hawk on others, you will be left out in the cold most of the time.*

media tends to look for either one conservative and one liberal voice, or one voice in favor and one opposed to the issue on the table, such as gay marriage. Typically, Jim Lehrer's *NewsHour* casts Mark Shields as the liberal and David Brooks as the conservative representative. FOX uses conservatives, MSNBC uses liberals, and so on. Hence, if you take an intermediary position or are a dove on some issues and a hawk on others, you will be left out in the cold most of the time.

Communitarians like myself do not fit into this rigid format. I do not mean to blame the media for not granting me more of a forum. Indeed, I have gained quite a bit of a hearing over the years, but mainly on those occasions in which the did not mean this to be flattering, nor, it seems, did others who read the article.

My excuse for my "omnipresence" was that I sought to discover what new light one could cast on a variety of subjects if one examined them from the particular sociological and normative viewpoint I adopted, which later came to be called communitarianism. However, I could not append a note to this effect to each publication and interview, and I doubt that such notes would have reversed opinions if I had.

Lesson number seven: you had better not follow my footsteps and instead stick to your knitting—or at least do not pick up too many subjects about which to pontificate.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1049096510001319 Published online by Cambridge University Press

FASTEN YOUR SEATBELT—IT IS A ROLLER COASTER RIDE

If you make it—if you have been quoted three times in a row by major newspapers and the Associated Press to boot, penned an op-ed for the *Washington Post*, and had your picture in the *Chronicle of Higher Education*—then beware. The same media that gave you a voice will just as quickly take it away.

For a while, one could hardly open the *New York Times* without reading a book review, essay, or op-ed by Alan Wolfe, a true, broad, and deep-thinking PI. In 1998, he published eight articles in the *Times* and six in each of the following three years. But in 2002 and 2003, the *Times* published only one of his articles each year. The same situation befell Noah Feldman, who, for a while, was the go-to source for Muslim issues. Although the *Times* published 11 of his articles in 2007 and 10 in 2008, only three have appeared in 2009. Niall Ferguson lasted longer in the limelight than many, but he too has now been eclipsed. If you are lucky, you may ride a second and even a third wave, but very few PIs remain at the top of their game year in and year out.

Lesson number eight: Don't mope. It isn't personal. This is the way of the world, or at least of the public arena. You can hope to catch a second wave some day, but do not sit by the phone waiting for it to ring.

CROSSFIRE IS GOOD FOR THE MISSION, BUT . . .

PIs face the danger that they will stray too far from the facts, overgeneralize, simplify, and emote. Scholars face the danger that they will stray too far into subjects that matter to no one but themselves, overspecialize, make things more complicated than they need be, and suppress their affect. Actually, the sniping that takes place between scholars and PIs is functional: scholars attempt to keep PIs from yielding to the sirens that tempt them and from becoming too popular, and PIs attempt to help scholars from becoming, well, too academic.

If you plan to try your hand at being a PI, you should expect criticism from your academic colleagues. As Russell Jacoby points out, "The worst thing you can say about someone in an academic meeting or when you're discussing tenure promotion is, 'Oh, his work is kind of journalistic.' Meaning, it's readable. It's journalistic, it's superficial" (2001). Richard Posner accuses PIs of being "often careless with facts and rash in predictions" (2001, 35). Jean Bethke Elshtain writes that intellectuals "[possess] a worldview whose logic promises to explain everything, and perhaps, in some glorious future, control and manage everything" (2001, 43).

The *New Yorker* wrote about John Kenneth Galbraith that "even some of those economists who personally like Galbraith dismiss him with the usual tags—'popularizer,' 'gadfly,' or, worst of all, 'journalist'" (Cassidy 1998). Cornel West was savaged by the *New Republic*, which wrote that his books were full of pomposity and demonstrated "a long saga of positioning" (Wieseltier 1995). Carl Sagan was not allowed to rest even after he died. He was described as a "cunning careerist" and, the ultimate put-down, "compulsive popularizer" (Mallon 1999). I was not treated much better.

PIs have responded that academics today learn more and more about less and less, study trivia, write in ways that cannot be comprehended, and, above all, that their works are irrelevant to the burning social issues of the day. Mark Krupnick wrote that "as their critical idiom has become more and more technical and specialized, they have exercised less and less influence on the general culture" (2005, 274). C. Wright Mills dedicated a good part of a book, *The Sociological Imagination*, to blast academics for being abstract, socially unaware, and otherwise irrelevant.

If one puts aside the overblown and harsh ways that both sides attack one another, one can see some value in the standing conflict between the PI and the academic roles. The fact that PIs are under constant pressure to generalize less, document more, and so on helps to keep them more intellectually responsible than they would be if they were not exposed to such pressures, and it protects them from becoming more ideological, from being commercially bought, from seeking to ingratiate themselves to governing elites, or from playing to the public—all temptations they face from the public side of their role. And in turn, PIs help keep academics from becoming lost in ever-narrower specializations and meaningless concept splits and arguments about how many angels can dance on the head of a pin.

Lesson number nine: Do not expect kudos from your academic colleagues. Treat their barbs as ways to help keep you from drifting too far from scholarly standards, and—when the sprit moves you—fire back. Such a response will keep the academics from becoming too scholastic.

DRIP-DRIP

Once upon a time, before I spent a year in the White House, I had a *West Wing* image of how major decisions are made and how our voices might be heard. This picture resembled a football huddle, only one that lasted longer and allowed everyone their say. I had an image of a bunch of people standing around the president's desk in the Oval Office or sitting around a table in the Situation Room. Fierce debate would take place. You would throw in your two cents. If you were right, after a few more rounds of give and take, more and more people would nod their heads in agreement with you. The president would stand up—meaning the meeting was closed. Voila, a decision had been made, and you had carried the day for the nation, maybe the world.

Actually, with extremely rare exceptions, your voice is likely to be heard first in the public realm before reaching the seats of power. Thus, President Kennedy's thinking about the war on poverty was influenced by Michael Harrington's book *The Other America*, not because he listened to Harrington (or read the book), but because he read a review of the book in the *New Yorker* (Troy 2010). Cass Sunstein's book *Nudge* (coauthored with Richard Thaler) was widely lionized in the media before President Obama appointed Sunstein as head of the Office of Information and Regulatory Affairs within the Office of Management and Budget. (The two did know each other in their days in Chicago, before either moved into the White House.) I was drafted by the Carter White House after the *Wall Street Journal* ran a front-page story about a paper I wrote when I was a visiting scholar at Brookings.

It seems that preparing the ground in the public realm is a valid reason for people in power to draw on your voice. After

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1049096510001319 Published online by Cambridge University Press

all, we are dealing with politics; simply having good ideas will not often get you very far unless you can bring the public along. Think about the public arena as a screen test before you can move into the inner circles of power—although some do manage to find a shortcut, circumventing this test.

Next, be prepared for the fact that, with rare exceptions, few voices carry the day alone. Most times, voices are accumulative: You find kindred spirits in the corridors of government or they find you. You together prepare a memo (a much more common way to communicate an idea than having a place in the presidential huddle or at the Situation Room table). You run the idea by others, revise the memo, convince others to cosign. Then, often, you need a gatekeeper—the chief of staff or a senator's administrative assistant—to let the memo through the gate, usually after he or she runs it by still other people. In short, whatever grandiose notions I once cherished about making a mark, I learned that in order to have a mark, one must be prepared to allow one's ideas to be reformulated, modified, and folded into other ideas.

Lesson number ten: being a PI is more of a process than a role.

DOWN THE ACTION CHAIN?

I have focused so far on the seats of power in Washington and London. However, if you seek to influence the labor movement, the greens, the Democrats, or another politically relevant body, many of the same observations will apply. Moreover, on all these fronts—and fronts they are, rather than welcoming open doors—a PI must decide how far down the action chain he or she is willing to descend. Some decide to stick to the higher reaches, formulating ideas that they float in the public realm, hoping that they will wash up on the right shore when the time is right. Others jump in and paddle, trying to ensure that their ideas will reach the right harbor just in time. They impatiently call the press when it does not call them and flood editors with op-ed pieces. You hear them on radio call-in shows when they are not on C-SPAN.

Still other PIs are willing to go even further. For instance, I discovered early in my Columbia days where my place was. I could not resist going beyond words. Thus, I joined others in demonstrating against nukes in Trafalgar Square and against the Vietnam War in DC, and I participated with others in knocking on the doors of members of Congress in support of the Voting Rights Act. I do not regret any of these steps, but I do note that the further you go down the action chain—the closer you shift toward an activist rather than a PI role—the more you must realize that not everyone will welcome this transition.

CONCLUSION

Think of the role of a PI as a calling or public service, rather than a joy ride that will get your picture on the front page or on the evening news. There will be many more times that you will be damn sure everyone should listen and nobody will than occasions when you will carry the day. Being a PI has its rewarding moments: when a war finally ends, or when the number of nukes is cut back. (The discovery that I was on Nixon's enemy list—together with a great number of Americans I much admired—made my day.) However, if you are going to persevere, you need a thick skin and considerable stamina, because you will encounter one hurdle after another. Hence, you had best not start down this road unless you are quite sure that this is a mission you firmly believe you ought to take on. See you in the trenches. ■

REFERENCES

Baxter, Sarah. 1995. "I Am the Way and I Am the Truth." *Sunday Times*, March 19.

Cassidy, John. 1998. "Height of Eloquence." *New Yorker*, November 30, 70–75.

Elshtain, Jean Bethke. 2001. "Why Public Intellectuals?" *Wilson Quarterly* 25 (4): 43.

Jacoby, Russell. 2001. "The Future of the Public Intellectual: A Forum." *The Nation*, January 25. http://www.thenation.com/article/future-public-intellectual-forum.

Krupnick, Mark. 2005. *Jewish Writing and the Deep Places of the Imagination.* Madison: University of Wisconsin Press.

Mallon, Thomas. 1999. "Billions and Billions." *New Yorker*, November 22, 196.

Phillips, Melanie. 1994. "Father of Tony Blair's Big Idea." *Observer* (London), July 24.

Posner, Richard. 2001. *Public Intellectuals: A Study of Decline.* Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

Tepperman, Jonathan. 2009. "Why Obama Should Learn to Love the Bomb." *Newsweek*, August 29. http://www.newsweek.com/2009/08/28/why-obama-should-learn-to-love-the-bomb.html.

Time. 1975. "Behavior: The Everything Expert." *Time*, February 17. http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,912881-1,00.html.

Troy, Tevi. 2010. "For Obama and Past Presidents, the Books They Read Shape Policies and Perceptions." *Washington Post*, April 18.

Wieseltier, Leon. 1995. "All and Nothing at All." *New Republic*, March 6, 31–36.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1049096510001319 Published online by Cambridge University Press

American Political Science Association

APSA Membership Opens Doors

Take Advantage of the Value of APSA Membership

As the the oldest, largest, and most comprehensive political science society in the world, APSA supports over 14,000 members in 70 countries and advances political science in many ways. Open the door to your future. Become an APSA member!

Offering Online Scholarship
Scholarship is central to APSA membership. Current and recent back issues of all three APSA journals are available online to members through Cambridge Journals Online. Members can also gain access to the full historical collection through JSTOR subscriptions. Political Research Online (PROL), a collaborative project led by APSA and a consortium of political science and related associations, houses 30,000 searchable conference papers.

Creating Networks and Connecting Scholars
APSA strives to provide valuable opportunities for members to network with colleagues, share ideas, and form relationships to drive their careers. Members receive discounts for APSA conferences—the Teaching and Learning Conference, Conference for Chairs, and the Annual Meeting—as well as access to the association's Organized Sections.

Providing Career and Employment Resources
APSA's eJobs is the most comprehensive online resource of political science employment opportunities and job candidates. It is fully searchable and updated daily with new job listings and candidate resumes. The eJobs placement service at the Annual Meeting brings employers and candidates together in person to greatly facilitate the hiring process.

Supporting Political Science Research
The Centennial Center for Political Science & Public Affairs, located at APSA's headquarters building, provides office space for scholars and students conducting field work in Washington, D.C. Through the Center, APSA also offers a number of research grant opportunities for scholars working in various subfields.

Membership application, rates and details: www.apsanet.org/membership

apsa

1527 New Hampshire Avenue NW, Washington, DC 20036 | 202.483.2512 | www.apsanet.org

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1049096510001319 Published online by Cambridge University Press