Enlightenment and Engagement in “Dark Times”:
Notes on the Intellectual and Practical Contribution of Richard Falk

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I thank the organisers for the privilege to speak on this panel in honour of Richard Falk as this year’s Outstanding Public Scholar in International Political Economy. Whilst no single award is really sufficient enough to capture all of Richard’s accomplishments it nevertheless provides us with an opportunity to recognize one of the finest scholars and public intellectuals of our era, and in particular to appreciate his practical contributions to national and international public life. The International Studies Association (ISA) could not have chosen a better person for this award – quite simply Richard Falk is a towering figure. His career spans many years, it has encompassed distinguished contributions in many disciplines, including political economy, international law, religion, civilizations, the environment, and futurology. It is a career that has involved often difficult, sometimes controversial, but consistently principled engagement on the crucial issues of our times. His contribution as a public scholar to national and international public life is indeed, outstanding. He has shone a bright and penetrating light, as he would put it, in “dark times”.

My appreciation of Richard Falk began many years ago in my very earliest days as a scholar when I heard him deliver the plenary address at the British International Studies Association annual meeting in Lancaster. I had read Richard’s work on the Vietnam War and questions of world order as a student and I had been deeply influenced by his views. At the BISA event, as I listened to Richard for the first time, I was struck by his immense clarity and eloquence, by his profound powers of analysis, and by his deeply ethical perspective. I was particularly moved by his argument since it was something I rarely encountered in International Relations scholarship in Britain. Richard was asking what it means to be human and to act humanely in international relations.

I approached him after his talk and to my surprise, he invited me, a young, unknown scholar who he had never before met, to join him for dinner, where he engaged me in conversation and debate about the questions of the day – a conversation that happily continues. In that conversation, and in his writings and actions, Richard has consistently shown me that the possibility of a truly democratic society depends upon well grounded and freely expressed arguments, and a willingness to confront and address controversial issues with an unwavering intellect and a commitment to fairness, to truth and, on more than one occasion, to the underdog.

Richard Falk has never shied away from either the theory or the practice of ethical and political obligation. He has spoken out against and intervened as a public figure in the debates concerning the legality and injustices of the Vietnam War; the ongoing challenges of the Arab-Israeli conflict and the relations between Israel and Palestine; and the vexing questions of injustice and inequality associated with what he has called “predatory globalization” –
throughout raising fundamental issues concerning ethics, justice, governance, law and legitimacy. More recently he has called into question the official versions of the truth concerning 9/11, raising issues that fundamentally challenge the structure and practice of political power in the USA and in particular how this is used instrumentally to secure a form of US supremacy and imperialism in world order. I could list other intellectual and practical contributions but they number so many it would take way too long.

In the little time I have left I want to try to pose the following question: What can animate and motivate a person like this to act in such a way? I will try to scratch the surface of an answer by starting with three short quotations that will be well known to Richard Falk. These quotations may provide an indication of some of his maxims of conduct for ethical public life, or put differently, for the responsibilities of a global public scholar.

The first is from Bertold Brecht’s poem, “In Praise of Doubt” (Poems, 1938-41); the second is from Hannah Arendt’s, Men in Dark Times (1968).

Here is Berthold Brecht:

“The thoughtless who never doubt/
Meet the thoughtful who never act”.

Here is Hannah Arendt:

“We humanize what is going on in the world and in ourselves only by speaking of it, and in the course of speaking we learn to be human”.

Now let me add a third quotation from Richard Falk, which might perhaps serve as his personal motto:

“The responsible scholar carries a lantern, but does not withdraw from the darkness.”

Richard Falk used the two quotations from Brecht and Arendt in a paper he delivered at the 47th Annual International Studies Association Convention in Montréal in 2007 entitled, “Responsible Scholarship in Dark Times.” It was a reflection on the corrosion of political discourse in the United States after 9/11 and during the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, although it spoke to a much longer history and to a wide-ranging set of issues.

Here I simply would like to note one of its key arguments since it applies to the material and intellectual conditions of existence of the academic world in the USA. The argument – and I over-simplify on grounds of the need for brevity – was this: progressive or liberal academics working in the United States have been and continue to be intimidated and silenced by the power, institutional dominance and ideology of conservatism. The explanation for this state of affairs requires us to combine political economy and institutional analysis with ethical and moral reasoning.
Richard Falk gives as an example his 40 years at Princeton, where conservatives were given many opportunities to consult with agencies such as the Pentagon or CIA, to sit on advisory panels, and to speak to the media. Conservatives were provided “with a halo of credibility that seemed often to presage their selection for university posts of high administrative rank”.

Falk also observed in the same ISA paper:

“This double standard is probably reinforced by the disproportionately conservative orientation of wealthy university donors and of members of boards of trustees”.

What this specifically meant for liberal academics was revealed early in his career at Princeton during the Vietnam War:

As the war unfolded in the 1960s, more and more colleagues were privately opposed to the war policy, but few were willing to manifest this opposition in public, despite the growing unpopularity of the war, and even if they did, then only in the most timid ways. This reluctance applied to faculty with tenure and professorial rank even more than to those who held no secure appointment, but had not yet been fully absorbed the professional ethos of self-censorship.

I cannot even begin to do justice to the complexity of the rest of the argument in that Montréal paper, so I simply recommend it to all scholars.

It can be retrieved from the following link:


In conclusion, a review essay of four books by Richard Falk (which were published between 1999-2002) characterized Richard Falk as “the Grotius of our time” whose writings have been “often a decade or more ahead of international lawyers and civil servants on issues such as humanitarian intervention, international tribunals, and weapons of mass destruction”.¹ The author, international lawyer Henry Carey, showed how both Hugo Grotius and Richard Falk are towering figures in international studies and how both addressed not only issues of war and peace but also the rules, principles and practices of international commerce and trade – and did so as engaged public scholars. Of course their intellectual and political commitments were quite different – the latter is more “progressive” than the former, although the use the term “progressive” in relation to the time of Grotius might perhaps be anachronistic.

The reviewer also noted Richard Falk’s unusual degree of intellectual honesty, a person who recognizes that he does not have all the answers – coupled with a rare willingness to consistently question his former positions and if need be to change his mind. Indeed the reviewer stated that Falk’s “perspicacious insights and arguments” are grounded in a “mood of guarded optimism” [that] “remains ever realistic to the core…” [As Falk has observed]… “he follows Mark Twain and ‘reads the weather forecast before praying for rain’”\(^2\).

So Richard, I end with a question that follows from one of my favourite quotations.

This is from Dante’s *Purgatory*, XXII, 67-9, from the *Divine Comedy* (1308-21):

\[\text{come quei che va di notte,}\]
\[\text{che porta il lume dietro e sè non giova,}\]
\[\text{ma dopo sè fa le persone dotte.}\]

“As one who, walking by night/
Carries a light behind him not for his own benefit/
But to make wise those who come after him.”\(^3\)

I think that quotation from Dante applies to you, Richard.

So my question is this – assuming you have checked the weather forecast – can you reconsider if we have still have grounds for “guarded optimism” concerning the emergence of a more just and humane world order? And if so, what further light can you shed for us on our pathways forward?
