

# *Theory Talks*

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THEORY TALK #36

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## MICHAEL J. SHAPIRO ON PICTURES, PAINTINGS, POWER AND THE POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY OF INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

### Theory Talks

is an interactive forum for discussion of debates in International Relations with an emphasis of the underlying theoretical issues. By frequently inviting cutting-edge specialists in the field to elucidate their work and to explain current developments both in IR theory and real-world politics, *Theory Talks* aims to offer both scholars and students a comprehensive view of the field and its most important protagonists.

**Citation:** Schouten, P. (2009) 'Theory Talk #36: Michael J. Shapiro on Pictures, Paintings, Power and the Political Philosophy of International Relations', *Theory Talks*, <http://www.theory-talks.org/2010/02/theory-talk-36.html> (01-02-2010)

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## MICHAEL J. SHAPIRO ON PICTURES, PAINTINGS, POWER AND THE POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY OF INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS



How do images reflect politics? How can one learn to appreciate the ‘everyday’ as imbued with power? The oeuvre of Michael J. Shapiro has transcended—or rather—refused—the disciplinary boundaries that structure most inquiry to produce unsettling, difficult yet profoundly relevant and rich accounts of the world around us. Drawing on such diverse traditions as literary theory, sociology, and cultural studies, Shapiro, amongst others, discusses the political philosophy of International Relations; explains what we could learn from critical humanities and reflects on the way in which pictures are relevant texts for critical analysis.

**What is, according to you, the biggest challenge / principal debate in current IR? What is your position or answer to this challenge / in this debate?**

The biggest challenge for contemporary IR is to wake up from its pre-Kantian slumber. Most of the discipline remains uncritical because it is predicated on an anemic, empiricist philosophy of social science which treats mere appearances. The Kantian/post Kantian innovation is to focus on the conditions of possibility for something to appear. More concretely, the dominant forms of realism and rationalism in the discipline tend to naturalize the geopolitical world of states and to allow an unreflective discourse on sovereignty to dominate the problematics that mainstream inquiry entertains. From critical perspectives, the discipline or IR is an object of analysis rather than a set of norms for creating and analyzing global phenomena. IR and empiricist social science in general is tied to appearances. If we follow the trajectory of post-Kantian critical thinking, our concerns become involved with the alternative ways in which the world is politically partitioned and note the economies of what is able to appear versus what is concealed. The experiences of slavery, forced migration, violent usurpation of indigenous territories, global trading in bodies and body parts all produce perspectives and voices that challenge security-minded and war-strategy focused versions of “international relations.” One critical question, then, is why the dominant sovereignty-predicated focus remains; the others involve recognizing and analyzing global exchanges that operate outside of or below the level of inter-state relations. My strategy? Forget IR.

### **How did you arrive at where you currently are in IR?**

I must preface my response by noting that I am NOT ‘in’ IR. How IR makes its world is a subject matter for me, not part of my intellectual or disciplinary affiliation. How did I arrive at the kind of critique of the discipline that operates implicitly in my work? I think two aspects matter here. First of all, I consumed a lot of writing in the history of philosophy and I have always been attentive particularly to critically oriented philosophy. This has allowed me to relate questions asked in IR (the discursive ‘appearances’) to the related or underlying conditions. Secondly, I have always tried to heed methodological approaches that distance me from what is familiar. Third, I familiarize myself with a wide variety of genres – literature, film, architecture, poetry, music, landscape painting, and so on. These different genres articulate alternative thought-worlds and allow me to see things from alternative perspectives. For example, one of the best ways to heed the consequences of the Cuban revolution for Cuba’s contemporary life world is to read the crime stories of the Cuban writer, [Leonardo Padura Fuentes](#). And one of the best ways to appreciate the demise of European colonialism is to watch Gillo Pontecorvo’s 1966 film commissioned by the Algerian government, *The Battle of Algiers* (watch the trailer [here](#)).

### **What would a student need to become a specialist in IR or understand the world in a global way?**

My advice is to avoid becoming “a specialist in IR” because it is a specialty that is intellectually challenged; it’s a “trained incapacity” (to use [Thorstein Veblen](#)’s expression). One who wants to achieve a critical distance from the way the dominant disciplines make their worlds must seek to learn the nuances of what Jacques Rancière calls ‘indisciplinarity’. As Rancière puts it, “indisciplinarity thought,” is the kind of thought that breaks disciplines in order to deprivilege the distribution of (disciplinary) territories that control “who is qualified to speak about what.” My answer to those who think that critically oriented inquiry is hard to grasp is that things *should* be hard to grasp. When they are easy to grasp “we are not thinking yet” (to quote one of Gilles Deleuze’s frequent remarks). To cut to the end: the benefit of resisting disciplinary discourses is that one gets to think rather than merely recognize things. And thinking requires the invention of new concepts, new angles of vision, and the production of encounters between bodies that do not share worlds. For example, the Mexican writer, [Carlos Fuentes](#) was led to recognize that the world functions within more than one temporal practice. While driving with friends in the Morelos section of Mexico, he got lost and asked a *campesino* the name of the village where he had just stopped. The answer was that the village is named Santa Maria in times of peace and Zapata in time of war. The epiphany that Fuentes achieved at that moment was to see that (in his words) “there is more than one time in the world” – other than, for example, the one bequeathed by the dominant states.

### **What constitutes good social analysis?**

Good social analysis does one or more of the following: It adds voices and perspectives to a domain of thought or inquiry that has generated silences that narrow the scope of “the political.” It invents new concepts. It disrupts the process by which we have assumed that we are attaining a

deeper understanding (I am paraphrasing [Maurice Blanchot](#) on the purpose of literature here). It substitutes contingency for certainty. It historicizes what is treated as timeless. In short, it unsettles the process of settling how we should interpret the social and political world.

**Your work seems to consist in many instances of critique of text. How do you choose your texts?**

The issue of a choice of text cannot be characterized in general. For example, when Michel Foucault went back historically to texts on instructions for those “manning” confessional booths, his purpose was not to teach us what the development of Christianity was about. Rather, it was to make current demands on people to tell truths about themselves seem peculiar and thereby to be able to characterize the particular aspects of power-knowledge in the present. By showing that there was once a different kind of demand during a different historical period, he is able to provide a history of “truth” as a power-knowledge phenomenon. He could have done this with other texts from other periods. It is a matter of finding a text that, when juxtaposed with something else, delivers a critical way of thinking about politics, power, authority, etc.

In my case, while treating “American political thought” I chose to examine African American, Latino American and Native American crime novels because by so doing, I was able to see how the perspective on American politics could be enlarged when we go beyond the issues that are enjoined in Euro-American texts. I discovered what I call alternative thought worlds. Such discoveries challenge what many regard as unified centers of knowledge.

Thus, for example, global cities are complex racial-spatial and ethnic orders that reveal their fraught inter-racial/inter-ethnic relations in a wide variety of texts. In the case of France, the films *La Haine* (watch trailer [here](#)) and *Caché* (watch trailer [here](#)) are among the most instructive texts.

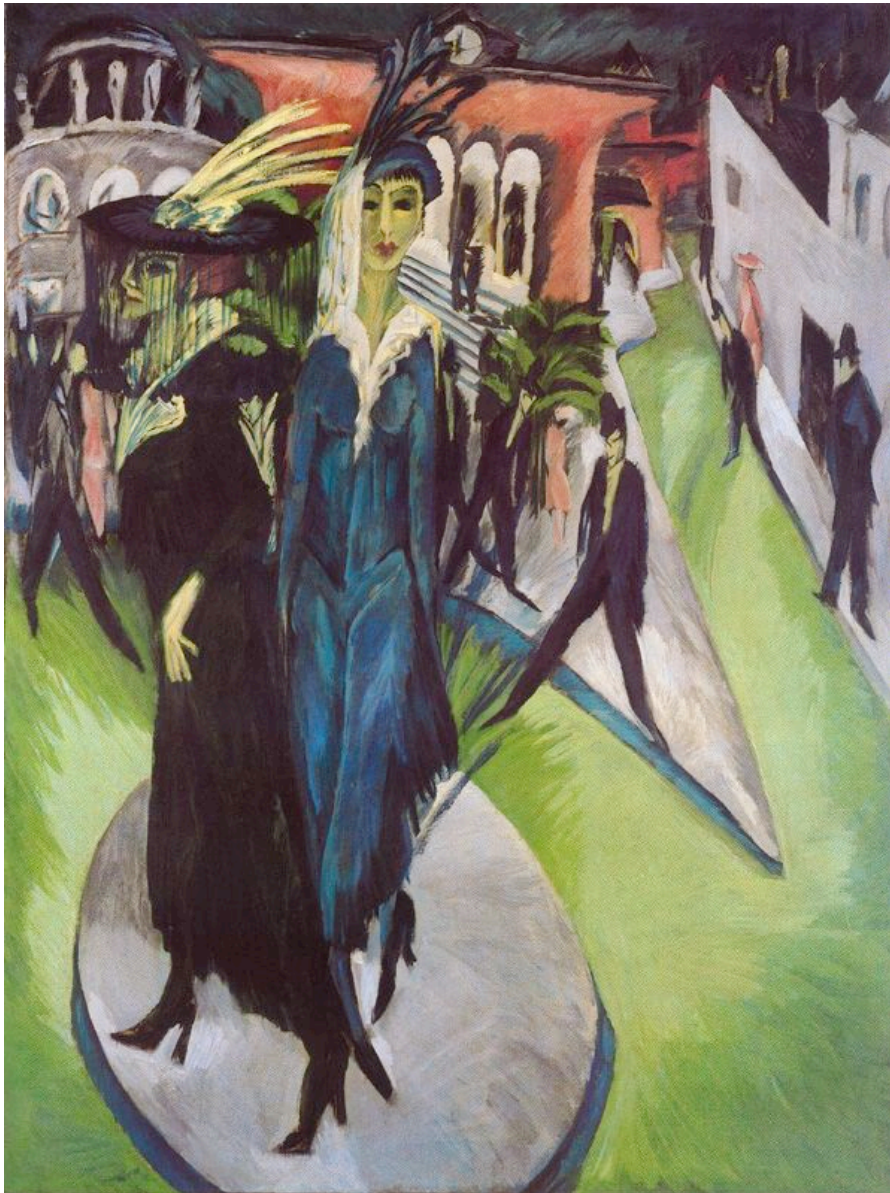
In the case of Berlin, before the Berlin Wall came down, graffiti was among the more instructive texts. Now that the city is unified, and Berliners are seeking to overcome much of what they regard as a shameful past, architecture is among the most important texts because, as Andreas Huyssen has put it, Berliners recognize that memory is built.

**Which images related to social or political issues have inspired you most or show well the relation between representation and power and why?**

My work on cinema, influenced a lot by the cinema books of Gilles Deleuze, treats the way film form can constitute a way of thinking – about politics, about war, about subjectivity, etc. An example of this is the composition of images in Michael Cimino’s *The Deer Hunter*. This film, which by part two creates episodes during the Vietnam War, helps us understand the forces at work that allow young men to be recruited as soldiers into a violent conflict. Among what the film shows, by examining their pre-war daily life world, is the extent to which they lack complex codes that can compete with the patriotic, duty-compelling codes that instigate their willingness to serve.

I cannot cite images without also noting the commentary (sometimes my own) that has helped me see them politically. The opening scenes in Robert Altman's film *McCabe and Mrs. Miller* (watch the opening scene [here](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1iYxrsd59-E&feature=related)) struck me right away because the scene takes place in the Pacific Northwest and thus deforms the traditional western films (especially those of John Ford), which operate in different, typically desert-like, landscapes.

Another example of an image that I cherish is linked to the following. As I was working on an essay on Berlin and Hong Kong while treating the special case of cities and crowds, I was struck by Ernst Ludwig Kirchner's painting of Potsdamer Platz in Berlin because of the way he depicts a crowd where the people are in close proximity while ignoring each other.





Or for another example: I saw the famous *Signing of the Declaration of Independence* painting in the Independence Hall in Philadelphia very differently once I read the novelist Jamaica Kincaid's commentary on it:

“America begins with the Declaration of Independence...but who really needs this document... There is a painting in Philadelphia of the men who signed it. These men looked relaxed; they are enjoying the activity of thinking, the luxury of it. They have time to examine this thing called their conscience and to act on it...some keep their hair in an unkempt style (Jefferson, Washington), and others keep their hair well groomed (Franklin), their clothes pressed...”

She then speaks of those who have worked to prepare the men for the occasion “the people who made their beds and made their clothes nicely pressed and their hair well groomed or in a state of studied dishevelment.” This way of thinking about images, or rather, this different way of seeing what's in a painting is something I strive for.

**Much of your work transgresses the focus of IR on states, but establishes linkages across all levels of analysis. How does this work?**

IR purports to be about ‘macropolitics’. To put it simply, every aspect of macropolitics, e.g., governmental policies, has effects on the ways in which people manage their life worlds as they move from sensing things differently, to being affected by them, to taking initiatives. To focus on micropolitics is to map much of this management issue. A micropolitical analysis if it is

elaborated and deployed on the many different kinds of bodies affected by macropolitics reveals a level of political interaction that operates below the level of policy-making bodies.

For example, in relation to the issues of security, I treat in my forthcoming *The Time of the City* the contemporary “securescape” of the modern city, suggesting that increasingly, the well-off classes are walling themselves off from the underclass and that, as a result, the city is increasingly a scene of class warfare. But beyond that particular concern, which occupies a small section of the book, I am concerned with developing a geo-philosophy that is adequate to the micropolitics of urban life in general because most political philosophy is state-obsessed.

Another concept that has proven useful for me in this context is that of ‘biopower’ The concept is first mentioned in Michel Foucault’s lectures at the College de France and further developed in Foucault’s first volume of *The History of Sexuality*. It presumes first of all that power is productive in the sense that it works not just by inhibiting action but by also producing identities. Thus for example, by the nineteenth century, rather than merely a people, governments saw themselves as having a “population.” The biopolitics of the population becomes intelligible when one recognized that this new collective identity was an object of knowledge for government, that is, the fundamental structuring power in modern society. Dealing with the management of bodies, governments wanted to know about such things as life expectancy, how many calories have to be consumed to allow bodies to keep working, how many new bodies can one count on if one expands public health, etc.

Since then, the concept of biopower has come (at least in the more critical and innovative work) to compete with notions of territorial power as a dimension of state security policy, among other things at the macro-level, and at the micro-level it is used to reference that ways in which bodies which are officially deemed as politically unqualified engage in acts of subjectification, i.e. act to demand to be treated as those with politically relevant speech.

**Last question. On this more micro-level, the practice of family life has changed quite radically the last century, moving in the ‘West’ from ‘traditional’, patriarchal families to separations to LAT-relations and people living alone. You’ve written about ‘national culture and the politics of the family’ some time back; would you be able to relate this transformation in family life to changes in political and economical organization?**

In my book on the politics of the family I do much of what you’re asking. There was a time when the family was the locus of employment. However as large scale commercial enterprises developed and industrialization followed, the family became a place that sought to qualify their children for work outside of itself – for example by paying for training or education. At the same time, states became interested in family life precisely because it was recognized as the milieu in which useful working bodies are created. Jacques Donzelot’s book on the policing of families chronicles this development. It is thus not surprising that the primary innovation in the discourses on political economy in the nineteenth century focused on the body. Of course presently, different families within racial-spatial and class orders face different issues. In my 2006 book *Deforming American Political Thought* I contrast the film *Risky Business* with *Clockers*. In the

former, a white upper middle class family is consumed by the desire to get their son into an Ivy League college, so he can be sure to reproduce their level of privilege, while in the latter, a project-dwelling African American family is striving to keep their sons alive.

**Michael J. Shapiro is Professor of Political Science at the University of Hawaii. He has published widely on such diverse topics as political theory and philosophy, critical social theory, global politics, politics of media, politics of aesthetics, politics of culture, and indigenous politics.**

*Related links*

- [Faculty Profile at University of Hawaii](http://www.politicalscience.hawaii.edu/faculty/shapiro.html)<http://www.politicalscience.hawaii.edu/faculty/shapiro.html>
- Read Shapiro's *Globalization and the Politics of Discourse* (Social Text, 1999) [here](#) (pdf)
- Read Shapiro's *Samuel Huntington's Moral Geography* (Theory & Event, 1998) [here](#) (pdf)
- Read Shapiro's *Managing Urban Security: City Walls and Urban Metis* (Security Dialogue, 2009) [here](#) (pdf)
- Read Shapiro's *Every Move You Make: Bodies, Surveillance, and Media* (Social Text, 2005) [here](#) (pdf)