

# *Theory Talks*

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THEORY TALK #58

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DANIEL LEVINE ON HIDDEN HANDS,  
VOCATION AND SUSTAINABLE CRITIQUE IN  
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.

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# DANIEL LEVINE ON HIDDEN HANDS, VOCATION AND SUSTAINABLE CRITIQUE IN INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS



Daniel Levine is part of a new generation of IR scholars that takes a more pluralist approach to addressing the hard and important questions generated by international politics. While many of those interviewed here display a fairly consistent commitment to a certain position within what is often referred to as ‘the debate’ in IR, Levine straddles the boundaries of a diverse range of positions and understandings. Time to ask for elaboration.

**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 question I’d like us to be asking more clearly than we are is, ‘are we a vocation and, if so, what kind of vocation are we?’ This points to a varied set of questions that we, as scholars, gesture to but spend relatively little theoretical time developing or unpacking. There’s an assumption that the knowledge we produce is supposed to be put good for something, practical in light of some praiseworthy purpose. Even theorists who perceive themselves to be epistemologically value-free hope, I think, at least on an intuitive level, that some practical good will emerge from what they do. They hope that they are doing ‘good work’ in the sense that some Christians use this term. But, there is not really a sustained project of thinking through how those works *work*: how our notions of vocation might be different or even mutually exclusive, and how the differences in our notions of vocation might be bound up in non-obvious ways to our epistemological, methodological, and theoretical choices.

Moreover, except for a few very important and quite heroic (and minoritarian) efforts, we don’t really have a way to think systematically about the structure of the profession: how it influences or intervenes or otherwise acts on particular ideas as they percolate through it, and how those ideas get ‘taken up’ into policy. [Brian Schmidt](#) has done work like that, so has [Inanna Hamati-Ataya](#), [Ole Waever](#), [Ido Oren](#), [Oded Löwenheim](#), [Elizabeth Dauphinee](#), [Nacem Inayatullah](#), and [Piki Ish-Shalom](#); and it’s good work, but they are doing what they are doing with limited resources, and I think without due appreciation from a big chunk of the field as to why that work is important and what it means.

When I started writing *Recovering International Relations*, I had wanted to recover the ‘view from nowhere’ that many social scientists idealize. You know, that methodological conceit where we imagine we are standing on Mars, watching the earth through a telescope, or we’re Archimedes standing outside of the world, leveraging it with distance and dispassion. I had worked on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict for a long time, was living in Tel Aviv, working for a think tank, and was—am—an Israeli citizen and an American citizen. I had this somewhat shocking discovery right after the [Second Intifada](#) broke out. Most of my senior colleagues were deploying their expertise in what seemed to me to be a very tendentious way: to show why the second Intifada was Yassar Arafat’s fault or the Palestinian Authority’s fault—or, in a few cases, the Israelis’ fault. There were some very simplistic political agendas that were driving this research. People were watching the evening news, coming into work the next morning, and then running [Ehud](#)

[Yaari's](#) commentary through their respective fact-values-methods mill. Or if they were well-connected, they were talking to their friends on the 'inside', and doing the same thing.

It was hard to admit this for a long time, but I was very naïve. I found that very unsettling and quite disillusioning. That's why the view from nowhere was so appealing. I wanted to be able to talk *about* Israel and Palestine without taking a position *on* Israel and Palestine—but without eschewing the expertise I had acquired along the way, in part because I *was* a party to this conflict, and cared about its outcome. I was young, inexperienced, and slightly arrogant to boot—neither yet a scholar, nor an 'expert,' nor really aware of the game I was playing. So my objections were not well received, nor did I pose them especially coherently. To their credit, my senior colleagues did recognize something worthwhile in my diatribes, and they did their best to help me get into graduate school.

As the project developed, and as I started engaging with my mentors in grad school, it appeared that the view from nowhere was essentially impossible to recover. With Hegel and with the poststructuralists, we can't really think from nowhere; the idea of it is this kind of intellectual optical illusion, as though thinking simply happens, without a mind that is conditioned by being in the world. Therefore, there needs to be a process by which we give account of ourselves.

There are a variety of different ways to consider how one might do that. There's what we might call the agentic approach, in which we think through the structure of thought itself: its limitations, our dependence on a certain image of thinking notwithstanding those limits—thought's work on us, on our minds. This is closest to what I do, drawing on Adorno and Kant, and Adorno's account of how concepts work in the mind; how they pull us away from the things we mean to understand even as they give us the words to understand them. And drawing on [Jane Bennett](#), [William Connolly](#), Hannah Arendt, [Cornel West](#), [Joan Tronto](#), and [Judith Butler](#) to think through how one conditions oneself to accept those limitations from a space of love, humility and service. Patrick Jackson's ([TheoryTalk #44](#)) *Conduct of Research in IR* is quite similar to this approach; and so is [Colin Wight's](#) *Agents, Structures and International Relations*; though they use more philosophy of science than I do.

One could also do this more 'structurally.' One could say 'this is how the academy works and this is how the academy interconnects with the larger political community' and then try to trace out those links: I mentioned Hamati-Ataya, Oren, and Ish-Shalom, or you could think of [Isaac Kamola](#), [Helen Kinsella](#), or [Srdjan Vucetic](#).

Any of those approaches—or really, some admixture of them—would be pieces of that project. I would like us to be doing more of that—alongside, not instead of, all the other things we are already doing, from historical institutionalism to formal modeling, to large-N and quantitative approaches, and normative, feminist and critical ones. I would like such self-accounting to be one of the things scholars do, that they take it as seriously as they take methods, epistemology, data, etc. Driving that claim home in our field, as it's presently constituted, is our biggest challenge.

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

I'm 42, so the Cold War was a big deal. I'm American-born, and I was raised in a pretty typical suburb. John Stewart from the *Daily Show* is probably the most famous product of my hometown, though I didn't know him. My view of history was a liberal and progressive in the Michael Waltzer/Ulrich Beck/Anthony Giddens, vein, but I was definitely influenced by the global circumstances of the time, and by the 'End of History' discourse that was in the air. I thought that the US was a force of good in the world. I was a nice Jewish boy from New Jersey. I

really wanted to live in Israel for personal reasons, and the moral challenge of living in Israel after the Intifada seemed to go away with the peace process. So, it seemed to me that it was a kind of golden moment: you could ‘render unto Caesar what was due to Caesar’, and do the same for the Lord. I could actually be a Jewish-Israeli national and also a political progressive. (That phrase is, of course, drawn from the Gospels, and that may give you some sense of how my stated religious affiliations might have differed from the conceptual and theological structures upon which they actually rested—score one for the necessity of reflexivity. But in any case, those events were important.)

I moved to Israel when I was 22 and was drafted into the military after I took citizenship there. In the IDF, I was a low-level functionary/general laborer—a ‘jobnik’, someone who probably produces less in utility than they consume in rations. Our job was to provide support for the combatants that patrolled a certain chunk of the West Bank near Nablus—Shechem, as we called it, after the biblical name. I was not a particularly distinguished soldier. But we were cogs in a very large military occupation, and being inside a machine like that, you can see how the gears and pieces of it meshed together, and I started taking notice of this. Sometimes I’d help keep the diary in the operations room. You saw how it all worked, or didn’t work; or rather, for whom it worked and for whom it didn’t. All that was very sobering and quite fascinating.

I once attended a lecture given by the African politics scholar Scott Straus, and he said the thing about being present right after genocide is that you come across these pits full of dead bodies. It’s really shocking and horrific—there they are, just as plain as day. Nothing I saw in the sheer level of violence compares to that in any way—I should stress this. But that sense of it all just being *out there*, as plain as day, and being shocked by this—that resonated with me. Everyone who cared to look could understand how the occupation worked, or at least how chunks of it worked. So I would say in terms of events, those things were the big pieces that structured my thinking.

Here’s two anecdotal examples. Since I was a grade of soldier with very limited skills, I was on guard duty a lot. We had a radio. I could hear the Prime Minister on the radio saying we are going to strike so-and-so in response to an attack on such-and-such, and then I could see helicopters pass overhead to Nablus, and then I could see smoke. Then I could see soldiers come back from going out to do whatever it was the helicopter had provided air support for. I’d see ambulances with red crescents or red Stars of David rush down the main road. It began to occur to me that there was a certain economy of violence in speech and performance. I didn’t think about it in specifically theoretical terms before I went back to graduate school, but Israelis had been killed, political outrage had been generated. There was a kind of affective deficit in Israeli politics that demanded a response, and some amount of suffering had to be returned—so the government could say it was doing its job. I found this very depressing. My odd way of experiencing this—neither fully inside nor outside—is certainly not the most important or authentic, and I’m not trying to set myself up as an expert on this basis. I’m only trying to account for how it made me think at the time and how that shows up in what and how I write now.

Later, when I was in the reserves, I was in the same unit with the same guys every year. One year, we were lacing our boots and getting our equipment for our three weeks of duty in a sector of the West Bank near Hebron, I think it was. I remember one guy, one of the more hawkish guys, said ‘we’ll show ‘em this time, we’ll show them what’s what’. Three weeks later, that same guy said ‘Jeez, it’s like we’re like a thorn in their backside; no wonder they hate us so much.’ (He actually used some colorful imagery that I can’t share with you.) I remember thinking, ‘well, ok, he’ll go home and he’ll tell his family and his friends; some good will come of this.’ The next year, I saw the same guy saying the same thing at the start, ‘we’ll show those SOB.’ And then three weeks later, ‘oh my God, this is so pointless, no wonder they hate us...’ So after a few years of this I finally said to him, ‘*tagid, ma yibiyeh itcha?*’—Like, dude, what’s your deal? ‘We’ve had this

conversation every year! What happens to you in the 48 weeks that you're not here that you forget this?' And I think he looked at me like, 'what are you talking about?'

I thought about that afterwards: we have these moments of experience when we're out of our everyday environment and discourse, the diet of news and fear, PR and political nonsense—that's when these insights become possible. So, when this guy comes in and says 'ok, we'll get those SOBs,' he's carrying with him this discourse that he has from home, from the news and TV, from his 'parliament' with his friends where they get together and talk about politics and war and economics and whatever else—and then a few weeks of occupation duty disrupts all that, makes him see it in a different light, and he has these kinds of fugitive experiences which give him a weirdly acute critical insight. Suddenly, he's this mini-Foucault.

In a few weeks, though, he goes back to his life, there's no space or niche into which that uncomfortable, fugitive insight can really grow, so it just sort of disappears or withers on the vine, its power is dissipated. This is a very real, direct experience of violence and it's covered over by all of this jibber-jabber. So there's a moment where you start to wonder: what exactly happens there? What happens in those 48 weeks? What happens to *me* during those weeks? You can see how a kind of ongoing critical self-interrogation would evolve out of that. Again, none of those things are exactly what my book's about, but it gives you a sense of how you might find Adorno's kind of critical relentlessness and negativity vital and important and really useful and necessary. You can see how that might inform my thinking.

In terms of books, as an undergraduate, I had read, not very attentively, Said and Foucault, and all of the stuff at the University of Chicago we had to take in what they called the 'Scosh Sequence,' from sociologists like Elijah Anderson and William Julius Wilson to Charles Lindblom and Mancur Olsen: texts from the positive and the interpretive to the post-structural. I had courses with some very smart Israeli and Palestinian profs—Ephraim Yaar, Salim Tamari, Ariela Finkelstein. And of course Rashid Khalidi was there at that time. Once I was in the military, the Foucault and Said suddenly started popping around in my head. Suddenly, this sort of lived experience of being on guard duty made the Panopticon and the notion of discipline go from being a rather complicated, obscure concept to something concrete. 'Oh! *That's* what discipline is!'

When I went back to graduate school, I was given a pretty steady diet of Waltz, rational deterrence theory, Barry Posen, Stephen Walt ([Theory Talk #33](#)), and Robert Jervis ([Theory Talk #12](#)). Shai Feldman was a remarkable teacher, so were Ilai Alon in philosophy, Shlomo Shoham in sociology and Aharon Shai in History. Additionally I had colleagues at work who were PhD students at the Hebrew University working with Emanuel Adler; they gave me Wendt ([Theory Talk #3](#)), Katzenstein's ([TheoryTalk # 15](#)) *Culture of National Security*, Adler and Barnett, and Jutta Weldes' early article on 'Constructing National Interests' in the EJIR (PDF [here](#)). My job was to help them publish their monographs, so I got really into the guts of their arguments, which were fascinating. I am not really an agency-centered theory guy anymore and I am not really a constructivist anymore, but that stuff was fantastic. I saw that one could write from a wholly different viewpoint, perspective, and voice. This is all very mainstream in IR now, but at the time, it felt quite edgy, very novel. Part of the reason why the middle chapters of *Recovering IR* has these long discussions about different kinds of constructivism is that I wouldn't have had two thoughts to rub together if it was not for those books. I do disagree with them now and strongly, but they were very important to me all the same.

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

I'd be more comfortable answering that question as someone who was, until relatively recently, a grad student. I've not been productive long enough to say 'Well, here's how to succeed in this business and be a theorist of enduring substance or importance' with any authority. But I can say, 'here's how I'm trying to be one.' There's a famous article by Albert O. Hirschman called 'The Principle of the Hiding Hand,' (PDF [here](#)) and in it he says that frequently, the only way one can get through really large or complicated projects is to delude oneself as to how hard the project is actually going to be. He takes as an example these ambitious, massively complicated post-colonial economic projects of the Aswan High Dam variety. The only way such enormous projects ever get off the ground, he says, is if one either denies their true complexity or deludes oneself. Otherwise you despair and you never get it done. From the first day of seminar to dissertation proposal to job—thank God I had no idea what I was in for, or I might have quit.

Also, the job market being what it was, we had to be very, very passionate scholars who wrote and argued for the sheer intellectual rush and love of writing. And yet, we also had to be very practical and almost cynical about the way in which the academic market builds on the prestige of publications and the way in which prestige becomes shorthand for your commodity value. At least in the US, the decline of tenure and the emergence of a kind of new class of academics whose realm of responsibility is specifically to engage in uncomfortable kinds of political and moral critique—but without tenure, and at the mercy of a sometimes feckless dean, an overburdened department chair or fickle colleagues—that's *very* scary. If you're doing 'normal science', it's a different game and the challenges are different. But if your job is to do critique, in the last ten years, it's a very big deal. Very difficult. I'm very fortunate in that regard; at Alabama I've had great support from my department, my chair, and my college.

I was a Johns Hopkins PhD, and my department was fantastic in terms of giving me support, encouragement, getting out of my way while throwing interesting books at me, reading drafts that were bad and helping me make them good—or at least telling me *why* they were bad. We did not get particularly good professional training, because I think they did not want us to get professionalized before we found our own voice. I'm really grateful for that, truly. But then there's this period in which you have to figure out how to make your voice into a commodity. That's really tough, it's a little bit disheartening—even to discover that you must *be* a commodity is dismaying; didn't we go into the academy to avoid this sort of logic? But just like Marx says, commodities have a double life, and so do you. The use-value of your scholarship and its exchange-value do not interlock automatically and without friction. So you spend all this time on the use-value of it—writing a cool, smart, interesting dissertation—thinking that will translate into exchange-value, and it turns out that it sort of does, but a lot of other things translate into exchange-value too that aren't really about how good your work is necessarily. And many of your colleagues, if what you're doing is original, won't really understand what you're doing; the value or the creativity of it won't be apparent to them unless they spend a lot of time sifting through your bad drafts of it, which only a few—but God bless those—will do. So how you create exchange-value for yourself is important. So is finding people who will care about you, your project, your future—and learning when to take their advice, when to ignore it, and how to do so tactfully.

If all that's hard, you're probably doing it right. It's unfortunate that that's how it is, but at all events, that's how it was for me.

**Would you elaborate on the concept of vocation and why this is so important to the view from nowhere? It is important to say that the view from nowhere is perhaps difficult. So is vocation, or a kind of Weberian approach, a way to articulate that for you?**



There's a quote in a book from a Brazilian novelist named Machado de Assis. His protagonist is this fellow Bras Cubas, who's writing a posthumous memoir of his own life. He's writing from beyond the grave. From there, he can view his whole life and his entire society from outside; he's finally achieved positivism's view from nowhere. But the thing about this view—and the book means to be a sendup of the Comtean positivism that was fashionable in Brazil in those days—is that it gives him no comfort. He now knows why he lived his life the way he did; how he failed and what was—and what was not—his fault. The absurdity of it all makes sense. But it changes nothing: he has died unfulfilled, unloved, and essentially alone: a minor poet and back-bench politician who was ultimately of little use to anyone nor of much to himself. All he knows is how that happened.

In the end, if we're all playing a role in how a world comes into being and it's in some sense our job simply to accept this, and our job as scholars merely to explain it, this gives us no comfort in the face of suffering, in the face of violence and evil. To some extent as scholars, and to some extent as a discipline, we exist as a response to evil, to suffering, to foolishness, to folly; it's not a coincidence that the first professorship of IR is created in Britain in the wake of WWI, and that it's given to someone like E. H. Carr.

If we don't have a view from nowhere because we've given up anything like a moral sense that can't be reduced to fractional, material, or ideological sensibilities, and if we know that sometimes those 'views from somewhere' can provide cover for terrible kinds of evil or justify awful kinds of suffering, then the notion of vocation seems to come in at that point and say well, 'here's what I hope I'm doing', or 'here's what I wish to be doing', or 'here's what I'd like to think I'm doing', and then allowing others to weigh in and give their two cents. Vocation, in the sense of Weber's lectures, comes out of that. It's Kant for social scientists: What can I know? What should I do? For what may I hope? In other words, what the necessity and obligation of thinking is on the one hand, and on the other what its limitations are.

This is a way to save International Relations from two things: one, from relativism and perspectivism, and the other, from a descent into the technocratic or the managerial. I am trying to stand between the two. My own intellectual background was in security studies at Tel Aviv University in the 1990s: the period immediately after Maastricht, in the period of the Oslo Process, the end of Apartheid. My hope back in the days when the peace process seemed to me to be going well was that I'd be able to have a kind of technocratic job in Israel's Ministry of Foreign Affairs or Defense. Counting tanks, or something similar. I thought that would be a pretty good job. I would be doing my part to maintain a society that had constructed a stable, long-term deterrent by which to meaningfully address the problem of Jewish statelessness and vulnerability, but without the disenfranchisement of another people. I could sit down and count my tanks with a clear conscience, because the specter of evil was being removed from that work. The problem of the occupation was being solved. Again, it's somewhat embarrassing to admit this now.

I would say in the US academy, there is definitely a balance in favor of the technocrats. We have enormous machines for the production and consumption of PhDs in this country. The defense establishment is an enormous player. Groups like the Institute for Defense Analysis need a lot of PhDs, the NSF funds a lot of PhDs (for now, at least), and that tips the balance of the profession in a certain way. My ability to use ideas compellingly at ISA won't change that fact all by itself, there's a base-superstructure issue in play there.

In Europe, it's a different story, for a bunch of reasons. The defense establishments of the EU member states aren't as onerous a presence. And, there are more of them; so there's a kind of diversity there and a need to think culturally about how these various institutions interlock and how people learn to talk to each other: the Martha Finnemore-to-Vincent Pouliot-to-Iver

Neumann ([Theory Talk #52](#)) study of ideas and institutions and officials. Plus, you have universities like the EUI and the CEU, which are not reducible to any particular national interest or education system; creating knowledge, but for a political/state form that's still emergent. No one knows exactly what it is, what its institutions and interests will ultimately be. Because of that, it's hard to imagine the EUI producing scholars with obviously nationally-inflected research programs, like [Halford Mackinder](#), [Mahan](#), [Ratzel](#) from a century ago. There will still be reifications and ideologies, but there's more 'give' since the institutions are still in play. And there's fantastically interesting stuff happening in Australia, and in Singapore—think of people like Janice Bialley-Mattern, Tony Burke and Roland Bleiker.

**Critique has a long and controversial history in our discipline. Could you perhaps elaborate, as a kind of background or setting, how critique can be used in IR and why you've placed it at the center of your approach to IR theory?**

Critique as term of art comes into the profession through Robert Cox ([Theory Talk #37](#)) and through the folks that were writing after him in the '90s, including Neufeld, Booth, Wyn-Jones, Rengger, Linklater and Ashley—though pieces of the reflexive practice of critique are present in the field well before. For Cox, the famous line is that theory is always 'for something and for someone.' The question is, if that's true how far down does that problem go? Is it a problem of epistemology and method, or is it a problem of being as such, a problem of ontology? Is it fundamental to the nature of politics?

If the set of processes to which we refer when we speak of 'thinking' is inherently for someone and for something, and that problem harkens back to the idea that all thinking is grounded in one's interests and perspectives, i.e., that all practical or systematic attempts to understand politics are 'virtuous' in the Machiavellian sense (they serve princely interests) but not necessarily in the Christian sense (deriving from transcendent values), then we have a real problem in keeping those two things separate in our minds. Think of Linklater's book *Men and Citizens in International Relations* as a key node in that argument, though Linklater ultimately believes (at least in that book) that a reconciliation between the two is possible. I'm less convinced.

Now recall the vocation point we discussed before. IR as a discipline has a deep sense of moral calling which goes beyond princely interest. And the traditions on which it draws are as much transcendentally normative as anything else. So encoded in our ostensibly practical-Machiavellian analyses is going to be something like a sense of Christian virtue; we'll believe we're not merely correct in our analyses, but *really and truly right* in some otherworldly, transcendent way. True or not, that sense of conviction will attach itself to our thinking, to the political forces and agendas that we're serving. We'll come to believe that we are citing Machiavelli in the service of something greater: whether that's 'scientific truth' or the national interest, or what have you. Nothing could be more dangerous than that. Critique, as an intervention, comes here: to dispel or chasten those beliefs. Harry Gould, Brent Steele, and especially Ned Lebow ([Theory Talk #53](#)) write about prudence and a sense of finitude: these are the close cousins of this kind of critique.

If we take seriously the notion that people sometimes fight and kill in the service of really awful causes while believing they are doing right, and that scholars sometimes help them sustain those convictions rather than disabuse them of them—even if they do not intend this—then critique becomes an awfully big problem and it really threatens to undermine the profession as such. It opens up a whole new level of obligation and responsibility, and it magnifies what might otherwise be staid 'inside baseball'—Intramural scholarly or methodological debates. Part of the



reason why the ‘great debates’ were so great—so hotly fought—had to do with this: our scholarly debates were, in fact, ideological ones.

It undermines the field in another way as well. If we take critique seriously, there’s got to be a lot of moral reflection by scholars. That will make it hard to produce scholarship quickly, to be an all-purpose intellectual that can quickly produce thought-product in a policy-appropriate way, because I will want to be thinking from another space, and of course precisely what policy-makers want is that you *don’t* think from some other space; that you present them with ‘shovel ready’ policy that solves problems without creating new ones.

So you now have not just a kind of theoretical or methodological interruption in the discussion of, say, absolute or relative gains. You now have to give an account of yourself. And for me, that’s what critique in IR means. To unpack the definition I gave above, it’s the attempt to give an account of what the duties and limits of one’s thinking are in the context of politics, given the nature of politics as we understand it. Because IR comes out of the Second World War, we’re bound to take the most capacious notions of what political evil and contingency can be; if we are not always in the midst of genocide and ruin, then we are at least potentially so. And so contingency and complexity and all the stuff that we’re talking about must face that. I want to hold out that Carl Schmitt and Hans Morgenthau *might be right*—in ways which neither they, nor I, can completely fathom. Then I have to give accounts of thinking that take a level of responsibility commensurate with that possibility.

In that vein, when I look at accounts of thinking in the context of the political, when I look at what concepts are and how they work and how they do work on the world so that it can be rendered tractable to thought, I realize that what we come up with when we’re done doesn’t look very much like politics anymore. We have tools which, when applied to politics, change it quite dramatically; they reify or denature it. To be critical in the face of that, you’re going to be obliged to an extensive degree of self-interrogation and self-checking, which I call *chastening*.

That process of chastening reason, is, in effect, what remains of the enlightenment obligation to use practical reason to improve what Bacon called the human estate. What’s left of that obligation is to think in terms of the betterment of other human beings as best as you can, knowing you can’t do that very well, but that you may still be obliged to try.

That’s really hard to do and it’s an odd form of silence and non-silence. After all, if I were to look at the Shoah while it was happening, or look at what happened in Rwanda, and say ‘well, I don’t really have a foundational position on which to stand so I can’t analyze or condemn that’—that would not be a morally acceptable position. Price and Reus-Smit ([TheoryTalk #27](#)) say this in their 1998 article and they are absolutely right. But then there’s the fact that I don’t quite know what to say beyond ‘stop murdering people!’ The world is so easy to break with words, and so hard to put back together with them—assuming anyone cares at all about anything we say. So I am obliged to respond to those kinds of events when I see them, and I am also obliged to acknowledge that I can’t respond to them well, because my authority comes from the conceptual tools I have, and they aren’t really very good. Essentially, what I’m doing as scholar of IR is the equivalent is using the heel of my shoe to hammer in a nail. (That’s a nice line, no? I wish it was mine, but it’s Hannah Arendt.) It will probably work, but it will take a while, and the nail won’t go in so straight. To chasten one’s thinking is to remind oneself that the heel of one’s shoe is not yet a hammer; that all we’re doing is muddling through—even when we do our work with absolute seriousness and strict attention to detail, context and method—as of course we should.

**You discuss IR theory in terms of different reifications. In which way does that also lead you to take a stand against a Weberian understanding of IR?**

I think where I depart from Weber is that he has more faith than I do that, at some point, disenchantment produces something better. There is faith or hope on their part that the iron cage that we experience as a result of disenchantment and as a result of the transformation from earlier forms of charismatic and traditional authority to contemporary rational ones won't always be oppressive, not forever. New forms and ways of being will emerge, in which those disenchanted modes actually will fulfill their promise for a kind of improvement in the human estate. If it's a long, complicated process—hence the image of slow boring into hard wood—but faith is still justified, good things can still happen.

For me, the question is how would you manage a society that is liable to go insane or to descend into moments of madness because of the side-effects or intervening effects of disenchantment and modernization, while holding fast to the notion that at some point, this is going to get better for most people? I'm a bit less certain about that than I read Patrick and Weber being. I think that even if they're right, it makes sense morally as scholars, not necessarily as citizens or individuals or people, to dwell in the loss of those who fall along the way.

I find myself thinking about the people who are gone a lot. My ex-wife teaches on slavery, and I think a lot about this terrible thing she once told me. On slave ships, when there was not enough food they would throw the people overboard because ship masters got insurance money if their property went overboard, but not if human beings succumbed on-ship. There's a scene depicting this in Spielberg's film *Amistad* and it haunts me. I find myself thinking about those people, dragged under with their chains. I wonder what they looked like, what they had to say. I wonder what they might have created or how their great-great grandchildren children would have played with my child. I wonder if my best friend or true love was never born because her or his ancestor died in this way. An enormous number of people perished. I can't quite believe this, even if I know it's true.

Yoram Kaniuk, the recently deceased Israeli novelist, wrote that the Israeli state was built on the ground-up bones of the Jews who couldn't get there because it was founded too late. I wonder about them too. And when I taught course modules on Cambodia, I would find myself looking at the photographs made of the people in Tuol Sleng before they were killed, the photo archives which the prison kept for itself. There is a mother, daughter, father, brother, son, and I find myself drawn into their eyes and faces. I don't want those people to disappear into zeros or statistics. I want somehow to give them some of their dignity back, and I want to dwell in the tragic nature my own feeling because it bears remembering that I cannot ever really do that. If I remember that, I will have some sense of what life's worth is, and I won't speak crassly about interventions or bombings or wars—wherever I might come down on them. I would say that it's almost a religious obligation to attend to the memory of those people. My desire to abide with them makes me very, very suspicious of hope or progress. I want this practice of a kind of mourning or grief to chasten such hope.

There's a problem with that position. Some will point out to me that this will turn into its own kind of Manichean counter-movement, a kind of Nietzschean *ressentiment*. Or else that dwelling in mourning has a self-congratulatory quality to it. And there are certainly problems with this position at the level of popular or mass politics. We do see a lot of *ressentiment* in our politics. On the left, there's a lot of angry, self-aggrandizing moral superiority. And you can think about someone like Sarah Palin in the US as a kind of populist rejection of guilt and responsibility from the right.

But as social scientists, we might have space to be the voice for that kind of grief, to take it on and disseminate the ethics that follow from it; to give that grief a voice. That kind of relentless self-chastening is what I'm all about. I think it opens you up to new agendas and possibilities. I think it's a much deeper way to be 'policy relevant' than most of my colleagues understand this term. If we are relentlessly self-critical as scholars, and if we relentlessly resist the appropriation of scholarly narratives to simplistic moral or political ends and if we, as a society, help to build an intolerance of that and a sense of the mourning that comes out of that, we also open our society up to say things like, 'ok, well what's left?'

And then, well, maybe a lot of things are left, and some of them are not so bad. Maybe we start to imagine something better. That's where I'd rejoin Jackson and Weber; after that set of ethical/emotional/spiritual moves. I think, by the way, that Patrick mostly agrees with me; it's only a question of what his work emphasizes and what mine has emphasized. On this point, consider Ned Lebow's notion of tragedy. He and I disagree on some of the details of that notion. But on top of his remarkable erudition, he's a survivor of the *Shoah*. I suspect he has thought very deeply about grief and mourning, and in ways that might not be open to me.

**The final question I want to pose to you is a substantive one: Your understanding of critique somehow does relate to sustaining progress, in a way. Perhaps on the one hand, you are not so optimistic as Weber was, but on the other hand, your work conveys the sense that it is possible to bridge the gap between concepts and things. I'm not sure if it's possible, but perhaps you can relate it to the substantive example of how your work relates to concrete political situations. I think the example of Israel-Palestine comes to mind best.**

Again, I don't think I am as optimistic as that. In my heart of hearts, I desperately wish this to be the case. To think of the people who were most influential on my intellectual development—my cohort of fellow grad students at Johns Hopkins and our teachers, to whom as a group I owe, really, everything in intellectual terms—I was certainly in the minority view. Most of them were, I think, working in the Deleuzian vein of making 'theory worthy of the event.' I just don't believe that's possible; or anyway I think it's *really, really, really* hard, the work of a generation to tell that story well and have it percolate out into our discipline and our culture. In the meantime, we must muddle through. I hope I'm wrong and I hope they're right. I'm rooting for them, even as I try to give them a hard time—just as I give Keohane ([Theory Talk #9](#)) and [Waltz](#) and [Wendt](#) and everyone else I write about a hard time. But I'd be happy, very happy, to be wrong.

What I do think can be done is that you can sustain an awareness of the space between things-in-themselves and concepts, and by extension some sense of the fragility and the tenuousness of the things that you think and their links to the things that you do. Out of this emerges a kind of chastened political praxis.

You mentioned Israel and Palestine, which I care a great deal about and am trying to address more squarely in the work I'm doing now, partly on my own and partly in pieces I've worked on with my colleague Daniel Monk. What we observe is that though the diplomatic negotiations failed pretty badly twelve and a half years ago, we're still looking at the same people running the show: the same principal advisers and discussants and interlocutors: in the US and Israel and in the Palestinian Authority. The same concepts and assumptions too. Just a few days ago, Dennis Ross published a long op-ed about how we get the peace process back on track, and you might

think that you're reading something from another time—as though the conflict were a technical challenge rather than a political one. You know that Prince song about 'partying like it's 1999'?

I don't know what a peaceful, enriching, meaningful Israeli-Jewish-Arab-Palestinian-Muslim-Christian collective co-existence or sharing of space or world looks like, but I know that this pseudo-politics ain't that. When I see something that's just a re-hashing, I can say, 'come on guys, that is not thinking, that's recycling the old stuff and swapping out dates, proper nouns and a few of the verbs.' Nor is it listening to other voices who might inspire us in different ways, or might help us rethink our interests, categories and beliefs. Lately, I've been listening to a band called System Ali, hip-hop guys from Jaffa's Ajami quarter, who sing in four languages. What they say matters less to me than the fact that they really seem to like another, they trust each other, they let each voice sing its song and use its words. They have something to teach me about listening, thinking, acting and feeling—because it's music after all—and that can produce its own political openings.

Of course, there are pressure groups, from industry and [AIPAC](#) to whatever else in the US, and those groups merit discussion and debate, but I'm also wary of the counter-assumption which follows from folks who talk about this too reductively: that there actually is an American interest, or a European or Arab or Israeli one, which somehow transcends partisan interest—one that can be recovered once the diaspora Jews, the oil moguls, the arms dealers or the Christian 'Left Behind' people are taken out of the picture. That feels like the same heady brew that Treitschke and Meinecke and the German *realpolitik* scholars poured and drank: that the national state has some transcendent purpose to which we gain access by rising above or tuning out the voices of the polity or its chattering classes. Only with a light liberal-internationalist gloss: Meinecke meets David Lake ([Theory Talk # 46](#)), Anne-Marie Slaughter or John Ikenberry.

I can also go meet starry-eyed idealists who want to hold hands and sing John Lennon, I can say to them yes, I want to hold your hand and sing John Lennon, but I am also enough of a social scientist to know that if a policy does not respond to real and pressing problems—water, land, borders etc.—that any approach that does not respond to those things will be hopelessly idealist. It will be what my granny called *luftmentsch-nachess*—the silly imaginings of men with their heads in the clouds, like the parable about Thales and the Thracian maiden. I am not interested in being either a *luftmentsch* nor a technocrat. So what does that leave with you with? You need to balance.

You can look at groups at the margins of political culture to see what they can tell you. In Israel and Palestine, it's groups like *Ta'ayush*, Breaking the Silence and *Zochrot*, and this settler leader who recently died, Rabbi Frohman, who was going out and meeting every Palestinian leader he could because for him, being a Jew in the land was not, in the first instance about his Israeli passport. There were and are possibilities for discussion that feel really pregnant and feel very different from the conversation we are sustaining now; which reveal its shallowness and its limitations and its pretentiousness. These other voices are of course not ideal either, they are going to have their own problems and limitations, their own descent into power and exclusion and so on, but they reveal some of the lie of what we're doing now.

I guess in the end, social scientists make a living imagining the future on the basis of the past. I also spend a lot of time reading novels and watching books and films. Partly because I am lazy and I like them. Partly because I'm looking for those novels and films to help me imagine other possibilities of being that aren't drawn from the past. Art, [Dewey](#) tells us in *The Public and its Problems*, is the real bearer of newness. Maybe then, I get to grab onto those things and say ok, what if we made those them responsive to an expansive materialist analysis of what an Israeli-Palestinian peace would need to survive? What if we held the *luftmentsch*'s feet to the materialist/pragmatic fire, even as we held the wonk's feet to the *luftmentsch*'s fire? Let them both squeal for a while. There's possibility there.

Daniel J. Levine is assistant professor at the University of Alabama. Among his recent publications (see below) stands out his book *Recovering International Relations*.

*Related links*

- [Faculty Profile at U-Alabama](#)
- Read the first chapter of Levine's *Recovering IR* (2012) [here](#) (pdf)
- Read Barder and Levine's *The World is Too Much* (Millennium, 2012) [here](#) (pdf)
- Read Levine's *Why Morgenthau was not a Critical Theorist* (International Relations, 2013) [here](#)(pdf)
- Read Monk and Levine's *The Resounding Silence* [here](#) (pdf)