

See discussions, stats, and author profiles for this publication at: <http://www.researchgate.net/publication/277892146>

"Shapiro, Ian (1956--)," in The Encyclopedia of Political Thought, Michael T. Gibbons, ed., (John Wiley and Sons, 2015): 3427–3434. Published online September 2014: DOI: 10.1002/97...

CHAPTER · JANUARY 2015

---

DOWNLOADS

3

---

VIEWS

3

1 AUTHOR:



[Elisabeth Ellis](#)

University of Otago

27 PUBLICATIONS 3 CITATIONS

SEE PROFILE

# Shapiro, Ian (1956–)

David Switzer and Elisabeth Ellis

Ian Shapiro is Sterling Professor of political science and Henry R. Luce Director of the Whitney and Betty MacMillan Center for International and Area Studies at Yale University. Born in South Africa, he received his BSc with honors from Bristol University in the UK. Shapiro holds PhD and JD degrees from Yale University, and served as the chair of the Department of Political Science at Yale from 1999–2004. He is a fellow of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences and the American Philosophical Society, and a member of the Council on Foreign Relations.

At this writing, Shapiro's most important scholarly contribution is his theory of democratic justice. Taking a realistic perspective on political life, Shapiro begins with the fact that advocates for democracy have always been clearer about what they oppose than what they plan to accomplish. This reactive character of democratic movements is no flaw, but the authentic expression of what human beings can achieve politically under endemic conditions of uncertainty. We may not know what is politically possible at any given moment – indeed, Shapiro counsels suspicion of “vanguardist” theorists whose inflexible and dogmatic ideas can lead to a lot of human suffering – but we do have a strong sense of injustice when it confronts us. Though there is no one sense of justice whose deficit we can measure, and though there are as many kinds of injustice as there are contexts for it, still most people associate injustice with the experience of powerlessness. “People demand justice to escape domination” (Shapiro 2012: 1). Whether it comes from oppressive states, entrenched social hierarchies, or even from within the family, domination prevents people from pursuing their interests, and for Shapiro, the ordinary pursuit of life is what politics ought

to enable. He calls democracy a “subordinate foundational good” for that reason: democracy is valuable because it offers the best means to oppose domination and not because democracy is itself a good to be desired (Shapiro 1999: 21).

How does Shapiro know that democratic institutions are the best bulwarks against domination? Rather than positing some absolute good and reasoning from it to necessary institutions, Shapiro practices what he calls “adaptive” political theory. There has never been agreement on principles of justice, and even if there were a single best account of justice for human beings, we have no reason to believe that most people would assent to it. Moreover, our empirical knowledge of how politics works evolves continuously to account for ever-changing conditions, while being permanently subject to necessary imperfections (such as the resistance to observation of important determinants of political outcomes like leadership and norms, not to mention the inherent contingency of political outcomes themselves). These considerations should humble the ambitions of utopian political philosophy and political science alike, and (as we discuss below) Shapiro does expend considerable scholarly energy in applying the limits of possible knowledge of politics to inappropriately ambitious schools of thought in both fields. Out of these critical considerations, however, come Shapiro's programs for doing defensible political theory and political science in the adaptive and problem-driven (as opposed to method-driven) modes.

In fact, Shapiro's substantive work deliberately collapses the disciplinary distinctions between political theory and political science (1989: 66). For example, when Shapiro analyzes the strategic political dynamics facing agents seeking cooperation under conditions of uncertainty, he employs the wisdom of canonical theorists like Thomas Hobbes and Niccolò Machiavelli, but also the insights of present-day political scientists like Robert

Axelrod. It is very difficult if not impossible to achieve stability by dominating every other actor as all three scholars would tell us in their different ways. With long-run domination of everyone else off the table, a rational actor will pursue the second option of making sure that no one else dominates us either. Considerations like these lead Shapiro to advocate domestic democratic institutions to oppose domination, and also the policy of containment in international relations (Shapiro 2007).

Shapiro takes his insight where he finds it: from canonical philosophers to contemporary political scientists, and from detailed case studies to mass interviews. His most comprehensive account of democratic theory to date, *Democratic Justice* (1999), uses a series of case studies of political conflicts in context to deepen and illustrate general considerations about political life. In work with Michael Graetz on the debate in the United States over estate tax repeal, Shapiro and his coauthor conduct interviews and historical research to address the puzzling problem of how a policy benefiting a few at the expense of a huge majority could attract broad bipartisan support (Graetz and Shapiro 2005). The main insights of his theory of democratic justice, such as his focus on real interests and attention to insiders' wisdom, shape his inquiries into specific topics: thus Shapiro consistently argues that groups are not monolithic but full of competing players with disparate interests, and he consistently opposes rationalist theorists who would pre-judge the results of democratic decisions. In this way, Shapiro is practicing a relatively minimalist, Schumpeterian form of democratic theory, in which constraining domination and other "bads" takes priority over the conventional democratic imperative to pursue the "common good." Unlike some contemporary political theorists, Shapiro's engagement with political science is central to his work: for example, he demonstrates that political science's median voter theorem is not "right" or "wrong," but accurate for some types of policy (e.g., social security privatization in the US, about which voters have intense preferences),

and inaccurate for others (e.g., estate tax repeal, where the intensity of preferences is much lower) (Shapiro 2011).

Whether discussing economic policy, social science method, or philosophical ideals, Shapiro tends to orient his positive claims by criticizing related and competing positions. Thus, for example, his recent work on non-domination, though it begins and ends with crucial substantive arguments about justice as nondomination, is mainly a working through of the alternative positions of Rawls, Walzer, Foucault, Habermas, Pettit, and Skinner (Shapiro 2012). An extremely prolific theorist writing in several academic disciplines, Shapiro is not easily identified with any one school of thought; between this and his habit of orienting his positive arguments around critiques of interlocutors, it is perhaps not surprising that Shapiro is better known today as a critic than for his more important substantive contributions to democratic theory. Another reason Shapiro is difficult to categorize stems from his problem-driven, adaptive method. Ever wary of armchair scholarship, Shapiro opposes the use of strategies, ethical or methodological, that obscure reality for the sake of dogma. It is this consistent commitment to approaching the political world in a way that prioritizes political reality over ideology that makes Shapiro's criticisms so strong, and his own place in the ideological world so difficult to define.

In his first book, *The Evolution of Rights in Liberal Theory* (1986), Shapiro provides an ideological history of the development of the concept of rights in liberal thought, tracing it from Thomas Hobbes and John Locke to John Rawls and Robert Nozick. Over the course of his later works, Shapiro relies on results from this study of liberal theory, including, for example, the fact that there never has been agreement about the substantive contents of natural rights, or the related conclusion that the presumption of a pre-political order must always be counterfactual (this last bolstered with evidence drawn from across empirical and historical social science). Shapiro's method in *Evolution* is developed in

opposition to two alternative approaches. First, his method proceeds “in contrast to those commentators who identify ‘modernity’ with a single-unit idea” (Shapiro 1986: 5), referring specifically to Leo Strauss, C. B. Macpherson, and Alasdair MacIntyre. Rather than presuming that an idea can be defined by a singular ideology, he approaches rights in liberal thought as being a group of related doctrines that are complex and quite variable. Second, Shapiro’s work in *Evolution* stands opposed to the history of ideas approach taken by Quentin Skinner and his followers. While Shapiro does not deny the importance of locating work within its historical context, his main goal in the book is “comprehending contemporary ideas historically” (Shapiro 1986: 11), and thus he finds it necessary to go beyond framing ideologies purely within historical context. In the concluding chapter of his book, Shapiro practices the type of thinking that illuminates the rest of his career. By engaging in a historical search for the development of rights, treating the topic as the evolution of an ideology, Shapiro questions the kind of “ideal theory” practiced by contemporary theorists like Rawls and Nozick, calling instead for a more empirical approach that emphasizes “factual arguments about the causal structure of the world which is where problems of social justice arise” (Shapiro 1986: 304).

Answering the call for a new methodological approach to the practice of political thought that he made in *The Evolution of Rights in Liberal Theory*, Shapiro turned to a theory of democratic justice. Shapiro’s articles, “Three Ways to Be a Democrat” (1994) and “Elements of Democratic Justice” (1996), both of which were reprinted in *The State of Democratic Theory* (2003a), provided the basis of what eventually became *Democratic Justice* (1999), which as we have already discussed contains the most detailed account to date of his theory (though the forthcoming *Justice against Domination* will provide a new version). In *Democratic Justice*, Shapiro proposes to overturn the prevailing wisdom that the goals of democracy and justice conflict with each other. Proceeding in typical fashion, Shapiro constructs his argument against

previous ideas of justice, specifically those of the liberals and the communitarians. He opposes the liberal attempt to reserve a space beyond politics for private life, and argues that the ubiquity of politics and conflict makes this impossible. While sympathetic to the goals of communitarian thinkers like Walzer and MacIntyre, he is critical of their appeals to consensus, and builds his own principle of justice on the democratic “intuition that dissensus is an essential ingredient to the just ordering of any domain of human interaction” (Shapiro 1999: 14).

As already noted, Shapiro describes democracy as a subordinate foundational good. He argues that it is foundational in the sense that no other commitment should be considered prior to or more vital to justice than the commitment to democracy. In calling democracy a subordinate good, Shapiro is arguing that while goods should be pursued through democratic means, they should not be sacrificed to democracy. “Valuable as democratic participation is ... it is not the point of the exercise” (Shapiro 1999: 23). Democracy is not valuable for its own sake, but only for the superordinate goods it provides. This does not mean, however, that democracy is merely instrumental for Shapiro, as he argues that there is inherent value in pursuing collective good through democratic means. In making the case that democracy is the best way to pursue the goal of justice, Shapiro recognizes two specific elements of democracy that are responsible for its effectiveness: collective self-government and institutionalized opposition. The values of collective self-government will be expressed differently in different contexts, and decision rules ought likewise to vary depending on circumstances, but they ought always to ensure that people affected by a policy have a say in making it. Institutionalized opposition works toward justice by allowing for periodic turnovers in power, by encouraging stability through allowing dissenting groups to focus on the present government rather than bringing down the state, and by ensuring that there is transparency in the use (and abuse) of power. With

these principles as his starting point, Shapiro applies these ideals of democratic justice to political conflicts endemic to all stages of human life, from the governing of children to the eventual ending of life.

Some of Shapiro's most influential contributions have been his critiques of the methodological approaches taken by his fellow scholars. While criticizing dogmatic forms of inquiry, however, Shapiro has also devoted considerable professional energy to encouraging scholars in many different fields to pursue problem-driven research from a realistic perspective and to learn from each other's work. Thus Shapiro's many edited books include contributions by scholars from a wide variety of disciplinary backgrounds, each of whom constitutes part of an effort to grasp a pressing political problem. Among his more exclusively critical works, probably the best known is his *Pathologies of Rational Choice*, written with political scientist Donald Green, which we discuss below (1994). However, Shapiro has also written important critical essays about the future of political theory, specifically, and the field of political science, more generally; we turn to these here.

In his 1992 article with Alexander Wendt, "The Difference that Realism Makes: Social Science and the Politics of Consent," Shapiro argues against two forms of social inquiry, logical empiricism and interpretivism, concluding in favor of a third alternative of realism. Shapiro and Wendt argue against logical empiricism, which is grounded in the idea that science should be about building general scientific laws and testing them predictively, by noting that the nature of social life makes it very difficult to come up with law-like statements about society without ignoring some of its essential features. For the authors, "an empiricist approach to explanation may exhibit systematic biases that lead their proponents to ignore the opaque dimensions of causal relations" (Shapiro & Wendt 1992: 205). In opposition to this approach we have the interpretivists, who argue that social action should be understood by attempting to decode the meaning of

the action for the agent performing it, often through the use of linguistics and hermeneutics. Shapiro and Wendt are critical of this approach too, arguing that while "the phenomenal realm should not be granted a privileged status that delimits the bounds of inquiry, neither should it be arbitrarily disprivileged" (Shapiro & Wendt 1992: 210). The biases of the interpretivist school lead them to ignore plausible causal explanations for social behavior, and this is as large a problem for the authors as the complete reliance on empiricism.

Shapiro and Wendt suggest that a different approach, that of the realists, offers a better way of interpreting social science phenomena. Realism differs from interpretivism in that it asserts that the self-understanding emphasized by the interpretivists is itself a product of causal processes. It stands against empiricism, however, in that it looks to the unobservable world for explanations of social actions, as well as to what can be observed. "By itself observation is not an adequate foundation for knowledge: Existence claims always involve a combination of observation and theory-based inference" (Shapiro & Wendt 1992: 211). What realism does for scientific practice is to clear away epistemic constraints, Shapiro and Wendt argue, and in doing so it allows for a more complete study of social phenomena. Once again, it is through critique that Shapiro builds his substantive contribution, this time arguing for the realist study of social science largely through a critique of its alternatives.

Shapiro also criticizes the conduct of political science as a whole, as well as the role that political theorists have played in it. His argument in "Problems, Methods, and Theories in the Study of Politics, or What's Wrong with Political Science and What to Do about It" (2002) is twofold. First, he argues that the move toward method- or theory-driven rather than problem-driven approaches in political science have been a detriment to the scientific enterprise. Second, he argues that political theorists have had a role in this problematic development, and that they should make strides toward mitigating it.

Regarding the first problem with method-driven research, Shapiro is critical of work that studies a phenomenon in order to vindicate a particular theoretical approach, rather than to understand a problem, since such work will tend to construct an empirical world that conforms to its expectations. Of course, Shapiro does not argue that theoretical approaches cannot influence the search for problems in the world of political science; instead, he asserts that they should not drive the research agenda. His further complaint with the theory-driven mode of scientific inquiry stems from its reductive quality. Rather than looking at all possible explanations of a phenomenon, theory-driven research will only look at the explanations that best fit the theory being posited. Shapiro responds to the common counterargument – that we should adjudicate among competing theories according to their predictive power – by noting that a focus on prediction makes it likely that areas of politics that do not lend themselves to prediction will be neglected, and thus that the practice will lead political science to focus on phenomena because they are easily predicted, “rather than because we have independent reasons for thinking it worthwhile to study them” (Shapiro 2002: 609).

In his related critique of political theorists, Shapiro complains that they have ceased to understand the empirical side of political knowledge, and that they focus far too much on arguing with each other, rather than exploring substantive problems in politics. Consistent with his usual method, Shapiro’s sharp critiques of political science and the role of political theorists in it support substantive recommendations for how to fix the problems he identifies. Shapiro argues that political theorists have a large role to play in turning political science research back to problem-driven questions. He recommends that political theorists become more engaged with the empirical side of the discipline, and that they should be active in identifying what is at stake in the systematic study of politics. Among other tasks, theorists should engage in

“problematizing redescription” of conventionally understood political phenomena; redescription would allow us to see new possibilities that were occluded by conventional accounts.

Shapiro has not only been critical of political theorists’ place in the discipline of political science, but also of the practice of political theory itself. In his 1989 article, “Gross Concepts in Political Argument,” he criticizes political theorists for relying too much on “gross concepts,” which he defines as what happens when theorists “reduce what are actually relational claims to claims about one or another of the components of the relation” (Shapiro 1989: 51). Arguments about the priority of autonomy put forth by any number of liberal theorists make this error, according to Shapiro. Theorists from Mill to Rawls to Nozick have claimed that autonomy is the major feature of their work, and yet, Shapiro argues, what they are really arguing about is what liberties should be applied to whom, and at what cost. He is similarly critical of communitarians, dismissing their views as romantic, and arguing that they ignore the ever shifting boundaries of the political world. Shapiro points to two possible reasons for the continued use of gross concepts in political theory. First, he notes that the use of these concepts leads to continued debates, which, intentionally or not, can be good for academic careers. Second, he points to the need in political theory to derive moral beliefs from a few basic “foundationalist” principles, pointing out that this need is far more difficult to overcome. It is the human need for unifying and simplifying concepts that drives political theorists to use gross concepts. In order for the discipline of political theory to advance, theorists must transcend disciplinary boundaries and address the empirical questions that their conceptual inquiries naturally raise: “If a theory of freedom is partly a theory of enabling and restraining conditions, many, if not most, of the most pressing and politically charged questions will be empirical ones about their nature” (Shapiro 1989: 66).

Providing a similar critique of theory-driven methodology within the realm of empirical political science, Shapiro, writing with Donald P. Green, criticizes the prevalent use of rational choice theory in political science. In *Pathologies of Rational Choice Theory* (1994), Green and Shapiro describe “the syndrome of fundamental and recurrent methodological failings rooted in the universalist aspirations” of contemporary political science (Shapiro 1994: 33). Much like Shapiro’s other criticisms, this one focuses on rational choice scholars’ commitment to vindicating the theory, rather than to a research program designed to understand and explain actual political phenomena. This flaw in rational choice theory manifests itself in three ways according to Green and Shapiro. First, it shapes its new theories according to evidence that disproves previous theories, and they argue that this is done in a way that avoids actual empirical testing of the formulated theories. The second point, closely related to the first, is that when rational choice theorists do test their hypotheses, they escape rigorous scientific scrutiny by either using the variety of unobserved thought processes tied up in rationality to explain away empirical failures, or by testing their hypotheses in ways that do not necessarily fit the theory being tested. The third reason for their critique lies in how rational choice theorists select and interpret the evidence for their theories. Green and Shapiro argue that rational choice theorists often will accept supporting empirical evidence, while completely ignoring strong evidence against their theories. They also note that rational choice theorists will focus on exceedingly obscure and small bits of evidence to prove the force of their theories. Finally, they will arbitrarily restrict the domain of their theories, according to Green and Shapiro.

Green and Shapiro’s criticism of rational choice theory focuses mainly on its empirical results. Above all else, they are concerned with theories’ congruence with the empirical realities of the political world, and they do believe

that rational choice theory can have a place in the study of politics as long as it becomes more empirically accountable. The authors provide a couple of substantive recommendations to that end. First, they suggest that rational choice theorists must begin more systematically to develop empirical tests of their theories, and avoid constantly updating their theories to fit the data, unless they plan on retesting them. Second, they call on rational choice theorists to stop attempting to universalize rational choice theory and to recognize the limits to the theory.

In addition to his substantive theoretical and critical work, Shapiro has also made important contributions to the furthering of political theory education. His political theory textbook, *The Moral Foundations of Politics* (2003b), grew out of a course he has taught at Yale for decades; the book has been an influential work in making the field of political theory intelligible to a larger audience. Additionally, his introductory course, from which the book takes its name, has been made available to the wired world for free through Yale’s online open course series.

Shapiro has written dozens of books and articles, many more than could be summarized in the brief space available to us here. We have chosen to focus on his theory of democratic justice and on a few of the projects that directly support that theory, but we could also have discussed Shapiro’s forays into constitutional law, his readings of canonical figures, his writings on international relations, his engagements with groups of scholars like the deliberative democrats, his writings on democratic transition in South Africa, or any of the many other topics on which Shapiro has written. The same skeptical yet hopeful voice emerges in each of these texts, reminding us that even though we face daunting odds in our efforts to understand how democracy can work for justice and against domination, we ought to continue to try.

**SEE ALSO:** Contingency; Democracy; Distributive Justice; Justice; Liberal Theory; State of the Discipline in Political Science

## References

- Graetz, M. J. and Shapiro, I. (2005) *Death by a Thousand Cuts: The Fight over Taxing Inherited Wealth*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Green, D. P. and Shapiro, I. (1994) *Pathologies of Rational Choice Theory: A Critique of Applications in Political Science*. New Haven, CT, and London: Yale University Press.
- Shapiro, I. (1986) *The Evolution of Rights in Liberal Theory*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Shapiro, I. (1989) "Gross Concepts in Political Argument," *Political Theory* 17 (1), 51–76.
- Shapiro, I. (1994) "Three Ways to Be a Democrat," *Political Theory*, 22 (1), 124–51.
- Shapiro, I. (1996) "Elements of Democratic Justice," *Political Theory*, 24 (4), 579–619.
- Shapiro, I. (1999) *Democratic Justice*. New Haven, CT, and London: Yale University Press.
- Shapiro, I. (2002) "Problems, Methods, and Theories in the Study of Politics, or: What's Wrong with Political Science and What to Do about It," *Political Theory*, 30 (4), 588–611.
- Shapiro, I. (2003a) *The State of Democratic Theory*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Shapiro, I. (2003b) *The Moral Foundations of Politics*. New Haven, CT, and London: Yale University Press.
- Shapiro, I. (2007) *Containment: Rebuilding a Strategy against Global Terror*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Shapiro, I. (2011) *The Real World of Democratic Theory*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Shapiro, I. (2012) "On Non-domination," *University of Toronto Law Journal*, 62 (3), 293–336.
- Shapiro, I. and Wendt, A. (1992) "The Difference that Realism Makes: Social Science and the Politics of Consent," *Politics and Society*, 20 (2), 197–223.

## Further Reading

- Shapiro, I. (1996) *Democracy's Place*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.
- Shapiro, I. (2005) *The Flight from Reality in the Human Sciences*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Shapiro, I. (forthcoming) *Democracy and Distribution*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Shapiro, I. (forthcoming) *Justice against Domination*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.