

Book Review

The Rise of Realism

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The Rise of Realism
Manuel DeLanda and Graham Harman
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Manuel DeLanda and Graham Harman are two influential realist theorists who are credited with reinvigorating the Continental tradition of philosophy by taking the issue of realism seriously. Their new book, *The Rise of Realism*, is a provocative study of realism, both as a historical idea as well as their respective realist positions. The book is unique, written as a dialogue between both DeLanda and Harman, which ultimately gives the text an original vocative flow that makes it easy to follow and digest. The volume is divided into five parts. The first part of the text is a discussion about the history of realism, mainly its place in the continental tradition as well as its relationship with materialism. DeLanda argues that, although not implicit in most of his prior works, that any “... coherent materialisms must be forms of realism...” (p. 3). This is a radical claim to levy towards the continental tradition that has and currently is, steeped in materialist conceptions while either ignoring realism as a pseudo-problem or bracketing it off entirely. Harman, who although sees the reasoning behind DeLanda’s flavour of realism, ultimately rejects materialism because of its duoming tendencies to either reduce objects to their constitutions or reduce them upwardly to their effects – something that he argues relational theories of objects like ANT and theories in New Materialism tend to do (Harman, 2016).

One of the main issues is the multitude of appropriations of the terms realism and materialism. Meaning something specific to both DeLanda and Harman’s respective philosophical positions, their confusion both in and out of scholarship is the result of an association of many meanings. Part one seeks to give a recent genealogical account of such appropriations as well as clarify, if not specify, what they mean by different thinkers who employ them. In doing so, they deftly situate their position – without yet explicitly formulating it – concerning their rivals.

The Rise of Realism aims to introduce and clarify both students of philosophy – the analytic and continental traditions – as well as current scholars in the field to the recent developments in object theories and the intersection of philosophy, critical theory, and science studies. DeLanda and Harman deliver on this promise by providing the reader with a lucid and entertaining guide to some of the most misinterpreted debates in the field. Not only do the authors clarify some of these notions, but

they are able to weave their respective positions within the broader philosophical narrative and explain how such impacts the discussion. Given the authors' objective of providing a comprehensive guide to understanding realism in modern philosophy and critical theory, DeLanda and Harman's sharp, yet rich dialogue accomplishes this with ease. The text gives the sense that the authors transcribed their conversation over coffee, drawing the reader into the otherwise dense debates by creating a friendly, non-judgmental space. In these respects, this book is not only relevant but tasteful.

Its strength lies in the second part of the text *Realism and Anti-Realism*, which, as its title suggests, aims to explore the difference between the two concepts as they are portrayed by various thinkers such as Hegel, Nietzsche, and Heidegger. This section best levies the dialectical style that the book employs. The dialogue between the two authors makes for both a linear and comprehensible exploration of these concepts. Its prowess lies in its ability to merge historical and contemporary thought while simultaneously laying the groundwork of their positions and specialties among more familiar ontological and epistemological theories. In doing so, DeLanda and Harman provide a holistic scholarly *tour de force* that one would be hard-pressed to find any other volume on the topic.

Unfortunately, one of *The Rise of Realism's* greatest strengths occasionally weakens it. The dialogue between DeLanda and Harman is functional in more than one way. As mentioned, the flow of the text in comparison to a standard linear prose often results in an easy read, as if you were sitting in on a casual conversation. However, as is often the case with casual conversation, it can sometimes detract from the main subject. *The Rise of Realism* is no different in this respect. Although all of the dialogue in a particular section is related, the conversation often diverges from where it began, and only loosely, if at all coming to any consensus or application to the original point. This has one benefit, the exposure to numerous related ideas that are important with the historical and contemporary thought regarding realism, however, the execution can sometimes obscure the aim of clarification. To be fair, these detractions are few and far between; however, these do strengthen the conviction that this volume was composed of a series of emails or messages that were later organized into a coherent text.

Naturally, any work of non-fiction that is composed in this manner, if such was the case, will contain some departures from the topic. Although the anomaly above stood out to me, the impact of *The Rise of Realism* is not hindered by it. The ultimate success of this work that it has and will receive undoubtedly lies in its grounded prose style. The sentences are clear, brief and sufficiently explanatory without any central points burdened by qualification. Additionally, the fetishized passive voice of academia with its aim to attain the effect of authority and impartiality is free from DeLanda and Harman's book. Most often than naught, *The Rise of Realism's* sentences read like this:

Now that you put it that way, I think I understand your question better. Heidegger's clearest statement on the a priori comes in his discussion of Husserl in the first hundred or so pages of the 925 Marburg Lecture Course, translated into English as History of the Concept of Time. The course begins with a really profound discussion of Husserl, and Heidegger's agreements and disagreements with him; it's absolutely the best text for examining their intellectual relationship. Heidegger tells us here that the three most important contributions of phenomenology were intentionality, the original sense of a priori, and categorical intuition. But he missed the most important of all: intentional objects, which Heidegger simply ignores in his own work even though they are the very foundation of Husserl's Logical Investigations. (1970) (authors' emphasis, pp. 54-55)

Unlike many other volumes that explore the topics of realism, materialism, and related theories, which may ultimately become oppressive because of the dense qualifying materials, DeLanda and Harman concisely situate their claims within the historical narrative and contemporary thought viz. light-footed conversational prose. However, the authors do provide consistently, but tastefully placed references for further reading. As such, the often lackluster and challenging style employed in academia is superseded by a rich and fluid prose. This in itself is a reason to pay closer attention, where other

topical works make accessibility difficult, particularly in a newly developing sub-field, this volume abandons that conviction, making it both intellectually valuable and accessible.

In sum, *The Rise of Realism* is of course entirely timely and presents two novel flavors of realism situated within a philosophical tradition that has and currently does eschew such realist sentiments. This book not only serves as a well-researched introduction to realism but as a useful resource that should be continually referred to given its consolidation of all the pertinent information regarding the historical and contemporary explorations of realisms and materialisms and its investigations that extend beyond the customarily discussed scope of the field, in particular, social theory. As such, students of ANT and the schools of New Materialism will find this volume particularly useful. Its dialectical prose is engaging, inclusive, and active making it accessible to anyone interested in realism in contemporary continental philosophy, critical theory and the study of science, technology, and society.

NOTE

All page references are to DeLanda, M., & Harman, G. (2017). *The Rise of Realism*. Polity Press.

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