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The Universities and the Challenge of Realism

MARY EVANS

Gender Institute, London School of Economics, UK

ABSTRACT

Universities are often enjoined to 'get' with the 'real world'. In this article, Mary Evans gives an account of interpretations of literary realism in order to consider the 'coercive realism' of the contemporary university. The prevailing assumptions that universities must contribute to the 'real' world are damaging the complexity of the process of learning and the idea of 'knowledge' that underpins it.

KEYWORDS *interpretation of 'realism', universities*

THIS ARTICLE WAS PARTLY INSPIRED BY A PLACE: the place being Galway and the reason for my being there a conference at the National University of Ireland's Galway campus on the subject of *Critical Thinking*: a subject close, we might hope, to the hearts and minds of all academics. Both place and conference were inspirational, a hugely interesting and well-attended conference and a place which had once been a home to James Joyce's muse, Nora Barnacle, a person to whom I will return later.

The title of this article includes the word 'realism' and it is this word which I wish, initially, to try to define. For students of literature and visual representation the word has long had the meaning of that movement in fiction and art which turned to the everyday, quotidian world for its subject matter. In literature we can recognize this very clearly in what has long been described as the 'rise' of the novel, the emergence in the eighteenth century of the fiction which examined the careers of both societies and individuals in ways specific to defined contexts and characteristics. No longer were heroines and heroes to be mythical figures, they were now to be those 'ordinary' characters with names such as Tom Jones or Fanny Price who have

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become commonplace figures of western culture. This 'realistic' fiction tells us stories about various kinds of relationships (for example, marriage, courtship or motherhood) with which we can all identify. George Eliot, Elizabeth Gaskell, Charles Dickens and Leo Tolstoy, just a few of the great narrative realists of the nineteenth century, told us about worlds we either know or with which we could establish imaginative connections. The work of all these novelists told us tales with inherent possibilities about what might happen to their characters: in *War and Peace* we wonder if Natasha is going to marry Pierre; we conjecture about the possible endurance, in *Middlemarch*, of the marriage of Dorothea to Casaubon.

Thus I would suggest, initially, that whilst the much-used term 'realism' always has connections with the various domestic and social worlds which we know, it also has – and would hardly be fiction or a work of the imagination if it did not – a degree of uncertainty and openness in its passage towards a conclusion. Indeed, part of the measure of the quality of fiction is the degree to which we are convinced that the conclusion has been reached through the created agency of the characters rather than the explicit authority and control of the author. In this, realist fiction is both clearly 'realistic' in the sense that it can tell us, for example, about the ways in which people organized and conducted their daily lives, and un-realistic in the way in which it can introduce elements of chance or coincidence. The less that the 'unlikely' occurs in fiction the more we are inclined to accept the questions which the novelist is asking us to consider. Jane Austen, for example, knew and demonstrated the temptations of the bizarre in *Northanger Abbey*; generally read as a satire on the gothic novel and the over-abundance of the imagination in real life, the novel is also a demonstration of the part that the imagination *should* play in everyday life. If we cannot see, like Catherine Morland, that a wooden chest *might* contain something more than old laundry lists, then we do not have the imagination either to see ourselves in different kinds of human relationships or make the kind of imaginative leaps that make possible art, science and the construction of the material world.

The 'realism' associated with late eighteenth- and nineteenth-century European fiction thus allowed both the recognizably realistic and a degree of imagination. The superb balance achieved in Austen, Eliot et al. gave us the canonical fiction which is such a rich part of European culture. Yet in the twentieth century various kinds of challenges to realism occurred. In the old Soviet Union the early intellectual experimentation of the Revolution gave way to what the critic Georg Lukacs was to describe (with a considerable absence of enthusiasm) as 'socialist realism'. This movement, in both literature and the visual arts, he contrasted to 'critical realism' (the great works of the nineteenth century) and to the work of writers such as Virginia Woolf

and James Joyce, whose concern was to illuminate individual subjectivity. There is a place (as the art critic Andrew Hemingway has pointed out) for rethinking the art of socialist realism, not least because it gave a place in representational art to those millions of people who had seldom previously achieved any form of recognition, as either individuals or as metaphors for particular kinds of work (Hemingway, 2002). But this rethinking was decades away from the assumptions of Lukacs and other, western, critics. Whilst Lukacs was as unenthusiastic about Joyce as he was about socialist realism, western critics hailed the work of Woolf, Joyce and Marcel Proust as groundbreaking work in the history of literature.

What literary modernism did was to re-situate the realism of the nineteenth century in terms of a negotiation with the achievements of Woolf and her contemporaries. It also introduced into discussions of the novel diverse traditions of the 'realistic' and the meaning of realism. In many ways a curious process of cultural osmosis took place in the west in which the Soviet meaning of realism often became part of the meaning of 'realism'; to be 'realistic' came to mean both an acceptance of the imagination and a determination to discuss those aspects of the social world (class, sex and money) whose representation was often resisted. In the history of the theatre in England this particular construction of the 'realistic' was often met with a considerable degree of antipathy; the 'new' English drama of John Osborne and Shelagh Delaney was described with the pejorative title 'kitchen sink drama'. Yet the dramatists themselves surely saw their work as 'realistic' in the more positive, nineteenth-century sense; it might have been heretical in the 1950s to consider the links of sympathy between George Eliot and John Osborne, but with hindsight we might consider that these two authors (and others across the nineteenth and the twentieth centuries) shared the same assumptions about the necessary centrality of the idea of realism to works of the imagination.

It might therefore seem, in the light of this abbreviated account of the idea of realism, that realism is a very complex idea and one which can bring together authors across time, place, class, race and gender. Realism, and the realistic, are not, therefore, ideas or sets of possibilities which we should necessarily reject or locate in terms of a tedious, mechanistic reproduction of the social and personal world. But unfortunately for many in contemporary universities a new meaning of 'realism' has come to hold sway, a meaning which limits inquiry and is, in many ways, hostile to debate and discussion. This form of realism I would describe as 'coercive realism', the form of realism which insists that we can describe, absolutely and finally, the social world, and that the world in which we live is not merely 'real' but is also both constant and fixed.

This view, like all views of the world, has intellectual parents and it is useful to define certain aspects of that parentage. The first and most obvious form of the new account of realism is derived from the ideas surrounding the 'fall' of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and the end of the old Soviet Union. One of the many implications of this dramatic event was the global normalization of the market economy and the apparent naturalization of views about the nature of the relationship of the individual to property and to the state. The 'naturalization' of the market economy suggested that the given order of the social world, and that of the social relationships within it, was that of capitalism, a free market and the legitimacy of the pursuit of profit. It was not that these ideas had not been espoused before 1989, in various versions they had been part of many parts of the world for centuries. But, post 1989, voices in neoliberal societies across the globe spoke of certain forms of economic relations in terms which increasingly naturalized them. The impact of this on the universities was that the Thatcher and Major governments in Great Britain faced little confrontation when suggesting that it was entirely appropriate that universities should engage in 'enterprise' and 'entrepreneurship'. Accordingly, from the 1980s onwards, universities (and academics) have increasingly been asked to provide evidence of their contribution to the economic market-place. The justification for this is that it would be wrong to allow universities, largely supported as they are by tax payers' money, to fail to contribute to the national economy. The argument is sometimes difficult to resist: few people wish to be seen to be a-social (in the sense of refusing to contribute to a wider society), but at the same time questions about, let us say, the distribution of wealth go unanswered. A curiously 'a-social' thesis operates in these ideas: we are all expected to contribute to society but definitions of the meaning of that society are not welcomed.

A second, and rather more diffuse, parentage of 'coercive realism' is the use of the term 'natural' in various social contexts. Any observer of the market-place of the twenty-first century will be familiar with the advertising claim that 'we are all worth it' (a claim that on humanistic grounds few of us would refute), and since we are all 'worth it' it is 'natural' that we should want, let us say, expensive handbags or a redecoration of our home or whatever consumer goods are on display and for sale. This naturalization of the desire for consumer goods has become so closely associated with constructs of 'human nature' that it is seldom remarked upon, but with it come assumptions about the essential maintenance of economic growth and the entrepreneurial spirit. This spirit, which Max Weber described as part of the 'spirit of capitalism', was crucially recognized by him as an emergent property of sixteenth-century Calvinism. In this, Weber offered what was a social, rather than a natural, understanding of a view of the world. The irony is that in the twenty-first

century, as our relationship with the actual 'natural' world becomes increasingly problematic, so we turn to it for the derivation of our social beliefs.

The process of the naturalization of consumer desire and the material order of the market economy is to be found throughout both social and intellectual life. There are numerous ways in which this might be demonstrated, but two examples suggest something of the changes in understanding that are being produced. The first is that once we see the market economy as the norm in social life and as the 'normal' in human aspiration we implicitly make dissent from this view abnormal. Thus long, and diverse, traditions about, for example, trade union rights become by their very content oppositional. The second is that the appetite of desire for consumption is limitless: like a child fed only on sweets, what emerges are monsters in which desire is never satiated. If we put together these two examples, of what Lisa Rofel has described as the 'desiring subjects' of the market economy with the marginalization of alternative normative traditions, what we confront, in terms of the students in universities, are people who have become used to certain kinds of largely unchallenged assumptions about the social world (Rofel, 2007). The homogeneity of much western political discourse makes it often difficult to suggest that the cultural and intellectual histories of the world are not about a seamless progression towards a global market economy but about diverse and often contradictory attitudes and values. Whilst much effort has been devoted to the discussion and representation of cultural difference, there remains a sense in which political difference has become increasingly obscured. In this context it is often difficult to see the way to, as T.S. Eliot (1922) wrote,

show you something different from either
Your shadow at morning striding behind you
Or your shadow at evening rising to meet you.

The question with which we are then faced, as academics, is how to show that there is something 'different' in universities. Aspects of that difference are not necessarily always contested; a considerable amount of academic work in the past twenty years has actively rewritten the curricula of many university departments: what was once the 'canon', in disciplines across the humanities and the social sciences, has been disputed and found wanting. A new 'canon' has been instrumental in bringing to the academic world the study of women, of non-white people and of cultures outside the previous gaze of western eyes. 'Difference' has become, in many ways, an established part of the university curriculum.

Yet for all that, and despite the manifest and remarkable changes in what is now studied at universities throughout the west, there is an accompanying

normalization of other aspects of the 'real' world. Of this, ideas about the 'real' world and 'being realistic' are of central importance. This has led, I would suggest, to the 'management' of knowledge in ways which are deemed appropriate in terms of the 'real' world. The idea of the 'real' world of course constructs a binary division, in which we are asked to accept that the world of the universities, and the goals which we might pursue within them, are in some sense 'unreal'. There has been for decades a view of the universities which argues that they are the ivory towers of the social world, places in which people with little understanding of the everyday produce work which only deepens that divide between the academy and the general population. That view never had any real substance. In various ways, not all of them necessarily positive, British universities always had close connections with the 'real' world. They produced, for example, almost all the country's research in the natural sciences, and at the same time they produced generations of young people (largely, it has to be said, young male people) who were trained and educated in ways deemed appropriate for the administration of various sectors of both the domestic and the overseas state. To argue, in the light of this evidence, that universities constituted 'ivory towers' was to ignore the many crucial interventions which universities made in British social and political life.

But the idea of the distinction between the 'real' and the 'unreal' world has built on the very flimsy sands of the idea of the 'ivory tower' to produce an even more rigid, and arguably more damaging, view of the relationship between universities and the wider world. In this more contemporary view, universities are asked to 'get real' and are told that they have to 'live in the real world'. This endless reiteration of the apparent, and clearly firmly internalized, account of the real and the unreal ignores many of the empirical links that exist (and have always existed) between the academic world and the world outside. At the same time, the coercive assumption that the 'real' world is the world which should dictate the conduct of university life becomes the principle around which universities are increasingly organized. Thus it is all too easy for universities to assume (or to be encouraged to assume) that their priorities should include teaching 'work-related skills' and assessing students in terms of their ability to present ideas. In these novel pedagogic agendas there exists a curious mix of both valuable and less valuable innovation. For example, offering various forms of teaching guides to students and emphasizing the importance of communication is to provide significant assistance for many students. At the same time, an emphasis on 'presentation' can over-shadow content. As many people who have attended 'presentations' will know, it may very well be the case that the content of what is being said has little or no importance. To offer students prepared packs of reading may appear to be

helpful, but at the same time it might carry a message that the pack contains all that there is to know. The question of the subliminal message of contemporary aids to teaching demands a greater degree of attention than it usually receives.

The pressures, throughout Europe, to extend recruitment in higher education have inevitably led to a degree of inconsistent standards throughout the sector. Differences in funding, and the 'cultural capital', not just of individuals but also of institutions, can (and do) make a significant difference to the quality of higher education. But here a second aspect of the question of the 'real world' intrudes, in that the universities where the 'real' world is likely to be the most visible are generally those universities with the least in the way of resources. For ancient and long established universities (in Britain Oxbridge and the old civic universities), the 'real' world of economic scarcity, a student body with various forms of social disadvantage and the pressure to accord with government demands can be resisted in various ways, not least through the degree of financial independence and significant social status which those institutions possess. Hence the 'real' world, of the constant need to accord with government strictures, makes less impact in these institutions. The inevitable paradox is that the very democratization of higher education which its expansion was designed to ensure is lessened by the impact of academically detrimental policies which can be more easily resisted by the privileged than by others. For example, in England there has been a pattern in which higher-status universities or university colleges (for example Oxbridge and the London School of Economics) have been able to resist the most obvious interventions by the Quality Assurance Agency in the pattern of teaching and the explicit collusion with the demands of the labour market. A further paradox which is also apparent here is that these very higher-status universities are those institutions whose graduates are more widely welcomed in the labour market. It would appear that the 'real' world does not extend a particularly warm hand of welcome to those educated in terms of the 'real' world.

Collusion with the apparent aspirations of the 'real' world does not, it would seem, always reward those who most energetically pursue that path. In this we come to another aspect of the question of the 'real' and the 'unreal' worlds. It is that this distinction fails to recognize the great complexity of the process of learning and the idea of 'knowledge' which underpins it. By its very nature academic teaching and research is open-ended and, certainly at its very best, a way of looking at and studying the world which allows as much for what we do not know as for what we do. Ambiguity, doubt, dissent, disorder are valuable and central tenets of the academic process: how else, we might ask rhetorically, should we ever learn to question and to think

critically about what we know? To abandon this account of 'the getting of wisdom' in favour of a template which speaks of 'learning objectives' is to endorse a form of inquiry which has all the hallmarks of those authoritarian regimes (whether of the past or the present) where there was only one way to 'know'. The case of science in the old Soviet Union is the dramatic example of this kind of approach to knowledge: the refusal to allow scepticism made it very difficult, if not impossible, for advances to be made.

The over-management of knowledge, and an over-management which is legitimated in terms of its value for the 'real' world, thus fails to do two things. First of all it entirely fails to distinguish between information, knowledge and wisdom. The world of the twenty-first century is one which for many people is information rich: the internet gives many of us rapid access to enormous amounts of material. But we have to continue to recognize the distinctions between information and knowledge. We do not have to disallow information, but what is essential is learning, and being taught, that what we have to take to this information is the ability to consider and assess it. The second issue about the over-management of knowledge is that it refuses the contradictions and the ambiguities, the incoherence and the chaos of both the social and the intellectual world. In 'managing' knowledge, and formatting it in ways which make it easy to assimilate and process, we can often avoid the recognition of the ways in which ideas are not always part of ordered patterns or those binary forms of 'for' and 'against'. In narrative fiction in the nineteenth century bourgeois realism opened the eyes of many to the cruelties and injustices of the social world. The bourgeois 'realism' of the twenty-first century is often more inclined to secure agreement and the authority of the conventional than it is to consider what might be difficult or uncomfortable.

The present seizing of the idea of 'realism' for purposes that many of us might question should not, however, encourage us to abandon the term. There is, notwithstanding the best efforts of various state agencies to persuade us that the 'real' can be easily defined, what might be described as a 'real' realism. This realism, rather than engaging with some of the fanciful aspects of constructions of the world, recognizes some of the 'real' realities of the world, a world in which, for example, access to clean water constitutes a major source of global inequality. Other 'real' aspects of the world which we might consider include the capacity of the employment market to absorb large numbers of graduates or the relationship between the financial cost of higher education with individual financial gains from it. Even more 'real', in 2009, is the question, and the implications, of the health of consumer spending in relation to general social prosperity.

All these three questions constitute 'real' questions and they can be substantiated in terms of evidence and the experience of everyday lives. The answers

to these questions suggest that one of the great challenges which we face in the twenty-first century is learning to distinguish between various forms of 'realism', between the one which offers a constructed and questionable account of the purposes of education and the other which defines precisely those conditions of 'reality' which are too often overlooked. In the early years of the twentieth century James Joyce was inspired to write his great novel *Ulysses* by the presence of his muse, Nora Barnacle, a woman who lived an 'ordinary', otherwise unexceptional life in Galway. Joyce did not, therefore, look to a fantasy version of womanhood, or fictional women, for his inspiration. This example, of the meeting of the everyday and the extraordinary, offers us important ways of defining our relationship with the 'real'. Joyce did not look at, or think about Nora Barnacle in terms of attempting to render a precise picture of a human being. On the contrary, he looked at the 'real' in order to find ways of thinking about what might be, what could be, and what was possible. Rather than turning to the existent social world in order to curtail the imagination, he used it as a place from which to construct possibility. In this we can see something of the way in which we might both resist homogenizing versions of the 'real' and turn instead to those accounts which allow us to develop the visions and the varieties of human intelligence.

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BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

MARY EVANS taught Sociology and Women's Studies at the University of Kent for 38 years, before moving to the Gender Institute of the London School of Economics as a Visiting Fellow. Whilst at Kent she helped to establish the first MA in Women's Studies in Britain and was a founding editor of the *European Journal of Women's Studies*. She has written widely on feminist theory and women writers (including Jane Austen and Simone de Beauvoir). More recently she has written on detective fiction and is now working (with Kathy Davis) on a study of the diversities of Anglo-American feminism.