

Manifesto for New Realism

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A spectre is haunting Europe. It is the spectre of what I propose to call “New Realism”, which lends it name to an international conference to be held in Bonn next Spring, that I have been organizing with two young colleagues Markus Gabriel (Bonn) and Petar Bojanić (Belgrade). Thinkers such as Paul Boghossian, Umberto Eco and John Searle will take part in the conference, which aims to give back to the notion of “realism” the space it deserves in philosophy, politics and everyday life, despite the postmodernists’ refusal of it as philosophically naïve and politically conservative. When hermeneutics and “weak thought” were the order of the day, it was said that reality is never accessible to us as such, given that it is mediated by our thoughts and our senses. As well as being philosophically nugatory, the appeal to reality in an age still attached to the dreadful slogan “power to the imagination” seemed to be the wish that nothing should change and an acceptance of the world as it is.

The first thing to undermine the postmodernists’ certainties was politics. The rise of media-based populisms – which are anything but purely imaginary – gave an example of a farewell to reality that was not at all liberating, not to mention the Bush administration’s unscrupulous use of the truth as an ideological and “imperial” construction, which unleashed a war on the basis of phoney evidence for the existence of WMD. On the television news and on political programmes, we have seen the dominance of the Nietzschean principle that “there are no facts, but only interpretations”, which a few years earlier philosophers were flourishing as the means to emancipation and which, after all, seemed like a justification for doing and saying what one felt like. In this way people discovered the true meaning of Nietzsche’s saying “the reason of the powerful is always better”. I think it is for this reason that philosophical realism has been on the rise since the end of the last century.

The New Realism is rooted in a simple question. Is it true that modernity is liquid and postmodernity is gaseous, or is this just an ideological representation? It is a bit like when we say that we have entered into an immaterial world and at the same time are rightly afraid that the computer will fall on the floor. From this point of view, the first crucial move was to criticize the idea that everything is socially constructed, including the natural world, and in this Searle’s book on *The Construction of Social*

Reality (1995) was a turning point. In Italy, the call was given by Eco in his *Kant and the Platypus* (1997), which saw reality as the “hard core” with which we have to deal, and he thus completed the argument begun in 1990 with *The Limits of Interpretation*. In the same years, the return to thinking of esthetics as a philosophy of perception, rather than as a philosophy of illusion, was a sign of the renewed readiness to take on the external world that stands outside conceptual schemes and is independent of them, just as we cannot, with an effort of mere reflection, correct optical illusions or change the colors of the things around us.

This growing attention to the external world also meant a rehabilitation of the notion of “truth”, which the postmodernists had regarded as exhausted and less important than, for instance, solidarity. In this, they failed to consider how important truth is in our everyday practices, and how intimately it is bound up with reality. If someone goes to the doctor, he will certainly be happy to have his solidarity, but what he really needs are true answers about his state of health. And those answers must be more than more or less creative interpretations: they must correspond to some reality that is to be found in the external world and, in the case in hand, in the body. For this reason, Paul Boghossian in *Fear of Knowledge* (2005) and Diego Marconi in *Per la verità* (2007) have argued against the view that truth is a relative notion and wholly dependent on the conceptual schemes with which we approach the world. Within this framework, the keywords of the New Realism are: Ontology, Critique, and Enlightenment.

Ontology simply means that the world has its own laws and imposes them on us. The postmodernists’ mistake was to confuse ontology with epistemology, what there is with what we know about what there is. It is clear that, to know that water is H₂O, I need a language, schemes and categories. But water wets and fire burns whether I know it or not and independently of languages and categories. At a certain there is something that will not give. This is what I call “unemendability”, which is the leading feature of the real. This may be a limitation but, at the same time, it gives us the foothold for distinguishing between dreams and reality, between science and magic.

Critique means this: the claim of the postmodernists was that unreality and the heart beyond the obstacle were liberating. But this is clearly not so, because while realism is immediately critical (“that is not how things stand”: ascertaining is not accepting) unrealism runs into a problem. If you think that there are no facts but only

interpretations, how can you tell that you are transforming the world and not merely imagining that you are transforming it or dreaming that you are doing so? Critique is built into realism; acquiescence, the fairy tale to send babies to sleep, is the essence of unrealism.

Finally, then, *Enlightenment*. Recent history has confirmed the diagnosis that Habermas gave thirty years ago when he saw postmodernism as a wave of anti-Enlightenment. As Kant said, Enlightenment is daring to know and leaving behind man's childhood state. In this sense, Enlightenment still calls for a choice of position and faith in mankind, in knowledge and in progress. Mankind must save itself and certainly no God can do such a thing. What are needed are knowledge, truth and reality. Failing to accept them, as philosophical postmodern and political populism have, means pursuing the ever-open alternative proposed by Dostoevsky's Grand Inquisitor: the path of miracles, mystery and authority.