

BOOK REVIEW

Manuel DeLanda and Graham Harman. 2017. *The Rise of Realism*, Oxford, Polity. ISBN Paperback 9781509519026.

Radovici, Mihai Christopher Marian, PhD student

University of Economics Studies, Faculty of International Economic Relations,
Doctoral School International Business and Economics
Bucharest/Romania

1. INTRODUCTION

The manuscript's title, ordered as a definite description by Manuel DeLanda and Graham Harman, represents a clear reference to the discussions surrounding a grander continental philosophy. Therefore, all these narratives have often been ordered under the same umbrella of speculative and new realism, speculative materialism, object-oriented and flat ontology. Yet, although bearing more nuanced approaches, which draw from a wide range of political and international relations discourses, these projects have as a common determinant their commitment to one variety of realism, striving to offer a comprehensive understanding of the entities and phenomena which occupy the international spaces. In turn, this is understood as an exclusionary worldview, one which ignores and even corners any matters related to idealism or anti-realist stances, especially those which contoured 19th to 20th century European philosophical movements, ranging from Kantian, and its *post-* derivatives, linguistic, absolute or transcendental liberalism all the way to the recent social, linguistic or cultural constructivism and institutionalism. In this context, DeLanda and Graham provide insight into the emergence of a new continental

and even trans-continental realism, identifying its common methodological starting point as the rejection of a sharp and ontologically relevant divide between the human and non-human actors. Hence, the authors index and interpret all of its forms, showcasing that the nature and relations of objects, entities and phenomena must not be comprehended in terms of any kind of subjective, linguistic or societal form of human perception, cognition or representation, but rather through a new *sui generis* mechanism, one which resides in their own operationalization of interpretations through a self-constructed palette of terms, completely separated to the question our knowledge of, or access to, them.

2. REALIST PERSPECTIVES IN DIALOGUE

The entire manuscript consists of a vivid and complicated dialogue between the two scholars, which designate themselves as leading figures within the realist school of thought. Thus, throughout a series of topical chapters, both explore in-depth the programmatic, methodological and metaphysical commitments that sediment their perspectives, comparing them to each other and *en passant* their interconnection (or at times divergence) with more mainstream continental approaches, particularly the phenomenology and Deleuze's virtual ontology frameworks. Therefore, the work calls upon the readers that bear an interest in either the contemporary applications, alongside the historical transformations, of these perspectives, or those interested in the broader debate surrounding the need for a renewed realist metaphysical approach within the European social and philosophical environments. Both scholars bringing forth a variety of specific and idiosyncratic commitments that they developed, often pitching them against one another and overseeing the results.

Thus, Herman's object-oriented ontology, first underlined in a heterodox realist reading of Heidegger in his 2002 *Tool-Being*, characterizes objects not on their various and dynamic relations but by how they withdraw from the totality of their relationships, and from any exhaustive exploration of it. As Harman highlights, this approach was already proposed by Husserl's characterization of

the intentional object of a perceptual act as representing something which cannot be exhausted by any number of its perceptual adumbrations or partial appearances. (p.34-37) Instead of idealistically constructing the object, as a fictitious limit of these presentations, Harman reverses Husserl's position into a realist prism that surrounds the object itself as the absolute obscure substrate for its relations. This means that he endorses the existence of a substantial form or singular essence, which are not directly understandable or exhausted by any of the epistemic external relationships. (p. 19; pp. 55-58) In this context, Harman refuses all attempts to reduce the objects of socio-political thought to simpler constituents, arguing that by explaining them in simplified version, based on their position within a grander holistic and relational network, just undermines their intrinsic capacities.

In contrast, DeLanda's realist understanding finds its roots in Deleuze's differential ontology of dynamical processes, and his takes towards either the formal or structural preconditions that allow for the emergence, evolutionary trajectories, developmental environments and transformation or transcendence of objects. Thus, Deleuze understands the broader contexts, required for systemic transformation, as a virtual element, in the sense of preceding or altering their dynamic actualization within concrete events, but also as real in respect to their complete position within the material reality. Hence, DeLanda emphasizes across his 2002 *Intensive Science and Virtual Philosophy* that virtual conditions are based on Riemannian n-dimensional manifolds. Therefore, dynamic systems are portrayed through their nonlinear manoeuvrings within phase spaces characterized by bifurcations, attractors and topological features. An understanding that is indifferent to the human-inhuman distinction whilst accounting for temporal changes or emergences across a wider range of scales when compared to the classical socio-political perspectives. Also, in *A Thousand Years of Nonlinear History*, DeLanda applies these nonlinear dynamics and models to the development of ethno-communal spaces throughout history, arguing that they are dependent on a complex interaction network, rather than directly progressing straightforward. Hence, he argues that if these nonlinear dynamics of virtuality were generally applied, they can subsume the relatively stable identity we attribute to objects and forms within the broader explanation

of dynamic mechanisms and their novel emergence, homeostatic self-organization and plenitude of possible transformation ramifications. (pp. 89-90) Whilst both reject the all human-centred perspectives, DeLanda and Harman diverge paths, not only in the details they provide but also in respects to the methods and objectives of their subsequent global ontologies. Whereas Harman centres his ontology on objects, regarded as self-standing and stable (or enduring) entities, DeLanda focuses on the dynamic historical processes, in which individuals, entities or objects emerge solely as a temporary stable configuration out of the broader systemic dynamics and norms. Moreover, their dissensions also spun into the methodological role of natural-scientific across the social sciences, and particularly within the realist contexts. In this sense, while for DeLanda these elements are central to accounting for global changes, Harman considers primarily important the aesthetic paradigm of the object as underlying, without being reducible, to the totality of its appearances or relations across the system. (pp. 147-149)

These dichotomies place the two into an opposite stance across several central issues, for instance, whereas DeLanda sees his position as primordially materialist, accepting entities or subjects that are „immanent to the patterned matter-energy” (p.23), Harman argues that in the socio-political realms we can witness „forms without matter”, wondering whether there is any sense to the notion of matter at all other than that of a „feeble explanation of the difference between real and imaginary things”. (p.19) Subsequently, the authors disagree in respect to the theoretical essence too, as for Harman the ultimate basis of a single object’s individuality resides in the reality of its essential form, for DeLanda these explanations of processes are to be eschewed in favour of structural and dynamic recollections of their historical pathways of transformation. Moreover, DeLanda considers any denial of objective time „anathema” (pp. 149-151), as the objective emergence and articulation of entities occurs within the clear historical and temporal contexts, while for Harman time „belongs purely to the sensual realm”, in an extended sense meaning that it encompasses the spatial „network of relations and non-relations between objects” rather than the realm itself. (pp. 123-125)

Therefore, it is through these rifts that we can question whether the authors can be regarded under the same realist aegis, as they don't provide any guidance towards a comprehensive understanding of the methodological or ontological approaches to realism, but rather accentuate that there is a myriad of socio-political views.

Furthermore, their dialogue seems to further surface questions surrounding the relationship of the realism types defended and the more metaphysical and ontological positions that nowadays dominate the European landscape. While this results in the foregrounding of a strict separation of epistemology from ontology, it also tends to obscure or elide the broader potential of linguistic, logical and semantic considerations to the question of defining and articulating realist thoughts in themselves. In parallel, this approach risks of leaving out or distorting the distinctive contributions to the issue of those who never formulated their thesis in the traditional subject/object manner, but rather situated their works in a broader contextualization of global considerations or local particularities (such as Dummett and Putnam).

Lastly, the manuscript mostly contains a suite of point-by-point comparisons between the commitments that arise from two highly specific perspectives of realism. Without any detailed introduction or other explanations, the text dives deep into their converging and diverging dimensionalities, drawing cross-field comparisons, making the reader rely on background knowledge or additional exploration to understand and familiarize with the specificities entailed in the chapters. In turn, this makes the work appear opaque at times, whereas those already familiarized will find the exchange suggestive for the new developments and articulations regarding what philosophical realism can become today and how it can serve the larger society.