

Truth, Fiction, and Inequality

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TTH 1:10-2:30P

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Corporate capitalism and realist fiction came of age together in the nineteenth century. It thus seems fitting that, today, when commentators are looking to describe the inequality of twenty-first century capitalism, they often say that we have entered “a new gilded age,” a term originally coined by the American realist writer Mark Twain. However, instead of realist novels, the favored modality of political discourse is now statistical, with graphs and datasets taking the place of plot lines and character studies. Most conspicuously, the “Occupy Wall Street” movement popularized the growing wealth gap by telling a story about the 1%, while a recent article in *The Economist* assures us that it’s not the 1% we need to worry about, but rather the .01%. Gone are the great realist novels exploring the psychological and sociological complexities governing the distribution of wealth and power. This course is motivated by the statistical turn in the contemporary story of inequality to reconsider of the older story told about inequality by nineteenth-century realism.

What happens when we go back to realism to tell the story of inequality? Perversely, we find ourselves in a world deeply scarred by irreality, by the fictiveness of evident social truths. Can a painting or a story can ever be real? Does anyone really think there is such thing as truth in fiction? Isn’t the definition of fiction dependent on something like a lie? After all, we are talking about made-up novels and images on a canvas, not journalism, not history, not documentary. And then, what about the irreality of corporate capitalism and consumer culture? Doesn’t the very idea of a commodity entail a fiction, the consumption of a feeling or a mood as much as real thing? What is a corporation if not a kind of fiction, a legal entity standing in place of an owner?

Our exploration will be both historical and theoretical. Given the variety of ways to address inequality, and the many different ways to write a novel, why would socially engaged authors in the nineteenth century make the improbable decision to organize under the banner of realism? What made them think that they had something to say about major contemporary issues—such as economic, gender and racial inequality—that couldn’t be better said by a statistical measure or a political essay? And why did they think that “realist” art could get them closer to the truth than the lyric self-searching of romantic poetry, the emotive force of sentimentalism, or the spiritual purchase of a sermon?

Students will also be introduced to the long academic pedigree of this question about the relation between realism and capitalism. We will read accounts of it from Marx and Veblen to Lucacs and Jameson. We will also consider some key moments in the intellectual history

of the period, especially with regard to the development of pragmatist philosophy. Issues of race and gender will be situated alongside that of wealth. These will help students gain an understanding of the kind of debates literary scholars are still having about how to read the fiction of the period.