

# Theorizing Determinism: American Naturalism and the Question of Belief

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SÄMI LUDWIG

“Faith thus remains as one of the inalienable birthrights of our mind.”  
(William James 1996b, 225)

**U**TOPIAN VISIONS or dystopian visions are often a matter of attitude, of optimism or pessimism, as they manifest themselves in times of change. They reflect human hopes and fears—faith or lack of faith, respectively. It is no coincidence that the secular utopian tradition begins in early modern times with the discovery of America. The existence of a New World made the middle class dream about a more egalitarian order. Yet at the same time dystopian tales (even about cannibals!) kept these high hopes in check. Ever since, we have had times of crisis that led us to extremes of dystopia, but also, curiously, to more hopeful utopian visions. To avoid too much historical generalization about this complex issue, I will limit myself to a particular period of American writing, the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, and the discouraging case of Naturalism and determinism, as discussed by the New American Studies critics a hundred years later. On the utopian side, I will then contrast their strand of thinking in a chiasmic gesture to the work of William James, who was a contemporary of the Naturalists but gives us in *The Will to Believe* (1897) an antidote to despair and even a rational theory that supports theoretical optimism. This will in turn lead to the question of who is continuing such a utopian strand of thinking in contemporary theory...

When I wrote my book on American literary Realism, I found out that many—especially American—critics put “Realism” and “Naturalism” in the same category, usually seeing Naturalism as a more advanced version of the same kind of positivist epistemological enterprise of putting our hands on objective representation. There is a whole series of books that go in this direction: David Shi’s title *Facing Facts: Realism in American Thought and Culture 1850-1920* (1995) is a very solid study and a good example of this approach. The idea is that realists want to bite into objective reality to overcome the romantic delusions of the preceding Civil War period.<sup>1</sup> Also take Philip Fischer’s *Hard Facts* (1987) as an example of the same approach. From such an angle

the bourgeois realism of William Dean Howells, the hard-working editor of *The Atlantic Monthly*, literary mover and shaker, and “dean” of realism, necessarily looks a bit tame. No wonder his protégé Frank Norris bit the hand that fed him in a patricidal gesture and called Howells’s realism “the drama of a broken teacup” (1986, 1166).

But what about the nature of such Naturalist “hard facts”? In “Zola as a Romantic Writer” (1896), Norris writes that “Naturalism is a form of romanticism, not an inner circle of realism” (1986, 1108). Thus in a “Plea for Romantic Fiction” (1901) he accuses Realism of describing “only the surface of things (1986, 1166). And in “The Novel with a ‘Purpose’” he states that his interest is not in “the study of men but of *man*” (1986, 1196, my italics). Thus beyond observation, Norris was interested in describing an essentialist subtext of human identity, a strategy curiously harking back to traditional allegory or Romantic Idealism and at the same time anticipating Modernism.<sup>2</sup> The difference was of course that the inner logic of Idealist progress came at a cost, and that’s what the Naturalists were concerned with, showing the dystopian side of such an approach.

For the Naturalists the two main subtexts determining human behavior were biology and human-made social structure—and both of them had their “scientific” empirical supporters. To stay with Norris, much of the drama of Naturalist stories is about the biological limitations of human intelligence—the protagonist of *McTeague* (1899) is intellectually limited, and so are his associates. They pay the price for this lack—significantly, McTeague and his nemesis Marcus take a tragic end, dying handcuffed to each other in Death Valley... a truly dystopian prospect of human relations! The other limitation is emphasized in Norris’s *Octopus* (1901), i.e., the framework of economic and social relations as a hegemonic power that keeps some people from achieving their dreams. The wheat business, the railroads, speculators, and banks control the price and thus the work and life of the wheat farmers, driving them into bankruptcy. Elements such as biological and social structures replace the metaphysical framework of Romantic Idealism. What all of these theories do have in common, however, is their progressive logic (utopian for the Romantics, who remain optimists against all odds,<sup>3</sup> and dystopian for the Naturalists).

Curiously, when a hundred years later we look at the sophisticated theories of the New American Studies, which very much see themselves as a reaction opposing Ronald Reagan’s neo-liberalist economics and often deal with culture in terms of Foucaultian notions of power and text, we find a great number of books by Walter Benn Michaels, Amy Kaplan, Alan Trachtenberg, or Lee Clark Mitchell that have rediscovered the significance of a Naturalism so much despised by the Modernist new critics.<sup>4</sup> These new “historical” critics approach late-nineteenth-century and turn-of-the-century fiction in a curiously materialist grammatology—and I will argue that it is “materialist” in the very sense of a Marxist inversion of Hegelian dialectics, i.e., a logic haunted by imitation... To be sure, the similarities between Reagan’s conservative revolution and what happened in the Gilded Age are striking and justify such comparisons—Trachtenberg’s *The Incorporation of America* (1982) makes neo-liberal economics look truly like a *déjà vu*! But to better exemplify the theoretical paradox of this approach, let us investigate the rather extreme case of Lee Clark Mitchell’s *Determined Fictions* (1989).

Mitchell praises American Naturalism for its epistemological superiority, taking determinism “seriously” from a narratological point of view, and even approvingly quotes some of the social Darwinists. Thus an 1862 statement by Herbert Spencer is quoted: “In a good modern work of imagination [...] the events are the proper products of the characters living under given conditions, and cannot at will be changed in their order or kind” (1989, ix). And so is Ernst Haeckel of 1900: “We know that each act of the will is as fatally determined by the organization of the individual and as dependent on the momentary condition of his environment as every other psychic activity” (1989, ix). Obviously, Mitchell walks a thin line between historical observation and endorsement, unearthing statements that have long ago been scientifically refuted in their own field. His new angle is the application of these issues to the narratology discussions of his own time: “...current work in narratology encourages us to turn our attention to questions like, How can an action be shown to be impersonally caused rather than motivated?” (1989, x). Mitchell explains:

The naturalists, contrary to the central claim advanced by proponents ever since Zola, did not simply substitute a mechanistic determinism for the assumed agency by the realist novel. In far more searching endeavors, they depicted the ways in which ‘agency’ itself is constructed only after the fact, made up as we go along in the stories we tell ourselves about the moments of our lives. The imposition of causality and motive on a series of past events is, as recent theoreticians have observed, the inevitable consequence of narration itself. What distinguishes the naturalists, however, is their sensitivity to the logic that informs such rationalization. (1989, xi)

In my opinion this rediscovery of the work of the Naturalists is no coincidence and correlates with the surprising compatibility of attitudes of the Naturalists of yore and the New American Studies critics a hundred years later, who create an undifferentiated *mélange* of theory and history, which mainly manifests itself in the arrogation of reality through conceptualizations or narrative subtexts that determine what happens.

Mitchell’s “serious determinism” radically denies the Realists’ notion not only of responsibility but a self, and instead champions the Naturalists who “rejected the very category of the ‘self,’ creating characters who seem little more than occasions for passing events—who merely mark the bodily intersection of outer force and inner desire” (1989, xii). He further observes that “[c]learly, the ‘mechanisms’ of literary naturalism belong less to some physical ‘universe of force’ than to the grammatical pressures of distinctly verbal realms” (1989, xv). Reality itself turns into a grammatical issue—and that seems to be *prescriptive* grammar rather than *descriptive*: “To take naturalism seriously is to recognize how deeply we resist a determinist vision, how predisposed we are to assume capacities we cannot prove we possess” (1989, xvii). We also learn that, excluding the self, “naturalists experimented with unusual strategies to reinforce a more purely ‘objective’ perspective” (1989, 15). Similar to Norris’s Romanticism, such objectivity caters to a subtext:

Naturalism reminded realism, that is, that our reasons for wanting to believe in a ‘self’ are of a different order from the reasons we have for believing in a ‘character.’ When persons are looked at from the outside as characters whose actions are caused, not done, the category of responsibility comes to seem simply irrelevant. It then exists as no more than a grammatical function in what has become the subjective language of the self. (1989, 17)

Note that such pure (outside? materialist?) objectivity depends on an emphasis on (inside? conceptualist?) language and causality as a “grammatical function.” In that sense Mitchell is a typical theoretical representative of the “linguistic turn” of his own time.<sup>5</sup> Certainly in the Middle Ages Mitchell would have sided with the Thomist “Realists,” who insisted that language universals are real (*universalia sunt ante rem*)...

This retrograde orientation of Mitchell’s determinist vision beckons in his comparison of Naturalist discourse to “Old Testament prose” and its “insistent dimension,” i.e.: “The naturalists likewise enforced a sense of unalterable necessity” (1989, 23). Also notice the monological approach: “...naturalists instead establish something like a single causal order, instilling a sense of certitude by returning us over and over to the same grammatical place” (1989, 24). Determinism of course insists on a single plot option. But interesting in this context is also Mitchell’s discussion of the “workings of chance” as an “engine of plot in most naturalist texts” (1989, 27):

Chance, accident, probability, fortune: any such characterization is merely a misunderstanding of the logic of events—events that, because determined, are predictable consequences of prior causes. Our limited perspectives do not always permit us to know those causes or to foresee events, but they are not therefore any less certain to occur in a determined universe. (1989, 28)

He then also quotes the philosopher Laplace’s totalizing vision of an “intelligence which could comprehend all the forces by which nature is animated [...]; for it, nothing would be uncertain and the future, as the past would be present to its eyes” (1989, 28). Mitchell argues that Naturalists “could not have patterned their fiction on his model of omniscience, since narrative requires a deferral of knowledge [...]. That is why even those naturalists who may well have realized chance was precluded by determinism nonetheless admired its dramatic possibilities” (1989, 28). We find here a convincing explanation of the connection between the old Baroque conceptual pair of *fatum* and *fortuna*—determinism and chance! Why this echo of old metaphysical times? Note the uncanny resemblance in how poststructuralists or even certain new historicists are reviving these old patterns.

Moreover, Mitchell’s determinist Naturalism also follows poststructuralist dogma insofar as we have no selves but only “subject positions” to be manipulated by what French critics call “discourse,” a realm in which behavior and subtext merge—usually in a tragic outcome.<sup>6</sup> In such a universe, serious determinism is without alternative, as all behavior is scripted and the rules of text determine our minds and our behavior.<sup>7</sup> As a consequence, the only field accepted as free of determinism remains the play of deconstruction—which we can associate with the baroque notion of *fortuna*. But the mes-

sage is basically pessimistic, dystopian, because the master critics find always new structures that limit our moral choices. This strange self-mutilation can only be understood as part of an *arrière garde* movement of formalism that has unfortunately continued deeply into the many post-post movements that made the old premises more sophisticated rather than overcoming them, grinding on in the old hermeneutic circles instead of constructing new alternative, merely “critiquing” the old models *à la française* instead of criticizing them (replacing them)—and at the same time claiming that there is no other way.

This curious revival of dystopian Naturalism motivated by specific formalist/determinist theoretical tendencies almost a hundred years later makes us wonder if there is a more positive alternative to this, some kind of a utopian paradigmatic alternative. I happen to disagree with the dystopian critical theory approach, and my disagreement leads me to the complementary end of these theorists’ Naturalist hobbyhorse, namely the meaning and purpose of American Realism. As opposed to the supposedly “more advanced” Norris, the Realists were interested in human interaction and in gestures as behavioral forms that precede any essentialist units of meaning, i.e., any logical phenomenology or formalized subtext. Real are the people and how they physically communicate and interact—therefore the keen interest in the minutest details of human encounters.<sup>8</sup> Realism tries to imagine literary figures that are more than “paper beings,” or rather, it creates paper beings that operate with minds modeled on cognitive psychology rather than mere subject positions determined by discursive grammars or some semiotic logic.<sup>9</sup> Of course they are not “real” in any phenomenological sense, but they are trying to say something about the real rather than about a theory. Their loyalty is to a referential plane.

Thus my main line of argumentation in *Pragmatist Realism* was the fact that all of the most significant realist authors, and certainly Mark Twain, William Dean Howells, and his own brother Henry, were correspondents and close friends of William James, the American physiologist, psychologist and philosopher, who despised dystopian determinism. They were all familiar with his pragmatist ideas. If we see William James as an ancestor of cognitive psychology and the operational structuralism of Jean Piaget, this suggests a literary reality that is not flattened out into some kind of discourse that can be processed on a single level or in a single currency (as some capitalist critics<sup>10</sup> like to do), but it is “round” in E.M. Forster’s traditional sense (2005) of separate levels of thinking, speaking, and doing that cannot be processed in any kind of universal grammar.

If we have approached the Naturalist past as determinist and dystopian through contemporary theory, we may find an alternative to contemporary pessimism<sup>11</sup> by suggesting that the theory our time might look for more freedom (and maybe even utopian hope) in alternative voices of that very past contemporary to the Naturalists. Determinism is, ultimately, defeatist and hence discouraging agency (see Mitchell above). This is the point where I want to discuss William James’s critique (=discussion) and ultimately criticism (=rejection) of his own determinist contemporaries as a source of hope for the critical concerns of our own time. The elder James brother’s career after all paralleled the emergence of the Naturalist movement in the United States.

As his biographer Ralph Perry writes, James had an existential depression in 1870 (1996, 120) from which he recovered with a belief in free will (as he wrote in his diary):

“My first act of free will shall be to believe in free will” (qtd. in Perry 1996, 121). James then created a philosophy in which we may be controlled by all kinds of forces, inside and outside, but ultimately, they never conspire into a unified single force—even though subjectively we may at times feel so. The William Jamesian universe is pluralistic, hence not controllable as a single object—and the good news about this is that we (I, you) can be players in it just like everybody else.<sup>12</sup>

We find James attack philosophers like “Mr. Herbert Spencer” who confuse their own claims with the methodologies of the hard sciences (1956, 217): “It is folly [...] to speak of the ‘laws of history’ as something inevitable [...] Why, the very laws of physics are conditional, and deal with *ifs*” (1956, 244, original italics). And he ads: “The evolutionary view of history, when it denies the vital importance of individual initiative, is, then, an utterly vague and unscientific conception, a lapse [...] into the most ancient oriental fatalism” (1956, 245).<sup>13</sup>

But James’ criticism of such “fatalism” goes beyond that. His real disagreement is with “dialectics,” a concept still abundantly used by progressive critics in our own time. Thus in “Some Hegelianisms” James observes that Hegel’s “system resembles a mousetrap” (1956, 275), noticing that the chiasmic system of “The principle of the contradictariness of identity and the identity of contradictories is the essence of the hegelian system” (1956, 277)<sup>14</sup> and that this involves a “principle of totality”: “This principle says that you cannot adequately know even a part until you know of what whole it forms a part” (1956, 277).<sup>15</sup> Hence James sees Hegelianism as nothing less than a totalitarian epistemology. Like Bakhtin much latter, he therefore opts for dialogue and believes in a “pluralistic universe” or “multiverse,” where life exceeds dialectics, and our notions of the world must be based on a “faith-ladder” (1996b, 224). But what does he mean by that faith part? And, can we connect it to utopian notions?

Significantly, for James faith is at the heart of the very nature of scientific hypothesis. Thus in “The Sentiment of Rationality” he observes that “Faith is synonymous with working hypothesis” (1956, 95). This is crucial if we move beyond a universe of mere semiotics into the world of behavior, change and causality. He advises us not to get “paralyzed by scruples and wait [...] for more evidence” (1956, 94). And then he explains: “Believe, and you shall be right, for you shall save yourself; doubt, and you shall again be right, for you shall perish. The only difference is that to believe is greatly to your advantage” (1956, 97). Note that James creates a philosophy that demands optimism because “faith [...] verifies itself” in behavior (1956, 100). This is of course a crucial truth of Pragmatism, but it is not only so in the sense of a simplified “might is right,” or “the big stick” as James’s Harvard student Teddy Roosevelt might have put it, but it is part of a fundamental epistemological paradox that leads us back to such issues as agency and responsibility. If we take power “seriously” (to adopt Lee Clark Mitchell’s stance), we have to accept it, together with all of its responsibilities: “The belief creates its verification. The thought becomes literally father to the fact, as the wish was father to the thought” (1956, 103).<sup>16</sup> Actually, James even creates a utopian epistemology in proposing a moral obligation to believe: “If I refuse to bale out a boat because I am in doubt whether my efforts will keep her afloat, I am really helping to sink her” (1956, 109). And he adds: “Skepticism in moral matters is an active ally of immorality” (1956, 109).<sup>17</sup> In short, *vanitas, vanitas* creates defeatism.

In “The Dilemma of Determinism” James again argues against the “temper of intellectual absolutism, a demand that the world shall be a solid block, subject to one control” (1956, 157-58), and instead proposes an “indeterminism” that implies that “no part of the world, however big, can claim to control absolutely the destinies of the whole” (1956, 159). Hence he believes in an “optimism *quand même*” (1956, 162) as the “expression of a tender and pathetic hope” (1956, 163). For James this “question of determinism and indeterminism slides us into the question of optimism and pessimism” (1956, 164), which makes him turn to the example of the French Naturalists and criticize that “under the pages of [Zola] there sounds incessantly the hoarse bass of *vanitas vanitatum, omnia vanitas*” (1956, 173, original italics). Note the striking correlation with the issues discussed in Mitchell’s New American Studies approach. In contrast to that, James wants “a theory [that] gives a pluralistic, restless universe, in which no single point of view can ever take in the whole scene” (1956, 177). Not only does he explain the dysfunctional nature of determinist practice (i.e., skepticism) and the totalitarian nature of its monologic assumption of omniscience (ethnocentrism?), but he also offers a pluralistic system that is animated by multiple agents (“multiverse”).

This attitude is exactly not cynical but responsible. In the appendix to *Some Problems of Philosophy* (1911) James significantly rejects the Nietzschean ring of a “will” in his earlier formulation and instead opts for “Faith and the Right to Believe” (1996b, 221-31) in which the vicious circle of determinism is replaced by a “faith circle,” hoping that “experience may weed out the more foolish faiths” (1996b, 231) in a process of progressing scientific hypotheses reminiscent of his colleague Charles Peirce’s notion of fallibilism (1955, 47; 356; 359).

If in the guise of “theory” the literary critics and cultural critics of our days have lead us into an overly conceptualistic understanding of reality, often championing the Naturalist artists of a century ago for their epistemological insights, my aim here has been to show that alternatives to this paradigm already existed a hundred years ago. No alternative for the Modernist paradigm, which was initiated by Naturalism, can come out of its own formalist logic and the many derivative post-post critiques... In order to cope with the paradigmatic shortcomings of this “long Modernism” (as I call it elsewhere<sup>18</sup>) I have suggested that we turn to some contestations at its origin. But can we also find literary art that promotes a Jamesian argumentation, even in our own time? Let me point out some utopian endings in post-realist fiction that lead us in the direction of William James’s belief in belief. Often this sense of utopian hope appears in a Christian guise and in unexpected places in American literature, be it in Faulkner’s figures of the un-Abrahamic Ike McCaslin (1940) or the slave-holding Christ-figure Charles Bon (1936), or in the ending of John Steinbeck’s *Grapes of Wrath* (1939), when after the devastating flood, Rose of Sharon saves a starving man by giving him her breast milk.

In Don DeLillo’s *White Noise* (1985) the supposedly most terrible cynicism of Jack Gladney’s journey culminates in Sister Hermann Marie’s denial of religious belief, or rather, in her pragmatic dedication to pretense (1998, 318), and it is followed in the last chapter by the boy Wilder’s dangerous excursion with a plastic tricycle on the expressway, from where he is saved by “a passing motorist, as such people are called, [who] alert-

ly pulled over, got out of the car, skidded down the embankment and lifted the boy from the murky shallows, holding him aloft for the clamoring elders to see” (1998, 324). This is an unmotivated and anonymous gesture of human kindness, and it tells a very different story from the determinist dystopias of the power theorists. Maybe one project of the future will be to theorize how and why even serious fiction writers sometimes create soppy sentimental incidents that raise questions which tie in with the utopian epistemology of William James.



## Notes

1. Chivalry is replaced by battle. As Winfried Fluck has pointed out in his early chapter “Realismus und moralische Regeneration,” this was clearly an initial aspect of the realist enterprise (1992, 88 fol.).
2. Significantly, many literary historians see Naturalism as the beginning of Modernism; see, for example, Bradbury and McFarlane (1991).
3. Emerson’s Transcendentalism at the time of American slavery can be seen as a good example of this...
4. See, for a late example, Michael Davitt Bell: “Norris is one of the most incompetent practitioners of his craft across the whole range of the American canon” (1993, 116).
5. See my own comments on the theoretical “linguistic turn” in *Pragmatist Realism* (2002, 84).
6. Coercion is at the very heart of tragedy, according to Augusto Boal (1985, 46). Or, as Norris says about his “Novel with a ‘Purpose’,” “for certain reasons, difficult to explain, the purpose novel always ends unhappily. It is usually a record of suffering, a relation of tragedy” (1986, 1199). Also see Fischer on the “tragic ambitions” of Dreiser’s work (1986, 169). The theoretical work of the New American Critics seems to naturalize this fact (to use a Marxist argument against leftists).
7. An extreme case of such textualist reductiveness is Keir Elam’s wonderful drama handbook in the prestigious Methuen “New Accents” series, called *The Semiotics of Theatre and Drama*, in which performance is reduced to a matter of signs (1980).
8. As Norris rightly observes, realism notes “only the surface of things” (1986, 1166). My own approach to realism therefore connected it with American pragmatism and cognitive psychology. We should not see the existence of moral choice in *The Rise of Silas Lapham* as a mere unsophisticated infelicity of a “colonel” leading generals (Bell 1993, 14), but as a part of a strikingly different mode of representation, of different epistemological choices, motivated by non-formalist philosophical assumptions.
9. See my article on “Real Paper Beings?” (2015).
10. The term is strangely contradictory because it implies that the thinking of these critics of capitalism is often modeled *on* and *by* capitalism, thus reinforcing what they claim to be opposing (see my point in “Currencies and Realities,” 2010).
11. I remember many years ago, when the much revered poststructuralist pundit J. Hillis Miller gave a talk to the Swiss Americanists in a restaurant near the US Embassy in Berne, explaining to us that the fight of progressive theory has been fought and that we lost it. He stood there, with his old-fashioned suspenders, telling us the defeatist message that we were done for...
12. See James’s powerful manifesto *A Pluralistic Universe* (1909).



13. According to William James, Spencer's notions of conditioning only correspond to lower strata of the mind; they are "fatally literal" and associated with "treadmill-like operations" (1956, 248). Thus: "The plain truth is that the 'philosophy' of evolution [...] is a metaphysical creed and nothing else [...] scientific discoveries had nothing to do with bringing it to birth" (1956, 253). James also writes that "the spencerian 'philosophy' of social and intellectual progress is an obsolete anachronism, reverting to a pre-darwinian type of thought, just as the spencerian philosophy of 'Force,' effacing all the previous distinctions between actual and potential energy, momentum, work, force, mass, etc., which physicists have with so many agonies achieved, carries us back to a pre-galilean age" (1956, 254).
14. This chiasmic argumentation can also be found in the postmodernist philosophy of Guy Debord (1995)—which shows an unscientific red thread that goes from the idealist phenomenology of the early 19<sup>th</sup> century to the poststructuralism and the postmodern philosophy of the late 20<sup>th</sup> century.
15. This has a strong influence on negativity: "Hegel's quibble with his word *other* exemplifies the same fallacy. All 'others,' as such, are according to him identical" (1956, 283, original italics). Negativity as such does not do justice to variety or pluralism. James concludes that "A negation says something about an affirmation,—namely that it is false. There are no negative predicates or falsities in nature. Being makes no false hypotheses that have to be contradicted" (1956, 290-91). Hence "denial must be of something mental" (1956, 291). If we follow William James, we basically have to abandon all the claims of poststructuralist alterity, French feminism, or any ethnic conceptual inversions. On this issue of negativity, also see Kenneth Burke, "the negative is a peculiarly linguistic resource" (1966, 419).
16. As a consequence, James criticizes the "positivists" of his time because "the 'evidence' which they wait for can never come so long as we are passive" (1956, 108).
17. Thus James criticizes the philosopher Clifford, who wants absolute proof for his beliefs (1956, 8). He observes that Clifford's "insufficient evidence" assumes a "*closed* system" (1956, 13, original italics) in which "the *empiricist* way" is similar to "the *absolutist* way of believing in truth" (1956, 12, original italics). For James, "faith [...] creates its own verification" (1956, 24). His main scientific rival in his own time was the theory of epistemological skepticism: "It is as if a man should hesitate indefinitely to ask a certain woman to marry him because he was not perfectly sure that she would prove an angel after he brought her home" (1956, 26). Anticipating Paul Watzlawick's famous behavioral axiom on the impossibility of non-behavior, he observes that in "either case we act, taking our life in our hands" (1956, 30).
18. See my point in "Currencies and Realities" (2010).

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### **Abstract**

#### Theorizing Determinism: American Naturalism and the Question of Belief

My research on American literary realism has shown me that in particular American scholars often do not know and are not interested in the difference between realism and naturalism. Many of them follow the early prejudices of the young naturalists, who had the natural urge to “slay their fathers” and put down realism as too civilized, too effeminate, not tough enough to face the “real” experience of an industrial world. Though such an attitude is perfectly understandable in its historical context, it is more worrisome to see that much of the New American Studies criticism and its poststructuralist approaches have fallen into the same trap and offered simplistic visions of realism while at the same time championing naturalism, which supported their determinist views.

In a sense, the dividing line can be seen between optimism and pessimism, a vision of utopia or dystopia, where critics simply pick views that serve their argumentation. It may therefore be interesting to look at the utopian ingredient of the cognitive theoretical foundations in the realist camp and their argumentation, which is a kind of deconstruction *avant la lettre* of determinism. I find much of this in William James’s work on Hegel and on determinism contrasted by his “rose-colored” vision of the “right to believe” as a useful way out of the dystopian vision of non-agency—an attitude still present in important modern and postmodern fiction.

### **Keywords**

Realism, Naturalism, New American Studies, determinism, agency, Pragmatism, William James, free will, right to believe.