

Emotion and Reason
in Social Change
Insights from Fiction

John Girling

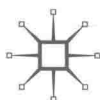


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Emotion and Reason in Social Change

Also by John Girling

THAILAND: Society and Politics

AMERICA AND THE THIRD WORLD

CAPITAL AND POWER

MYTHS AND POLITICS IN WESTERN SOCIETIES

CORRUPTION, CAPITALISM AND DEMOCRACY

SOCIAL MOVEMENTS AND SYMBOLIC POWER

My starting point is the undeniable evidence of powerful emotions at work in even the most advanced countries of the modern world. My aim is to understand this emotional involvement, not directly, but imaginatively, through fictions. My argument, however, is that structural conditions – in economy, politics and society – determine whether the flow of psychic energy is constructive or destructive. The result is an entirely new, critical approach to global capitalism, neo-imperialism and modernisation, and social change: notably the degradation of the environment and the contested role of women.

Why can the passions which affect the will only be spoken of in the coded language of a mythics?

Paul Ricoeur

I find my chief comfort more and more in . . . Plato and Shakespeare. Why is it so difficult to find a true combination of passion and intellect?

J.M. Keynes

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Preface

This book is about ways to understand human behaviour – in economy, politics and society – through the use of selected fictions: mostly novels, but also poetry, drama and painting. My premise is that emotionally-charged beliefs, often expressed in myths and imaginative literature, play a vital role in contemporary society, notably because of the emotional force, or psychic energy, that enters into both public and private decisions.* Yet the rational tradition of the social sciences does not provide a satisfactory explanation of what is undoubtedly an ‘extraordinary’ state of affairs.

Two distinct methods of investigation are therefore required: analysis of the subject-matter guided by informed hypotheses, which satisfies rational criteria, on the one hand; and vicarious experience drawn from works of imagination, which is emotionally fulfilling, on the other. Neither offers a sufficient explanation in itself: instead, each complements the other.

My aim, therefore, is to bring together the ‘imaginative truths’ of fiction and the ‘rational’ truths of sociological analysis in order to produce a fuller explanation of such crucial issues as modernisation, global capitalism, nationalism and imperialism, political violence, environmental degradation, civil society and women’s rights. I read Balzac’s novels, for example, in understanding capitalism. As the critic Martin Turnell (1962: 227–8) writes: money, lust and magic motivate the *Comédie humaine*; money, gained by whatever means has become the symbol of the deepest aspirations of society. Consider, too, Maurice Bowra’s (1968: 26, 30) observation of classical Greek literature, which made abundant use of symbols derived from myths: ‘Such symbols concentrate in themselves a mass of associations which are instinctively apprehended, and are therefore more urgent, more vivid, more intimate, more charged with personal emotion than the usual run of abstractions.’ It was these emotions, he goes on, ‘that set the intelligence to work . . .’ Through such fictions, in my view, it is not only possible to probe more deeply into social problems but also to cope more effectively with the ‘uncontrollable’ aspect of emotional drives.

For this work, I have drawn on my experience as a researcher in various fields, with books on insurgency and US foreign policy, social change in developing countries, ‘capital and power’, political myths, corruption, and civil society. These form the analytical part of the book. As for the fictional side: this is not a question of literary criticism, needless to say,

but of bringing out from selected works the emotional and motivational expression. For imaginative novelists are far more aware of the relationship of their work to society (consider Grass's *The Tin Drum* or Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*) than are social scientists in the reverse situation, that is, their appreciation, or lack of it, of fiction. Yet society is formed of and by (and for?) human beings. The necessary interrogation – for whom in particular? And for what purpose? – is the starting point for the creative enterprise of writers and scholars.

*On emotion, feeling and affect. 'Affect' refers to psychic energy, expressed in everyday terms as 'emotion' or, more subjectively, as 'feeling'. Dictionary definitions are either circular – affect being defined as feeling, emotion or desire, and vice-versa – or polysemic: feeling is emotion or physical sensation, given that words may have more than one meaning. This is not a defect, as Paul Ricoeur points out in *The Rule of Metaphor*, but rather the characteristic of 'ordinary language', which refers not to an ideal world, but to the world we live in. This 'indirect and metaphorical' language preserves the highest descriptive power as regards human experience.

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1

Introduction: Bridging the Emotional/Intellectual Divide

Rejoyce! Deliberation is at hand!

(Fictional Joyce. The genuine article is too costly for words)

... the possibility exists for fiction to function in truth ...

(Foucault)

The following themes are discussed in this chapter:

1. From different perspectives on 'Night and Day' to the 'Contradictions of Modernity': the expectation of ever-increasing rationality in economic enterprise and in bureaucratic administration confronts violent outbursts of 'irrational exuberance'.
2. The Enlightenment tradition of social science and its belief in the 'rational actor' find great difficulty in accounting for the role of the 'irrational'.
3. The use of fictions, as source of emotions, restores the repressed affective dimension of society.
4. The two components – emotional and rational – are represented in Kant's 'trilogy of passions', fusing imaginative truths with the existential conditions of economic 'possession', political 'power' and social values. These conditions are necessary for the production of wealth, political order and social identity; but they may take either a destructive or constructive form (power, for example, may be used cooperatively for the common good, or abused in the interest of an elite).
5. 'Theory in Context': the challenge of change, through economic innovation, war, internal unrest. Stimulating conditions (inspirational or traumatic) provoke an emotional reaction, which then has a social

impact. Such is the theme, in economics, politics and society (vision and division), of the following chapters.

Night and day

The mysterious 'night world' of feelings and emotions, of hidden or unconscious desires, is sharply contrasted in the Western mind with the day world of rationality and logic, definition and calculation. Indeed, the distinction goes back to ancient Greece, when *mythos* (fable, myth) yielded to *logos* (reason, the word). Joyce's procedure is the reverse: the largely day-world of *Ulysses* – a journey of self-discovery – merges into the night-world of *Finnegans Wake*: dream-history of humanity. The Chinese tradition, too, differs from that of the West. The *yin* and *yang* – also symbolising night and day – are equally perceptions of the female and male principles, negative and positive, cold and hot, dream and reality; but to the Chinese these are *complementary* rather than antagonistic. In their view, neither dimension is to be excluded in the world of humanity. As a Chinese philosopher argues, Chinese thought is not directed solely at the intellect, but at the whole person – less to argue rationally than to practise how to live (Chen, 1997: 34; and on yin/yang, 253–5).

Western rationality versus Oriental mysticism? Rather, I argue that despite the Enlightenment conception of progress and reason driving out prejudice and superstition (and other barbarous forms of irrationality) nevertheless emotional behaviour thrives. Paradoxically, the very prophet of rationality, Max Weber (1948), also accounts for the force of 'unreason': that is, the 'warring gods' of conflicting values that go beyond – and cannot be reconciled by – pure reason. But can we, as Weber suggests, isolate the sphere of reason (his 'ethic of responsibility') from that of emotionally-charged values? In my view, this is an illusion. The realm of 'magic' – dreams, myths, values and fictions – does not merely coexist with that of reason, but permeates it at all levels. Together, they form the imaginative truths of our existential condition, conceptualised in the Kantian trilogy of possession, power and 'esteem': the latter being interpreted as consciousness of oneself and one's place in society. These are the themes I seek to develop in this introductory chapter.

Contradictions of modernity

The founder of modern sociology, Max Weber, was convinced that 'disenchantment' – the end of myth and magic – would inexorably result from the growth of ever more rational and bureaucratic systems of economy,

politics and social order. This has not been the case – far from it. Enchantment persists, taking both sublime and terrible forms. As I wrote in an earlier work:

Despite Max Weber's assumption of ever-increasing rationality in the modern world, events of this [twentieth] century have demonstrated – along with the spread of legal-rationality, organizational norms, and cooperative regimes – the power of entirely opposite elements: mass movements of unreason, whose violence and destructiveness were unmatched (even unimaginable) in the West in the previous century. . . . On the positive side, meanwhile, the end of the Cold War, the construction of a new Europe, and efforts to maintain the liberal trading regime contrast with new forms of irrationality: nuclear armed ambitions, ethnic and religious conflicts, and environmental degradation.

(Girling, 1993: 1)

It is not unreasonable, faced with such contradictions, to argue that emotionally-charged beliefs, often expressed in myths, do play a powerful role in contemporary society and politics, as they have done in the past, and that so far there has not been a satisfactory explanation of this extraordinary state of affairs. Despite the abundant evidence of irrational conduct, effective investigation (I surmise) is impeded by the Enlightenment tradition of the rational actor (Girling, 1993: 1). But note the admission by the celebrated economist J.M. Keynes that rational civilisation ignores the formidable part of irrational forces and 'certain powerful and valuable springs of feeling' (cited by Leavis, 1962: 258).

Weber's work does, however, suggest a resolution. For he notably distinguished, in 'Politics as a Vocation', between an 'ethic of ultimate ends' demanding the fulfilment of values and an 'ethic of responsibility' pragmatically concerned with the consequences of action. In the former case, he asserts, politicians insisting on an 'absolute ethic' will only obscure the truth by the wilful 'unleashing of passion'. The reason, as Weber points out in 'Science as a Vocation', is that the 'various value spheres of the world stand in irreconcilable conflict with each other'. Such is Weber's famous evocation of the 'warring gods' of Olympus (Weber, 1948: 148, also 120).

We live as did the ancients when their world was not yet disenchanted of its gods and demons, only we live in a different sense. As Hellenic man at times sacrificed to Aphrodite and at other times to Apollo, and, above all, as everybody sacrificed to the gods of his city, so do we still nowadays, only the bearing of man has been disenchanted

and denuded of its mystical but inwardly genuine plasticity. Fate, and certainly not 'science', holds sway over these gods and their struggles.

For Weber, only the ethic of responsibility came within the scope of political or social analysis. Indeed, he considered that only such 'value-free' behaviour was an appropriate subject of study. Insistence on absolute values evoked the arena of warring gods – a conflict that could not be decided on rational grounds.

The issue of religion is exemplary. Consider the worshippers of Christianity, Islam and Judaism – all 'people of the Book [Old Testament]', as Muslims affirm. For all that, their doctrines are irreconcilable. Christ as the Son of God is a blasphemy to Muslims; the belief in the guilt of Jews – and their descendants – as the murderers of Christ inspired centuries of persecution; while the unique Jewish claim to be the 'chosen people' is unacceptable to 'Gentiles'. Such a spirit of exclusiveness between and within religions is a source of conflict rather than harmony; nevertheless, the certainty of believers in their version of the truth – however partial in the view of outsiders – provides an extraordinary sense of identity, of belonging to a community. Moreover, these 'contrasting visions of life', as C.H. Peake observes of the moral drama of Joyce's *Ulysses* (1977: 339), 'must be shown, not described, felt rather than understood'. Indeed, to recall Maurice Bowra's observation of classical Greek literature (1968: 26, 30) is to realise the abundant use of symbols derived from myths, 'which are instinctively apprehended and therefore more urgent, more vivid, more intimate, more charged with personal emotion than intellectual abstractions'. Responding to Greek tragedy, the playwright Edward Bond in turn asks: 'how can theatre transform the meaning of the world?' We must try, like the Greeks, to make the theatre an arena of justice – 'otherwise we will sink into an increasingly violent, corrupt and authoritarian society' (interview with Fabienne Darge, *Le Monde*, 19 April 2003). And consider the visionary Antonin Artaud, poet and critic: 'The theatre, like the plague . . . unleashes conflicts, lets loose forces, reveals possibilities and if these possibilities and forces are dark this is not the fault of the plague or theatre, but of life'. For 'the idea of theatre' is 'a magical, atrocious link with reality and danger' (Artaud, 1964: 45, 137, and see 18–19, 61–9, 109–10, 123–4, 157–61, 177).

Magic realism

These warring values of religion and legend are 'magic': the realm of myths, dreams, fiction, the 'night world' of humanity. That is why I have

borrowed the term 'magic realism' from literary criticism to convey the *imaginary* situations in which participants, nevertheless, act realistically: they pursue each other with passionate intensity, swayed by overriding emotions, but are aware of the appropriate means to achieve their unruly desires. Indeed, magic realism represents in fiction what value-conflicts represent in political and social behaviour. For 'magic' is the *inexplicable* event – either an 'extraordinary' achievement or an unforeseen catastrophe – *in real life*. Thus, to return to *Ulysses*, the precursor, where reader and artists realise – as S.L. Goldberg shows (1961: 313) – a sense of the wholeness of life, of its irrational paradoxes, intermingled decay and vitality, absurdity and mystery: where moral criticism and mythic parallels converge.

The inexplicable event. Who, even in Weber's time, could have foretold the Holocaust? Who could have believed, a century ago, that people would be flying across the oceans as an everyday reality? Who in the eighteenth century – 'the age of reason' – had the notion of steam trains, still less of motor cars or space machines? All these achievements, from television and computers to organ transplants and genetic discoveries, now taken for granted, were literally unimaginable only a few generations ago – apart from some works of fiction, which could hardly be taken seriously.

'Magic realism', according to Margaret Drabble's edition of the *Oxford Companion to English Literature*, is expressed in stories and novels which 'have, typically, a strong narrative drive, in which the recognisably realistic mingles with the unexpected and the inexplicable, and in which elements of dream, fairy story, or mythology combine with the everyday, often in a mosaic or kaleidoscopic pattern of refraction and recurrence'. The concept has been used to describe the work of writers such as Borges and Garcia Marquez in Latin America or Gunter Grass, John Fowles and Italo Calvino in Europe and Salman Rushdie's fabulous depiction of India, Pakistan and the Muslim world. Thus, Borges is noted for bringing together in his works fiction, truth and identity, while Garcia Marquez mingles the ordinary and the miraculous, the semi-supernatural and the concrete detail, charged with heightened power and colour.

Existential conditions

Now, the imaginative truths of literature and the visual arts relate to the philosophical insights of Kant's 'trilogy of passions' – possession, power and esteem – as well as to the Buddhist trilogy of greed, anger and illusion. The latter can be seen as Kant's 'passions' taken to extremes, which for Buddhists are the causes of suffering in this world. It may not be fanciful to consider Freud's trilogy of id, ego and superego in this context.