The Critical Naturalism Manifesto: Some Comments
Hans Radder

Abstract

The prior issue of Krisis (42:1) published *Critical Naturalism: A Manifesto*, with the aim to instigate a debate of the issues raised in this manifesto – the necessary re-thinking of the role (and the concept) of nature in critical theory in relation to questions of ecology, health, and inequality. Since *Krisis* considers itself a place for philosophical debates that take contemporary struggles as starting point, it issued an open call and solicited responses to the manifesto. This is one of the sixteen selected responses, which augment, specify, or question the assumptions and arguments of the manifesto.

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By and large, I sympathize with this Manifesto and its main ambition to rehabilitate nature in the context of critical theory. The authors cover *many* topics, which are necessarily treated quite concisely. For the most part, these topics could be convincingly developed by revisiting them in more detail.[1] Some of them, however, require minor or major revision. In this commentary, I briefly address three related issues.

1. I agree with the authors that critical theory should involve more than a reconstruction of the norms of social critique (Thesis 7, 108-109; all page numbers refer to the Manifesto). Yet, this normative dimension cannot be left out. On this issue, the position of the Manifesto is unclear. It states, for instance, that "critique must not be thought of as a judgment" (118). But in fact the Manifesto abounds with judgments, for instance where it interprets and criticizes phenomena as "inequalities and relations of domination". More generally, the authors state that "Critical Naturalism proceeds negatively, by a critique of what is given, the prevailing forms of life" (119). What is lacking is a normative account that tells us why a defence of the prevailing forms of life is mistaken or wrong.[2] Such an account also needs to address the issue of the epistemic normativity of critical theories themselves. As the authors rightly say, "theorists and theories have a tendency to overshoot" (120). Since only empiricists (wrongly) think that we can, or even should, do without theories, advocates of critical theories need to reflect on what theories can, and cannot, accomplish. For this purpose they can profit from insights in recent philosophy of science, according to which the scope and justifiability of *general* theories also depends on their connections to *particular* models and *specific* empirical procedures.

2. The Manifesto is explicitly presented as a philosophical work. As such, its general style is quite traditional. Its theses and arguments are mostly abstract and theoretical. Even the more specific topics in the third section, meant to be "exemplary sketches of the varying ways to practice naturalist social critique" (108), are described in quite general terms. In contrast, for several decades many branches of philosophy (for instance, the philosophies of science, technology, ethics, and politics) have developed approaches that are "empirically informed". That is, their theoretical arguments are confronted with detailed studies of a variety of concrete practices. It is true that several of the references to the Manifesto include investigations of

relevant practices. But the text of the Manifesto itself does not demonstrate great affinity with these newer ways of doing philosophy.

Consider the huge impact of all kinds of technologies on the ways we live our lives. In contrast to the early critical philosophers of the Frankfurt School (see, e.g., Marcuse 1968[1964]), the Manifesto hardly addresses the issue of the many entanglements of technology and society. The only discussion is a criticism of "technologicalism", the idea that our basic social problems can (eventually) be fixed by technological progress (112). There is no discussion, or even mention, of the flourishing debates on critical theories of technology. A major illustration can be found in the extensive, profound and much-discussed publications of Andrew Feenberg (see, e.g., Feenberg 2002 and Cressman 2022). They exemplify an approach that combines both well-developed theoretical accounts, detailed empirical studies and "valuable strategies for progressive politics" (112).[3] While the authors write that "there is a need for a critical theory of our uses of the natural and artificial environments" (120), my point is that it is already there, in the form of a substantial body of critical literature about technology.

3. A basic claim of the Manifesto is that nature and society constitute two aspects of the same reality, which cannot be reduced to each other. The authors rightly criticize both a social constructivist and a reductionist physicalist ontology. From an empirical perspective, we can of course study the various relations between natural and societal "aspects". However, in a conceptual-philosophical sense the notion of aspects leaves the nature of their connection in the dark. Concerning this problem, the more specific notion of emergence – which seems to be compatible with the position defended in the Manifesto – can be fruitfully used. The core of emergentist accounts of the connection between nature and human society is that the latter depends on, but is irreducible to, the former (Radder 2023). Thus, it avoids both the non-sequitur that irreducibility implies independence and the conceptually unfortunate combination of irreducibility with continuity (see Gregoratto et al. 2022, 114). Typical elements of a social ontology, such as meanings and values, can then be seen as abstract entities that emerge from specific socio-material practices: they cannot be reduced to these practices, but they still depend on them because they would not exist in their absence. Furthermore, in this conception the possibility of social critique – that is, the capability of imagining what has not been present so far but might come to be realized in the future – depends on the open-ended nature of these nonlocal meanings and values.

Notes

1] For this purpose, the views developed by Roy Bhaskar in the 1970s and 1980s could be helpful. He combined a realist theory of the natural sciences with a naturalistic account of the human sciences (see, e.g., Bhaskar 1979).

2] In Radder (2022) I propose such an account, in terms of the concept of common goods, which includes a multidimensional, normative notion of democracy. Furthermore, this account meets the requirement of the Manifesto that it should not merely be critical but also positively applicable to "the reconstruction of the criticized state of affairs" (p. 120).

3] As to the latter, a remarkable aspect of the Manifesto is the absence of concrete opportunities for activism, which are often seen as a distinguishing feature of manifestos (see Sally Wyatt's (2008) review of a range of manifestos concerning feminism, technology and society).

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Biography

Hans Radder is Professor Emeritus in Philosophy at VU University Amsterdam. In 2019, he published *From Commodification to the Common Good: Reconstructing Science, Technology, and Society* (University of Pittsburgh Press). Two recent articles about the ethics and politics of science can be found at https://doi.org/10.1080/08989621.2022.2115888 and https://doi.org/10.1080/08989621.2023.2193694.