

Critical Naturalism: The Manifesto and Critical Realism

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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.

Keywords

Critical naturalism, Critical realism, Pragmatism, Frankfurt school, Critical theory

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Urs Lindner

When I read the Critical Naturalism manifesto (Gregoretto et al. 2022), I had mixed feelings. On the one hand, I was enthusiastic about it. Finally, there are guys from the Frankfurt School who try to overcome its anthropocentrism and its retreat to second order critique, and develop philosophical tools that may allow to grasp the planetary crises we face. That this includes questioning established practices of philosophy and critical theory is one of the important messages of the manifesto. There may be minor weaknesses in it. Subsuming, for example, Nancy Fraser's innovative work on capitalism as an institutionalized social order under Social Reproduction Theory, and criticizing her for dualisms she has successfully historicized (Fraser and Jaeggi 2018), is not very convincing. But even its weaknesses prove the point of the manifesto. Critical Naturalism (CN), I would argue, is a great framework for making philosophical sense of Fraser's social theoretical innovations. In the last decade, we have seen under the labels of "new materialism" and the "ontological turn", initiatives that were only peripheral to what philosophers understand as materialism or realism. By contrast, the CN of the manifesto is critical and naturalist in the best philosophical sense.

On the other hand, I was baffled (and angry). The platform that the manifesto wants to initiate has already existed for decades. In 1979, Indian-British philosopher Roy Bhaskar published a book titled *The Possibility of Naturalism: A Philosophical Critique of the Contemporary Human Sciences*, which developed "critical naturalism" as a programmatic term for critical theory. In the 1980s, Critical Realism (CR) emerged as a trans-disciplinary platform in the UK, synthesizing Bhaskar's two main initiatives: "transcendental realism" as a philosophy of the natural sciences, and "critical naturalism" as a philosophy of the human sciences. Since then, CR has succeeded globally primarily as a critical meta-theory of the social sciences, which is why it is fair to say that CN is its core project. It is astonishing that the authors of the manifesto do not even mention this platform for naturalist critical theory.¹

Bob Jessop once said that CR is a "broad church" allowing for different elaborations.² I am sceptical about several of its elaborations, and I find the guru cultus around Bhaskar that some Critical Realists practice quite problematic. But I consider its CN core, what I call basic CR,

reasonable and helpful. And I do not see any significant philosophical differences between basic CR and the CN of the manifesto.

Can I prove my point within an article of 1000 words? Hardly so. But let me give you at least some hints: The core meaning of “critical” in the manifesto is that philosophy should do all it can in order to help save the planet and establish sustainable, egalitarian and caring life forms both amongst humans and in their interactions with non-human nature. The same holds for CR. Just look at the title of Bhaskar’s third book (*Scientific Realism and Human Emancipation*, 1986), the titles of the many CR-conferences that took place since the 1980s³ or the introductions by Andrew Collier (1994) and Doug Porpora (2015).

The authors of the manifesto have chosen a stipulative procedure. They identify three fields they consider central in order to address the current crises (ontology, anthropology, and social theory) and indicate what CN may mean with respect to each. Let me suggest, in the spirit of CR, a more explicative procedure and follow established philosophical meanings of naturalism with regard to ontology, epistemology, and ethics.

Ontologically, the major claim of the manifesto is made with reference to Dewey: CN is both anti-reductionist and anti-dualist. This is also the thrust of Bhaskar’s 1979 book, which developed a double critique of positivism and hermeneutics, criticizing, amongst others, Frankfurt School’s tendency to understand nature as a primarily ideological device. There have been extensive debates in CR about whether “emergence” and “stratification” are good concepts for theorizing the world’s irreducible plurality (Elder-Vass 2010; Kaidesoja 2013). Another important claim of the manifesto is that nature is not subject to “universal and unchanging regularities.” This has been the main topic of Bhaskar’s first book (1975), leading him to a causal powers-ontology distinguishing between the real, the actual, and the empirical. Where the manifesto demands a critique of abstract social constructionism and flat ontologies, just look at the highly sophisticated proposals of Dave Elder-Vass (2008; 2012).

Epistemologically, the common CN ground between the manifesto and CR is that philosophy should be informed by scientific knowledge, without being reducible to it, and that the plurality of cognitive accesses to the world has to be appreciated, especially in order to avoid the pitfalls of Western-centrism. Finally, with respect to ethical naturalism, the manifesto reads as if its authors would admire Andrew Sayer’s *Why Things Matter to People* (2011) as much as I do.

Sayer criticizes, much in the vein of pragmatism, the “naturalist fallacy” as a positivist chimera, stresses the importance of lay normativity, and uses affect and vulnerability as cornerstones of social critique. He accuses Habermas of not taking seriously the fact that we humans are embodied beings, which are only partially malleable by society and whose very nature may revolt against certain conventions, norms etc.

Against the backdrop of CR, the following statement of the manifesto needs revision: “Critical naturalist motives have not played a major role in the recent developments of critical theory.” It would be great if the authors lived up to its next sentence (“Critical Naturalism is a learning process”) and started engaging seriously with CR. One interesting question that might arise then would relate to the exact contours of a critical-naturalist *social* ontology. CR, especially with the work of Margaret Archer (1982; 1995; 2000), ascribes to social structures, actors, and artifacts emergent properties of their own, and is critical about the tendency of (several) pragmatist approaches to reduce these entities to social practices, considering this move as yet another act of “conflationism.” If the CN of the manifesto shall be coherent, I guess, its authors should follow CR in this respect as well.

Notes

1] An attempt to put CR into conversation with critical theory in Germany has been Lindner and Mader 2017. The Frankfurt School is present in this volume with contributions from Robin Celikates and Hartmut Rosa.

2] That was at the CR-conference in London in 2008.

3] For example, the title of the CR-conference held in Lillehammer in 2018 was: “Sustainability, Interdisciplinarity and Transformative Change. A Critical Realist Response to the Crisis System.”

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Biography

Urs Lindner is a postdoctoral researcher at the Max-Weber-Kolleg of the University of Erfurt. His research interests include egalitarianism, affirmative action, Marx, Critical Realism, memory politics, racism and colonialism. He has just submitted his habilitation/second book titled *An Egalitarian Justification of Affirmative Action: Nonideal Theory and the Scope of Political Philosophy*. He has co-edited (with Dimitri Mader) the volume *Critical Realism meets kritische Sozialtheorie. Ontologie, Erklärung und Kritik in den Sozialwissenschaften* (transcript 2017).