

Anthropocene Self-Consciousness: Response to “Critical Naturalism: A Manifesto”

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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 Manifesto

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Liberal capitalism is a failed and failing form of life: it is failed in the precise and narrow sense that it has destroyed the material conditions necessary for its social reproduction, namely, Holocene nature; it is failing in the stringent moral sense that it possesses the material capabilities to provide for equal basic human rights to food, shelter, health care, and meaningful work but consistently and blatantly fails to do so – on the contrary “Today, [71 percent](#) of the world’s population live in countries where inequality has grown” (UN 75: 2020). If we are living in a failed and failing form of life, then the Critical Naturalism Manifesto is too modest in consideration of providing a platform for the discussion of problems faced by critical theory today: Critical Naturalism must be conceived as *the material a priori principle that provides the rationally necessary orientating horizon for the intelligibility of the present as a transition moment between a failed and failing form of life and a form of life to come*. Critical Naturalism is the critical self-consciousness of the emergence of: A.) the Anthropocene as a consequence of B.) the separation of economic production from social reproduction under capital – theses implicit in the Manifesto (Gregorata, et al. 2022, 140) that, I will argue, demand rational upgrading.

A.) *Necessary Naturalism*. On May 21, 2019 the Anthropocene Working Group announced that it accepted that Anthropocene be treated as a formal geological unit, and that its beginning point be located in mid-twentieth century (circa 1950 – the onset of the “Great Acceleration”) (Working Group 2019). As originally proposed by Nobel Laureate Paul J. Crutzen and Eugene F. Stoermer, the idea that the Anthropocene should be regarded as a new stratigraphic epoch turns on the thesis that during the course of industrial modernity “mankind’s activities grew into a significant geological, morphological force” comparable to the great forces of nature (Crutzen and Stoermer 2000). Rather than nature being the background to human action, an indifferent externality that can be relied upon for resources, and rather than it being an autonomous system occasionally disturbed by human action, “[t]he term Anthropocene suggests that the Earth has now left its natural geological epoch, the present interglacial state called the Holocene” (Steffen, Crutzen, and McNeill 2007, 614).

The epoch immediately prior to the Holocene was the Pleistocene that stretched back 2.6 million years. What distinguished the Pleistocene was that it went through repeated stretches of glaciations and brief warmings. These fluctuations made for such unstable and generally cold climatic conditions that nothing approximating settled human life could develop. Human hunter-gatherers emerged toward the end of the Pleistocene. The Holocene arrived just 11,700 years ago – bringing into being a *moderately warm* and *relatively stable* set of climate conditions that enabled the biosphere and its biodiverse ecosystems to develop maximally *resilient forms*. This is when human living began to be radically transformed from hunting and gathering, following the weather, vegetation, and the animals, to agriculture, which exploded 8,000 years ago. Agriculture makes possible the emergence of cities and with them all the arts, sciences, and technological innovations that are constitutive of what we think of as human civilization. If this is broadly accurate, then it follows that the rational intelligibility of *human civilization is dependent on, and therefore nondetachable from, Holocene nature – human civilization is (was) Holocene civilization*. Nature, it transpires, is not a permanent, unchanging, background and resource for human social action; living nature is historical. It is that historicity, dependence, and nondetachability that constitute the *naturalism* of Critical Naturalism as the necessary self-consciousness of historical humanity having been constituted through the environmental beneficence and resilience of the Holocene, and then deposited by capitalism's ecocidal actions in the Anthropocene. Said otherwise, humans are not essentially rational animals, linguistic animals, political animals, cooperative animals, souls, autonomous subjects, or persons; rather, the arrival of the Anthropocene forces us to become aware that the defining capacities of the human are the means through which *human niche constructing practices* (Gregorata, et al. 2022, 140) carry out the requirements for biological reproduction through historically dynamic social practices. *We are innovative niche constructors and engineers.*

B.) *The Necessity of Critical Self-Reflection*. Fossil fuel capitalism, with its twin evils of global warming as caused by the emitting of CO₂ into the atmosphere – from 285ppm in 1850 to 320ppm in 1950 to 420.99ppm in June 2022 – and the massive destruction of ecological habitats, are the joint direct causes of the destruction of Holocene nature. But that destruction of Holocene nature is not a contingent feature of capitalism: as first-generation critical theory and ecofeminism both argue, the seismic contradiction at the core of capitalism is its structurally

mandatory pursuit of profits and wealth without end – as configured in Marx’s simple formula of $M-C-M'$, *Money* purchases (raw) materials and labour for the making of *Commodities* that are sold for *More Money* than the original investment – in systematic detachment from considerations of social reproduction; where, furthermore, the practices and material conditions necessary for social reproduction are wholly subordinated to the mandatory demands of production for the sake of wealth creation. As if this separation were not a sufficient indictment of capitalism, ecofeminists argue that capitalism has secured social reproduction, to the extent it does, not through market mechanisms but through a version of what Marx called “primitive accumulation”. Maria Mies states the thesis this way:

Rosa Luxemburg wrote that Marx’s model of ongoing accumulation of capital was based on the assumption that capitalism was a closed system in which only wage laborers and capitalists existed. She wrote that capitalism always needed “non-capitalist milieu and strata” for its extension. According to her thesis these strata were peasants, colonies and the imperialist system. Without the ongoing exploitation of non-waged workers and of natural resources, and a perpetual extension of markets, capitalism would not be able to continue its process of permanent “primitive accumulation” [...] Luxemburg was not a feminist. But her analysis was crucial for us to understand why women as unpaid domestic workers, the colonies and finally nature’s resources have to be exploited for the process of ongoing capital accumulation. This process is necessarily based on violence, and finally destroys the subsistence of people and [with the transition to the Anthropocene] nature. (Mies 2014, xvii).

Inequality under capitalism is more than the market regulated exploitation of nominally “free” labour; it occurs through on-going non-market mechanisms of domination. The elaboration of the separation-and-subordination of nature, women, racialized bodies, and colonial bodies first into an account of social reproduction, and then reconstructing that account of social reproduction into a version of primitive accumulation, reveals the deeply violent and contradictory structure of capitalist accumulation. This analysis follows critical theory in its contention that it is the domination of nature that finally spreads to become morally egregious human domination.

But it is solely this comprehension of the structure of capitalist production which demonstrates that the *Critical* element of *Critical Naturalism* essentially depends on the demonstration of the deep irrationality and *natural objective wrong* (Gregorata, et al. 2022, 129, Thesis 4) of capitalist production. In this respect too, Critical Naturalism is the necessary self-consciousness of humanity's exile from Holocene nature and its habitation of a new historical deformation of living nature, the Anthropocene, thus practically and morally demanding the construction of a new form of life.

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Biography

J.M. Bernstein is University Distinguished Professor of Philosophy at the New School for Social Research. His writings include: *The Fate of Art: Aesthetic Alienation from Kant to Derrida and Adorno* (1992); *Recovering Ethical Life: Jürgen Habermas and the Future of Critical Theory* (1995); *Adorno: Disenchantment and Ethics* (2002); *Against Voluptuous Bodies: Late Modernism and the Meaning of Painting* (2006). His most recent book is *Torture and Dignity: An Essay on Moral Injury* (2015). He is completing a book on climate change: *Of Ecocide and Human Rights: Ethical Life in the Anthropocene*.