

How Critical is “Second Nature”? A Diagnosis and an Antidote

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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, Second nature, Social philosophy, Adorno, Hegel

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Even for a naturalist, names matter. One should welcome the new label “critical naturalism” and wish it good luck on the contemporary philosophical battlefield, where various opponents – be they reductive or liberal sorts of naturalism – are already waiting for the fight. Yet, as the *Manifesto* repeatedly states, the initial proposal of combining “critique” and “nature” under one and the same heading is an invitation to raise further questions, among which: How critical actually can the concept of nature work? And how far should we be critical in our discursive uses of it? One thrilling path opened by the *Manifesto* pertains to the concept of “second nature.” Conceived as a way to escape both reductive naturalism and supernaturalism, “second nature” allows us to adopt “nature-skeptical” and “nature-endorsing” arguments (Soper 1995) as it comes to grasp the historically changing and complex interrelationships of other-than-human natures and all-too-human societies. Two claims are indeed central for a “second nature” approach in critical social philosophy. On the one hand, it affirms that the realm of the social is to be conceived as taking the secondary shapes of embodied habits, customs, rules, and institutions, in which first nature – be it internal or external – exists insofar as it is socially mediated. To put it with Adorno, “in truth second nature is primary” (Adorno 1984). On the other hand, “second nature” firmly opposes constructivist and hybridist approaches where first nature seems to vanish beneath its secundarization. Far from disappearing altogether, first nature here is seen as *persisting* through its mediated forms in the second nature of the social. Since Hegel, we know that mediation is neither about construction nor artificialization, but about dialectically relating analytically distinct terms (in our case, “nature” and “society”). However promising the path might look, the question about the critical potential of “second nature” yet remains overt. The strong and convincing philosophical commitments behind “second nature” are not *per se* critical. Again with Adorno, one could say that “second nature” is only “tainted with critique” (Adorno 2015). If not critical all the way round, it even appears here and there – in Adorno, for instance – as a direct target of social critique.

One example of how “second nature” becomes an object of critique rather than operating as a critical tool is provided by Hegel in his anthropology (Hegel 1978). Putting into question the mind-body dualism, the anthropology is also the place where Hegel develops some of his most

racist thoughts about non-European cultures. The paradox is that Hegel's racism is closely tied to a non-reductive "second nature" naturalism. Whereas spirit in general stems from nature without being reducible to it, some races and cultures have shown to be *relatively more* attached to their natural environments and inner needs than others. Considered in environmentalist and culturalist terms, Hegel's racism partakes of the core idea of "second nature." Still applying to every human being and to each "spirit of a people," the *Bildungs*-process which consists in transforming natural environments through work, and elevating one's natural impulses into spiritual wants, appears to Hegel as unequal in time (some people are more "civilized" than other "barbarian" or "savage" ones) and in space (geographical conditions supposedly impede the advancement of human culture in some parts of the globe). The alleged superiority of some human cultures over others is therefore as gradual (and not absolute) as the process of *Bildung* itself.

Now, this does not necessarily mean that we have to throw away "second nature" with the dirty water of Hegel's environmental and cultural racism. Adorno's immanent critique of Hegel aims to show that he has not been dialectical enough when thinking of the relations of nature and spirit. The problem for Adorno lies not in the dualist autonomy of Hegel's spirit apart from nature, but precisely in its autonomization from it, which results in the affirmation of spirit's gradual superiority over nature. To Adorno, Hegel has failed in his own dialectical terms to grasp the mediation between nature and spirit in the very moment he considered the former as hierarchically superior to the latter.

If the diagnosis of the non-critical, ideological side of "second nature" in Hegel is correct, Adorno also furnishes an antidote to it by way of the concept of "nature-history" (*Naturgeschichte*) (Adorno 2006). In the steps of Marx' critique of political economy, "nature-history" serves to criticize the way social tendencies (such as capital's accumulation) are being "naturalized" under the guise of so-called eternal laws of history. But next to this ideology-critique variant of the naturalistic fallacy argument it also frames the way to a non-hierarchical, dialectical understanding of the relations of nature and history. Unlike Hegel, nature does not constitute for Adorno the mere "basis" (*Grundlage*) from which (European) spirit progressively detached itself in the course of history. Instead, nature and history must be conceived as remaining on equal grounds. Quoting from Marx' *German Ideology*, Adorno speaks of the true "inner mediation" of nature and spirit instead of the subordination of the one to the other.

This leads to stressing the theoretical need today for more – not less – “naturalism” in critical social philosophy. The concept of “nature-history” implies to denounce ideologically abusive “naturalizations” of socially contingent practices and institutions *and* to give nature its fair due within its constant interrelationship with human history. In our present socio-ecological crisis where the possibility of escaping the stranglehold of Capitalocene is bound up with the need of inventing new ways of socializing with nature, this double-sided approach could contribute to the “critical naturalism” program so generously sketched by the *Manifesto* and its authors.

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Biography

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