

Critical Naturalism from the Margins

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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

Apocalyptic capitalism, Critical naturalism, Neoliberalism, Neo-extractivism,
World periphery

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The manifesto as form. In a historical moment when scholars of all research fields are continuously expected to comply with performance measurements which are ever more focused on quantifiable, individualized productivity metrics, a tendency proliferates in academic philosophy to play it safe. After all, at stake is more than the prospect of a distinctive career path towards international recognition and its perks, as it were, but the very possibility of guaranteeing one's livelihood as a professional researcher. In this context, investing time and energy to produce a collectively authored piece that, while well researched and skilful, does not fit the traditional standards for evaluating academic production and overtly champions a contentious theoretical position, seems as risky as it is necessary.

Traditional and Critical Naturalism. The chief statements of the manifesto for Critical Naturalism published in the previous issue of *Krisis* (Gregoratto et al. 2022) are spelled out in its Section One by way of eleven theses. Among its (in my view very compelling) claims, it urges us to recognize the inextricable connection between the projects of independence from, and domination of, nature (theses 4 and 5), and argues that although a utopian drive, it is necessary to reimagine the relationship between nature and society (thesis 11), otherwise the repression of nature will continue to return in the form of symptoms that are at the same time unbearable and subject to be perpetuated via management techniques (theses 1 and 2).

Echoing Marx's notorious eleventh thesis *ad* Feuerbach –“Philosophers have hitherto only *interpreted* the world in various ways; the point is to *change* it” (Marx 1978 [1845], 7) –, perhaps the sixth thesis for Critical Naturalism encapsulates the crux of the proposal: “Most Critical Theory has hitherto only *denaturalized* the social in various ways, the point is also to *renaturalize* it. Relations of domination in society are embodied materially, biologically, technologically, habitually, and institutionally, and so is the resistance to them” (Gregoratto et al. 2022, 108). By introducing the word “also” in their formulation, the authors of the Critical Naturalism manifesto avoid the long discussion present in historical materialism about whether Marx was advocating for revolutionary praxis to replace theory, or rather for both to be consciously articulated in their dialectical unity. Since here the point is to renaturalize the social *as well as* to denaturalize it, the manifesto clearly intends to avoid an either/or stance. It

recognizes the emancipatory drive behind Critical Theory's challenging of the natural character of deeply social categories – humanity, gender, race, freedom, and so many others – and its liberating pressure against relations of domination; at the same time, it insists that nature *exists* and should not be subsumed under the social: natural determinations are mutable and variable, but they not only cannot be manipulated *ad infinitum*, they can also harbour a reservoir of emancipatory impulses (thesis 8). Critical Naturalism proposes, however, in yet another contrast to “traditional naturalism”, an expanded and processual concept of nature, one that moves between stability and precariousness (thesis 9) and is the fabric of plural forms of scientific and aesthetic experiences (thesis 10).

I am very much receptive to the theses proposed by Gregoratto, Ikäheimo, Renault, Särkelä, and Testa in Section One of their manifesto, as my own work on the *ambiguity* and *dilaceration* between nature and society, or spirit, can attest (Teixeira 2022 and 2023). In my view some issues arise, however, in the next sections. Here I will focus on one aspect of the historical diagnoses intended to demonstrate the need for Critical Naturalism.

Whose welfare? The three interconnected challenges singled out in the manifesto as eminently pressing for contemporary social critique are the dismantlement of the welfare state, the environmental catastrophe, and the healthcare crisis. My intention here is not to dispute that these are in fact pressing issues of the present time, but rather to situate the first one in its geopolitical location in the capitalist world system, and argue that the need for Critical Naturalism might be even *more* pronounced if we consider the challenges posed by capitalism beyond the borders of the hegemonic countries of the North Atlantic.

In the first historical diagnosis, the manifesto clearly refers to the current stage of capitalist development, commonly termed neoliberalism, and its assault on the reproduction of social life on the planet. Less clear is the reason why this phenomenon is formulated in terms of the dismantlement of the welfare state, since the authors acknowledge that “this attack is indeed experienced everywhere on our planet, and not only in countries where welfare institutions have regulated social reproduction” (Gregoratto et al. 2022, 110). By framing the calamitous sharpening of social-economic inequalities and the precarization of life in this way, one risks not only treating the specific shapes neoliberal capitalism takes in the peripheries of the world as secondary or derivative –as theories of dependency and world-systems have questioned

(e.g., Gunder Frank 1966) –, but also rendering invisible the fact that the welfare of European workers was also achieved at the expense of populations and their environments outside Europe.

Neoliberal and apocalyptic capitalism. Taking the experience of capitalism in the peripheries as a reference point illuminates phenomena that would render the first diagnosis even bleaker than the dismantling of the welfare state. Neo-extractivist (Acosta 2013) enterprises sponsored by international corporations and enforced in the Global South by local elites and governments, for instance, have genocidal and ecocidal consequences that allow us to speak with Rita Laura Segato (2018, 11) of an *apocalyptic* phase of capitalism. The humanitarian crisis of the Yanomami peoples in the Amazon region that recently hit the headlines of the international press (e.g. *Al Jazeera* 2023; Boadle and Nomiyama 2023; Gozzi 2023; John and Pedroso 2023; 2023; and Philips 2023) laid bare the intricate entwinement of the overexploitation of natural resources through illegal mining, the international financial system and the laundering of criminal activities, government neglect, corruption, and downright sabotage, leading to the devastation of the natural, material, social, and cultural conditions of life in the region, culminating in mass deaths among the indigenous populations (particularly children) caused by famine and severe malnourishment, mercury poisoning, rapes, diseases ranging from pneumonia and worm infestations to malaria and flu epidemics, pure violence, and suicides. This tragedy provides a painfully exemplary entry point for grasping the constitutive entanglement between the challenges facing social critique today, and which Critical Naturalism wants to tackle.

Critical Naturalism from the margins. The issue discussed here hints at the need to strive for an openness to the realities of the peripheries of the world, as well as to their theoretical contributions to this debate. When Yanomami Shaman and activist Davi Kopenawa says, for instance, that “What the white people call ‘nature’s protection’ is actually us, the forest people, those who have lived under the cover of its trees since the beginning of time” (Kopenawa and Albert 2013 [2010], 398), he urges us to a renewed, eminently non-dualistic practical understanding of the nature-society relation.

Considering that theory as well as praxis are both individual and collective, the intention of this brief commentary is to accept the invitation spelled out in the manifesto to broaden it by experimenting with inputs from other standpoints. Labelled as “natural” *par excellence*, the

margins outside the “civilized”, de-naturalized center have a vital role in the reimagination and re-naturalization of the social beyond the reification of nature as the site of exploitable resources inhabited by populations often either villainized as barbaric or romanticized as uncorrupted.

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Biography

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