

Is Critical Naturalism Necessary?

Martine Prange, Ties van Gemert, Willem van der Deijl-Kloeg, Paolo Santori

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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, Nietzsche, Neoliberalism, Braidotti

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Is Critical Naturalism Necessary?

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After a collective reading and discussion of the Critical Manifesto, members of the Tilburg Research Group Philosophy of Humanity, Culture, and Ethics (PHC&E) and Tilburg Center for Moral Philosophy, Epistemology and Philosophy of Science (TiLPS) decided to write the present response, combining each member's remarks and questions. We believe that the challenges addressed by the Manifesto are pertinent and urgent. We are sceptical, however, of the ways in which the authors address the problems and of the version of "critical naturalism" they propose. The following four points capture some of our reservations:

1. The question is, first, what the authors mean by "critical naturalism," since "naturalism" is hardly defined; and, second, what critical naturalism has to offer or add to existing theories that have been concerned with similar issues. Think, for instance, of Braidotti's critical posthumanism (Braidotti 2013). Think also of Latour's thought on the Anthropocene and his concept of "Gaia" as an ethical alternative for "Earth" or "nature" (Latour 2017); think perhaps even of the Romantic tradition running from Humboldt to Nietzsche, which is marked by its claim for the unity of humanity and nature (Nietzsche 1980). The authors of the manifesto overlook these, and other, traditions, and as a result invite us to reinvent the wheel. They seem to operate from an awareness that Critical Theory currently offers little to the (philosophical and political) climate debates, and that any serious social critique needs to. As they claim, the human-nature relationship needs to be rethought because, they state, the social is embedded in nature. Naturalism, in this context, seems to mean: "critical theory turning its focus to nature," which makes a very meagre concept. How does this concept strengthen or defy existing concepts from the long traditions of naturalism in both continental and analytic philosophy? What strikes us as odd in addition to this, is that they advocate a turn to Hegel – the giant thinker of "spirit," to address nature. Is Hegel really a greater thinker of nature and the humanity-nature relationship than, say, Humboldt, Nietzsche, or Latour? In sum, it is praiseworthy that the authors try to open up a way for scholars in the Frankfurter tradition to rethink the humanity-nature relationship in light of the current climate crisis. The question is, however, whether we are not better off with

Nietzsche's attempt at "naturalizing" humanity, Latour's concept of Gaia, and Braidotti's post-critical humanism – which fruitfully combines an inter-relational ethics, anti-speciesism, and capitalist critique – at least as long as the authors have no clear definition of "nature" and "naturalism."

2. Critique is a reflective gesture where thought turns towards itself and scrutinizes the conditions and validity of its content (Kant 1929 [1787]). Naturalism, by contrast, aspires to remain faithful to the appearances and to introduce nothing exterior to the given (Neurath 1973 [1921]; Quine 1969). How can we combine these two commitments? This is no hint at a paradox, but an invitation to make this tension productive (Deleuze and Guattari 1980). Perhaps one could even argue that intensifying this tension is the very task of any critical naturalism. We wonder how the authors intend to come to terms with this tension. Will they give up on critique as reflection and simply equate critique with care? Will they answer by insisting that anyone who asks the question remains a victim of a false, outdated dichotomy? Or might they be willing to rethink the relation between reality and appearance (Brassier 2013)?
3. Is a critical naturalistic theory necessary? How can such a theory motivate us to change? Isn't it already obvious what needs to be done? We need to significantly cut our emissions by swiftly shifting alternative energy resources (Broome 2012) and to stop exploiting animals (Singer 1977; Regan 1983). In short, to take our duty of caring for the planet seriously. We doubt whether critical naturalism has the theoretical resources to contribute to solving the challenges involved in these practices. How can it contribute to problems such as whether we should use geo-engineering to fight climate change (e.g. Mittiga 2019), or whether we should start eating lab-grown meat (e.g. Schaefer and Savulescu 2014)? If we know what to do but simply miss the motivation for action, how can critical naturalism aid us in reforming and ameliorating our interests to live our lives as environmentally, ecologically, and animal-friendly as possible?
4. Can we speak about capitalism in a singular tense, identifying it with neoliberalism, as the authors of the manifesto seem to do? There are good reasons to avoid this oversimplification. First, the geopolitical context shows that such major players as the USA are not holding on anymore to the neoliberal dogma of the Washington Consensus,

favouring protectionism and commercial wars over global liberalization and open frontiers. Second, there is a lot of variety in capitalism. Take, as just one example, the Italian entrepreneurial fabric. There we find ample family businesses, small-size enterprises, cooperatives and so on. It is a “spirit” and practice of capitalism very different from the Anglo-American, neoliberal one, made of vertical corporations and anonymous markets (Bruni and Zamagni 2016). Reducing the plural economic realities to one dominant standard under the label of “neoliberalism” risks overshadowing potentially good practices. The same goes for economics. While there is a neoliberal mainstream in research and teaching in business schools and economics faculties, there is a growing field of economic research which challenges that. To list a few examples, think of Raworth’s *Doughnut Economics* (Raworth 2017) as it is applied to cities, or Mazzucato’s view of *The Entrepreneurial State* (Mazzucato 2013), not to mention the Dasgupta Review (Dasgupta 2021), funded by HM Treasury (curiously enough a neoliberal institution), that advocates for a new understanding of nature in economics. All of this calls for a change in the economic curricula, from the neoliberal focus on private goods and rational interest toward common goods and care. By lumping together economics, capitalism, and neoliberalism, and considering them simply as the enemy, the authors of the Critical Naturalism Manifesto miss the opportunity to theorize how some forms of capitalism and economic theories might actually become potential allies in the anticipated change.

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Biography

Martine Prange is Full Professor of Humanity, Culture and Society. Her research focuses on the History of Modernity, Continental Philosophy, contemporary questions of free speech, critique, and media as well of 'public listening' and 'auditive democracy' (the philosophy and art of listening, attention, and silence). She also teaches philosophical anthropology, posthumanism, and the Anthropocene.

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Paolo Santori defines himself as a philosopher at the crossroads between economic thought and theology. Currently, he is Assistant Professor in the Department of Philosophy of the Tilburg School of Humanities and Digital Sciences (Tilburg University). He obtained (2022) the Italian National Scientific Habilitation as Associate Professor in History of Economic Thought.