

Earth System Breakdown Does Not Care About Tenure Track

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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

Climate breakdown, Critical naturalism, Critical environmental justice, Decoloniality, Activism

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The university resembles an ivory tower: white and above sea level. This influences how academia responds to any crisis. “Critical Naturalism: A Manifesto” invites us to “take seriously the enormous challenges our societies face with regard to inner and outer nature” (Gregoratto et al 2023, 108). How should we tackle problematic issues without an account of power and change?

A slogan from the Hambach Forest occupation states: “Der Klimawandel wartet nicht, bis Dein *Bachelor* fertig ist” (Hambi Forest Occupation 2018). Academics could take that more seriously. I wish that academics as concerned, eloquent, and rigorous as the writers of the “Critical Naturalism Manifesto” would spend more of their time thinking about the organisation of power. Following the Zapatistas, I would like to start with a “no” from which “many yesses can follow” (Chabot and Vinthagen 2020). A bold “no” to interlocking systems that deteriorate living conditions for the semi-privileged in the so-called Western world and destroy lives in the so-called Global South. Philosophy, especially critical theory, should take the crises of our times seriously. Climate breakdown asks for an unprecedented mobilisation of political power to prevent further planetary destruction and mitigation of, as well as compensation for, existing suffering caused by the fossil fuel industry. What does it mean for climate breakdown not to wait until we have the correct theories?

Maldonado-Torres argues that “decolonial movements tend to approach ideas and change in a way that do not isolate knowledge from action” (2023, 7). When writing about decolonization, he warns against “the organization of special conferences and, especially, in the creation of powerless ad hoc committees and task-teams that are meant to take as much time as possible in generating extremely minimal recommendations that hardly anyone will implement and less follow” (2023, 3). For me, it echoed George Monbiot and Matthew Prescott’s observation about climate policies that “government policy *is* the reports and reviews” (Lanchester 2007).

With Matthew Huber, I agree that what we are up against to prevent further suffering, and how to ameliorate and adapt to the changing circumstances, is part of a class struggle: “this particular power struggle is a class struggle over relations that underpin our social and ecological

relationship with nature and the climate itself: ownership and control of production” (Huber 2022, 3). He argues that the professional class “centres its politics not on material struggle over resources and power, but on ‘knowledge,’ or the belief or denial of climate change itself” (Huber 2022, 5). Academics have been concerned with a specific conception of knowledge, a “liberal conception of knowledge” (Maldonado-Torres 2023, 7), or a knowledge that prevents one from focusing on power (Huber 2022, 3). It seems as if the “Critical Naturalism Manifesto” falls into the same trap – while mentioning some forms of domination, it leaves power and how to contest it mostly unexamined.

I too am convinced academia should lose its Eurocentric bias, as are the authors. However, there is more to learn – not just about nature and naturalness, theory and praxis, but about confronting power. David Naguib Pellow introduced the concept of “critical environmental justice” (2018), which connects environmental justice with insights from critical race theory, amongst other disciplines. Racism is a word that is absent from the manifesto – surely, this is also one of the problems of our time, since it exacerbates the suffering caused by the dismantling of the welfare state, the environmental crisis, and the pandemic.

Of course, it is relevant to denaturalize the idea of race, disability, and gender, amongst other axes of oppression, and see what is at stake in these forms of domination. However, to do so, it would benefit one’s analysis to call for non-Eurocentric authors and read and cite them more generously.

The most well-versed answers to crises have come from those people and places that have been most affected. The Bali Principles of Climate Justice, created by “representatives of people’s movements together with activist organizations working for social and environmental justice,” form an excellent example of movements theorizing what is needed (Bali Principles, 2002). The principles, amongst other things, affirm the need to oppose transnational corporations and market schemes, and call for a moratorium on all fossil fuel exploration and expansion. Their demands of two decades earlier align with current scientific evidence, which suggests that “little or no new CO₂-emitting infrastructure can be commissioned and that existing infrastructure may need to be retired early” (Tong et al. 2019).

I fully agree that we fail to answer if we fail to grasp the interconnectedness of several crises. A failure to understand how the violation of “the basic rights of people in less developed

countries has been made possible by historic abuses of power” can generate “mistakes about the nature, significance, and prevention of the injustice” (McKinnon 2022, 37). For example, Kathryn Yusoff laments that in his *Fossil Capital*, Andreas Malm does not hear the chains of the enslaved rattle when he writes about cotton and the industrial revolution (2016, 16). More diverse voices are needed – not for ticking a box, but for taking radically different perspectives. Maybe that perspective should inform us not only about what we write but also about what we do. Next time on the barricades?

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Biography

Harriët Bergman pursues a PhD at the Centre for European Philosophy at the University of Antwerp, researching whether feminist philosophy and critical race theory can help discussions on climate breakdown concerning emotions, privilege, power, and social change.