

“First Nature” and Colonial Rifts: 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, Colonialism, Eurocentrism, Critical theory, First and second nature, Metabolic rift

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While a central focus of critical theory has been modern man’s relation to “inner” and “outer nature,” a noteworthy ecological theory has not developed within the tradition. Famously, Adorno and Horkheimer already connected enlightenment and reason to “the mastery of nature,” although their analysis did not so much lament the exploitation of nature but rather explained how the mythical function of enlightenment (and its dialectics) derived from the fear and terror of “nature.” In this sense, the *Critical Naturalism Manifesto* (Greggoratto et al. 2022) revisits the constitutive role that “nature” plays in the tradition of critical theory, and they usefully repurpose the tradition in service of a more complex account of today’s environmental challenges. The manifesto’s key strength resides in its comprehensive overview of many new directions in eco-philosophy that update and reboot critical theory’s insights for what they call a “new critical naturalism.” In line with the tradition’s idea that overcoming social domination in all forms should be the aim of critique, the authors rightfully see an urgency in reorientating it towards the “environmental catastrophe” and all its related health and social crises. However, in its conceptualization of the notion of “nature,” the manifesto largely overlooks the colonial and gendered history of deploying this notion for domination. The question remains as to what extent the manifesto’s attachment to the dialectical relation between “first” and “second nature” limits the possibility to address who or what belongs to “outer nature.” In aiming to respond to the particular social and political inequalities that characterize the climate crisis, the manifesto would benefit from a more sustained engagement with decolonial thought.

The manifesto acknowledges the contested ontological status of “nature” but emphasizes the need to hold on to distinctions between nature and society/history/culture, albeit with recognition of the different meanings these terms have in different language games. Therefore, in the debate between the “hybridists” (e.g. Bruno Latour, Jason Moore) who think we should do away with the distinction, and those who emphasize the need to uphold it (e.g. John Bellamy Foster, Andreas Malm), the manifesto clearly aligns itself with the latter position. This positioning has to do with the manifesto’s investment in the Hegelian distinction between “first” and “second nature.” For the authors, this distinction between “internal” or “primordial nature”

(first nature) and its transformation or reification through the “process of socialization” (second nature), shows that Hegel was not so much a body-disavowing idealist like Kant, but was rather critical of mind-body dualism. The authors emphasize the distinction because it enables them to think through a dialectical relation between man and nature that leaves open the possibility of using critique to “renaturalize” what actually is “first nature” (“humans remain natural organisms”), and “denaturalize” the “distorted mirror” that is “second nature.” The distinction also aligns with the eco-Marxist “metabolic rift” theory, according to which the dialectical relation between man (society) and nature – characterized as a metabolism (*Stoffwechsel*) – is distorted.

Despite the “continuous” and dynamic conception of the relation between nature and society, and the statement that “concepts and theories of nature are not innocent,” the manifesto still seems to hold on to a relatively traditional (objectified) notion of nature. By deploying such formulations as “societies’ natural *environments*,” and “*our experiences of nature*” (own emphasis), a critical reader is permitted to wonder if the manifesto’s working conception of nature might in fact be regarded as *too innocent*. Precisely because notions of “nature” have been essential for legitimizing oppression and domination, it is not clear how the distinction between “first” and “second nature” can be so easily drawn in the first place. From within modern European societies, “second nature” refers to all the existing rules, norms, customs, and beliefs that “enslaved” humans within this sociality, the “dereification” of which critical theory saw as one of its main tasks. However, what in modernity belonged to “first nature” were also humans and non-humans considered to belong to “primordial” or “wild nature” (the literally enslaved). The question of who or what belongs to “first nature,” and who or what to “second nature” is thus itself part of “second nature” (engrained, socialized norms and institutions).

Moreover, the manifesto mentions the Marxist/Hegelian idea that “for a society to reproduce itself, it must satisfy the needs of its members via a transformation of external nature.” The problem, though, is that it does not account sufficiently for the fact that it was the subjection of colonized and enslaved people which enabled the reproduction of capitalist societies through their metonymic equivalence with “external nature.” In the same way that colonization was viewed as the primary stage of “primitive accumulation” in Marx – rather than part of the social struggle between capitalists and the proletariat – the colonized seem to be left out of the Eurocentric picture by not being part of society, or “second nature.” How can we account for

the gendered and racialized naturalization of unpaid work and slavery when “nature” is only seen as “external”/ “wild” or “socialized”? When “second nature” prevents Europeans from seeing the colonized and enslaved as human and as possessing culture or society (through their ontological reduction to passive extractable matter that awaits White domination), then we must ask if such metaphysical violence necessarily places them in the category of “external” or “wild nature” which can only be mastered – or worse, saved – through White enlightenment. This blind spot of critical theory remains urgent, especially now that the climate crisis exacerbates neocolonial relations (Bhambra 2021, 80).

Despite the manifesto’s suggestion that critical theory “must overcome” its “Eurocentric bias,” it does not adequately address the many metabolic rifts between humans and “nature” (and colonizers and colonized) that already happened in Europe’s centuries-long colonial project. Like Kathryn Yusoff’s (2018) important insight that there have been “a billion black anthropocenes” rather than one (*the Anthropocene*), we cannot suggest similarly that there has only been one metabolic rift that developed from Europe’s industrial revolution. In a similar vein, Malcolm Ferdinand (2022) suggests that the problem of many environmental theories is that they only focus on one fracture (the metabolic rift) instead of the double fracture that characterizes modernity: the colonial and environmental fracture (3). A combined decolonial and ecological approach is not only crucial to fully understand the complex ways in which historical injustices affect today’s unequally distributed vulnerabilities to climate catastrophes, health and social crises, but it is also necessary because it urges critical theory to look beyond its own tradition for more fruitful ways of thinking about nature. As Gurinder Bhambra (2021) asks: “why valorize what can be presented as ‘its own theoretical tradition’ rather than the possibility of learning from other traditions?” (81). Such a dialogue with other traditions might however mean that the dialectical notions of “first” and “second nature” and “metabolic rift” limit the manifesto’s aim to “come to terms with ourselves.”

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Biography

Jasmijn Leeuwenkamp is a doctoral candidate in philosophy at the Amsterdam School of Cultural Analysis, University of Amsterdam. Her research focuses on anthropocentrism in human rights discourses and explores the interrelations between political philosophy, critical theory, ecological concerns, and rights-based environmental protection strategies. Her work appeared or is forthcoming in the volumes *Post-Everything: An Intellectual History of Post-Concepts* (2021) and *Religion, Populism, and Modernity: Confronting White Christian Nationalism and Racism* (2023).