

Theory at the Limits of Science and Politics: The Challenges of Writing a Manifesto in Times of Climate Collapse

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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, Critical theory

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Carmen Lea Dege

We know today that, in the absence of significant changes to how billions of humans conduct their lives, part of the Earth will likely become close to uninhabitable, and other parts horrifically inhospitable, as soon as the end of this century. Against the sense of continuous denial, powerlessness, and lack of meaningful action, “Critical Naturalism: A Manifesto” responds to the urgency of the moment from the perspective of critical theory. The authors maintain that philosophy can no longer be assimilated to the owl of Minerva, which only flies at dusk, because we no longer have the luxury to wait, and because philosophy, so they argue, mirrors and reproduces the very ideas of nature that aggravate the climate catastrophe. These ideas have too long been driven by the pernicious desire to master and control. In order to arrive at a more holistic and sustainable approach to life on Earth, the authors demand of us to change our relation to nature, rather than abandon the concept or abstract society away from it. Instead of separating nature and society, or romanticizing a harmonious reconciliation, the authors suggest that we carve out a self-reflective, experimental and ambiguous space of “third nature” (123) that resists “hubristic fantasies of independence from nature” (121) and enables us to “care for vulnerable, embodied, interdependent humans in natural and social environments” (115).

The choice of the manifesto as a genre of writing appears to be motivated by this combination of theoretical challenge and practical urgency. I find myself mostly in agreement with the content of the text but want to pause and ask, first, whether we are in fact dealing with a manifesto worthy of the name. I claim we do not, which might, curiously, provoke a sense of frustration and performative contradiction in the reader and undermine the intentions of the text. Despite its title the text primarily represents a scholarly intervention framed in terms of a theoretical solution. Secondly, I wish to resist a plausible response to my critique, namely that the term “manifesto” might be merely tagged on to the title in order to gain attention. Instead, I contend that it is precisely these alternative narrative formats of fiction and non-fiction – and their emphasis on imaginative success rather than ideology critique and scholarly argumentation – which are more attuned to the idea of nature that the authors of the text seek

to highlight. As we have learned from the Covid pandemic and the rise of conspiracy theories and science denialism, the public sphere is not a seminar room or laboratory which might be more conducive to the forceless force of the better argument. People do not change their beliefs in accordance with overwhelming scientific evidence, neither do they seem to respond positively to the politicization of knowledge. In this context, the choice of more experimental writing styles seems apt. If done in a self-reflective manner, I suggest, methods and hermeneutic tools such as these might enable theory to realize for itself a third standpoint of critique that can straddle the divide between science and politics.

If we think of famous manifestos – such as the “The Communist Manifesto” (1848), “The Manifesto of Futurism” (1909), but also, for the purposes of this text, “The Surrealist Manifesto” (1924) by André Breton – the text does not seem to match the genre. Evocative phrases such as “a spectre is stalking Europe” (Marx and Engels 2004, 61) or “beloved imagination, what I most like in you is your unsparing quality [...] By contrast, the realistic attitude, inspired by positivism, [...] is made up of mediocrity, hate, and dull conceit” (Breton 1971, 26), express a bold and assertive style that reflects a sense of urgency as well as an imaginative vision which rallies diverse groups around a common cause. Unlike a scholarly article that uses technical and specialized terminology, or a party program that provides outlines of specific policy proposals, a manifesto represents a passionate and persuasive statement that enables new forms of solidarity, coalition building, and collective action. In my view, “Critical Naturalism: A Manifesto” either does not seem to be able to commit to one of these genres or tries to be all at once: practical, visionary, and scholarly. This combination of narrative structures is clearly desirable, and one could argue that a successful manifesto realizes such a delicate balance. The text, however, is symptomatic of how difficult it is to confront this challenge, as it is particularly noticeable how the “manifesto” becomes dominated by a political and scientific language which, eventually, sacrifices any attempt to work on motivational commitments, or speak to our ecological sentiments and the ways they appear *natural* to us. In the end, the passionate inversive style so characteristic of a manifesto almost entirely gives way to a political academic program which – heavy in jargon despite its critique of intellectual abstraction – might not reach beyond the horizon of a few not-yet-fully convinced critical theorists who continue to use uncritical forms of either naturalism or anti-naturalism.

But if the audience mainly consists of those almost or already converted, why write a manifesto after all? There is an attempt at coalition building, but it features in a strange way because leading theorists who might be in favour of the project are criticized, and in turn potentially alienated, while other scholars and resources that do exist and could help envision an alternative horizon of environmental thinking and action are not mentioned at all. For instance, I would argue that Bruno Latour, Axel Honneth, Nancy Fraser, and Judith Butler are probably more in solidarity with the overall project and represent less suitable theoretic antagonists than the authors want the reader to believe. On the other hand, there are many social and critical theorists who already form part of a larger intellectual movement that shows considerable overlap with the goals of the text. Why not include exemplary allies who, for instance, theorize fabulations between scientific evidence and experimentation (Haraway 2016) and indigenous wisdom (Wall Kimmerer 2013; Kohn 2013), engage meaningfully with Marxist theorizing in the Anthropocene (Saito 2002), or think of nature in agentic ways (Taylor 2011; Vettese and Krause 2020)?

Taking my cue from Liza Taylor's inspiring examination of theoretical resources developed by the coalitional politics of US women of color feminists (2022), I suggest we need more manifestos which use both audacious as well as conceptually rigorous expressions of belief to braid solidarities more effectively. A self-critical focus on storytelling may allow us to demote the significance of rational argumentation, scientific accuracy, and political appeal in ways that remain inquisitive and dialogical. Most importantly, this kind of imaginative exploration may be more amenable to a non-dominating relation to nature which resists the robust, integrated subject or the presentism and solutionism of narrative completion. Given that our ideas of nature are deeply habitual and hard to change, I argue that conceptual shifts require forms of myth critique that move beyond argumentative debates. As we are complicit in reproducing the most foundational yet ultimately self-destructive ideas of human life and nature, the problem might consist less in the correct science or politics of philosophy but rather in its practice as visionary thought. Such a practice will have to enable us to "stay with the trouble," using Haraway's words. The text might express intentions along those lines, but its language draws too heavily on traditional notions of objectivity and political authority to show a stronger potential to translate key ideas into a more aspirational and inspiring idiom. Caught between science and politics, the fragmentary and experimental all too easily drowns. For it to have a

more emancipatory voice, critical theorists might need to become better storytellers and reflect on the conditions of imaginative success for critical naturalism in particular, and social critique in general.

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Biography

Carmen Lea Dege is a Visiting Scholar at the Remarque Institute at New York University and, starting January 2024, an Assistant Professor of Ethics and Political Philosophy at Radboud University Nijmegen. She holds a Ph. D. in Political Theory from Yale University and a Master's degree in the Social Sciences from the University of Chicago. Her work is situated within critical theory, political epistemology, democratic theory, and environmental thought. It probes the role of myth and ignorance in the face of humanity's inability to act despite the overwhelming scientific evidence about human-caused climate change.