

Critical Naturalism: A Manifesto

Federica Gregoratto, Heikki Ikäheimo, Emmanuel Renault,
Arvi Särkelä and Italo Testa

Krisis 42 (1):108-124.

Abstract:

The Critical Naturalism Manifesto is a common platform put forward as a basis for broad discussions around the problems faced by critical theory today. We are living in a time, e.g. a pandemic time, when present-day challenges exert immense pressure on social critique. This means that models of social critique should not be discussed from the point of view of their normative justification or political effects alone, but also with reference to their ability to tackle contemporary problematic issues (like the dismantlement of the welfare state, the environmental catastrophe, and the sanitary crisis). With this manifesto, we invite varying practices of philosophical, artistic and scientific social critique to take seriously the enormous challenges our societies face with regard to inner and outer nature.

DOI

<https://doi.org/10.21827/krisis.42.1.38637>

Keywords

Nature, Society, Critique, Crisis, Future

Licence

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 License International License (CC BY 4.0). © 2022 The author(s).

Critical Naturalism: A Manifesto

Federica Gregoratto, Heikki Ikäheimo, Emmanuel Renault,
Arvi Särkelä and Italo Testa

Preamble

This manifesto is an invitation. It invites varying practices of philosophical, artistic, and scientific social critique to take seriously the enormous challenges our societies face with regard to inner and outer nature. It has three parts. The first part consists of the eleven theses of Critical Naturalism. The second part is conceptual. It identifies the historical crises and catastrophes that Critical Naturalism seeks to respond to, dispels the prejudices against naturalism in contemporary critical thought, sketches out the notions of nature and naturalism, and anchors Critical Naturalism in the history of Critical Theory. We understand this history, initially, as that of the Frankfurt School, which must then be expanded and enriched by other approaches to social critique. The last part consists of fragments for models and projects of Critical Naturalism. They are exemplary sketches of the varying ways to practice naturalist social critique. The hope is that the list will be extended by those who want to join us.

Section One: The Theses

1. Nature, whose concept and reality once seemed overcome, returns by force of its own repression as a signature of our present historical situation.
2. Nature spilling over, populations spilling over, hospitals spilling over, climate anxiety spilling over: The symptoms of the repression become unbearable. Yet, catastrophes do not mean social transformation. They can be perpetuated by administration. 2020 might continue.
3. Concepts and theories of nature are not innocent. They participate in bringing the disasters forth and contribute to perpetuating them. A rational response to the current catastrophes must include attempts to grasp both these new realities of life and the dead ways of thinking that sustain them. Such has been Critical Theory's claim. Critical Naturalism carries it into our times.
4. The so-called naturalistic fallacy is hardly a greater peril than global warming, metabolic rift, and zoonotic spillover. On the contrary, a social philosophy which abstracts from nature is a mirror image of the lethal practical illusion of independence from nature.
5. Independence from nature and domination of nature are two sides of the same coin. There is no emancipation without liberation within nature.
6. 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.
7. Normativist critical theory has reconstructed the norms of social critique, naturalist

critical theory pushes forward. It reconstructs *social life*, especially the relation of societies to their natural environments and constituents, and it understands itself as part and parcel of social transformation.

8. Natural (inter)subjective determinations – drives, impulses, affects – can operate as critical forces of liberation. Even if always socialized, they are not infinitely malleable and they can work against encrusted social norms and structures. Critical Naturalism cares as much for our natural determinations as for our dispositions to redirect them.
9. Nature has contingent and plural histories. It is geared to mutability and variation. Critical Naturalism acknowledges nature as ordered and disordered, in between stability and precariousness. It has a transient character.
10. Traditional naturalism's illusion of the One Nature of the One Science mirrors the destructive tendency of capitalist societies to reduce nature to resource, and it ignores the irreducible plurality of both science and our everyday and aesthetic experiences of nature. It also impoverishes the ethnographic and cultural variety of experiences of nature. This plurality is a resource for naturalistic social critique.
11. Critical Naturalism harbors the utopian drive of reimagining the relationship between nature and society. It calls for articulation of, and experimentation with, human social forms of life that can be *sustained* and freely *affirmed* by their individual members.

Section Two: The Need for Critical Naturalism

Historical diagnoses and theoretical obstacles

We are living in a time when the challenges of the present exert immense pressure on social critique. Notably, this means that models of social critique should not be discussed from the point of view of their normative justification or political effects alone, but also with reference to their ability to tackle contemporary challenges. The dismantlement of the welfare state, the environmental catastrophe, and the healthcare crisis are three of the most pressing issues of our time, and each of them can be addressed separately by specific critical models, but as long as they are addressed separately, the reactions to them are doomed to suffer from political one-sidedness.

A *first historical diagnosis*, concerning the neoliberal attacks against the welfare state, can be articulated within the framework of a theory of social freedom. As Axel Honneth has argued in *Freedom's Right* (Honneth 2015) a welfare state is required to institutionalize the conditions of social freedom. As such, the project of a critical theory of social freedom is clearly relevant. However, this approach is exclusively society-centered, and thus not able to capture what is at stake in the current environmental disaster and care crisis. Moreover, it draws, at least in Honneth's case, on a Durkheimian conception of the social as a *sui generis* reality, a conception that makes it almost impossible to interconnect the social conditions of freedom with the society-nature relationship.

A second way of articulating the critique of the dismantlement of the welfare state is presented by social reproduction theory (SRT), as seen for instance in Nancy

Fraser and Rahel Jaeggi's *Capitalism* (Fraser and Jaeggi 2018) and in the *Feminism for the 99 % Manifesto* (Arruzza, Bhattacharya, and Fraser 2019). In a Polanyian way, Neoliberalism is here depicted as an attack on the conditions of *social life*, that is, not only on the welfare state as a condition for social freedom, but on the very conditions of the reproduction of social life. This is important since this attack is indeed experienced everywhere on our planet, and not only in countries where welfare institutions have regulated social reproduction. Indeed, social life cannot reproduce itself without reproducing its relations to natural environments, and without biological reproduction in the sense of procreation of humans by humans. Insofar as the SRT approach considers society-environment relations, it does support ecosocialist and ecofeminist projects. The problem with this approach, however, is that the concept of "reproduction" is defined through the contrast between "productive" and "reproductive" work, and between "societal" and "social reproduction" (where "societal" refers to the reproduction of the capitalist system as a whole, and "social" to the activities, attitudes, emotions, and relationships directly involved in maintaining life; see Brenner and Laslett 1991). What is required today is the overcoming of both these dualistic and schematic distinctions. We must reconstruct the reciprocal impact of productive and reproductive work in novel ways. Furthermore, we must investigate the deep and intimate relationship not only between societal and social dynamics, but also, systematically, between such dynamics and their natural environments (focusing also on how these environments condition societal and social dimensions).

The *second historical diagnosis* concerns the environmental crisis. Here, the tradition of critical theory can attempt an endemic articulation by drawing upon the Marxist notion of "metabolic rift". This concept suggests that the interactions between human societies and their natural environments are analogous with the metabolic processes of animal bodies. According to this approach, the reciprocal transfers between societies and their environments are depicted as metabolic processes that can break down. The result is the destruction of the social forms of life that depend on it. Here, the main issue touches upon the environmental conditions of social life. When societies overuse the resources of their natural environments, or when they eject too much waste into the environment, these can no longer reproduce or reintegrate the waste. On this diagnosis, it is important to consider how the processes of societal reproduction are organized: the dynamics of neoliberal capitalism, as well as the types of consumption associated with contemporary social inequalities, are the main culprits (see Foster 2020; 2021).

However, the problems, in our era of extreme inequalities, exceed those to do with the metabolic exchanges with natural environments. This becomes painfully clear with the *third historical diagnosis*, that of "the era of pandemics". Indeed, the fact that new viruses emerge ever more frequently and that they are becoming ever more dangerous is linked with the contemporary overexploitation of natural environments, as stated by metabolic rift theories (see Malm 2020); yet it is not reducible to that. The temporality of the diagnosis cast in terms of an "era of pandemics" is namely different from that cast in terms of an "environmental crisis": whereas global warming is catastrophic for its medium-term impact on sea level, meteorological disasters, biodiversity, and mass migration, the healthcare crisis creates a state of emergency here and now. The content of this diagnosis is also different from the previous one since it sheds a different light

on society–nature relations: the pandemic makes it painfully evident that despite socialization human individuals remain natural organisms, belonging to the same realm as all other species. Humans are just as vulnerable to “zoonotic spillover” as other species are. Moreover, the healthcare crisis is intimately linked with the destruction of the welfare state. Dismantling the public health system is a very bad idea in general, but it is even worse under pandemic circumstances, where it leads to outright global emergencies. It is striking how poorly equipped critical theory is for articulating this third diagnosis. Critical theory has rarely been concerned with issues of health in its critical models, and when it has, this has been only in terms of mental health. Even when elaborating on the idea of ‘social pathology’, pathologies in the literal medical meaning of the term have rarely been given serious consideration.

Most of the proponents of the above-mentioned critical models agree that from a political point of view, the conjunction of these three diagnoses calls for some kind of socialism with an ecological focus as a remedy to the neoliberal destruction of the welfare state, to metabolic rifts, and to the healthcare consequences of environmental overexploitation. The contemporary crises deepen not only class inequalities and domination, but also gender and racial inequalities, as well as inequalities between rich countries with *comparatively* efficient healthcare sectors, vaccination capacities, and highly destructive environmental impact on the one hand, and poor countries more vulnerable to crises they are not responsible for on the other. The demand is for a socialism with a feminist, anti-racist, and anti-imperialist focus as well. These political desiderata can of course be articulated in different strategic and programmatic ways. Their justification depends on political arguments as well as on sociological and ecological facts rather than philosophical reflection. Nevertheless, philosophical reflection can also play a role, and one of the useful tasks in this respect is to draw together the ontological, anthropological, and social–theoretical implications of the three above mentioned diagnoses in a consistent way that can be informative of, and experimented in, political practice. Critical Naturalism is the label we use to denote this kind of philosophical reflection.

The challenges of our times call for the Critical Naturalist approach. Importantly, they also put in serious doubt a number of accepted assumptions in various strands of contemporary critical social science and philosophy. Let us mention some of the most obvious ones:

Abstract social constructivism. According to abstract social constructivism, health should be analyzed as a social construct. One should avoid referring to it from a critical point of view, as that would mean falling into the traps of biopower. By contrast, Critical Naturalism addresses health as well as the body as *both* social constructs *and* something irreducible to social construction. When biological organisms are transformed into social and cultural agents able to express and address organic problems by means of social norms, these problems do not thereby cease to be biological problems. Critical Naturalism rejects the symmetrical pitfalls of a social constructivism that reduces society to social construction and abstracts from its relatedness to nature on the one hand, and a biological reductionism on the other.

Technologicalism. Some forms of social critique based on abstract constructivist accounts end up conflating criticism with the search for technological solutions. For sure, repurposing technologies for emancipative ends is a valuable strategy for progressive politics. Techno-utopian agendas such as the Accelerationist Manifesto (Williams and Srnicek 2013) have rightly diagnosed the sense of the future having been erased from political imagination in the last decades. However, by not considering the dialectics between society and nature, such positions eventually endorse a form of artificialism in conceiving the role of technology that is both ontologically incoherent and ecologically dangerous. The future is already here, and it is accelerating in a direction that dreams of collective self-mastery through technological acceleration will not account for. The abstract, disembodied character of rationalist social engineering implemented by neoliberalism is precisely part of the problem.

Artificialism. Abstract constructivist models of social emancipation, also shared by post-humanists and accelerationist feminists such as the *Xenofeminist Manifesto* (Cuboniks 2018), conceive of social emancipation as a matter of incrementally bootstrapping ourselves into artificial existence. As such, they are essentially anti-naturalist, believing that we can simply leave nature behind. This is unsustainable already with regard to the ontology of artifacts, which in order to be enacted in the world must be materially embodied, situated in the environment, and adapted to our bodily habits. Social criticism has rightly denounced the ideological nature of commonsense essentialist naturalism, which deems unnatural anyone who does not conform to posited biological or theological norms, and thinks of nature as invariant. However, this does not do away with naturalness. The Xenofeminist slogan “if nature is unjust, change nature” should not be taken *ad absurdum*. Critical Naturalism understands naturalness precisely as something open to change and to plural orders of transformation, or even as what allows change! However, this does not mean that nature can change indefinitely, that it can be manipulated without limits.

Flat ontologism. It is tempting to combat the modern denial of the natural conditions of social and human life by rejecting the society-nature distinction altogether. According to Bruno Latour, the very idea of society depends on such denial. But rejecting the social-natural *divide* should not lead to a rejection of the social-natural *distinction* and to relinquishing the very concepts of nature and society¹. Such conflation of nature and society ends up missing the critical potential of their relative non-identity. Here again, Critical Naturalism is an attempt to avoid symmetrical pitfalls: society is neither a reality *sui generis*, essentially detached from nature, nor merely a set of specific networks with other natural entities.

Conflation of naturalism with ideology. A powerful source of worries concerning naturalism within contemporary critical social science and philosophy stems from the fact that “naturalism” is conflated with an ideological formation that seeks to justify social inequality and domination by an appeal to nature. The suspicion is that any reference to nature in a context where social critique is at stake runs the risk of involving such ideological

justification. One good example is the famous distinction between “sex” and “gender”, understood as a distinction between biological (sex) and social (gender) definitions of human beings. Initially, this distinction had the critical function of distinguishing social norms, which vary historically and geographically, from the biological descriptions of sexual difference. What was at stake was the struggle against the ideological justification of these norms by presenting them as derived from natural differences. In other words, this distinction was initially a critique of ideological naturalism. Judith Butler then famously contended that the biological distinction between the sexes actually also amounts to a normative construction, and thus to ideological naturalism (Butler 1990). However, as feminist biologists teach us (e.g. Fausto-Sterling 2012), studying the nature of our sexual bodies leads us to discover a rich range of possibilities, which goes well beyond the simple gender dualism (cis-male vs. cis-female). Similarly, studying the nature of our sexual desires points us to a rich range of possibilities that goes well beyond the heteronormative regimes. Trans, transitioning, non-binary, third gendered, queer, etc. bodies can be seen both as natural variations and as social, human, interactional projects or, as in a Deweyan sense, *experimentations*. The same goes for gay, lesbian, queer, non-monogamous, polyamorous, kinky, anarchist or otherwise non-conventional forms of sexual, intimate, erotic encounters and relationships.

We are not convinced by arguments for dropping all references to nature in social sciences or social and political philosophy as these would allegedly amount to ideological naturalism. These arguments render any form of naturalism incompatible with the very project of a critical theory of society. On the contrary, there are good reasons to believe that such reference plays a pivotal and inalienable role in contemporary critical theories. Even when gestures and practices of denaturalization are still needed, an understanding of the nature of our bodies can have a role in debunking prejudices, challenging widespread assumptions, and thus contributing to changing norms and structures of oppression. For instance, comparing racialized groups from a biological point of view can be a powerful weapon for dismantling any justification for oppression, discrimination, or even differentiations based on socially constructed notions of “race”. On this point – that race does not exist biologically – every social constructionist appears to be a critical naturalist too! Regarding disability and aging, embodied and extended cognition – a broadly naturalist approach, sometimes also critical (see e.g. Gallagher 2020) – can show how institutions, norms, and thus domination are incorporated in bodily habits and skills and create embodied exclusions and inclusions.

Critical Naturalism, as we can see, is critically sensitive to the different issues at stake in domination based on gender, race, and disability. It doesn’t come with a pre-packaged solution for all of them. It suggests approaching these areas without the nature-culture and mind-body dualisms that have long blocked critical inquiry.

Nature and Naturalism

If the very notion of Critical Naturalism sounds paradoxical to many, this is not only because of the above-mentioned assumptions and prejudices in critical social science and philosophy. Another reason is a set of conceptual worries about “nature” and “naturalism”.

Some of the worries about “nature” relate to the fact that it is thought to be legitimate, for social sciences and philosophy, to focus on what makes contemporary societies irreducible to their natural conditions and components. Society should be thought of independently of nature, so the thinking goes. The validity of this claim depends on a particular way of defining “nature”, “society” and “irreducibility”.

In ordinary language, the meaning of the term “nature” is often linked to the need to distinguish things: nature-convention (rules and norms), nature-culture, nature-history, nature-artifacts, and nature-nurture. It makes sense to consider all these distinctions intersecting and together comprising the nature-society distinction. Whereas such distinctions work fine in most situated language games, they should not be hypostatized, that is, posited as fixed metaphysical divides. For one thing, there is culture and social life in non-human nature too. And conversely, in some language games it makes sense to describe “human societies” as part of “nature”.

The distinction between nature and human society can be understood in two different ways: thinking of nature and society either as two separated realities, or as various aspects of the same reality. Thinking of them as two separate realities is not feasible since it would then hardly be conceivable that human societies have natural elements and conditions. Such a conception also suggests that the nature-society distinction is analogous to another distinction involved in the ordinary uses of the word “nature”: the natural-supernatural distinction. Critical Naturalism rejects this outdated metaphysical dualism, i.e., all views that make a *categorical* distinction between natural and supernatural realms of existence.

Critical Naturalism also opposes defining and analyzing societies merely in terms of their allegedly distinctive characteristics (rules, norms, culture, artifacts, nurture), without considering their relations with the naturalness from which they might be distinguished. In other words, Critical Naturalism does not reject all distinctions between nature and convention, nature and history, nature and culture, nature and artifacts, or nature and nurture. Rather it strives to bridge the gap between the distinguished terms and use them critically, conscious of their role in our natural and cultural forms of life. In this respect, what matters is not so much the question as to whether or not, or to what respect and degree, human societies are natural, but rather a twofold fact: firstly, there is a *continuity* between human forms of life and non-human forms of life, as well as between forms of life and non-living natural phenomena; secondly, these continuities are present within human forms of social life.

“Continuity”, in this sense, is a concept coined by John Dewey, a naturalist philosopher whose significance for critical theory is now widely acknowledged. Continuity means refusal of both reductionism and dualism. In fact, Critical Naturalism recognizes a plurality of forms of continuity: genetic continuity, relational continuity, and dynamic continuity. Genetic continuity is a point made by evolutionary theory. Living beings have come about through a series of transformations of inanimate beings, and human forms of life are a product of a series of transformations of non-human forms of life.

Relational continuity is a socio-ontological claim: social entities cannot be abstracted from their natural environments, and their relations to these environments

are not only external but also internal. For instance, human labor activities do not only mediate between societies and their natural environments, but also structure social life, shaping both the natural environments and the inner nature of the workers.

Most crucial for critical theory is the third continuity, namely dynamic continuity. According to this idea, continuity also includes constraints on convention, culture, nature, artifacts, and nurture. In present times, it should be all too obvious that healthcare crises would not occur were our biological naturalness not an inescapable constraint on us, or that ecological crises would not occur were our natural environments limitlessly malleable. It should not be provocative to point out that artifacts are produced in conformity with mechanical and chemical laws, and that social individuals whose behavior is mediated by conventions and cultural symbols remain animals subjected to death and disease. And yet it is taken to be controversial to claim that the human body is not a *tabula rasa* where culture leaves its print, or that drives, and psychic defenses are deeply rooted in the history of our species and still produce structuring effects in contemporary culture. Evolutionary naturalism, as well as Freud's drive theory, inflicted wounds to human narcissism by highlighting that humans remain animals. Aligned with technological optimism, social and cultural conservatism, and traditional dualistic thinking, human narcissism has proved to be strong enough to patch over these wounds. Critical Naturalism does not provide first aid for blows to fantasies of human omnipotence. It cares for vulnerable, embodied, interdependent humans in natural and social environments over the long term.

Further worries about "nature" have to do with its widespread association with the ideas of eternal laws of physical phenomena, invariable forms of the living species, reified genus concepts, and unchanging structures of human nature. Thinking of societies in their relation to their natural conditions and constituents would then be incompatible with any project of radical social transformation. But as contemporary physical cosmology shows, the universe is a result of processes. Biology tells us that organic species should not be understood as unchanging structures, but as changing patterns of adaptation to, and adjustment of, changing environments. Contemporary philosophy of science can therefore support a processual naturalism, in which nature is seen as composed of interacting processes generating innovations rather than of phenomena subjected to universal and unchanging regularities (see Dupré 2015; 2018). Critical Naturalism draws lessons from these accounts. It rejects the static conception of nature that identifies nature with a set of unchanging laws and species, and takes nature to involve both stability and precariousness, to be a mixture of necessity and contingency, ever in the making.

Naturalism and critical theory

Critical Naturalism aims to be critical in the sense of the traditions of critical social theory. If one understands critical theory in the broadest sense, these traditions can be specified by a focus on what is going wrong in our societies, and by attempts to participate in shaping social practices. They contrast, firstly, with a traditional conception of theory where the focus is on the "first principles" of knowledge, the definition of the most fundamental traits of reality, or the rationality of the real and an attempt to

discern what is irrational in a specific historical situation. They contrast also with a conception of theory that has its aim in itself, truth being an end in itself, and replaces this with a conception of theory as a tool for making the world less wrong. Within the Frankfurt School tradition, this conception of critical theory was famously articulated in Horkheimer's article "Critical Theory and Traditional Theory", as well as by Marcuse, Adorno, and others. But the conception can be traced back even further to Hegel and Marx, who both historicized philosophical theorizing and emphasized a close and reflective connection between theory and practice. These two moves also played a decisive role for Dewey who claimed that "philosophy recovers itself when it ceases to be a device for dealing with the problems of philosophers and becomes a method, cultivated by philosophers, for dealing with the problems of men". Such a conception of critical theory is also illustrated nowadays, outside contemporary contributions rooted in the Frankfurt School tradition, in various branches of critical thought, be they inspired by Foucault (for instance in discussions about biopolitics), by pragmatism (for instance in discussions on racial integration and epistemic injustices; see Anderson 2013; Medina 2013), or by Marx (such as in the metabolic rift theories), or be they feminist theories, theories elaborated in critical race studies, critical disability studies, or critical environmental studies.

In the history of critical theory the type of critical naturalism we are advocating has often played a crucial, even if nowadays neglected, role. Since Hegel is one of the starting points of the traditions of critical theory – both Marx and Dewey having started their intellectual lives as Hegelians, and the Frankfurt School trying to synthesize Hegel, Marx and Freud – it is reasonable to start these brief historical remarks with him. Contemporary critical theories inspired by Hegel² generally read him as an anti-naturalist philosopher. They typically emphasize his deconstructions of the theory–practice, individual–society, and moral–politics dualisms, without taking seriously the fact that he also criticized the nature–spirit dualism. Hegel presented this latter criticism from an anthropological as well as a socio–ontological point of view.

From the anthropological point of view, Hegel criticized the mind–body dualism and emphasized that humans have both a "first" and a "second nature": their internal nature is transformed by the process of socialization in the social world which is organized by social norms that are a result of a historical process. A similar anthropology played a decisive role for Dewey, for whom human nature is characterized by a set of plastic impulses, resulting from natural selection and environmental pressure, as well as by habits or second nature, which direct these impulses. Important for the critical naturalist orientation here is the idea that even though impulses are always socially channeled, contradictions can occur between the impulses and the social norms which condition habit formation, and such contradictions can critically contribute to undermining the norms. One finds a similar critical naturalist anthropology in the early Frankfurt School reception of Freud's drive theory. Though the drives are plastic and socially channeled, they are also repressed, and their repression can retroact in various ways on social life, both by contributing to pathological developments (for instance by generating the "authoritarian personalities" analyzed by Adorno) as well as by defining emancipatory potentials (for instance in Marcuse).

From a socio-ontological point of view, Hegel already contended that society should not be analyzed as a normative realm disconnected from external nature and the internal nature of individuals. What defines the sociality of human life is a transformation of the first nature of human organisms into a second nature, which also makes individual and collective freedom compatible. Furthermore, for a society to reproduce itself, it must satisfy the needs of its members via a transformation of external nature operated by a system of division of labor (a “system of needs” in Hegel’s terminology). This latter ideal is taken up by Marx who defines work as the “metabolism between man and nature”, or “between society and nature”, with reference to the possibility of “metabolic rifts”. Similar ideas are expressed by Dewey, who defines the economic process as a human transformation of the biological process of mutual adaptation and adjustment of organism and environment. In various ways, the relations between societies and their natural environments are also crucial in the first generation of the Frankfurt School. The reference to these relations is loaded with both negative and utopian dimensions. For instance, in the young Adorno’s text “The idea of Natural-History”, the notion of second nature has an ontological connotation, expressing the transient and plural character of naturality: “nature” acquires historical contingency. Acknowledging this character makes it possible to give expression to those aspects of fragmentariness and appearance that are proper to the second-natural being of human social life and that are simultaneously concealed and amplified by reification. For Adorno, the key concept for a critical social philosophy that makes this task its own proves to be that of “second nature”: it allows us to think of a social concept of nature and a natural concept of history. Here, second nature brings to light that reciprocal reference of nature and history, that contamination between the two poles of the eccentric trajectory of human life which thwarts any attempt both to hold them fast in isolation and to reduce one to the other.

The history of critical theory is a source of inspiration for Critical Naturalism in many other respects as well. In *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Horkheimer and Adorno highlighted that domination of nature results in domination in society. However, they did not consider that the domination of nature could result in the kind of natural feedback effects we are currently experiencing in the form of environmental disasters and public health crises. Alfred Schmidt put emphasis on Marx’s theory of the society-nature relation, and on the concept of “metabolism between society and nature” (Schmidt 2013). Schmidt also demanded that Feuerbach’s sensuous naturalism be taken seriously by critical theory (Schmidt 1977). A similar point was made by Honneth and Joas (1989) by now four decades ago, before they elaborated their less naturalistic mature programs.

Critical naturalist motives have not played a major role in the recent developments of critical theory. Critical Naturalism is a learning process. It aims to bring these motives back to the fore, in a form adjusted to the challenges of our time. Notably, it must overcome the Eurocentric bias of critical theory and outline diverse, non-reified, multiple, complex ideas and practices of nature and naturalness. Critical Naturalists must practice self-criticism and avoid the traps of colonizing and imperialist dynamics. Critical theorists have already made some resources available for a richer and more inclusive approach to nature: in particular, Adorno’s notion of “mimesis”, his

critique of identity thinking, and his essayistic and micrological methods (indebted to Walter Benjamin), as well as Dewey's idea of pluralistic, multi-layered and changeable natures, and his fallibilist method of inquiry, are promising starts in this respect. Critical Naturalism's concepts remain to be hybridized, affected, integrated, revised.

Section Three: Fragments

Critical Naturalism is not *a* theory. Like the nature it refers to, and the forms of life it critically engages with, it appears in plural forms. This last section of the Manifesto exemplifies directions of Critical Naturalism by sketching out some of its models and intents in fragmentary form. The list of fragments is open-ended and contains an implicit invitation to grow in number and depth and extend all the way into the fragmentary experience of everyday life.

The task of critical theory

"What is the most central task for critical theory today?" – "Who are we to say? Philosophers always come late. They don't write manifestos. It will be up to the readers of tomorrow to say what was our most important task today." Bad question, right answer. Yet the current catastrophic relationship between nature and culture has rendered the right answer impossible and the bad question necessary. As things stand today, the old answer has become ominous. It might well be that there will be no readers of philosophy tomorrow. To contribute to preventing that from happening, to help achieve natural and cultural conditions, which allow for humanity to survive and to care for its forms of life is, if not the most central, then certainly an imperative task for critical theory today.

Nature, culture and care

Culture means care, it derives from the Latin *colere*. Adorno once remarked that this *colere* originally meant the activity of the peasant, the *agricola*, that is, a certain way of relating to nature, the *care for nature*. The fact that we set different relations to nature, that we have different forms of life, different ways of caring for nature within and without us, means a chance for us, by mutual criticism, to *come to terms with ourselves*, to grow by reconciling ourselves with something different than ourselves. Culture means care of nature. Critique means care of the relationship between culture and nature. Critique must not be thought of as a judgment, but as a coming to terms with oneself and each other as natural and cultural beings. Critique promises a non-violent mode of cultural transformation, the possibility of transforming our lives with care.

It is written in the face of our current form of life that it is failing in this regard. We find ourselves in a new historical constellation of nature/culture: a contradiction between the continuation of our capitalist form of life and the survival of humanity as we know it. And we find ourselves completely unable to react collectively to this enormous challenge ahead of us. The fact that global warming has reached a point of no return means that the ecological disaster that we are facing is not merely a crisis. It is a permanent catastrophe, a mutation of our relationship with the environment, of our culture. We simply have no choice but to permanently alter our relationship with nature.

How should students and teachers of philosophy react? There are two options: we can either ignore the fact that global warming has reached the point of no return, that is, try to suppress the fact that our culture will change, try to, as it were, “engineer” ourselves into a new form of life, or we can go about this change reflectively, react to the disaster creatively, go through our mutation *with care*.

One such attempt at a creative reaction has been to create a completely new vocabulary for nature/culture. Critical Naturalists agree that we need a radically new beginning. However, a radically new beginning does not mean suppressing the past. Such reactions end with implausible and abstract vocabularies that cannot be continued in ordinary language and guide everyday life. They will be either powerless or violent in the face of prevailing habits and customs. Therefore, Critical Naturalists believe that suppressing the past isn’t radical at all, it is superficial. Instead, Critical Naturalism proceeds negatively, by a critique of what is given, the prevailing forms of life. Reacting with care means being sensitive to the needs and powers our form of life has developed, it involves redigesting our history from the perspective of the contemporary disasters. No culture can be created from scratch. New forms of life are assembled from old forms of life. We can only react creatively from pre-existing habits by cultivating those habits further and redirecting them from the point of view of the disaster and the objective possibilities at hand.

Niche constructors

As a particular animal species, humans are distinguished by the fact that work is the mediator of their adaptation to their natural environment. Work can fulfill this mediating function only with a division of labor which involves a stock of technical knowledge and norms of cooperation – even in cases where division of labor is structured by social domination. This also means that, from an evolutionary point of view, work plays both productive and reproductive roles: it is both a productive activity of transforming materials into consumption goods that can satisfy our vital needs and make our human forms of life ecologically sustainable, and it is the reproductive activity of educating to social norms and technical knowledge, as well as providing the services required by the cooperative structure of society that has made human forms of life possible.

Productive work consists of uses of natural environments in order to satisfy a set of biological needs, but it also produces transformations in natural environments, turning them into partly artificial ones, which then generate new needs and new uses of natural environments. Representations, including representations of nature, are crucial for orienting productive work and therefore crucial for the quality of the human effect on human environments too. All of this means that, more than any other animal, humans are *niche constructors*. Nowadays, the implications of this anthropological fact are denoted by the term “anthropocene”, even if the problem with the anthropocene is not the specificity of human niche construction, but the forms it has taken since the emergence of capitalism.

Work can either sustain, as in foraging societies, or destroy these environments, as under capitalism. The challenge is to transform destructive work into sustaining work without returning to foraging. What is required for tackling this challenge is not only

a critical theory of capitalism – the existing economic system of production for profit rather than for use, and instrumentalization of social cooperation to benefit the rich at the expense of the poor. Additionally, there is a need for a critical theory of our uses of the natural and artificial environments, a reactualized theory of “use value”, as well as for a critical theory of the norms of cooperation, a theory that would question the allocation of wages and prestige, something which is currently far from being based on the ecological and social value of the professions. What is demanded is also a critical theory of work that undermines the hegemonic definition of work as a consumption of raw materials, including one’s body, rather than as a fruitful use of these material and bodily instrumentalities. In fact, this hegemonic definition provides an ideological justification both for the exploitation of nature and for the exploitation of workers.

Reconstruction and experimentation

When intellectuals no longer have the opportunity to be organic intellectuals of a massive social movement, yet they still want to be sincere, the task remaining for them is chiefly *critical*. Hence, the philosophical industry in critical theory is today mass producing norms and models of social critique, and a great many empirical inquiries from a critical sociological point of view. Although their value should not be underestimated, for naturalist critical theory the various normative, epistemological, and empirical contributions to social critique are not enough. What matters is also the reconstruction of the criticized state of affairs. Our relations to our natural and artificial environments, our drives, our habits of conduct and thought, our systems of institutions, all have to be reconstructed. Working towards these goals requires elaborating new critical models which take into account the ecological, technological, and economic constraints at play in our relations to our natural and artificial environments, as well as the anthropological constraints defined by our psyche and the inertia of our habits, and the sociological constraints bearing on the practice of social transformation. What is required is developing models of social critique that are also models of social experimentation, models that are intimately linked with knowledge of these constraints and with practical imagination of solutions.

Beyond ideological naturalism and ideological antinaturalism

Theorists and theories have a tendency to overshoot. The exaggeration has a tendency to become habitual and unreflective over time and with academic socialization. Critical theory is especially prone to this process of ossification as it comforts itself by the assurance of being “critical” by default: what begins as critique turns easily into dogma. The critique of “naturalism”, “essentialism”, “naturalistic fallacy” and so on has become an automatic reflex to an extent that it is an obstacle for addressing global warming, metabolic rift, zoonotic spillover, and the myriads of ways in which culture is essentially related to nature. Whereas the evils of social thought implicated in, or explicitly preaching, ideological forms of naturalism are well-known and forever something to be vigilant about, the current situation forces a clear-headed assessment of social thought which abstracts from nature, thereby forming a mirror image and contributing to the lethal practical illusion of independence from nature. All of the original worries concerning naturalism need to be

revisited without prejudice, so as to achieve a perspective which is neither ideologically naturalist, nor ideologically anti-naturalist, but that of Critical Naturalism.

Freedom and life

Freedom is an inescapable ideal for critical and emancipatory thought and action, but the dominant models of freedom are at best inadequate for grasping the constitutive connectedness of humanity with nature, and at worst complicit with the current crisis or ongoing catastrophe. The concept of freedom as autonomy or self-determination is in this regard no less problematic than the simpler concept of negative freedom: it easily lends itself to the hubristic fantasy of independence from nature. Such independence can never be actually given, and practical attempts to bring it about can only take the form of increasingly drastic attempts to dominate nature, to keep its irreducibly independent dynamics and indifference to human concerns at bay and out of mind. The psychoanalytic lesson about the folly of attempts to force internal nature into submission apply even more so in the relation with external nature. So does its lesson about freedom: the abstract concept of freedom as independence or abstraction from what necessarily determines us is self-subversive and destructive when applied in practice. The only real, concrete form of freedom with regard to what we are constitutively related to and thus determined by is reconciliation that acknowledges its otherness but overcomes the hostility in the relationship. It is this unity of difference and unity, or being with oneself in otherness—to use the famous Hegelian formula—that characterizes the ideal of a free relation of a human individual with her body, as well as of a human community with external nature. As processes of life never cease, freedom in this sense is never given once and for all, but is always a task to define the specifications of, and to aspire to. If we fail in this task, we will die out. As Hegel reminds us: the ends of freedom cannot be separate from the ends of life.

Affects and critique

The emotional and affective dimensions of our habits, institutions, norms, and practices are of crucial importance, both for philosophy and for life. Living, social, human and nonhuman beings are shaped and driven by non-cognitive, non- or pre-intentional, non-linguistic, non- or pre-rational affects. Beings try to articulate affects in specific emotions (fear, hope, joy, anger, love, hate, guilt, shame, enthusiasm, etc.). Affective and emotional aspects of individual and collective selves, of their bonds and associations, of their interactions with the environments, are not only a fact – they can also contribute to imaginative, critical, and transformative practice. Critical Naturalism, contrary to most positions in the contemporary landscape of critical theory and social philosophy, tries to understand the imaginative, critical, and transformative dynamics of affects and emotions.

Affective experiences are vague, incomprehensible, uncontrollable, inchoate, confusing, at least in many phases of experience. As such, they can signal a non-alignment between our present and future selves, between given orders (patterns of action, meanings, values, norms) and what these orders could be and become, how habits are disrupted and must be readjusted. But they can also be destructive, harboring anti-social forces. Emotions, for their part, are conscious signs of breaks and disruptions

– they express awareness of how things should not be, or how they could be different.

We are sensual beings in the sense of the young Marx and of Dewey: our task is to explore the critical and transformative powers of the affects and emotions that all our senses generate in non-alienated and non-reified transactions with other human and nonhuman beings, with organic and nonorganic environments.

Natural vulnerability

Affects and emotions reveal the specific and contextual ways in which human (and nonhuman) beings are vulnerable, the extent to which vulnerability is concretely and contextually shared. They indicate possible venues for acknowledging, taking up and organizing socio-natural bonds so that vulnerability can become a possibility for alternative, radical social and political experiments. Affects and emotions reveal how different beings are vulnerable in different ways – also on the basis of socio-natural determinations like sexuality, gender, race, disability, etc. – and indicate ways in which such differences can come to produce, increase, and share knowledge and mutual care, instead of perpetrating and strengthening mechanisms of domination, oppression, and exploitation. The recognition of vulnerability is not giving in to politics of precariousness, tendencies to produce ‘victims’ and reify the discriminated, misrecognized, and invisible: on the contrary, the recognition of vulnerability supports the critique of these policies and tendencies.

Cherishing the opaque, uncommendable, impulsive, and thus vulnerable sides of our lives calls into question current neoliberal imperatives of self-optimization, “enforced happiness”, positive thinking in the face of catastrophes, practices of mindfulness as individual(ized) strategies against systemic and structural problems. We cannot effectively manipulate and control ourselves (our internal nature) in order to obtain the desired goals, we are not merely the object of constant creation and invention. But affects and emotions are not just limits; they also entail positive contents from which we can learn. In this sense, Critical Naturalism can be the metaphysical spring- (or surf)board for new ethical projects (some ideas: ethics of passivity, ethics of ambiguity, ethics of ignorance).

Third natures

The contrasting use of the notions of nature and society, first and second nature, does not refer to metaphysically given, separate, domains of objects, but rather articulates an expressive vocabulary for developing social analysis. Nature and society, first and second nature, are dialectically intertwined place-holder concepts, to be filled pragmatically in relation to different contexts, concepts which disclose certain configurations of experience and action. In this sense their distinction is a dispositive, which needs to be deployed anew in relation to the contexts we need to map, operate within, and critically transform. Hence, the distinction between first and second nature is contextual and positional and has not only descriptive, but also critical and dialectical power. It deploys the perspective from which, from time to time, we can critically re-describe processes of associated life. But the breaking down of given social categories, by the application and determinate negation of the notions of first and second nature, is also future oriented, and has a utopian moment, aimed at a trans-categorical, affirmative re-description of our

forms of life and of their emerging, dynamic, yet undecided orders of possibilities. One could say that third nature is what Critical Naturalism, with the place-holder notions of first and second nature, aims at. The re-configurative task of Critical Naturalism is confronted today, in the face of the ecological catastrophe and the entropic transformations of contemporary landscapes, with the problem of anticipating the future while grasping a third way between primordial nature and reified second nature, wild nature and humans' enslaved nature: the problem of re-imagining natures, through cultural and technological means, and conversely, of reinventing third natures as plural, contingent, hybrid orders. In his essay on *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, Walter Benjamin raised the question of how we can free ourselves from the historical cage of a given second nature as it has been shaped through a relation – labelled as “first technology” – to naturalness as to an external material to be dominated. Whereas second nature, as it is historically given, is a distorted mirror of human beings' domination over first nature, the utopian moment of Critical Naturalism envisages a third possibility, whose anticipated figure could let us catch a glimpse of a different relation, which goes beyond both the mere naturalization of human beings, and the humanization of nature. Benjamin named “second technology” a different project of our relation to naturalness, whose objective correlative, in the horizon of the future, could be aesthetically anticipated through the figure of third natures. Their traces can be detected in those interstitial, undecided territories Gilles Clement names “third landscapes”, which are left over, unattended by human beings and their historical constructions, and appear as undetermined fragments, ciphers of the planetary garden.

Notes

1 As happens in Bruno Latour, in Jason Moore's (2015) *monist world ecology*, and in Timothy Morton's (2009) *ecology without nature*.

2 Such as by Judith Butler, Axel Honneth, or Slavoj Žižek.

References

- Anderson, Elisabeth. 2013. *The Imperative of Integration*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Arruzza, Cinzia, Bhattacharya, Tithi, and Nancy Fraser. 2019. *Feminism for the 99%. A Manifesto*. London: Verso.
- Brenner, Johanna and Barbara Laslett. 2019. “Gender, Social Reproduction, and Women's Self-Organization: Considering the US Welfare State.” *Gender & Society* 5 (3): 311–33.
- Butler, Judith. 1990. *Gender Trouble. Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. London/New York: Routledge.
- Cuboniks, Laboria. 2018. *The Xenofeminist Manifesto. A Politics for Alienation*. London: Verso. Available also online: <https://laboriacuboniks.net/manifesto/xenofeminism-a-politics-for-alienation/>
- Dupré, John. 2015. *The Disorder of Things. Metaphysical Foundations of the Disunity of Science*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Dupré, John. 2018. *Everything Flows*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Fausto-Sterling, Anna. 2012. *Sex/Gender: Biology in a Social World*. London/New York: Routledge.
- Foster, John Bellamy. 2020. *Marx's Ecology: Materialism and Nature*. New York: Monthly Review Press.
- Foster, John Bellamy. 2021. *The Return of Nature*. New York: Monthly Review Press.
- Fraser, Nancy, and Rahel Jaeggi. 2018. *Capitalism: A Conversation in Critical Theory*. New York: Wiley.
- Gallagher, Shaun. 2020. *Action and Interaction*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

- Honneth, Axel. 2015. *Freedom's Right: The Social Foundations of Democratic Life* (2011). Cambridge: Columbia University Press.
- Honneth, Axel, and Hans Joas. 1989. *Social Action and Human Nature*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Malm, Andreas. 2020. *Corona, Climate, Chronic Emergency: War Communism in the Twenty-First Century*. London: Verso.
- Medina, José. 2013. *The Epistemology of Resistance: Gender and Racial Oppression, Epistemic Injustice, and the Social Imagination*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Moore, Jason. 2015. *Capitalism in the Web of Life*. London: Verso 2015.
- Morton, Timothy. 2009. *Ecology Without Nature: Rethinking Environmental Aesthetics*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Schmidt, Alfred. 2013. *The Concept of Nature in Marx* (1962). London: Verso.
- Schmidt, Alfred. 1977. *Emanzipatorische Sinnlichkeit. Ludwig Feuerbachs anthropologischer Materialismus*. Berlin: Ullstein.
- Williams, Alex, and Nick Srnicek. 2013. "Accelerate Manifesto for an Accelerationist Politics." *Critical Legal Thinking*, May 14, 2013. <https://criticallegalthinking.com/2013/05/14/accelerate-manifesto-for-an-accelerationist-politics/>

Biographies

Federica Gregoratto is habilitated lecturer (Privatdozentin) in social and political philosophy at the University of St Gallen. She has published in English, German, French and Italian on a variety of topics in social and political philosophy, such as the philosophy of love and sex, critical theory (including the monograph on Habermas: *Il doppio volto della comunicazione*, Mimesis, 2013), pragmatism, recognition and power theories, debt-guilt debates, gender and intersectionalist studies. She is now working on a book about erotic love as a social space of power, freedom and transformation.

Heikki Ikäheimo is Senior Lecturer at the University of New South Wales, Sydney. His research areas include Hegel, German idealism, theories of recognition, intersubjectivity, subjectivity, personhood, the human life-form, critical social philosophy. He published the monograph *Anerkennung* (De Gruyter 2014), the edited collections *Recognition and Social Ontology* (Brill 2011) and *Recognition and Ambivalence* (Columbia University Press 2021), as well as *Handbuch* (Springer 2021). His next monograph *Recognition and the Human Life-form* is forthcoming by Routledge in 2022.

Emmanuel Renault is professor of philosophy at University of Paris-Nanterre. His research interests include Hegel, Marx, The Frankfurt School, Pragmatism, philosophy of nature, the theory of recognition and of work. His books in English include: *The Experience of Injustice* (Columbia University Press, 2019), *Marx and Critical Theory* (Brill, 2018), *Social Suffering: Sociology, Psychology, Politics* (2017) and *The Return of Work in Critical Theory: Self, Society, Politics* (Columbia, 2018, with C. Dejours, J.-P. Deranty and N. Smith).

Arvi Särkelä is Lecturer at the University of Lucerne and Postdoctoral Researcher at ETH Zürich. His research interest include Spinoza, Hegel, Emerson, Nietzsche, Dewey, Wittgenstein, Adorno, social philosophy, philosophy of culture and methodology of the history of philosophy. He has published the monograph *Immanente Kritik und soziales Leben* (Klostermann 2018), co-edited (with Axel Honneth) the German Edition of Dewey's *Lectures in China* (Sozialphilosophie, Suhrkamp 2019) and co-edited (with Martin Hartmann) the volume *Naturalism and Social Philosophy* (Rowman & Littlefield 2022).

Italo Testa is Associate Professor at the University of Parma. His research interests include German Classical Philosophy, Critical Theory, Pragmatism, Embodied Cognition, Social Ontology, theory of recognition, habit, and second nature. Among his books: *La natura del riconoscimento* (Mimesis, 2010), and the edited collections *I that is We, and We that is I* (Brill, 2016), *Habits. Pragmatist Approaches from Cognitive Science, Neuroscience, and Social Theory* (Cambridge University Press, 2021).