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Ecological Sensibility: Recovering Axel Honneth's Philosophy of Nature in the Age of Climate Crisis

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ABSTRACT

What is “critical” about critical theory? I claim that, to be “critical enough”, critical theory’s future depends on being able to handle today’s planetary climate crisis, which presupposes a philosophy of nature. Here, I argue that Axel Honneth’s vision of critical theory represents a nature denial and is thus unable to criticize humans’ instrumentalization as well as capitalism’s exploitation of nature. However, I recover what I take to be a missed opportunity of what I term as the early Honneth’s original ecological insight, which I reconstruct precisely as a philosophy of nature. Consequently, I identify what I describe as an ecological sensibility in Honneth. This refers to a bodily capability through which humans sensuously can resonate, communicate, and interact – and through that morally engage – with nature in its entire complexity. Furthermore, by virtue of this ecological sensibility, humans can recognize nature’s inherent moral value as a sensuously affected party. Then, the early Honneth’s original insight is recovered as a critical political ecology, which is needed facing today’s climate crisis.

KEYWORDS

Axel Honneth; critical theory; climate crisis; nature denial; philosophy of nature; ecological sensibility

Introduction

Today, we live in the age of climate crisis. According to the UN Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), “the more human activities disrupt the climate, the greater the risks of severe, pervasive and irreversible impacts for people and ecosystems, and long-lasting changes in all components of the climate system”,¹ which partly is due to global warming and greenhouse gas emissions. Additionally, nature’s diversity is reduced to a huge extent and at a high pace,² which brings about the extinction of many species and the overuse of natural resources. Also, the Earth Overshoot Day, that is, when Earth’s natural resources have been used up for the present year, arrives earlier each year; in 1970, this was December 29, whereas, in 2019, this day was July 29. Thus, human activities affect the planet’s ecosystems by, for example, production and overconsumption. This self-reinforcement between human inactivity and ecological footprints (the latter being a measure of the annual consumption of natural resources) can hinder the realization of the 1.5°C goal of the Paris Agreement.

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Against this backdrop, I claim that the later Axel Honneth's critical theory is not critical enough to handle today's planetary climate crisis. This is due mainly to its anthropocentrism, namely a human-centered viewpoint implying a denial of nature. Therefore, I ask, How can this Honnethian framework be recovered by moving beyond its anthropocentrism? I hold that Honneth's critical theory can be recovered from this nature deficit by identifying the missed opportunity of what I designate as the early Honneth's "original ecological insight", which I perceive as an *ecological sensibility*.³ The latter notion refers to humans' physical and sensuous resonance, communication, and interaction with – and thus the moral responsibility for – nature's entire diversity. Moreover, on the basis of this ecological sensibility, humans can recognize nature's inherent moral value by sensuously being an affected party. So, by reclaiming the early Honneth's attempt at developing a philosophy of nature, a critical political ecology can be created, which is critical enough to tackle better the pathologies of the age of climate crisis.

I proceed in three steps. First, ontologically, I show how to move beyond Honneth's nature denial. After this, epistemologically, I address what I take to be a true interdisciplinary methodology of critical theory. Last, but not least, normatively, I what conceptualize as a Honnethian ecological sensibility.

Beyond Nature Denial

In the first step of my recovery of the later Honneth's nature denial, I look closer at the ontological dimension within the Honnethian framework. Here, I identify what I take to be a *too narrow* ontology. So, while Honneth distances himself from a Cartesian, or ontological, dualism, he nevertheless presupposes what I term a "social-ontological dualism". This outlook treats humans and nature as different ontological matter.

In contrast, I show that we need an ontological holism, which acknowledges both humans and nature as belonging to the same reality. Moreover, I show that such a non-anthropocentrism belonged to the early Honneth's original ecological insight.

Social-Ontological Dualism

Honneth's present ontology is too narrow to include nature. This is because he views ontology as something "social", since its objective is "deciphering the elementary constituents of social life".⁴ Thus, Honneth's social ontology seeks something "more elementary" in terms of an "'existential' mode of recognition [that] provides a foundation for all other, more substantial forms of recognition" (i.e. love, respect, and esteem).⁵ Social ontology is, then, about the "foundations of our existence" in terms of humans' social lifeforms.⁶

Certainly, the concept of nature means a variety of things within different contexts. From humans' viewpoint, nature is often understood anthropocentricly, namely as something ontologically "other" vis-à-vis human lifeforms. Subsequently, anthropocentrism assumes that humans and nature are ontologically located in two different and divided parts of reality, which is due to their diverging characteristics. Humans are often described as rational, autonomous, and communicative, whereas nature, such as in the case of animals, plants, or ecosystems, are often described as receptive, dependent, and voiceless.

However, nature can also be defined as non-anthropocentric, meaning that humans are disregarded as the centre of the universe. Here, some non-anthropocentrists are biocentric,

that is, they understand nature ethically as including only living things (e.g. animals and plants). For example, Peter Singer's 1975 book *Animal Liberation* expands the universe within which moral status is ascribed to parts of the reality other than humans.

Still, other outlooks, such as Arne Naess' deep ecology (or, what he later named as eco-sophy), criticizes the Singerian account of nature for not being radical enough. Naess conceives nature ecocentric, which includes even non-living things (e.g. ecosystems, water, light, and temperature). Thus, we should acknowledge the "[r]ichness and diversity of [both human and natural] life forms." Also, regarding this richness and diversity, we should safeguard the "well-being and flourishing of [both] human and nonhuman life on Earth."⁷

To resonate with Naess's distinction between "deep" and "shallow" ecology – the latter capturing anthropocentric, instrumental, and materialist attitudes to nature – the problem with Honneth's ontology is its shallowness, which is due to being only social. Here, this difference illustrates Honneth's ontological deficit.⁸ Thus, I introduce the distinction between a "deep" ontology and a "shallow" ontology. The first notion refers to an ontological level that is more fundamental than and thus prior to the latter. Hence, this more fundamental, or, deep, ontology is the very basis of the shallow one. To deal with shallow forms of ontological issues, the deep ontology has to be acknowledged.

So, since the concept of nature can range over many different phenomena with varying characteristics and forms of activities, which nevertheless are viewed as parts of the same reality, Honneth's reductive ontology – which is a social and thus too narrow ontology – seemingly reduces the above described broader understanding of nature along with reality to something less than it is regarding what could have been a more relevant ontology to critical theory. This is problematic because Honneth, instead of including nature, either in the biocentric or – and preferably – an ecocentric understanding, rather reduces the conception of reality to covering the mere "social" in the meaning of humans' freedom of self-development through only mutual cognitive relationships and interaction with others within different social spheres.

Despite that Honneth in several other respects can be viewed as a "holist", for instance, concerning the social ontology of recognition, in the case of the concept of nature together with the natural part of reality, he represents an ontological dualism. In addition to this anthropocentric and hence ontologically reductive understanding of nature, Honneth's social, narrow ontology leads to an ontological dualism that, largely, reminds of the same Cartesian dualism from which he wishes to distance himself. By this notion, I think of the idea that certain parts of reality are viewed as ontologically divided into separate classes. Classic examples of such ontological dualism are the divisions between mind (e.g. the consciousness or the brain) and body (e.g. emotions and experiences) in addition to humans (e.g. society and culture) and nature. Paradoxically, I argue, Honneth is an ontological holist regarding the mind/body divide, but nevertheless an ontological dualist concerning the human/nature divide.

Hegel plays a central role here since Honneth draws on the Hegelian division between "first" nature and "second" nature. First nature refers ontologically to the part of reality that covers "object[s] [that are] independent of any conceptual prehistory".⁹ Second nature, however, refers to "[recognitive] attitude[s] (...) [that are] develop[ed] through corresponding processes of socialization into such a fixed habit that it comes to determine individual behavior".¹⁰ The main difference between these concepts of nature regards

which part of reality they refer to. First nature refers to humans' birth, childhood, and upbringing, namely before humans' nature becomes mature and emancipated enough to act freely through recognitive relationships resulting in a positive self-development. To do so, it is significant to leave one's first nature behind by entering into once second nature. Subsequently, to return from second nature to what is associated with first nature resonates with regress rather than progress.

To the extent to which the division between first and second nature presupposes an ontological dualism by implying an anthropocentrism regarding the human/nature divide, it can be argued that this approach is "deeply entrenched in our culture, in our mentality and in the ways in which children are socialized". Accordingly, "being a member of this society means that, in the course of childhood, the anthropocentric point of view, or worldview if you like, is internalized so as to be *second nature*". Here, it refers to the above Hegelian distinction between first nature (i.e. subjective nature) and second nature (i.e. intersubjective nature). Therefore, since Honneth adopts an ontological dualism in terms of his shallow and narrow along with a socially reductive ontology, he supports anthropocentrism as "one of the most deep-seated and pervasive features of modern culture and of ourselves as both products and reproducers of that culture". Thus, the Honnethian priority of second, intersubjective nature over both first, subjective and "third", objective nature is "always and everywhere presupposed, taken for granted and acted upon and never seriously questioned".¹¹

Honneth's Original Ecological Insight

To look closer at the term third nature, I argue that a broader ontological holism can solve the problem concerning Honneth's narrow, shallow, and thus reductive social-ontological dualism. This is because it includes the whole reality, hereunder nature ecocentric perceived.

In his book *A Realist Theory of Science*, Roy Bhaskar explains such an ontology:

[T]he intransitive objects of knowledge are in general *invariant* to our knowledge of them: they are *real* things and structures, mechanism and processes, events and possibilities of the [entire] world; and for the most part they are quite *independent* of us. They are not unknowable, because as a matter of fact quite a bit is known about them. (...) But *neither* are they in any way dependent upon our knowledge, let alone perception, of them.¹²

Bhaskar's critical-realist ontology challenges Honneth's social-critical ontology by suggesting that reality, including nature's ecocentric parts, exists *prior* to humans' interpretation of it. Hence, despite that Honneth's critical theory is about "the society", it is – at least in our age of climate crisis – nevertheless necessary to consider the entire reality, including both its "social" and "natural" parts. Bhaskar describes such a mutual dynamic between the natural and social parts of the entire reality:

This (...) attempts to *synthesise* these two critical strands [regarding ontology]; and to show in particular why and how the [critical] realism *presupposed* by the first strand [of natural ontology] must be *extended* to cover the objects of scientific thought postulated by the second strand [of social ontology]. (...) To see science as a social activity, and as structured and discriminating in its thought, constitutes a significant step in our understanding of science. But (...) without the support of a *revised ontology*, and in particular a conception of the [whole] world as stratified and differentiated too (...).¹³

Bhaskar further proposes that we should acknowledge that things that assumingly exist and events that appear – and indeed are experienced by humans – in the so-called social reality that is, the social part of the entire reality (which also includes “natural” parts), we most often understand as conditioned by what I above termed a reductive, social ontology of second nature. However, reality is, at least partly, preconditioned by natural phenomena (e.g. climate change, biological evolution, and geological time). So, viewed from the critical-realist outlook, “[T]here is an ontological basis for a concept of *natural necessity*, that is, necessity in nature quite independent of men or human activity [i.e. within the second, intersubjective part of the reality]”.¹⁴

Still, we must ask if there exists a corresponding intra-human nature, which dialectically interacts with the natural reality. According to Elizabeth Grosz, it is a close ontological relationship between the human body (e.g. the nerve system, the sense apparatus, and the emotional life) and biology (i.e. all organic life). Thus, the natural reality “enable[s] cultural, social, and historical forces to work with and actively transform” the internal, first nature of humans’ bodily existence. What is more, “Nature and culture can *no longer* be construed as dichotomous or oppositional terms when nature is understood as the very field on which the cultural elaborates and develops itself”.¹⁵ This is probably the reason why David Skrbina holds that:

The mechanistic worldview is *deeply embedded* in our collective psyche. For several hundred years the *dominant orthodoxy* has implicitly assumed that inanimate things are fundamentally devoid of mental qualities. (...) Ultimately it has *incorporated* itself into our deepest social values, and thus becomes reflected in our *collective actions*. We treat nature as an *impersonal* thing or collection of things, without spontaneity, without intrinsic value, without “rights” of any kind. Natural resources, plant and animal species have been *exploited for maximal short-term human benefit*.¹⁶

If so, it seems necessary to include at least two poles within the critical-realist framework. First, an *intra*-pole, which deals with all the subjective, embodied, and sensuous experiences, which ontologically is part of a person’s existence, and, second, an *inter*-pole, covering all our ways in which to be intersubjectively outward-oriented in the social part of reality. For, as Bhaskar reminds us, despite that humans do not subjectively experience or intersubjectively acquire knowledge about the entire reality, this reality nevertheless exists in itself. It is, therefore, important to include the natural part of reality without reducing it, as Honneth’s social-ontological dualism does, to mere intersubjectivity. Consequently, as I return to, we need to supplement these two poles with a third pole that denotes the reality of the objective nature, which I previously termed third nature.¹⁷

Yet, to incorporate such a multidimensional conceptualization of nature requires that we move beyond Honneth’s reductive ontology, which is inspired to a great extent by the above Hegelian, dualist concepts of first and second nature. In contrast, however, Kenneth Westphal reads Hegel exactly as an ontological holist:

[T]he basic model of Hegel’s ontology is a *radical ontological holism*. On the one hand, sensible things have their ground only in the *whole world-system*, insofar as their characteristics obtain only in and through contrast with opposed characteristics of other things and insofar as they are generated and corrupted through their causal interaction with other things. On the other hand, the concept, as the principle of constitution of characteristics through contrast, obtains only in and as the interconnection of things and their properties in [both the natural and social] world.¹⁸

This outlook resonates with Ted Benton's warning against naturephobia: "*any adequate conceptualization of ecological and environmental problems presupposes a minimally realis[m]*". Accordingly, a Hegelian critical-realism "acknowledg[es] the causal powers possessed and exercised by *non-human* beings *independently* of their discursive recognition by human agents".¹⁹ Or, as Benton states, "[I]f [the objective] nature were a discursive, or cultural construct, ecological problems would be an *ontological impossibility*".²⁰ So, to ontologically transcend the Cartesian dualism, as well as Honneth's social-ontological dualism, one needs to acknowledge "the complex processes of *interaction, interpenetration* and *mutual* constitution which link together the items which are *misleadingly* dissociated from one another and allocated abstractly to one side or the other of the Nature/Culture great divide". This sustains "an implicit or explicit valorization of the human/cultural *over the natural*".²¹

Relatedly, Hegel – in contrast to Honneth's own interpretation – is not an ontological dualist, but in fact, to use Westphal's wording, represents a radical ontological holism. This implies that the fundamental social-ontological assumption in Honneth can be replaced by a perception of reality – even its natural aspects – that takes the *whole* world-system into account, which, echoing Bhaskar's critical realism, seemingly means that Hegel, in fact, deals not only with the social part of the entire reality, but even the natural one. Subsequently, Honneth's understanding is misleading and should, therefore, be replaced by a Hegelian ontological holism.

In so doing, even a philosophy of nature can be included within this holist-ontological framing. In his book *Philosophy of Nature*,²² Hegel expresses this point thus:

The philosophy of nature itself belongs to this pathway of *return*, for it is the philosophy of nature which *overcomes the division* of nature and spirit, and renders to spirit the *recognition* of its *essence in nature*.²³

In his book *Hegel's Naturalism: Mind, Nature, and the Final Ends of Life*, Terry Pinkard argues along these lines by identifying an affinity between human nature and nonhuman nature in Hegel: "Purposiveness exists in nature, even if nature as a whole is not purposive".²⁴ Therefore, based on Hegel's philosophy of nature, if Honneth had chosen such an ontology, he could have widened his own narrow, dualist ontology into a broad, holistic one.

Against this backdrop, as already mentioned, I stress that we, in the early Honneth, find exactly such an alternative ontology. In his 1980 book *Social Action and Human Nature*, which was co-written with Hans Joas, Honneth introduces an original insight including even nonhuman lifeforms:

The legitimacy of the question of the [ontological] *relationship* of the human being to [the objective] nature and of [the subjective] nature in the human being is today *beyond all doubt*.²⁵

I call this the early Honneth's *original ecological insight*. It implies that the foundation of critical theory is not mere social-ontological narrowly and shallowly conceived, but rests, rather, on a mutual dynamic between the natural and the social parts of reality. Hence, this dynamic between humans and nature seems to describe, then, a broader and deeper ontological holism.

Noteworthy, too, is Honneth's ecological insight regarding the above-mentioned multi-dimensional conceptualization of nature:

[T]he [ontological] *relationship* of the human being [i.e. the intersubjective nature] to [the objective] nature and of [the objective] nature *in* [i.e. the subjective nature of] the human being.²⁶

As I read the above quote, it differentiates exactly between subjective or first (e.g. embodiment and emotions), intersubjective or second (e.g. recognition and communication), and objective or third (e.g. ecosystems) nature, respectively.²⁷ Hence, the early Honneth is able to address parts of reality being harmed by today's planetary climate crisis due to, for example, exploitative global capitalism.

Through a philosophical-anthropological investigation of certain ontological constants, namely what Honneth calls "the unchanging preconditions of human changeableness", a broader, or, deeper, ontology is seemingly included:

[A] self-reflection of the social and cultural sciences on their *biological foundations* [i.e. objective nature] and on the normative content of their bodies of knowledge, considered in relation to determinate historical and political problems (...).²⁸

Here, rather than an anthropocentric account of nature, Honneth puts forward at least a biocentric, if not even an ecocentric, outlook. Against the backdrop, he puts forward a "critique of the ontological dualism that has come to be taken for granted philosophically in the Cartesian tradition". In contrast to such ontological dualism, Honneth argues for a holism in terms of a "perceptual process" that "makes the world apprehensible and confers meaning on it" through the human persons' "bodily behaviour". Here, through such bodily perceived holism, "both [body and mind] are *fused together* to become a *single operation*", and hence "together they form an *indissoluble functional element*". Therefore, "then the body and mind, or consciousness, can *no longer* be treated as separate entities".²⁹

Although the early Honneth talks about humans' biological foundation, which may include merely the biocentric part of the objective nature, I take this viewpoint to include even the ecocentric part. As the body is, partly, constituted by biology in terms of the satisfaction of basic needs (e.g. nutrition), these needs are, to some extent, depending on ecocentric things (e.g. water).³⁰ From the outlook of an ontological holism, therefore, the early Honneth's original ecological insight concerns exactly an interconnecting dynamic between the subjective, intersubjective, and objective nature.

Toward a True Interdisciplinarity

In this second step of my recovery of the later Honneth's nature denial, I investigate the epistemological dimension within his framework. Here, I argue that Honneth runs into a *nature-scientific deficit*. Thus, in addition to the already integrated social sciences and the humanities, he should adopt an alternative and broader epistemological framing, including even natural sciences. This is particularly important concerning today's planetary climate crisis and thus our need for scientific knowledge about climate change.

I argue, therefore, that the later Honneth should rediscover his early epistemology, which interdisciplinary considers even natural-scientific knowledge. Against this backdrop, one has to ask whether Honneth's account is the true picture of natural sciences, and if natural sciences entirely are alike regarding what he takes to be their positivist and technical biases. Furthermore, to better tackle today's climate crisis, together with ways in which, for instance, the UN Climate Panel (IPCC) reports draw on natural-scientific knowledge, it is unsatisfactory to ignore such research.

Positivism Critique on Idle

Surely, Honneth's methodology is interdisciplinary. Here, he draws on a wide range of empirical disciplines. Primarily, Honneth takes social sciences, law, and the humanities into consideration.

Still, despite his largely interdisciplinary and thus promising epistemology, it is troublesome when Honneth seemingly runs into a nature-scientific deficit, by which I mean a positivism critique on idle. According to Honneth, the positivist dispute is "the touchstone" of critical theory,³¹ which is expressed in his 1985 book *Critique of Power: Reflective Stages in a Critical Social Theory* (which was translated into English in 1993):

[I]t can be said that positivism *misrepresents* the peculiarity of human socialization when it offers the procedures of modern [*natural*] science as the methodological principle of scientific rationalization for the solution to problems in general, since precisely those tasks that grow out of the social need for communicative understanding *cannot* be solved with the help of the [*natural*]-scientific results of empirical-analytic research.³²

Furthermore, Honneth explains that "what still appears here negatively as a limit upon a type of [natural-]scientific thinking positively signifies the recognition of an *independent region* of [natural-]scientific knowledge".³³ He even claims that there exists an epistemological divide between natural sciences, on the one hand, and the social sciences and the humanities, on the other:

While in the former [natural] reality [i.e. the objective, third nature] is experienced under the guiding preunderstanding of technical control, under the latter [social and human] reality is constituted under the guiding preunderstanding of the guarantee and expansion of communicative agreement.³⁴

Consequently, this entails a "positivistic reduction of human praxis to technical conduct".³⁵ Honneth even says that the "epistemological reinstatement of the understanding of meaning [e.g. hermeneutics] that results from the critique of positivism [i.e. natural sciences] *goes hand in hand* with the reinstatement of interaction" (e.g. recognition).³⁶

In the aftermath of one of Honneth's latest books, *Freedom's Right: The Social Foundations of Democratic Life* (which was originally published in German in 2011), within the context of his normative-reconstructive method, he introduces the notion of "foundational documents" (intellektuellen Gründungsdokumente). Here, he refers to "a study of philosophers and sociologist [i.e. the humanities and social sciences] who have provided important insights into the [social] sphere [of recognition or freedom] under investigation".³⁷ The reason I link this method to the issue of nature-scientific research and knowledge is that Honneth, throughout the entire book, never mentions any foundational document from within the natural sciences.

However, within the context of today's climate change, the IPCC documents natural-scientifically the risks of severe, pervasive, long-lasting, and irreversible impacts for *both* humans (e.g. societies) and ecosystems (i.e. nature ecocentricly perceived). Therefore, if Honneth really wants to take onboard foundational documents from the history of science, which I support, then the question is why he simply draws on social sciences and the humanities. Again, the positivism dispute on idle within critical theory seemingly forces him to ignore foundational documents within natural sciences (e.g. by Rosalind Franklin, Charles Darwin, and Carl Linnaeus).

In contrast, the early Honneth's "original anthropological theory of intersubjectivity was conducted within the general framework of a philosophy of nature", which "made relevant by the recourse to current research in the *natural sciences*"³⁸ and the "*biological* preconditions of human interaction".³⁹ Thus, in view of today's planetary climate crisis, we should let the study object (e.g. climate change) decide which method and knowledge are the most relevant. Then, however, Honneth must move beyond his natural-scientific deficit, which could make his critical theory more suitable while subjected to today's existential climate emergency.

Critical-Ecological Constructivism

In her book *The Green State: Rethinking Democracy and Sovereignty*, Robyn Eckersley suggests *critical constructivism* to move beyond the positivism critique on idle. Accordingly, we should "include *both* the human and the nonhuman world" in terms of a critical-theoretical epistemology.⁴⁰ Consequently, Eckersley argues that critical theory should consider "not only the community of humankind but also the broader *biotic* community (*in which* human communities are *embedded*)". In Eckersley, human exploitation and emancipation are important, even in the case of the third, objective nature. Still, she reminds us that the "domination of [the objective] nature is a complex phenomenon". Therefore, Eckersley suggests that critical theory should draw on an epistemology that avoids what I above termed nature denial. Instead, we need a methodological design including both human and nonhuman parts of the reality through an "*ecological* and social responsibility" taking into account, epistemologically, both "*biological* embodiment and *ecological limits*".⁴¹ In so doing, this alternative epistemological and methodological framing is adequate concerning today's climate crisis. Here, we need to avoid "exploiting, excluding, marginalizing, and depriving human *and* nonhuman" concerning a continuing "ecological irrationality and environmental injustice".⁴²

At work here, is an interdisciplinary approach and methodological design in which the study object is the starting point. In practice, to address climate change and the drivers behind it, such as exploitative, global capitalism, we should consider all kinds of scientific methods and scientific knowledge that might be relevant to address our shared environmental crisis. Given that, Eckersley's epistemology supports and regains the true interdisciplinary methodology of the early Honneth's original ecological insight.

Ecological-Sensorial Normativity

In the third, and final, step of my recovery of the later Honneth's nature denial, I investigate its normative aspects. Here, I look closer at the moral consequences regarding today's planetary climate crisis, and how the recovery can deal with this pathology.

Eco-Marxist Blind Spot

As noted, the IPCC documents that the current global eco-crisis influences both human and nonhuman nature. Disappointingly, therefore, Honneth never takes this ecological diagnosis of our times seriously enough. Rather, in the introduction to the 2017 Danish translation of his 2015 book, *The Idea of Socialism: Towards a Renewal* (which was published in English in 2017, as well), Honneth explains his nature denial:

Of course, I am aware that, as I outline it, socialism does *not* relate to one of the *greatest problems of today*, namely the *ecological crisis* and the *threat of disaster* that is associated with it.⁴³

Honneth further holds this crisis of the Earth system is best tackled through “political reforms”, which should be based on a “social division of labor”. This indicates “collaboration” and “balancing” between socialism, which “must concentrate on revolutionizing all our mutual relationships”, on the one hand, and “ecological movements”, which must assume a more restricted “moral responsibility of our relationships with the natural world”, on the other.⁴⁴ As a result, the more these different parts of society can collaborate and be balanced through a labour division based on their particular specialized expertise and goals, the more will their significant problem-solving be achieved, and through that the improvement of the whole society by means of emancipation.

Here, Honneth’s account of critical theory as socialism through social freedom and social democracy suffers from an *eco-Marxist blind spot*. To solve this issue, Honneth’s understanding of a “human” socialism should be transformed into eco-socialism or eco-Marxism. In contrast to Honneth, based on Paul Burkett, John Bellamy Foster, and others, it can be argued that Karl Marx’s term metabolism can be interpreted in ecological terms, too.⁴⁵ Accordingly, “*it [is] not possible to comprehend the full scope of [Marx’s] critique of political economy if one ignores its ecological dimension*”. If so, key concepts in Marx, such as “value” and “reification”, reveal his preoccupation with “the whole of nature” as the point of departure concerning critique of capitalism and the ways in which it exploits nature and, partly, causes planetary climate crisis.⁴⁶ We should ask, therefore, if this lack of an adequate capitalism critique could produce tipping points, namely a downward spiral where the Earth system is unable to recover due to, for instance, overconsumption and thus what I earlier explicated as overshoot.

Along these eco-socialist or eco-Marxist lines, I want to criticize the later Honneth’s account of capitalism, and for not acknowledging ecology as *superior* to economy. In his book *Freedom’s Right*, he holds that market economy is ethically grounded and thus constitutes a sphere of social freedom. Consequently, he introduces a dilemma: On the one hand, Honneth accepts that the realities of capitalism – particularly on a global scale – do not achieve the ideal of social freedom; on the other hand, he maintains that what Honneth terms as recognition-based social freedom is implicit in the market sphere and thus ethically legitimizes capitalism.⁴⁷

Problematically, this viewpoint depends upon a naïve vision of capitalism, especially concerning today’s planetary climate crisis and its, at least partly, global-capitalist drivers. Honneth holds that “like any other social sphere, the market also *relies upon the moral consent* of the participants, such that its existence *cannot* be explained without reference to the supplementary norms that legitimate the market in the eyes of economic actors”.⁴⁸ The problem with this description of capitalism, however, is the way in which this economic system colonizes people’s lifeworld in today’s globalizing world, which overconsumes nature’s resources and produces climate change:

The point is that sustaining profit—in the way in which profit *must be sustained* for capitalism to sustain itself, to remain capitalism—and sustaining the environment are mutually exclusive. The never-pausing effort of making sure to continue making the profit that must be made is taking place physically, and evolving through time, through the likewise perpetual overconsumption of nature.⁴⁹

Accordingly, John S. Dryzek argues that one main reason why a Honnethian, “ethical” account of capitalism fails is due to the fact that,

Marxism [e.g. Honneth’s version of socialism] (and so its associated models of democracy) is *just as materialistic and anthropocentric* as liberalism [e.g. global capitalism and representative democracy], seeking human liberation in part through *more effective domination and control of nature*.⁵⁰

Paradoxically, then, Honneth’s ethical account of market economy can reinforce global capitalism’s endless desire for its growth- and profit-imperative. Thus, facing today’s planetary climate crisis, such “ethical” capitalism is neither ecologically nor societally sustainable. Rather, Honneth’s critical theory should be reimagined as “green” enough to struggle against capitalism’s exploitation of nature. In short, without safeguarding a sustainable development in deep-ecological terms, there would be no societal nor natural ground upon which critical theory can be further developed.

According to Jean-Philippe Deranty, Honneth’s nature loss indicates a “*missed opportunity*”.⁵¹ Remarkably, “Honneth’s intellectual journey *started* on the basis of a *very strong* concern with *ecological issues*”, as well as their “implications for a regeneration of critical social theory”.⁵² So, what was left behind is the issue of “the normative meaning of non-human persons and natural environments”.⁵³

Also, Honneth’s “early proximity with ecological themes, through the emphasis on human beings’ ‘sensuousness’”, was later abandoned. Nevertheless, this attempt was “immediately obstructed by the Habermasian insistence on the necessity and normative innocence of an objectifying [i.e. instrumental and exploitative] attitude toward [the objective or third] nature”.⁵⁴ What is more, “Those ecological, naturalistic elements *disappear* in the course of Honneth’s development, as a result of his (...) interpretation of intersubjectivity”.⁵⁵ Subsequently, Honneth’s

initial entry into critical theory could have led him to propound a *much more expansive* theory of morality, one that would have made his ethics of recognition into a serious model for *political ecology*, clearly one of the most urgent theoretical tasks of our time.⁵⁶

Today, therefore, there seems “to be little room for any ethical duties toward non-human beings, except only indirectly” in Honneth.⁵⁷

Here, Deranty echoes the above statement in Honneth’s 1980 book *Social Action and Human Nature*, which introduces what I term as Honneth’s original ecological insight. This implies a Honnethian climate paradox: Forty years ago, Honneth was far more progressive vis-à-vis his picture of nature than today; then, it was “beyond all doubt” that critical theory should begin with the human-nature relationship, whereas today, in the age of climate crisis documented by the IPCC and others, Honneth has abandoned this outlook. So, why did Honneth change his mind? In Deranty’s view, within the framing of the early Honneth’s multidimensional account of nature presented above, “*all* the poles [i.e. all three forms of nature, namely subjective or first, intersubjective or second, and objective or third, respectively] are [ontologically] *in relation* to each other”. Given that, and more importantly, the “relations between two poles [i.e. the subjective nature and intersubjective nature] *depend* on the other relations between the other poles [e.g. the objective nature]”.⁵⁸

Yet another issue concerns Honneth’s approach to the Hegelian conceptualization of first and second nature, as well as the transition between the two.⁵⁹ As I have previously

addressed, Honneth's social-ontological dualism implies that second nature is given priority over first nature. Here, Deranty holds that "Paradoxically, Honneth's (...) position *coincides* with Hegel's official doctrine on the *gap* between first and second nature".⁶⁰ Still, in his initial approach to recognition, Honneth includes both verbal and non-verbal (e.g. body-linguistic) communication.⁶¹ This means that he ascribes even the first nature of the body a significant role within his comprehensive framework. Consequently, based on the affinity between first, subjective nature and the third, objective nature by recovering the early Honneth's original ecological insight, we identify a way in which to connect all the three poles.

Ecologically-Sensible Recovery

Now, we need to exchange Honneth's capitalism-supporting socialism with a new *ecologically-sensible* imaginary:

[L]iving nature (also) has agency and that continuing full pace to alter the physis of the world on a global scale is bound to *backfire*, putting into jeopardy not just the survival of nonhuman life-forms but the survival of humanity as well, since *the latter depends on the former* (...).⁶²

If so, we should identify nature – even the ecocentric part of the objective nature (e.g. ecosystems) – as sensually and perceptually an *affected party*. This implies that all human activity should be conceived as ecological footprints, namely the impact of human activities measured in terms of the area of biologically productive land and water required to produce the goods consumed and to assimilate the generated waste. Hence, the idea of ecological footprints is a way in which to consider humans' demand on nature's limited resources.

Subsequently, to acknowledge nature as an affected party due to humans' ecological footprints presupposes nature as an *ethical addressee*.⁶³ "All beings, all entities in and of the natural world, all forces, whether naturally or artificially forged, are connected energetically".⁶⁴ Then, nature is conceived as affected by the potential outcomes of human agents' action. Instead of dwelling on the issue of whether (parts of the objective) nature is a (human) "agent" or not, as a *lower threshold-level*, we have to recognize nature as an affective party in terms of its intrinsic vulnerability vis-à-vis humans' ecological footprints and climate change. This creates circles of concern regarding the relationship between humans and nature, which requires that humans have a particular moral responsibility due to the embodied and emotional sensibility of our subjective nature:

[A] round field of sentience sustained by the relationships between the myriad lives and sensibilities that compose it. We come to know more of this sphere not by detaching ourselves from our felt experience, but by inhabiting our *bodily experience* all the *more richly and wakefully, feeling* our way into deeper contact with other experiencing bodies, and hence with the wild, intercorporeal life of the earth itself.⁶⁵

Through such an ecological sensibility – by which I mean humans' bodily-sensuously attentive resonance and communicative interaction with nature in its entire diversity and complexity, receptivity and activity, vulnerability and violability – we can morally engage and interconnect with the nonhuman part of reality.⁶⁶ In so doing, the Honnethian critical theory can be reframed as a *critical political ecology*.⁶⁷

Conclusion

Interestingly, as a keynote address in 2001, Honneth social-philosophically articulates the normative grounding of a “political ecology”. Here, only an “extended conception of justice”, including references to “nature, culture[,] and the future” is adequate in facing the “climate change”.⁶⁸ Nonetheless, 10 years later, in Honneth’s seminal work *Freedom’s Right* (2011), albeit representing exactly an extended, recognitive account of justice and freedom, Honneth is completely silent concerning nature and future generations. Given that, Honneth creates a similar climate paradox as above: He is decreasingly engaged in the issue of climate change, although we have increasingly scientific knowledge and subjective experience concerning today’s climate change and the planetary crisis it produces.

Perhaps this Honnethian climate paradox is better understood by considering his 2015 rejoinder to the critique of his book *Freedom’s Right*: “Exceptions to this rule can probably only be found in the ‘ecological’ and ‘climate change’ movements; it is difficult, but perhaps not impossible, to demonstrate some implicit relation to the freedom principle in these cases”.⁶⁹ In short, the later Honneth maintains his ontological, epistemological, and normative denial of nature within the framework of social freedom and its recognitive grounding.

However, today, the Earth system is subjected to severe, pervasive, irreversible, and long-lasting pathologies for both human nature and nonhuman nature along with the extinction of nature’s diversity to a huge extent and at a high pace. So, although Honneth acknowledges this crisis as one of “the greatest problems of today”, to tackle it we need more than merely describing the situation as “difficult”. Furthermore, as a matter of rule, instead of the Honnethian “exception”, the priority of ecology over economy should be critical theory’s starting point. Nature is both a precondition and a limitation for human activities, since nature’s resources cannot be taken for granted but rather create an existential emergency and a potential point of no return.

Given this, as I have shown, within the context of a philosophy of nature, we should recover the early Honneth’s original insight by virtue of a critical political ecology. In doing so, we move beyond the later Honneth’s nature denial. Here, facing today’s planetary climate crisis, his version of critical theory is adequately recontextualized as critical enough to constitute what I conceptualize as an ecological sensibility.

Notes

1. IPCC, *Climate Change*, v.
2. IPBES, *Global Assessment on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services*.
3. Although some read Honneth within an environmental framing (e.g., Brincat, “Global Climate Change Justice”; Schlosberg, “Justice, Ecological Integrity, and Climate Change”; Laitinen and Kortetmäki, “On the Natural Basis and Ecological Limits of Recognition”; Pihkala, “Recognition and Ecological Theology”), they do so superficially, rather than adopting my comprehensive recovery of the early Honneth.
4. Honneth, *Disrespect*, 120. In his book *Reification* Honneth’s refers to “John Searle’s attempt to trace individual intentionality back to collective intentionality, which in turn is a ‘sense’ of coexistence or cooperation”, which Honneth finds “interesting” (Honneth, *Reification*, 159, n. 5). Later, Honneth explains that he is “alluding to the social ontology of John Searle, which bears some surprising but as yet unexplored similarities with Hegel’s theory of objective spirit” (ibid., 161, n. 4). However, Searle defines social ontology as including both humans and nonhumans animals (Searle, *Making the Social World*, 156).

5. Honneth, *Reification*, 90, fn. 70.
6. *Ibid.*, 149. See: Lysaker, “Democratic Disagreement and Embodied Dignity,” 150–2.
7. Naess, “The Deep Ecology Movement”.
8. Naess, “The Shallow and Deep, Long Range Ecological Movement”.
9. Honneth, *Reification*, 70.
10. *Ibid.*, 25. See: 33.
11. Vetlesen, “From Anthropocentrism to the Anthropocene,” 6 (my italics).
12. Bhaskar, *A Realist Theory of Science*, 12 (italics added).
13. *Ibid.*. (my emphasis).
14. *Ibid.*, 14 (original italics).
15. Grosz, “Darwin and Feminism,” 24, 44 (my emphasis).
16. Skrbina, *Panpsychism in the West*, 265 (italics added).
17. In Jean-Philippe Deranty’s reading, Honneth’s recognitive framework consists of all these three poles, which includes, e.g., “the natural (...) environment” (Deranty, *Beyond Recognition*, 470). See: Rosa, *Resonanz*, 69, 220.
18. Westphal, *Hegel’s Epistemological Realism*, 144 (my italics).
19. Vetlesen, “From Anthropocentrism to the Anthropocene,” 8 (my italics).
20. Benton, “Why are Sociologists Naturephobes?” 146 (emphasis added).
21. *Ibid.*, 137, 134 (emphasis added).
22. Composed over a span of around twenty-five years, and thus being a large part of Hegel’s philosophical project (see: Buchdahl, “Hegel’s Philosophy of Nature”; Rand, “The Importance and Relevance of Hegel’s ‘Philosophy of Nature’”), Honneth ignores Hegel’s philosophy of nature. Despite this ignorance, it seems, at least after the English translation of *Philosophy of Nature* in 1970, as if the international interest in Hegel’s philosophy of nature has increased (see: Houlgate, *Hegel and the Philosophy of Nature*; Petry, *Hegel and Newtonianism*; Pinkard, *Hegel’s Naturalism*; Stone, *Petrified Intelligence*).
23. Hegel, *Philosophy of Nature*, Part 1, § 247 (Addition) (my italics).
24. Pinkard, *Hegel’s Naturalism*, 25.
25. Honneth and Joas, *Social Action and Human Nature*, 3 (my italics).
26. *Ibid.*
27. *Ibid.*
28. *Ibid.* 9. See: 7.
29. *Ibid.* 116 (emphasis added).
30. Lysaker, Sårbarhet og ukrenkelighet, 252–4.
31. Honneth, *The Critique of Power*, 221.
32. *Ibid.*, 222 (my emphasis).
33. *Ibid.*, 223 (italics added).
34. *Ibid.*, (my emphasis).
35. *Ibid.*, 443 (my italics).
36. *Ibid.*, 223 (emphasis added).
37. Pedersen, “Writing History from a Normative Point of View,” 248. See: Honneth, *Freedom’s Right*, 267; Honneth, *The Idea of Socialism*, 82.
38. Deranty, “The Loss of Nature in Axel Honneth’s Social Philosophy,” 163–4 (italics added).
39. *Ibid.*, 162 (emphasis added).
40. Eckersley, *The Green State*, 9 (italics added).
41. *Ibid.*, 10 (my emphasis).
42. *Ibid.*, 10 (original italics).
43. Honneth, *Socialismens idé*, 14 (my italics and translation). The quotes are drawn from the introductory interview with Honneth conducted by Rasmus Willig in the Danish translation of the book *The Idea of Socialism*.
44. *Ibid.*, (my abbreviations and translation).
45. Saito, *Karl Marx’s Ecosocialism*, 13. See: Fraser and Jaeggi, *Capitalism*, 91.
46. *Ibid.*, 14 (original italics).

47. For a critique of Honneth regarding this dilemma, see: Jütten, “Is the Market a Sphere of Social Freedom?”
48. *Ibid.*, 183 (my italics).
49. Vetlesen, *The Denial of Nature*, 23 (original emphasis).
50. Dryzek, *Deliberative Democracy and Beyond*, 147, n. 1 (my italics). This problem in Honneth can also be linked to his methodological and normative nationalism, which collides with the partly global-capitalist drivers behind today’s planetary climate crisis: “[cosmopolitanism] is too far hasty, because it fails to take into account the degree to which major segments of social reality continue to be determined by national system of rules” (Honneth, *The Idea of Socialism*, 100).
51. Deranty, *Beyond Recognition*, 178 (emphasis added). See: *Ibid.*, 471.
52. *Ibid.*, 112 (my italics).
53. Deranty, “The Loss of Nature in Axel Honneth’s Social Philosophy,” 153. See: Deranty, *Beyond Recognition*, 373, 470.
54. *Ibid.*, 71 (emphasis added).
55. *Ibid.*, 341.
56. *Ibid.*, 376. (my italics).
57. Deranty, “The Loss of Nature in Axel Honneth’s Social Philosophy,” 168. See: Angella, “Axel Honneth, Reification, and ‘Nature’,” 1–2, 6, 7.
58. Deranty, *Beyond Recognition*, 470 (emphasis added).
59. Petherbridge, *The Critical Theory of Axel Honneth*, 91.
60. *Ibid.*, 375 (my emphasis).
61. See: Honneth, *The Struggle for Recognition*, 99–100.
62. Vetlesen, *The Denial of Nature*, 42 (my italics).
63. For this differentiation between being an “agent” and an “addressee”, see: Vetlesen, *ibid.*, 144.
64. Brennan, *Exhausting Modernity*, 41 (my italics). See: Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, 112.
65. Abram, *Becoming Animal*, 143.
66. Rosa, *Resonanz*, 77.
67. Deranty, *Beyond Recognition*, 376. See: Eckersley, *The Green State*, 8–10.
68. Honneth, “The Political Identity of the Green Movement in Germany,” 5.
69. Honneth, “Rejoinder,” 209 (my emphasis).

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