“The environment” is not among the topics with which Critical Theory is commonly associated. This seems to be the case for all three generations of philosophers in question: from Adorno over Habermas to Honneth, to pick just one name in each of them. That said, “nature” is certainly a central category in all the major versions of critical theory, though less so in Honneth than in Adorno.

In what follows, I have chosen to focus on two classics of the Frankfurt School: Adorno and Horkheimer’s *Dialectic of Enlightenment* and Habermas’ *Theory of Communicative Action*. Of course, both have received enormous amounts of critical commentary. However, the role played by what is said – or left unsaid – about nature is seldom at the forefront of the discussion. Putting it there will allow me to advance a much-needed critique of blind spots that are largely common in the two works, despite the well-known differences between them, which as a consequence may well appear less important than what unites them – namely a neglect of the nature-related (as distinguished from society-related) aspect of capitalist modernity and its discontinuities, a neglect that proves more philosophically and politically catastrophic each passing day.

**Myth and Enlightenment**

“The Concept of Enlightenment,” the first chapter in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, starts with a series of quotes from Francis Bacon. Bacon is taken to have defined the motives behind the “disenchantment of the world” that the Enlightenment aims at. “The sovereignty of man lieth hid in knowledge,” Bacon declared, continuing: “Now we govern nature in opinions, but we are thrall unto her in necessity; but if we would be led by her in invention, we should command her by action” (Bacon quoted in DE: 4). The scientific attitude that Bacon helped launch is “patriarchal” in that “the human mind, which overcomes suspicion, is to hold sway over a disenchanted nature” (ibid.). For Bacon as well as Luther, power and knowledge are synonymous. Bacon put it unequivocally: “The true end, scope, or office of knowledge [consist in] effecting and working, and in discovery of particulars not revealed before, for the better endowment and help of man’s life” (Bacon quoted in DE: 5). Adorno and Horkheimer take Bacon’s view to capture the overall aim of the Enlightenment: “What men want to learn from nature,” they write, “is how to use it in order wholly to dominate it and other men. That is the only aim” (DE: 4).
Enlightenment, Adorno and Horkheimer go on to assert, is totalitarian. It cannot tolerate anything that would oppose it or offer an alternative to it. Animism in particular, the cosmology most common throughout the world prior to the Enlightenment, must be rejected tooth and nail: its extirpation is what the disenchantment of the world is essentially about (DE: 5). No “occult” qualities within matter are allowed for; to be fully mastered, matter must be stripped of any “illusion of ruling or inherent powers,” since “whatever does not conform to the rule of computation and utility is suspect” (DE: 6).

Even more fundamentally, Enlightenment needs to root out anthropomorphism, “the projection onto nature of the subjective” (DE: 6), identified as the basic principle of myth. Citing at this point Hegel’s analysis in his Phenomenology of Spirit, Adorno and Horkheimer depict how such projection is at work so that “the supernatural, spirits and demons, are mirror images of men who allow themselves to be frightened by natural phenomena.” This being so, “the many mythic figures can all be brought to a common denominator, and reduced to the human subject” (DE: 7). Enlightenment is epistemologically totalitarian in that irrespective of what it is confronted with – whether “a piece of objective intelligence, a bare schematization, fear of evil powers, or hope of redemption” – the judgment will always be the same: “It is man!” Genuine manifoldness, or novelty, is a priori disallowed for; “its ideal is the system from which all and everything follows. Its rationalist and empiricist versions do not part company on that point” (DE: 7).

For power and knowledge to become truly synonymous, however, qualities of all sorts, including gods, must be dismissed as purely illusory, as having no – scientific, provable – ontological standing. Doing away with quality means giving primacy, nay monopoly, to numbers; number becomes the “canon” of the Enlightenment and what everything that is real, and that we may have knowledge about, reduces to.

To anticipate a point that will prove vital, it is part of Adorno and Horkheimer’s argument that myth’s alignment with power and hence control over outer nature was always an inseparable feature in myth, and precisely not a kind of alignment that began with the Enlightenment. “The myths which fell victim to the Enlightenment were its own products,” they assert, yet proceed to observe that “the myths, as the tragedians came upon them, are already characterized by the discipline and power that Bacon celebrated as the ‘right mark’” (DE: 8). Recall that “the Olympic deities are no longer directly identical with elements, but signify them” and that in Homer, “the gods are distinguished from material elements as their quintessential concepts” (DE: 8). The upshot is that “the world becomes subject to man,” and “the awakening of the self” is accompanied by “the acknowledgement of power as the principle of all relations.” God and man may be divorced, but as far as the attainment and exercise of power over nature are concerned, they are fully alike.

Adorno and Horkheimer describe the dialectic involved like this:

Myth turns into enlightenment, and nature into mere objectivity. Men pay for the increase of their power with alienation from that over which they exercise their power. Enlightenment behaves toward things as a dictator toward men. He knows them in so far as he can manipulate them. The man of science knows things in so far as he can make them. In this way their potentiality is turned to his own ends. In the metamorphosis the nature of things, as a substratum of domination, is revealed as always the same. This identity constitutes the unity of nature.

(DE: 9)

While calling “anachronistic” Freud’s ascription to magic of an “unshakable confidence in the possibility of world domination” (DE: 11), there is little in Adorno and Horkheimer’s argument about the entwinement of myth and Enlightenment to suggest they hold a different
view. A number of sweeping formulations are meant to show the many ways in which “mythology set itself off the unending process of enlightenment,” supposedly corroborating their overall thesis that “just as myths already realize enlightenment, so enlightenment with every step becomes more deeply engulfed in mythology. It receives all its matter from the myths, only to destroy them” (DE: 11f).

Adorno and Horkheimer seek to back up this thesis by pointing to the crucial role of repetition in rituals as prescribed in mythical cosmologies. Everything that occurs, every phenomenon and movement encountered in nature, is interpreted and tackled as a matter of things repeating themselves cyclically. This, they argue, is tantamount to the conviction that there is nothing new under the sun. In subscribing to such a view, promising to explain everything that happens, everywhere, myth again betrays itself as of one piece with the Enlightenment thinking that accordingly is not its antithesis or negation but its historical successor: “The principle of immanence, the explanation of every event as repetition, that the Enlightenment upholds against mythic imagination, is the principle of myth itself.” In both cases, “what was different is equalized, as expressed in the notion about the identity of everything with everything else.” Enlightenment, then, merely repeats “what in the Heraclian epic cycle is one of the primal images of mythic power: it exercises the incommunicable. Not only are qualities dissolved in thought, but men are brought to actual conformity” (DE: 12).

True, Adorno and Horkheimer occasionally acknowledge dissimilarities between myth and Enlightenment, for instance that magic sustains a relation to things in nature that is “one not of intention but of relatedness”; even though magic pursues aims just like science does, magic “seeks to achieve them by mimesis – not by progressively distancing itself from the object” (DE: 11). Yet the overall picture painted is that of profound continuity: Enlightenment has proved itself incapable of shaking off its debt to mythical worldviews and magical practices that predate its breakthrough in the West. The principle of immanence posits a taboo against admitting any source of quality, essence, value outside itself; outside, that is, the endeavor of science regarded as self-grounding, self-sufficient, and exhausting all there is to know, which is seen as identical to reality per se – which cannot be positively known, and proven to others as such by way of being so many data, so many observations repeatable to them, simply does not exist: this is the upshot of the marriage between positivism and scientism in the form of the Einheitswissenschaft that the Vienna Circle championed in the 1930s. Yet there is nothing new here, nothing that according to Adorno and Horkheimer was not at work in magic, indeed the force driving it – namely fear. The deeper aim of shrugging off the last remnants of superstition, of man’s propensity to invest the natural world with qualities modern science would show up as purely subjective as so as illusory, as inhering not in nature, not in re, but being projected onto it by way of anthropomorphism – that aim was always the same: to free man from fear. All beliefs, rituals, and sacrifices demonstrating awe with respect to the nonhuman natural world and the creatures encountered there, and upon whom men recognized they depended, are to be looked upon as being born of that single basic motive: fear. Since fear is always uncomfortable, it immediately begets attempts to fight it, overcome it. Pre-modern, primitive cultures feared nature as what was perceived as greater than themselves, more powerful, more cunning and mysterious, outwitting man – hence the crucial function of the magician and shaman as mediator between culture and nature, ensuring that the tribe in general and hunters in particular display the respect due to the forces that are superior to man and so may crush him and frustrate his every need. This then is the promise of knowledge, of science: “Man imagines himself free when there is no longer anything unknown” (DE: 16). That this is so and must be so, Adorno and Horkheimer continue, determines the course of mythologization, of enlightenment, which compounds the animate with the animate just as myth compounds the inanimate with the animate.
Enlightenment is mythic fear turned radical. The pure immanence of positivism, its ultimate product, is no more than a so to speak universal taboo. Nothing at all may remain outside, because the very idea of outsideness is the very source of fear.

(DE: 16)

It is the task of knowledge to see to it that this fear is overcome by means of doing away with everything that smacks of outsideness in the sense given. Not any notion of knowledge will do, only one where (outer) nature in its entirety appears as object, ensuring that everything encountered in outer, nonhuman reality (Descartes’ res extensa) is regarded as suited to – indeed, as meant for – human intervention and manipulation. As Bacon famously remarked, only by intervening into nature can man (indeed, the male subject) wrest its secrets from her so as to be able properly to exploit her. He phrased it dramatically in a passage oddly enough not cited in the Dialectic: “We should conquer and subdue her [nature], shake her to her foundations”; “storm and occupy her castles and strongholds, subdue Nature with all her children to bind her to your service and make her your slave” (Bacon quoted in Midgley 2014: 119). Following the taboo against anthropomorphism, the nature thus put to exclusive human use is one completely devoid of the subjectivity, spirit, and inherent purposiveness and meaning that mythic cosmologies had ascribed to it. To prove oneself “enlightened” is precisely to overcome (as childish, primitive, irrational) the inclination to perceive soul and subjective qualities as present in the whole of existence and as encountering themselves in all things. The result of admitting nature no inner life, no mental and psychic agency/subjectivity, no purposefulness and Aristotelian final cause, no goals of its own, reserving all such properties to man alone, is to render nature man’s absolute “other”; what man is, nature is not, and vice versa.

However, insofar as “for civilization, pure natural existence, animal and vegetative, was the absolute danger” (DE: 31), the return of the repressed (Freud) is a persistent concern. From the point of view of civilization, priding itself on progress made possible by man’s steady liberation from being at the mercy of nature, any reversion to mimetic or mythic modes of perception and behavior was bound to be feared as “a reversion of the self to that state of nature from which it had estranged itself with so huge an effort, and which therefore struck such terror into the self” (ibid.). To keep this danger at bay, the subjugation of nature – meaning the nature within as well as that outside the human subject – was made the paramount purpose of life. Self-preservation dictates nothing less.

Thus is triggered the dialectic of Enlightenment: seeking to free themselves from their subjection to nature, modern men become increasingly entangled in the subjection of nature to the Self. The emancipation celebrated by moderns is tainted by the unfreedom – fixity, rigidity, ultimately death – of the nature sought overcome, be it outside or inside the subject. The obsession with self-preservation comes at the price of denial, of renunciation of every trait, every aspect of living life, within or without, that threatens to defy the requirements of order over chaos, predictability over spontaneity, reason over affect.

This leitmotif explains why Adorno and Horkheimer declare Homer’s Odyssey “the basic text of European civilization” (DE: 46). No work offers more eloquent, indeed prophetic, testimony of the mutual implication of enlightenment and myth. Only through repression of instincts and continual sacrifice – what Adorno and Horkheimer deem “a denial of nature in man for the sake of domination over non-human nature and over other men” (DE: 54) – may Odysses survive. The autonomy sought for by the prototype of the modern bourgeois subject requires strict and relentless self-control: autonomy is gained over and against nature and other men only to the extent that he (again, the subject is tacitly male) learns to repress instincts, desires, and feelings. Spontaneity would only betray him and be used against him by the social and natural other alike. Inner no less than outer nature is mastered by rational calculation and for the sake of self-preservation.
When Adorno and Horkheimer assert that “the history of civilization is the history of the introversion of sacrifice, the history of renunciation,” their point is that “everyone who practices renunciation gives away more of his life than is given back to him: and more than the life that he vindicates” (DE: 55). Their argument traces the trajectory from adaptation to renunciation to death:

Only consciously contrived adaptation to nature brings nature under the control of the physically weaker. The ratio which supplants mimesis is not simply its counterpart. It is itself mimesis: mimesis unto death. The subjective spirit which cancels the animation of nature can master a despiritualized nature only by imitating its rigidity and despiritualizing itself in turn. Imitation enters into the service of domination inasmuch as even man is anthropomorphized for man. The pattern of Odyssean cunning is the mastery of nature sought through such adaptation.

(DE: 57)

As soon as man suppresses his awareness that he himself is nature, all the ends for which he keeps himself alive are null and void. On their analysis of what they term “the prehistory of subjectivity,” there is no escaping the dead – literally: dead – end of the logic according to which man's domination over himself no less than over outer nature – the very effort that grounds his selfhood – brings about the destruction of the subject in whose service it is undertaken. A result of this is the decreasing cultural tolerance for “flashes of nature” that Adorno in particular would be concerned with. Nature – meaning anything showing up within social intercourse that is deemed raw, primitive, improper – has become a moral, not merely an aesthetic provocation. There is a culturally induced imperative to rid oneself of all traits, whether in gestures, behavior, or appearance, that would betray nature in a sensuous form, especially that of sweat and bodily smell – hence the outcry when the female movie star has her photograph taken with her armpits unshaved. To always heed this imperative and to be willing to employ whatever techniques offered to improve one's effort is to prove oneself as having successfully completed the journey from nature to culture in one's own person.

The Revenge of Nature

It is noteworthy that the “nature” that interests Adorno and Horkheimer never does so per se but always in conjunction with its dialectical counterpart culture, or Enlightenment or Civilization. As the above summary of the first two chapters of Dialectic of Enlightenment shows, the Frankfurters' approach to the nature/culture constellation from beginning to end privileges its entanglement with another constellation, the power/knowledge one that they take Bacon to epitomize in the modern era.

The power/knowledge constellation as understood by Adorno and Horkheimer is not elementary, however. It is itself a product, namely of fear: the fear of nature that they regard as old as mankind's history on earth; the fear that was sought overcome by developing knowledge of the sort that would allow man to gain control over nature and so neutralize its power over man's fate. Never was there a relationship between man and nature not based on and shot through with fear. When Adorno and Horkheimer write that “the magician imitates demons,” they explain that “in order to frighten them or to appease them, he behaves frighteningly or makes gestures of appeasement” (DE: 9). The activities of the shaman – the individual who on behalf of his tribe functions as a mediator between the needs of the human group and the spiritual forces seen as present in nature – are so many clever tricks to “ward off danger”; to tackle his group’s fear of nature in such a way that nature continues to let humans take from her what they need in order to survive. This effort is all about appeasement.
since its aim – never reached or secured once and for all – is to neutralize nature’s capacity to take advantage of her superiority over man by denying him what he craves from her.

Understood as the promise of man’s overcoming of this fear, Enlightenment must be considered an utter failure: “Enlightenment,” we have already seen, “is mythic fear turned radical” (DE: 16).

There is something reductive about this whole approach. While criticizing the cultural taboo against anthropomorphism, Adorno and Horkheimer remain naively – uncritically – loyal to the no less deeply entrenched taboo against allowing for how practitioners of “mythic” cosmologies engage in various forms of non-fear-driven exchange and communication with members, parts, or sites in what used to be an exceedingly rich and manifold nonhuman natural world. There is not a word about how, say, human–animal relationships form patterns of mutual dependence, adjustment, and exchange; about how such interspecies relationships are borne by love and affection as arising between particular animals and particular human individuals sharing the same location/habitat throughout their lives; or about humans’ – especially young children’s – curiosity and open-mindedness toward everything nonhuman, being a source of endless fascination precisely on account of the otherness from humans thus encountered as part and parcel of a shared world, and so as enriching it (see Shepard 1982; Descola 2013; Kohn 2013). To the extent that a stance of respect and awe is acknowledged in Adorno and Horkheimer’s depiction – say, in hunters’ attitude to their game – it is so not as a genuine or original stance, but as one (cunningly, strategically) adopted ad hoc, as demanded by the pragmatics of the situation and as always originating from, and never fully escaping, fear. Professing to be constantly wary of projection and its workings, as having been skillfully demasked and seen through by the likes of Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud (“hermeneutics of suspicion”), Adorno and Horkheimer seem blind to their own projection of fear onto every historical instance of man’s relationship to nature.

This leads to a second point. The “revenge of nature” let loose by the dialectic of Enlightenment is only of interest to Adorno and Horkheimer in its gestalt as a revenge affecting humans. The fear-based compulsion to “rationally” – by way of science and technology – control outer nature is bought at the price of the repression of the “inner” nature of the human individual. But – as C. Fred Alford pointed out many years ago (1985: 7) – one could just as well focus on a second form of revenge of nature: namely the consequences of humankind’s careless intervention in the ecosphere. Once the importance of this second form is stated, its absence in the analysis offered in Dialectic of Enlightenment is conspicuous. No systematic attention is given to the destruction of nonhuman nature, be it from the point of view of the humans affected by it or – more to the point – from that of the wealth of creatures and life-forms of which nature consists. In this sense, there is a nature deficit in the early version of Critical Theory for which the Dialectic remains the classic statement. As I will detail below, one of the implications of this deficit is that when exploitation, alienation, reification, and commodification – or, more simply, capitalism – are criticized, it is so to the extent that these processes affect humans and humans only: the exploitation, etc. to be fought is that taking place as between humans, not that taking place in man’s relationship to nature, a nature denuded of agency and drained of value, consisting of so many passive objects as opposed to active-responding subjects with a species-specific point of view of their own. In other words, the entire critique is conducted within an intra-social and intra-subjective framework, anthropocentrically so, wholly conventionally and in that respect uncritically so.

To sum up, the notion of “external forces of nature” we find in Adorno and Horkheimer is meant to capture the ways in which such forces strike at social and individual life and cause repression in those two domains; repression understood as human-caused and so, in principle, avoidable and unnecessary suffering. Their bleak message is that however successful in its own right the endeavor to control outer nature, the parallel suppression of man’s inner
nature does not end; if anything, it is intensified following the near-complete mastery of outer nature. There seems to be no way out of this vicious circle.

The Paradox of Modernity

In his opus magnum *The Theory of Communicative Action*, Habermas turns to Max Weber to develop his case for the “paradox of modernity” that he clearly intends as his alternative take on Western history to that argued by his Frankfurt predecessors in *Dialect of Enlightenment*. Key to this paradox and the crises it entails is the state of affairs addressed in the following statement: “The rationalized lifeworld makes possible the emergence and growth of subsystems [of the capitalist economy and the state bureaucracy] whose independent imperatives [of money (monetarization, commodification) and administrative power (juridification, contractualization)] turn back destructively upon the lifeworld itself” (TCA II: 186). This tendency amounts to what Habermas famously terms a “colonization of the lifeworld,” that is, a type of domination that involves the incursion of cognitive-instrumental rationality and functionalist reason into the lifeworld.

Habermas’ argument is that this is bound to lead to various forms of pathologies within the lifeworld insofar as “capitalist modernization follows a pattern such that cognitive-instrumental rationality surges beyond the bounds of the economy and state into other, communicatively structures areas of life and achieves dominance there at the cost of moral-practical and aesthetic-expressive rationality” (II: 304f.). Specifically, such colonization distorts the linguistically generated and redeemed contributions of social integration to personality (socialization), to culture (the reproduction of tradition, the handing down of shared values), and to solidarity as between members of a social group. In other words, mechanisms belonging within the subsystems of the economy and the state drive out mechanisms of social integration from domains in which they cannot be replaced. The disturbance thus caused manifests itself as loss of meaning, anomie, and psychopathologies in the domains of culture, society, and personality, respectively. Correcting Weber's diagnosis of contemporary Western society, Habermas states that

it is not the irreconcilability of cultural value spheres – or the clash of life-orders rationalized in their light – that is the cause of one-sided lifestyles and unsatisfied legitimation needs; their cause is the monetarization and bureaucratization of everyday practices both in the private and public spheres.

(II: 325)

In effect, then, Habermas works out a Weber-inspired analysis of modernity that accuses Weber of having failed to adequately grasp the selectivity of capitalist rationalization and its causes: the trajectory taken by modernization was not/is not the only one possible. In conceiving rationalization in terms of the increasing dominance of purposive rationality and in creating the impression that this tendency exhausts the meaning of such rationalization and – in retrospect – must appear inevitable, Weber overlooked the distinctness of what Habermas refers to as moral-practical and aesthetic-expressive rationality. In doing so, Weber failed to do justice to the possibility opened up with the advent of Western modernity, and specifically by way of “the linguistification of the sacred”: namely a society allowing the free interplay – harmonious coexistence – between the three forms of rationality now evolving, permitting each of them to blossom within their respective proper domain. However, in following Weber's one-sided and ultimately reductionist understanding of rationality, Adorno and Horkheimer, Habermas argues, were led to deny any trace of reason in the structures and institutions of modern life.
Critical theory had come to a dead end. Due to what Habermas castigates as a “totalizing” critique of reason in Adorno and Horkheimer, one more deeply indebted to Nietzsche than to Weber, they throw the baby out with the bath water: having “surrendered to an uninhibited scepticism regarding reason, instead of weighing the grounds that cast doubt on this scepticism itself” (Habermas 1987: 129), Adorno and Horkheimer abandon a notion of reason worth defending in the face of the rise to dominance of the purposive-rational type. They therefore fail to appreciate that the (narrow, one-sided) cognitive-instrumental rationality now reigning at the cost of various pathologies within the lifeworld must be understood as one type of reason, not as reason tout court and so as exhaustive. This is the Nietzsche-inspired Weberian category mistake Habermas sees his predecessors as committing.

It is important to be clear about exactly why Habermas thinks *Dialectic of Enlightenment* amounts to a dead end. It is because its authors are unable to answer the question to which Habermas’ discussion leads: having followed Nietzsche in devaluing all predicates concerning validity and in holding that it is not validity claims but power that is expressed in value appraisals (“this is good,” “this is right”) – “by what criterion shall critique still be able to propose discriminations?” (1987: 125). The Nietzschean theory of power with which both Weber and Adorno and Horkheimer are so impressed is one intent on distinguishing between “active” and “reactive” forces but unable to distinguish truth from falsity, reason from unreason. What the analysis carried out in *Dialectic* leaves us with, then, is a regression: “a world fallen back into myth, in which powers influence one another and no element remains that could transcend the battle of the powers” (ibid.), i.e., what Weber, pessimistically, came to see as the irreconcilable struggles between the demons. In failing to account for modernity’s specific “dignity” as constituted by what Weber theorized as the differentiation of value spheres in accord with their own logics, allowing – at least in *principle*, if not in historical reality – the power of negation and the capacity of individuals to discriminate between “yes” and “no” – that is, to both offer one another and demand from one another the backing with reasons for any utterances (including value judgments) seriously made – Adorno and Horkheimer’s *Dialectic* “oversimplifies its image of modernity astoundingly” (1987: 112).

I have stressed what Habermas finds problematic in the position he sees Adorno and Horkheimer as ending up in because it helps highlight what he could have focused on in advancing his critique but does not. When he charges that their understanding of capitalist modernity is oversimplified (“narrow” in the German original) and that they fail to do justice to the complexity of the potential for rationality set loose (again: in principle) by modernity, he is not concerned with any of the points of criticism I raised against them above.

Habermas no less than Adorno and Horkheimer holds that there is a real danger that “reason itself destroys the humanity it first made possible” (1987: 110). Habermas’ take on this tendency for capitalist modernity to self-destruct consists in his version of the “paradox of modernity” that Weber had warned against without seeing any reason-based way out – Habermas’ version being that of the system’s incursion into and so distortion of the symbolic components of the lifeworld: culture, society, and personality. This, for Habermas, captures the self-destruction presently playing itself out in our society, with system-induced pathologies – loss of meaning, anomie, psychopathologies – as the empirical consequence within the lifeworld.

Having established that the notion that “reason itself destroys the humanity it first made possible” is one that makes sense to both Habermas and Adorno and Horkheimer (though Habermas insists on reasons of resistance within reason that he accuses his predecessors of ignoring), we need to ask whether this way of conceiving the essence of the crisis mankind is facing in late modernity actually does so. I think not. For all their differences, Habermas, Adorno, and Horkheimer share a common one-sidedness when it comes to identifying the
full scope of the present crisis. What they all overlook may well prove to be not just any aspect or dimension of that crisis but its most fundamental one, its driving force.

The Legacy of Uncritical Anthropocentricity

In 1979, in a rare discussion of Habermas’ view of nature, Joel Whitebook formulated the following question: “Whether we can continue to deny all worth to nature and treat it as a mere means without destroying the natural preconditions for the existence of subjects?” (Whitebook quoted in Alford 1985: 142).

This is a pertinent question to ask. Now, while posing what is no doubt a very serious question about Habermas’ position, Whitebook’s manner of doing so appears to be fully compatible with the anthropocentric framework that Habermas himself subscribes to throughout his entire œuvre, unapologetically at that – an anthropocentrism that also holds for his work on “discourse ethics” which I must leave aside here (see Habermas 1990, 1993). The danger Whitebook draws attention to is this: as long as human society denies all worth (or more precisely, more than merely instrumental value) to nature, that nature, short of the protection a full moral standing would have provided it with, may well be exploited for human purposes to the point of destruction, a destruction that in its turn may endanger the existence on earth of mankind itself.

To be sure, what Whitebook is pointing to is not something wholly overlooked in the above discussion. Adorno and Horkheimer were concerned that man’s (and again, the masculine is to the point here) ever-intensifying and ever-perfected effort to gain mastery over outer nature would backfire – it would trigger a dialectic whereby such mastery “outside” man would come back to haunt him in his social and subjective being, leading not to the liberation hoped for – liberation from fear, but also from scarcity, toil, and hardship – but instead to suppression: control over nature proves itself historically as intimately linked with, indeed inseparable from man’s control over man. The exploitation of nature does not meet the promise of allowing man to become free, but takes the form of some men’s (or one class’s) exploitation over others.

Simply put, what is considered wrong and deserving criticism is everything to do with the destruction wrought and the sufferings inflicted by and on humans exclusively, nothing with that caused to nonhuman nature, nature being a relevant factor in the criticism simply due to the fact that the exploitation in question does so mediated by outer nature. To invoke the Marxian schema on which this analysis relies: capital exploits labor in order to generate profit. It does so by controlling the processes and mechanisms (private possession of the means of production, etc.) by way of which labor performs that exploitation of man’s other (Marx). There is a triad involved for exploitation to come about, a triad counting two social forces and one natural. Only what passes between the two social forces – capital and labor – is considered a suitable object of critique: they are, they define and exhaust the loci within which wrong takes place; nature is precluded as such locus. That nature is being exploited for the sake of man is viewed as a sheer fact of existence, and as such beyond the scope of meaningful (political, social, moral) critique. So, while nonhuman beings may also suffer, the only instance of suffering that counts is the unnecessary or “surplus” (Marcuse) one that man continues to inflict upon his fellow men.

It will not do to maintain the conventional anthropocentric framework that the Frankfurters as well as Western Marxism subscribe to, where only humans are admitted intrinsic value (or inherent worth) and where humans are socialized so as to regard themselves as apart from nature rather than as part of nature, as superior (based on some criterion – intelligence, in the culturally dominant version – handpicked by men themselves for the purpose) and so as the sole creatures on earth who are ends in themselves and so entitled to
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use nonhuman nature as a big reservoir of means for human-posed ends. Space does not permit making the case for the non- (as opposed to anti-) anthropocentric position I defend, based on a strong version of ecologically informed realism where value is not understood as the prerogative of human subjects but as a quality – property, characteristic – that is constantly being brought forward, sustained, and protected in all living organisms as well as in and by the ecosystems they comprise, manifesting itself as the species-specific good-of-its-own pursued and defended in all forms of life (see Taylor 1986; Rolston 1988; Vetlesen 2015).

There is something surprisingly uncritical about how the leading thinkers in Critical Theory have simply taken over the anthropocentric perspective on the human–nonhuman, society–nature relationships. Philosophically, it is remarkable that the fact/value and is/ought distinction subscribed to by Western thinkers at least since Hume’s warning against the naturistic fallacy – deriving something normative from the factual, something about how things ought to be from the way they are – is perpetuated by generations of theorists aspiring to critique the key premises on which Western modernity is based.

Taking Nature for Granted

Against this background, let us investigate in more detail what Habermas’ account of modernity as worked out in Theory of Communicative Action says about nature.

Habermas makes a distinction between the material and the symbolic reproduction of the lifeworld. We saw above that the framework he develops to analyze the crises and pathologies he views as peculiar to late capitalist modernity is built around the system/lifeworld constellation, whereby systemic imperatives of money and power cross borders, as it were: not content to remain within their proper bounds within the economy and the state, the imperatives expand their reach so as to colonize the symbolic components of the lifeworld, producing distinct pathologies there inasmuch as the lifeworld cannot without distortion be sustained instrumentally and strategically instead of by way of the communicative, validity-redeeming, and speech-act mediated give-and-take of its individual members.

But what about the other dimension within which a concrete historical lifeworld is being sustained over time, the material one? Habermas has surprisingly little to say about it – both in general and as far as its relevance for the causes of crisis and pathologies is concerned. On closer inspection, the categories for which we seek are virtually empty, vacuous, in the 1200 pages making up his major work. True, he does note what he calls “the destructive side effects of the violent processes of capital accumulation and state formation.” But instead of dwelling on how this destruction plays out in nature and from the point of view of the nonhuman creatures affected, Habermas goes on to observe, coolly, that “the capitalist mode of production [...] can better fulfill the tasks of materially reproducing the lifeworld [...] than could the institutions of the feudal order that preceded them” (II, 321).

I believe the reason for this view on Habermas’ part is fairly simple: Habermas takes it for granted that nature in the way it figures in the material reproduction is basically a reliable factor, likely to remain so in the foreseeable future, so that what a society such as ours needs to take from nature in the form of resources and goods, nature will deliver. Again, the way a given society goes about organizing its ongoing exploitation of nature seen and treated as a vast reservoir of resources and distributing the goods among the humans (classes, nations, individuals) in need of them is an eminently contested political and ideological issue, and as such a long-standing concern of Western Marxism (see Habermas 1976).

What is overlooked in such a perspective is that in many regions of the world today natural goods and resources that both parties to the capital–labor constellation have relied upon and have taken for granted that they can continue to count on are either becoming increasingly scarce, or downright depleted, or so degraded as to be unable to recover and replenish.
Consider the following well-documented facts. In the last fifty years, the number of animals in the world has been halved. Three out of nine critical boundaries/thresholds of the earth system have been crossed (climate change, biodiversity, and human interference with the nitrogen cycle), while four others (ocean acidification, global freshwater use, changes in land use, and the phosphorous cycle) represent emerging rifts (see Magdoff and Foster 2011: 12f). In the course of the year’s first seven months, the global economy has used up resources it takes the affected ecosystems twelve months to reproduce and replenish. And so on and so forth. Now this is what overshoot is all about, what happens when a society goes beyond its carrying capacity, overutilizing resources by way of employing over-efficient methods and technologies, taking from nature more than nature is able to give back, and doing so at an increasingly greater pace and with ever-expanding reach on what is one physically finite planet.

To recognize the importance of this, consider that exploitation as constituting the modus operandi of capitalism as we know it is two-dimensional: when capital exploits labor, that labor is put to use so as to exploit nature in ways conducive to growth and profit. Short of a nature that provides the substrate at which labor directs its effort in turning everything into commodities to be accorded a price tag on a market, the foundation for capital’s ability to have those commodities produced and sold would evaporate. And it is not only that nature is invaluable to the process of making and selling commodities; nature is also invaluable to the reproduction of the human subjects that make up capital and labor as social classes. Humans are not a self-sufficient species; we cannot, strictly speaking, feed ourselves. We can only do so, and thereby help sustain humanity over time, by relying on the air, water, and soil that nature, and only nature, provides. Both humanity’s and capital’s existence depend on nature in this respect.

As indicated, Adorno, Horkheimer, and Habermas all subscribe to the premises of Western Marxism on this point. They all, that is, focus their critical attention so one-sidedly on the man-to-man exploitation as to neglect the man-nature one. They treat as secondary and derivative what is in fact primary: for lack of intact nature to exploit, the entire capital/labor dynamic will grind to a halt. Only at the moment when it is so degraded as to no longer be there for the taking, does the irreplaceability and indispensability for man, for capital, of the nature mistreated as mere means begin to dawn on us, reluctantly, belatedly. To fail to recognize as much is to prolong a blind spot in Marx, the nineteenth-century thinker, into the twenty-first century, a period whose distinct crises cannot be understood as long as the blind spot remains.

The point I am making is corroborated in economist Herman Daly’s insistence that “the economy is a subsystem of the ecosystem, and that the containing ecosystem is finite, non-growing and materially closed” (Daly 2007: 2). Using Daly’s terms, when the giants in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century economic thinking such as Smith, Ricardo, and Marx developed their theories, the world was relatively empty of humans and artifacts, products, and waste; today it is increasingly full. Hence, the pattern of scarcity has changed fundamentally: the limiting factor has changed from man-made to natural capital. Daly’s reasoning is worth quoting in extenso:

In yesterday’s empty world man-made capital and labour were limiting; in today’s full world natural capital with its flow of natural resources and flux of natural services is limiting. The fish catch is no longer limited by the number of fishing boats (man-made capital), but by the remaining populations of fish in the sea (natural capital). Cut timber is no longer limited by saw mills, but by standing forests. Energy from petroleum is no longer limited by pumping and drilling capacity, but by the remaining geological deposits. […] The difficulty is that the condition of maintaining productive capacity intact has in the empty world been applied only to man-made
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capital. Natural capital has not been maintained intact by any depreciation or deple- tion set-asides. The unsustainable depreciation and depletion of natural capital has therefore been counted as income, as if it were sustainable consumption.

(Daly 2007: 252, 28)

As Daly shows, economic thinking and practice have not changed, even though the limiting factor has. Man-made and natural capital continue to be seen and treated as substitutes, although in fact they are complements instead. What Nicholas Georgescu-Roegen (1975) designated “the fallacy of endless substitution” – a fallacy he attributed equally to the neo-classical school of economics underpinning current neoliberalism and to the Marxist one – is borne out empirically in that the capitalist system tries to survive by way of the only route it recognizes, namely by exploitation-facilitated growth. In persisting on sticking to this course, capitalism is bound to undermine the sources of value (profit) for which planet earth, within whose physical and biological limits this system is bound to operate, has no substitutes. We need to acknowledge – in their interconnectedness and mutual dependency – the two dimensions in which exploitation takes place: whereas human capital is overused and overstretched so as to result in burnout in the individual human agents affected, natural capital is overexploited so as to result in overshoot within the ecosystems involved, the consequence being the disappearance of habitat, the erosion of the soil, the toxification of the seas (now exacerbated by microplastics entering the marine food chain), the extinction of species, the loss of biodiversity, etc., referred to above.

That capitalism in its contemporary global reach overexploits and depletes the two absolutely essential and irreplaceable sources of value (profit) – the living nature that abounds in the natural world and the living nature that each human being exhibits throughout her life and in each instance of performing labor – and that capitalism as we know it cannot help itself from thus ruining the conditions it depends on strike me as the “paradox of modernity” that presently is playing itself out. And yet it is a paradox whose origins, mechanisms, and symptoms both the first and the second generation of critical theorists seem either unable or unwilling to acknowledge. True, Adorno and Horkheimer can hardly be faulted for not having addressed the specifics of a degradation that has accelerated in the last few decades in particular. Habermas for his part cannot be that easily let off the hook, being a contemporary to the trends we have witnessed at least since the 1970s. But my main charge against all three of them – and this goes for the likes of Marcuse and Honneth as well, although I cannot argue the case here – is that the nature deficit I have identified is essentially philosophical and not a matter of being more or less up to date with the empirical facts. Whether writing prior to the most severe ecodestructive trends or writing (as do Habermas and Honneth) at a time when they proliferate to the point of looming disaster, my point of criticism is the same: the very framework within which all three generations conceive of the society–nature relationship has proved inadequate to come to terms with what is at stake.

Return now to the case of Habermas. For all its ambition to offer an exhaustive analysis of the crises that characterize late modernity capitalism, the paradox of modernity in the way I have formulated it exposes a serious conceptual poverty in Habermas’ theory. Consider, for a start, his catalog of “formal world concepts” with corresponding epistemic domains, valdity claims, attitudes, and types of discourse: there is no distinct category for such natural entities and beings as trees, birds, and rivers; for habitats and ecosystems. In fact, there is no “natural world” in Habermas’ technical terminology; there is only an objective world, as distinct from a social and subjective one. And that objective world is defined as consisting of the totality of entities and states of affairs (“Tatsachen”) with respect to which propositions may be either true or false. The elementary distinctions between organic and inorganic, animal and inanimate, between nonhuman entities and artifacts, and between the grown and the
produced get lost insofar as everything covered by these distinctions is put undifferentiatedly within the “objective” world.

Indeed, on this score Habermas’ entire ouvre exhibits great consistency and continuity. Since the 1960s and up to the present, the leitmotif of his notion of critique has remained the same: to prevent relations between men – social relations – from becoming like our relations with the natural world (see Alford 1985: 77). Habermas has always subscribed to and never questioned Marx with regard to the distinction-cum-ontological dualism invoked here: society holds out the promise of freedom, nature is the realm of necessity; subjects with powers of agency exist only within the human-made social and cultural domain, nature remains the domain of objects, passively awaiting whatever projects homo sapiens pursues. Conceptually, Habermas continues to regard nature the way he did in his first major statement, Knowledge and Human Interests. The theory of quasi-transcendental epistemic interests may have been abandoned, but the triadic model is not and the objectivating stance continues to define the framework and methodology for scientific knowledge (“Naturwissenschaft”). In short, the species-bound interest in mastery and “technical control over objectified processes” (1972: 309), secured through a combination of laboratory experiments and carefully executed interventions (Bacon), is held on to. No nature-derived or nature-directed limits to such will-to-control over nature are seriously entertained – not empirically, and not morally. Indeed, the appropriate, and in that sense rational, type of action with respect to nature is that of purposive-rational action. This is not to say that, on Habermas’ scheme, other stances, attitudes, and types of action with respect to, say, a tree or a landscape, are not possible. But it is to say that such alternatives to the objectifying, purposive-rational stance, exhibiting cognitive-instrumental rationality and its validity claims of pragmatic efficiency and propositional truth, must be considered inferior as far as rationality is concerned and as mistaken as far as the appropriate validity claim is concerned. To greet and respect trees on the grounds that they too are subjects, loci of agency (as indigenous peoples do (did)), and as prescribed in mythical worldviews, in animism and in panteism, would amount to downright regression when measured against the modern scientific worldview that presently is being adopted by – or imposed upon – the whole world. As long as it operates within its proper domain of knowledge and intervention, i.e., external nature, the technical cognitive interest geared to mastery and control is the rational stance. Habermas puts it unequivocally:

While we can indeed adopt a performative attitude to external nature, enter into communicative actions with it, have aesthetic experiences and feelings analogous to morality with respect to it, there is for this domain of reality only one theoretically fruitful attitude, namely the objectifying attitude of the natural-scientific, experimenting observer.

(1982: 243f.)

Now recall what Descartes stated in his Principles of Philosophy:

There exist no occult forces in stones and plants. There are no amazing sympathies and antipathies, in fact there exists nothing in the whole world of nature which cannot be explained by purely corporeal causes totally devoid of mind and thought.

(Descartes 1644: para. 187)

To be sure, Habermas expresses his position using other terms than did Descartes. But one is hard pressed to find substantive ontological, epistemological, and methodological differences between their statements.
Reproducing Selectivity

Why is it that Habermas fails to address society’s escalating destruction of the natural world? Why, that is, does he restrict his scope of criticism to the inward-directed instances of the system’s colonization of the lifeworld when the outward-directed instances of the system’s twin imperatives – money and power, both wedded to and depending on never-ending growth – are no less dangerous? Why does Habermas shy away from what Paul Shepard in Nature and Madness suggested is the pivotal question in our time: “Why do men persist in destroying their habitat?” (Shepard 1982: 1).

That the domination of nature and the domination of man go hand in hand remains a crucial insight of first-generation Critical Theory, one to which Habermas subscribes. Yet the selectivity – to turn Habermas’ critique of Weber against Habermas – with which this insight is pursued is no less conspicuous in Habermas than in his predecessors. Habermas’ theory remains loyal to the axiom upon which capitalist modernity is premised: both his “critical theory” of this society and that society take it for granted that, as far as danger, damage, and pathologies are concerned, what matters is the human-to-human axis, not the human–nonhuman and the society–nature one. As we have seen, cognitive-instrumental rationality in conjunction with an objectivating attitude seeking technical control and gaining mastery over nature so as to exploit her resources for human ends is perfectly legitimate within its proper domain, indeed epistemically superior to any alternatives. The same holds for the imperatives of money and power within their proper domain, the systems of economy and administration. Problems arise, crises threaten, and pathologies may follow only in the case where what is the perfectly appropriate sort of rationality within one domain starts encroaching upon others so as to gain primacy there – hence the system’s colonization of the lifeworld.

In this entire setup – immensely theoretically complex and impressive in its empirical reach – the role of nature is oddly absent, the voice of nature silenced. Not how the systemic imperatives distort – to the point of degradation, depletion, extinction – the integrity of nature concerns Habermas, but only how they distort the integrity of the lifeworld. What Habermas fails to acknowledge is that the integrity of the lifeworld can only be preserved on the condition that nature’s integrity is. Habermas’ work fails to recognize that the two are connected in such a way as to involve the ontological primacy of nature over the lifeworld, revealing humankind’s continuity with nature as well as non-optional dependence on her – a dependence we should safeguard and celebrate instead of either fighting it or denying it, misjudging it as something negative.

To conclude, I believe that the exposed one-sidedness of Habermas’ theory of the causes of crises and the pathologies they produce mirrors the one-sidedness of the (selective, capitalist) modernization process he sets out to critically examine. This may well be the price he pays for staying too close to the object of his inquiry: the neglect of the damage done to the nonhuman world reflects in theory the indifference and carelessness fostering and accompanying those damaging practices.

References

CRITICAL THEORY AND THE ENVIRONMENT


Further Reading