

The causal power of the possible: forests, climate change and dialectical critical realism

This contribution explores how Dialectical Critical Realism can be mobilised to think the temporality and tensed processes involved in adapting forests to climate change. A central challenge in this field is that, due to the long development and life cycles of trees, decisions concerning forests several decades into the future must be made in the present – while the future climate remains both ontologically and epistemologically uncertain.

Through a case study in the Swiss Alps, I examine how forest practitioners and other actors navigate limited knowledge, the openness of the future, and their axiological moment in a world of change. I trace how the future forest emerges as a possibility through references to causal powers in biophysical nature, in reflexive knowledge about it, and in embodied agency – whereby the possible itself comes to exert causal power. I argue that despite an apparent axiological indeterminacy, forest praxis is neither arbitrary nor directionless.

Rather than emphasising the modern ideal of fully understanding or controlling the complexity of nature, the praxis observed is based on a reflexive awareness of one's positionality in relation to transcendent powers within nature. This perspective challenges dominant interpretations of nature governance framed by sustainability discourses and is constrained by an actualist philosophy, that exhibits an enduring desire to close the realm of the possible. In this sense, I argue that the issue of forest adaptation to climate change reveals the depth of our constellational containment within nature. It encourages us to conceive of ecological change not as a rigid act of steering nature from the present moment, but as a continuous meshwork of opening and closing possibilities.