



[Reviews]

Nature and the Form of Value under Capitalism: A Reading of *Free Gifts: Capitalism and the Politics of Nature*

Natureza e não-valorização no capitalismo: uma leitura de “Free Gifts: Capitalism and the politics of nature”

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Abstract

This review analyzes *Free Gifts: Capitalism and the Politics of Nature* by Alyssa Battistoni, situating its contribution within contemporary debates on capitalism and nature. It argues that, by emphasizing processes whose material significance does not appear in the form of value, the author tends to obscure the specific social mediations that historically organize the relationship between society and nature. Drawing on the relationship between nature and society in dialogue with the problem of expropriation, the review suggests that capitalist dynamics involve not only processes of invisibilization but also the continuous incorporation and commodification of new dimensions of nature. In this sense, the book's main contribution lies in making visible the material conditions of capitalist reproduction, even as its limitations point to the need for an analysis more centered on the social mediations of accumulation.

Keywords: Nature; Marxist ecology; Expropriation.

Resumo

Esta resenha analisa o livro *Free Gifts: Capitalism and the Politics of Nature*, de Alyssa Battistoni, situando sua contribuição no interior do debate contemporâneo sobre capitalismo e natureza. Argumenta-se que, ao enfatizar a não-valorização, a autora tende a obscurecer as mediações sociais específicas que organizam historicamente a relação entre sociedade e natureza. A partir do diálogo entre a relação sociedade e natureza com o problema da expropriação, a resenha sugere que a dinâmica capitalista envolve não apenas processos de invisibilização, mas também a contínua incorporação e mercantilização de novas dimensões da natureza. Nesse sentido, a principal contribuição do livro reside na explicitação das condições materiais invisibilizadas da reprodução capitalista, ainda que seus limites indiquem a necessidade de uma análise mais centrada nas mediações sociais da acumulação.

Palavras-chave: Natureza; Ecologia marxista; Expropriação.



1. Introduction

In recent years, the intensification of the climate crisis has produced a significant shift in discussions within contemporary social theory, leading to renewed interest in the relationships between capitalism, nature, and historical forms of socioecological domination. In this context, a number of recent works have sought to rearticulate Marxist debates on nature, aiming to understand not only the ecological limits of capitalist accumulation, but also the specific ways through which capitalism materially organizes the relationship between society and the natural world. It is within this field that *Free Gifts: Capitalism and the Politics of Nature*, by Alyssa Battistoni (2025), is situated, a work that seeks to reconstruct, through a reading of classical political economy and Marx's critique thereof (2023), the concept of the "free gift of nature" as a central category for understanding the specifically capitalist form of appropriating nature.

The starting point of the book is the idea that capitalism treats certain elements of nature as "free gifts," that is, as material conditions indispensable to the production process that do not appear under the form of value. This is a structural disjunction between material usefulness and economic recognition, in which processes essential to production remain economically "nonexistent" within the form of value. From this formulation, Battistoni (2025) shifts a classical question of political economy, the condition of nature in production, toward an investigation into how nature appears within the specific social forms of capitalism. This shift allows the author to argue that capitalism cannot be understood solely as a system of generalized commodification, but also as a regime structurally dependent on processes whose material significance does not appear in the form of value. In these spaces, natural and social processes remain outside the form of value while simultaneously sustaining the dynamics of accumulation. The concept of *free gift* thus designates this set of indispensable material conditions that do not immediately appear in the form of price or wage.

Based on this analytical framework, Battistoni (2025) significantly expands the scope of the concept by including not only elements of nonhuman nature, but also forms of social cooperation and reproductive labor. The *free gift* therefore comes to designate a broader logic of rendering invisible the material conditions of the reproduction of life, articulating debates on nature, social reproduction, and socioecological metabolism. The



author briefly reconstructs the concept of “gift” in social theory, distinguishing between approaches that interpret it as a gesture without reciprocity and those that understand it as a socially structured form of exchange. The capitalist *free gift*, however, does not correspond to either of these traditions: it does not involve reciprocity, nor is it based on an act of giving, but rather designates a structural form of appropriation mediated by dominant economic forms.

The theoretical ambition of the book is twofold: on the one hand, to reconstruct the category of free gift as an analytical tool for understanding the limits of commodification; on the other, to use it to reinterpret contemporary debates on environmental externalities, social reproduction, and ecological metabolism.

It is from this tension that the critique developed in this review is oriented. The central argument is that the category of *free gift*, as formulated by Battistoni, tends to obscure certain fundamental mediations within Marxist theories of the sociability of nature, especially those related to the problem of expropriation and the centrality of value theory. By emphasizing processes whose material significance does not appear in the form of value, the author partially shifts attention away from the historical violence that structures capitalist expansion.

To develop this critique, the text is organized into three moments: first, it reconstructs the theoretical architecture of the concept of *free gift*; then, it situates this proposal within contemporary ecological Marxist debates; finally, it mobilizes recent contributions in social theory to discuss the limits of material monism and its implications for analyzing the relations between capitalism and nature.

2. Constructing the Concept of Free Gift

In the introduction to the book, the author presents the central intuition of her argument, namely, the existence of a structural disjuncture between material usefulness and economic value. The opening chapters of the book are devoted to genealogically reconstructing this idea within the tradition of political economy, with the aim of demonstrating that the notion of “free gifts of nature” does not constitute an occasional metaphor, but rather a recurring category in modern economic thought. By revisiting classical political economy through the lens of Marx, Battistoni demonstrates that nature



functions as a productive force that enters the production process at no cost to capital. This formulation makes it possible to clarify a fundamental distinction between what enters the form of value and what, although indispensable to material production, remains outside the form of value. It is at this point that the author mobilizes Marx's reading, especially his discussion of ground rent, to argue that nature may function as a "free gift," that is, as a set of productive forces that enters the production process at no cost to capital.

While exchange value is determined by socially necessary labor time, nature possesses material usefulness without producing value in this strict sense, allowing natural elements to increase labor productivity and reduce production costs without being added to calculation in the form of wage or price. From this formulation, Battistoni argues that the separation between waged human labor and nature constitutes a structural feature of capitalism. Human labor enters the form of value and becomes the measure of social wealth, while nature appears as its counterpart, a set of unpaid productive forces indispensable to production, yet economically invisible.

This argument allows contemporary debates on environmental externalities to be reinterpreted by suggesting that capitalism depends upon processes that remain outside the form of value, so that the intensive use of natural elements not accounted for as costs does not constitute an anomaly, but rather a constitutive feature of the system. By rejecting a reading that reduces the ecological crisis to market imperfections, the author situates the problem at the level of the social forms that organize production.

3. Free Gift, natureza e liberdade coletiva

After establishing the conceptual foundations of the *free gift*, Battistoni (2025) shifts the focus of analysis by introducing the problem of freedom, allowing the author to situate the ecological question within a broader debate concerning the normative values that structure critiques of capitalism. She begins from the observation that many contemporary approaches to the ecological crisis assume two recurring forms: a moral critique of the destruction of nature and a technocratic critique based on the notion of externalities. The former tends to presuppose a relatively stable conception of nature as bearing intrinsic value; the latter reduces the ecological problem to market failures that



can be corrected through regulation. For Battistoni, both are insufficient, since they fail to interrogate the social forms that organize the relationship between society and nature.

To escape these limitations, the author proposes repositioning the ecological problem through the category of freedom. In this context, she mobilizes the contrast between two traditions of twentieth-century political theory: on the one hand, a conception associated with decentralized coordination through the market, in which freedom is understood as the absence of coercion in individual decisions; on the other, existentialism, a conception that emphasizes the collective dimension of freedom, understood as the capacity to socially determine the conditions of one's own existence. The central argument is that capitalism tends to restrict this collective dimension of freedom by organizing production through impersonal mechanisms, shifting fundamental decisions, such as the use of natural resources and the distribution of environmental risks, toward processes that escape political deliberation.

Within this framework, the concept of *free gift* acquires a specific normative function: ecological and social processes that sustain life become invisible presuppositions of production, limiting the possibility of their political problematization. Battistoni's ecological critique of capitalism, from this perspective, involves recovering the collective capacity to decide upon the use of nature. The "politics of nature" refers precisely to the possibility of making visible and contestable the ways through which capitalism organizes these relations.

In the following chapters, Battistoni expands the concept of *free gift* by including not only elements of nonhuman nature, but also forms of labor and social cooperation that do not appear in the form of value. The author engages with Social Reproduction Theory by identifying reproductive labor as the clearest example of this movement: activities indispensable to the reproduction of labor power which, although central to accumulation, do not appear in the form of waged labor, suggesting that a structural analogy exists between these processes. Just as nature may be mobilized as a free condition of production, certain forms of social labor are likewise treated as externalities. This expansion makes it possible to construct a broader theory of the material conditions of capitalist accumulation.

However, it also introduces an important difficulty. By bringing together under the same category distinct phenomena such as ecological processes and reproductive labor, the concept of *free gift* tends to become excessively broad, requiring a more precise



explanation of the mediations connecting these different dimensions. The central part of the book significantly expands the scope of this category, employing it as a key for understanding the material conditions of capitalist reproduction. The conceptual movement is clear: if capitalism depends on processes that are not accounted for as production costs, then its reproduction is anchored in a broader set of material conditions that remain outside the form of value. Nature ceases to appear merely as an exploited resource and comes to be understood as a structural condition of accumulation.

This expansion allows Battistoni to construct a broader theory of the material conditions of capitalism, shifting the analysis beyond the exploitation of waged labor while simultaneously offering a new reading of the ecological crisis. Rather than understanding it as the result of externalities, the author inscribes it within the very structure of capitalist production, which systematically depends on processes whose material significance does not appear in the form of value.

4. The Sociability of Nature, Expropriation, and the Limits of Monist Materialism

The reconstruction of the argument developed in this work makes it possible to recognize the relevance of Battistoni's contribution to contemporary debates on capitalism and nature by recovering the category of "free gifts of nature" present within the tradition of political economy, offering a sophisticated formulation of a central problem in the ecological critique of capitalism: the structural dissociation between material usefulness and economic value. Although capitalism depends deeply upon natural and social processes that sustain the reproduction of life, it tends to treat these processes as economically nonexistent.

However, the manner in which Battistoni (2025) progressively expands the concept of *free gift* also raises important theoretical difficulties. In particular, the tendency to treat natural processes and social processes as equivalent manifestations of the same logic of nonappearance in the form of value brings the book's argument closer to a broader conception of ontological unity between society and nature. The author herself explicitly characterizes her approach as materially monist, making explicit the ontological foundation of the argument that the relationship between nature and society is conceived through a principle of fundamental material unity, within which human



beings, living organisms, and nonliving physical processes participate in the same substance and the same physical reality. This position brings *Free Gifts: Capitalism and the Politics of Nature* closer to a broader set of currents in contemporary social theory, such as the new materialisms or world-ecology, which seek to overcome the modern dualism between nature and society through a unified material ontology.

Within these perspectives, distinctions between natural processes and social processes tend to be relativized in favor of a broader analysis of the metabolic interactions that structure the reproduction of life. Although this approach possesses important analytical merits, especially by emphasizing the materiality shared between humans and nonhumans, it also raises a central question for social theory: to what extent does the ontological dissolution of these distinctions effectively contribute to understanding the historically specific forms through which capitalism organizes the relationship between society and nature?

This question has been discussed by authors who seek to preserve the specificity of social mediations in the analysis of socioecological relations, arguing that many contemporary approaches aiming to overcome the dualism between nature and society ultimately produce a paradoxical theoretical effect: by dissolving distinctions between natural processes and social processes, they may obscure precisely what makes capitalism historically specific, namely, the particular social forms that organize the relationship between humans and nature (Malm, 2018; Žižek, 2017).

This critique begins from a relatively simple observation: although material production always involves interactions between society and nature, these interactions are mediated by historically determined social forms. Under capitalism, for example, the relationship with nature is organized through specific institutions such as private property, the value-form, and the commodity, which structure the ways through which natural resources are appropriated, transformed, and distributed.

One way of approaching this problem consists in drawing upon the idea of the sociability of nature, explored by Domingues (2024) in his most recent works on climate change. Domingues insists that the relationship between society and nature must be conceived from the recognition of what he calls the “insurmountable externality of nature.” This formulation is important because it makes it possible to avoid two opposing theoretical movements that frequently mark contemporary debate. On the one hand, it rejects the idea of an absolute separation between society and nature, typical of absolute



dualist or mechanistic readings of modernity. On the other, it also rejects the complete dissolution of these differences within a monist ontology that would reduce nature and society to undifferentiated manifestations of the same material process.

The notion of the externality of nature seeks precisely to preserve this tension. Nature participates constitutively in social life and in historical forms of production; however, it never becomes completely reducible to social mediations. There is always a moment of exteriority, ecological, material, and biophysical, that escapes full socialization. Conceived from this perspective, the relationship between society and nature appears as a historically mediated relationship, but never as an ontologically hybrid one. Human beings interact with the natural world through institutions, forms of production, and specific social structures; at the same time, however, nature maintains a dimension of autonomy that prevents its complete reduction to social forms.

This perspective makes it possible to reformulate the problem of the so-called “free gifts of nature” in new terms. If certain natural processes appear as economically free within capitalism, this does not mean that they are simply absorbed by social relations of production. On the contrary, their condition of relative exteriority is precisely what allows them to be appropriated by capital without their ecological costs fully appearing in the value-form. At this point, the discussion may be deepened through the so-called theorem of expropriation, developed by Dörre (2022). According to this argument, capitalist accumulation depends structurally on the continuous production of new frontiers of expropriation. Capitalism does not limit itself to exploiting already existing relations; it also continuously transforms social and ecological relations into new objects of expropriation.

Historically, this process has assumed different forms: the enclosure of common lands, the colonization of territories, the privatization of natural resources, and the incorporation of new regions into the world market. In each of these cases, capitalist expansion involved specific forms of violence that transformed previously common conditions into resources appropriable by capital. This dynamic remains central to understanding contemporary capitalism. Processes such as the privatization of water, the commodification of biodiversity, or the creation of carbon markets may be interpreted precisely as attempts to transform new dimensions of nature into objects of economic valorization.



In this context, it becomes possible to reinterpret the problem of the “free gifts of nature” in light of the notion of the externality of nature in relation to social forms of production, making it possible to understand why certain ecological processes may simultaneously appear as free resources and as new objects of capitalist expropriation. In other words, the same exteriority that enables their apparently free appropriation also opens space for recurring processes of expropriation and commodification. Nature may function as a *free gift* precisely because it is never completely subsumed by social relations; yet it is this same exteriority that makes possible its continuous transformation into new economic assets.

This tension becomes particularly evident in the contemporary context of the financialization of nature. In recent years, financial instruments such as carbon credits, green bonds, and compensation markets, among others, have sought to incorporate complex ecological processes into circuits of financial valorization. These mechanisms seek to assign prices to ecosystem services, carbon sequestration, or biodiversity conservation, converting natural processes into tradable assets in global markets. Nature thus ceases to appear merely as an external condition of production and becomes directly integrated into the valorization strategies of financial capital (Lavinias, 2025).

If, on the one hand, the concept of *free gift* emphasizes the ways through which certain natural elements do not appear in the form of value, on the other hand there is today a growing movement toward incorporating these same elements into the value-form. In such cases, nature does not appear simply as a free gift, but as a tradable financial asset, which suggests that the relationship between incorporation into the value-form and processes that remain outside the form of value is more dynamic and contradictory than the concept of *free gift* tends to indicate. This limits the understanding of the ways through which nature is incorporated into or excluded from the form of value.

Situated within this broader field of tensions, by emphasizing the logic of free gifts, the book illuminates an important aspect of the relationship between value and nature. At the same time, however, its perspective tends partially to shift the analytical focus away from the historical forms of expropriation and the social mediations that structure capitalist expansion. Recognizing this tension makes it possible to situate the work within a broader dialogue with different traditions of contemporary social theory. The principal contribution of *Free Gifts: Capitalism and the Politics of Nature* may lie precisely in opening a field of debate that remains central to contemporary social theory:



the problem of material conditions rendered invisible by political economy and their role in reproducing historical forms of capitalist domination.

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