

Alyssa Battistoni, *Free Gifts: Capitalism and the Politics of Nature*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2025. ISBN: 9780691263465 (cloth); ISBN: 9780691263489 (ebook)

As the rains arrive in the fall, a diverse array of people converge on the forests of North America's Pacific coast to pick matsutake (pine) mushrooms. At the end of each day picking, they sell the mushrooms to buyers stationed in remote bush camps who arrange for a series of middlemen to rush the mushrooms to Japan, where custom situates them as the basis of a kind of gift economy.

For Anna Tsing, who explores this odd-looking supply chain in *The Mushroom at the End of the World* (2015), this is an example of life "in capitalist ruins". Tsing's work is an entry in a still-growing wave of analyses that sought to deconstruct the Marxist tendency to understand capitalism as a totalizing system, arguing instead that it was possible to find areas of society and nature that exist beyond its all-encompassing commodification. In many instances, these analyses go so far as suggesting these putative non-capitalist worlds might hold the keys to a future beyond capitalism's grip.

In *Free Gifts: Capitalism and the Politics of Nature* (2025), Alyssa Battistoni interprets the case of the matsutake profoundly differently. The fact that matsutake production—which involves the mixing of human labor with nature to produce a commodity—is self-organized and conducted by independent workers operating in the forest rather than by capital-organized workers on the factory floor, she argues, does not mean that the matsutake trade is not capitalist. Instead, it demonstrates the adaptability of capital, showing how it responds to natural processes that it is unable, for material reasons, to fully subordinate.

This argument, one of the most politically salient points made in Battistoni's work, is just one of a range of interventions she makes as part of her exploration of Marx's peculiar term for nature: the "free gift". While the book is, in some sense, the latest entry in the burgeoning school of eco-Marxist thought, Battistoni carefully avoids the world of Marxology (attempting to divine what Marx the individual "really" thought or meant), instead using the "free gift" as a jumping off point to explore the role nature plays in capitalism's most fundamental process: production.

The book takes on three main tasks: theorizing the “free gift of nature as a capitalist social form” (p.11); critiquing capitalism's imposition of this social form specifically on the grounds that it restricts “our ability to act freely”; and analyzing the material implications of the “free gift” in capitalism today. Within each of these, Battistoni makes several arguments, including about how nature fits—and is fit—into a Marxist theory of production; about how divergent schools of radical ecological thought and Marxist feminism have mis-interpreted nature in ways that confound rather than clarify; and about what freedom is, and how the capitalist value form undermines it. Some of these contributions are extremely important for navigating the work of politics in our overheated and increasingly fascist world; others appear harder to translate into action.

The core question that motivates the book is this: what exactly does it mean to call nature a “free gift”?

It’s a confounding term because of its apparent redundancy, but for Battistoni, that is precisely where its meaning lies. On the one hand, virtually all cultural conceptions of the gift, which range from “an expression of pure generosity” to “a relationship of radical reciprocity” (e.g. in many North American Indigenous conceptions [Kimmerer 2013]), agree that the gift exists “as an alternative to the commodity” (p.9)—there is no market exchange involved. But on the other hand, for something to be “free” implies market exchange—it is “something ... priced at *zero*”.

By identifying nature as a “free gift”, then, Marx was denoting something completely different from notions of gifting that might undergird distribution and exchange in non-capitalist societies. He was defining a “distinctively capitalist social form, no less central to capitalism than more familiar concepts like the commodity and the wage” (p.10).

Capitalism, in other words, specifically constitutes nature *as* a “free gift”.

This “free gift”, Battistoni explains, has a “dual character” (p.89) that is crucial for understanding how capital integrates natural processes into production: it has “material capacities paired with an *absence* of exchange value”. This contrasts with human labor which has both material capacities *and* exchange value. It is this dual character that Battistoni uses to

explore how nature is incorporated into production, explaining it primarily through Marx's concept of "subsumption", the process of capitalist subordination of labor.

Marx split subsumption into two categories, "formal" and "real". Formal subsumption refers to the most basic form of integration into capitalism through the wage: workers are paid by a capitalist to produce the same goods they previously produced on their own, in more or less the same way they always have. It "is typically understood as a transitional stage on the way to real subsumption" (p.91).

Real subsumption involves the transformation of "the labor process *itself* ... in order to achieve greater efficiency and productivity by intensifying and rationalizing, rather than simply extending, labor" (p.91-92). It doesn't just change the social relations surrounding labor but changes the labor process itself—it "transforms it *physically*". This is how "the free gift of human cooperation" that drives so much of capitalist productivity is generated: real subsumption transforms labor into social labor.

This *physical* transformation of the production process holds the key, for Battistoni, to understanding why mushroom foraging—despite its non-capitalist appearance—is, in fact, a capitalist form of production. The mushroom's lifecycle cannot be fully subordinated to capital's time, but as Tsing's ethnography makes clear, the labor process that produces matsutake the commodity has undoubtedly transformed from whatever pre-capitalist mushroom foraging practices may have looked like.

Marx briefly described an in-between form of subsumption that he termed "hybrid subsumption". Battistoni rebrands this "commercial subsumption" and establishes it as a kind of spectrum that evolves dialectically: subsumption, in her telling, is not a linear path from formal to real subsumption with the latter being "full capitalism". Material reality shapes, in a back-and-forth, exactly how labor is subsumed by capital.

Neil Smith (2006) envisioned a capitalism that was well on its way to completing the real subsumption of all of nature, but that simply hasn't been borne out: large parts of biological reality have proven that they either can't be or aren't worth fully subjugating to capital's time. Battistoni's work helps us understand how these areas of "nature-based production", which she describes as being "abdicated" by capital, are still incorporated into capitalist production even as

they are not “really” subsumed and argues that it is physical properties that shape capital’s varied approaches.

In the case of mushroom foraging, as in other examples like family farming, labor is organized by capital *indirectly*: because nature can’t be fully subordinated to capital’s time, it dominates the labor process “primarily through control over exchange rather than production” (p.98).

This is perhaps the most crucial insight of the book, and it is particularly relevant for geographers, who tend to valorize these sites of apparently non-capitalist production as bastions of already-existing post-capitalism. If these are, in fact, just different forms of capitalist production, their importance for a post-capitalist future lies not in their unique characteristics but rather in what they share: the fact that they are forms of labor exploited by the capitalist class for the sake of accumulation. This recognition, Battistoni argues, should inform more “heterogenous forms of labor politics” (p.112) that can bring people together across stages of the production process, overcoming the atomization that capital relies on to maintain its domination—an argument reminiscent of some of the examples of labor politics offered in Stefania Barca’s *Workers of the Earth* (2024).

In making this argument, Battistoni also charts an interesting middle path between Malm (2016) and Mitchell (2009) on the one hand and those who have criticized their work as having an overly determinist emphasis on “materiality” (Chua and Bosworth 2023). As she tells it, the material properties of nature collide with the imperatives of capital to dialectically produce an array of diverse forms of subsumption that is neither wholly determined by bio-geophysical properties nor by social relations.

While *Free Gifts* makes important contributions to a variety of debates, Battistoni’s treatment of value—central to her arguments about freedom and capitalist unfreedom—oversimplifies Marx’s theory of value and leaves readers with a sense that “market rule” is the primary form of domination under capitalism. In short, Battistoni argues that capitalism’s failure to assign a price to nature (in most cases), which she argues is a constitutive outcome of the wage relation and humanity’s unique ability to sell our labor, creates a situation in which humans are unable to assign value to nature themselves. She characterizes capitalism as a “form of rule”

(p.16) defined by two modes of domination: “class rule and market rule”. But it is market rule, she argues, that makes it impossible for us to value nature, because the market is where prices are set. Even the ruling class, in Battistoni’s telling, has its action constrained by this form of domination.

This is the basis for her argument for a Sartre-and-Beauvoir-inspired climate existentialism, itself an undoubtedly justified clarion call for living as though we are in an emergency, but it’s built on a glossing over of the relationship between price and value in the Marxian sense. This relationship has been the subject of debate since the early days of political economy (Kendall 2026) and while there remains no consensus perspective, simply equating price and value—when prices rise and fall on a daily basis at the whims of commodity traders—risks obscuring the degree to which *class* rule imposes the destruction of nature upon society.

Battistoni implies that the price-setting mechanism of the market is a form of domination without agent. But price, as the Lebanese political economist Ali Kadri (2023) reminds us, is an instantiation of the state of class struggle in a given moment in history, a product of the power of capital vis-à-vis labor. While there are undoubtedly dynamics involved in price-setting that are not within the control of a given capitalist, to suggest that price-setting has no subject obscures the realities of monopoly capital and the myriad ways that capital acts as a class for itself. Doing so allows Battistoni to argue that the destruction of nature is largely a product of market rule and the market’s inherent inability to price (value) nature—a formulation that recognizes capitalism as responsible for ecological catastrophe, but not capital. This stands in stark contrast to Kadri’s analysis, for example, which argues that the destruction of nature itself is a form of value in the Marxian sense—bringing a historical subject, the capitalist class, back into the equation.

With that said, there is no doubt that Battistoni is correct that it is “capitalism as a form of rule” (p.16) that prevents us from valuing nature *differently*, because it is capitalism that has instantiated the “free gift” as a social form. This question about the freedom to value nature differently is what threads the book’s pieces together into a coherent project.

At a time when the academic left, and particularly the ecologically oriented academic left, has splintered into tendencies that often carry incompatible normative commitments, *Free Gifts* makes important contributions that illuminate shortcomings on all sides. It rigorously

explores how nature is constituted under capitalism and how it is incorporated into production and exhorts us to begin our analysis from there, rather than from specific visions of how the world might be otherwise. In so doing, it provides critical tools for geographers and other scholars interested in contributing to radical social change.

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Nick Gottlieb
Department of Geography
Simon Fraser University
nick_gottlieb@sfu.ca