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Review of *Free Gifts: Capitalism and the Politics of Nature* by Allyssa Battistoni

By Omar Kutty

Free Gifts by Alyssa Battistoni is an impressive and sophisticated work of Marxist political theory. The book makes insightful interventions into political ecology, political economy, feminism, and other aligned fields. Although a work of high theory targeted at academics, it exemplifies clear writing. While Battistoni is mainly calling for us to reevaluate the role of use-value in the relationship between capitalism and nature, she is also asking us to bring existentialism into eco-Marxist debates. This review will not comment on the latter point so as to stay focused on her main arguments.

Battistoni's central argument is that capitalism is systematically unable to assign values to the stuff of nature, and that it therefore treats that stuff as "free gifts" (10). She borrows the latter phrase from classical political economists, who had observed that much of what humanity depended upon came without cost to humans. In her account, the free gifts of nature take two forms: things that economists would think of as environmental or public goods (e.g. air, sunshine and nitrogen fixation). But Battistoni, in line with the classical economists, argues that ownable or controllable things should also be seen as free gifts of nature: processes like photosynthesis, the "elasticity of steam," as well as static physical properties like the tensile strength of metal and the hardness of glass (88).

It's pretty easy to see how air and sunshine are free gifts to capitalism, but the same cannot be said about foodgrains, metal or crude oil. Capitalists after all have to spend a lot of resources to extract those things and bring them to market. Battistoni recognizes this and points out that capitalists do not spend anything to develop their useful qualities (8, 172) – their photosynthesis, their tensile strength, their energy content, etc. Nature endowed those natural materials with such useful properties without asking anything in return.

To clarify, her argument is not simply that nature's gifts are free because capitalists don't pay the Earth anything for them. She is arguing, rather, that the things of nature have no value in the specifically Marxist sense of that word. In her framing, natural things function as zero-value items (10) because they are pulled into a system that automatically assigns value to the products of human labor but not to the products of nature (33). In other systems, the contrast between things with value and things without would either not exist or exist in very different ways. For this reason, she argues, the free gift of nature "is a form wholly internal to capitalism" (187).

Perhaps the best illustration of Battistoni's argument comes from her analysis of the nineteen-nineties' Biosphere 2 project (179). In that project engineers tried to create an entirely self-contained replica of the Earth's biosphere in a large greenhouse. The artificial biosphere depended on a vast capital investment: a hydro-mechanical infrastructure that circulated the air, water, nutrients and other vital substances in ways meant to make the artificial biosphere self-sustaining. To Battistoni, the project's failure shows not only how many free gifts humans get from nature and not only how many recalcitrant physical elements remain, but also how immensely expensive replication of the biosphere would be. She cites a study that estimated the cost to be three *quintillion* dollars for a single generation! Rather than put ourselves into a situation in which we are forced to replicate the many "ecosystem services" provided by the existing biosphere, she asks, why not just preserve the ones we have (188)?

Battistoni's political conclusions are ones with which most readers will agree (this reader included). She is opposed both to romantic environmentalists (101) who claim that nature is beyond all value and to economists who think that we can simply put a price on nature through the policy ideas of Pigout and Coase (120–135). "Why," she asks, "should the state go through so much trouble to privatize and capitalize nature instead of socializing it" (202). A post-capitalist world, she admits, would not necessarily solve ecological problems, but it could help us recognize that "decisions about how to organize ourselves as human beings will inevitably also be decisions about how to organize the nonhuman world" (210). Keeping our world habitable for humans, she argues, ". . . simply means taking collective responsibility for maintaining, remaking and cultivating, the multispecies worlds upon which human beings rely not only for mere survival but for lives that are pleasurable, fulfilling, and meaningful . . . It would be what we might think of as a form of conscious planetmaking" (202).

Given that Battistoni reaches very familiar, ecosocialist conclusions (e.g., Angus et al), we need to ask what her free gifts framing adds to debates within political ecology and aligned fields. It is tempting to say that her book is essentially a much longer version of the following paragraph written by John Bellamy Foster (1994, 123) some 32 years ago:

By failing to place any real value on natural wealth, capitalism maximizes the throughput of raw materials and energy because the greater this flow – from extraction through the delivery of the final product to the consumer – the greater the chance of generating profits. And by selectively focusing on minimizing labor inputs, the system promotes energy-using and capital-intensive high technologies. All of this translates into faster depletion of nonrenewable resources and more wastes dumped into the environment.

It is also tempting to say that her book is a rehashing of the idea of the "free appropriation of natural conditions" by capital (Burkett 1996, 341) and how the separation of value from use-value directs production to the needs of capital rather than the needs of people

(Burkett, 1996, 339). While the goal of these earlier theorists was to provide a clear and concise explanation of how nature's nonvalue within capitalism contributes to massive ecological disruptions, Battisoni's goal is different: she wants to take us into the hidden abode of use-value.

Battisoni thinks that Marx underestimated the significance of use-value when he declared that "use-value as such lies outside the sphere of investigation of political economy" (36). She does not want nature to be reduced to "throughput." Battisoni is pointing out that, even though capital always pushes toward more control through more measurement, more standardization and more speed, it can never completely control "the recalcitrant physical elements (176)" of nature; some residue or excess always remains (11). To her, the particular physical qualities of the matter within our use-values ". . . are significant to how different aspects of nature appear within capitalism - to whether they are subsumed, commodified, alienated, owned" (37).

She uses agriculture as an example: despite all the R&D done by agribusinesses, they cannot yet change the fact that corn stalks have to grow in one place for a full season before the corn can be sold (102). They can control the "upstream and the downstream" of crop production but they ultimately have to give the chloroplasts the time to make their sugars (104), and, because this part of the process cannot be controlled, capital "abdicates" it to family farmers (ibid).

The claim about family farms is highly suspect, but the rest of her claim does seem to be technically true, but only technically so. Agribusiness does, after all, invest huge sums in the upstream and downstream of cash crops. She makes a similar claim about the gestation of human infants (178), and it again seems to be true only in a purely technical sense; very significant amounts of capital are invested in all things surrounding pregnancy. This reader still finds himself agreeing with Marx's declaration that the hidden abode of use-value is not terribly significant to understanding the problems of capitalism, not even its relationship with the nonhuman world.

Much the same could be said about her argument about free gifts of nature. It is technically true that, under Marxist theory, the nature inside a physical commodity has a value of zero because only abstract labor confers value; the natural portion of a use-value is by definition the part not shaped by labor and so it can have no value. The idea of a "free gift of nature" is essentially just a restatement of value theory.

"Ecosystem services" or environmental goods such as sunlight and nitrogen fixation have a better claim to being free gifts given that we don't apply labor to them at all, but are they free gifts to capital? No, the only free gift that capital gets under Marxist theory is surplus value. Ecosystem services might be free gifts to *humanity* because they help

sustain the biosphere in which we evolved and because they contribute to the production of most of what we humans consume, but they are not gifts to capital *per se*.

And this prompts a larger question: should nature ever be thought of as a gift? In my view, we reify and anthropomorphize both nature and capitalism whenever we use the language of giving, reciprocation, exchanging (3), robbing, violating (49) or anything similar with regard to nature, even if we do so in loosely metaphorical ways. If Battistoni were to more thoroughly explore her own argument that humans are natural organisms operating in a universe of non-human nature (27), she might have opted for an alternative language. If humans are natural, then so are the products of human labor (Harvey 1996, 186); they are just parts of nature that have been *moved* and *transformed* by humans. The language of movement, transformation and disruption is preferable in my view because it is more literal and thus less prone to the problems of reification and anthropomorphism.

Another thing that Battistoni does not seem to fully appreciate is that all organisms move, transform and disrupt their ecological surroundings in order to survive and thrive. We humans are different from other organisms only in that we can change our mode of interaction with ourselves and our environment much more quickly than other organisms. Under the capitalist mode, we humans are both incentivized and empowered to move and transform such immense quantities of nonhuman nature that we endanger the conditions that sustain our position within the “web of life” (Moore 2015). It is true, as Battistoni suggests, that capitalism’s inability to value nature precludes a possible check on capitalism’s disruptive power, but the driver of that power is, as Burkett and Foster argue, capitalism’s tremendous but utter irrational capacity to produce.

I highly recommend *Free Gifts* despite my disagreement with its major claims. If you are like me, you will find yourself returning to your prior assumptions after reading it, but you will nevertheless find this book an engaging and even beautiful way to have those priors challenged.

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Author Bio

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