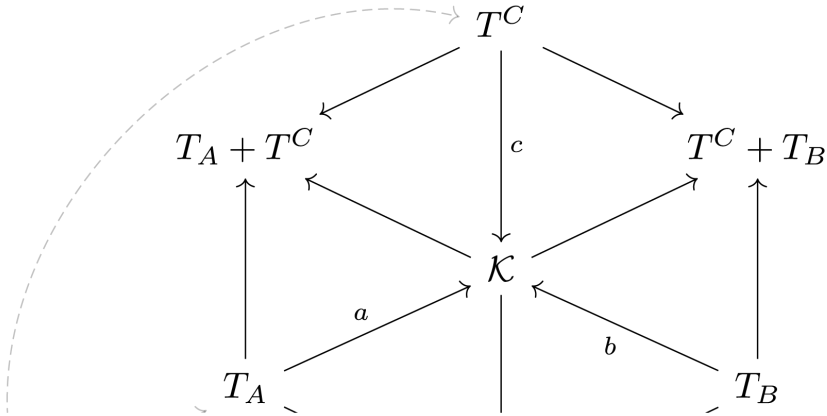


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 Individuals: it amounts to projecting onto the past a view that became seemingly self-evident only in modern society.”²² But as it is the case with commodity exchange, this is not simply a misperception, it reveals the fetishistic structure of power relations.

This is directly connected to the impossibility that monarchy—in this case, a basic form of State—could arise spontaneously from a single community: “A community grounded in the principle of reciprocity is capable of resolving whatever contradictions arise within it through the gift and redistribution. [...] A sovereign possessing absolute authority could never be born from this kind of situation.” In order for something like a king to arise, it is necessary that he “originally comes from the outside—in other words, that the sovereign arrives as a conqueror”.²³ This entails two things: on the one hand, a new king is established in a community by means of domination and plunder, but on the other, the king’s own power—the one he now has over his new and his old subjects—is also constituted in the process. The king’s conquest is a demonstration of his power, one that only exists by the collective attribution of his capacity to conquer again. It is true, as Marx once said, that “one man is king only because other men stand in the relation of subjects to him”, whereas they “imagine that they are subjects because he is king”.²⁴ What is not true is that this is simply a product of imagination and not the fetishistic effect of turning the relation of domination into an attribute of power.²⁵

What is also at play here is the double process of personification and naturalization. The king’s power is separated from the actual relation of domination—one that has to take into account the possible resistances and demands of the new subjects, which also have the “power” to make the domination non-sustainable—and is taken as the king’s “socio-natural property”; simultaneously, what is a relation between communities reappears as a relation between individuals who are represented as ideal—or, better put, juridical—persons, who willingly enter the relation of exchange between protection and obedience based on the inequality of power between the ruler and the ruled. This is the basic form of political fetishism, and it shows how power can be excised from the relations constituting it and appear to the individuals involved in the relations of power as an inherent property of these persons.

VIII. SEEING NATURE: CAPITALISM, ECOLOGY AND INTERCOURSE AS METABOLISM



So far we have been navigating through a diagram that is deeply inspired by Karatani’s attempt of reconstructing history through different combinations between modes-of-intercourse as they appear in different forms of social organization (II). In fact, to the cautious readers that are particularly concerned with the planetary scale impact generated by our own social activity and how questions of ecology must be weaved into any possibility of political experimentation, it can seem as if these categories rely on a conception of the “social” and its forms that might risk not accounting for this problem with the centrality it deserves.

We hope to make clear that ecology’s wager of mapping and rethinking the borders between the social and the natural is not merely compatible with our framework but, in fact, integral to it (IV). For that, we will argue that these different modes of intercourse and their combinations imply not only different

forms of relation to nature, but in fact different ways that nature is constituted as the “other” of sociality from the perspective of each of these social forms understood as modes of intercourse. Therefore, this positions our “transcendental” framework as a way to attain a new perspective on the social history of nature.

1. INTERCOURSE AS METABOLISM

Any claim of such a compatibility has to be developed in two steps: first, we briefly gloss over Karatani’s reliance on the concept of *intercourse* (*Verkher*) and how it relates to Marx’s own concerns with *metabolism* and to the field of Marxist Ecology. Then, through that, we attempt to systematize how nature becomes intelligible in a manner that is coextensive with these modes of intercourse. Doing so gives us a vantage point from which we can (at least briefly) contemplate the differences between each of the transcendental schemas advanced by specific modes of intercourse and then look at a particular problem from mode C, namely, the determination of use-values by exchange-values.

As previously stated, Karatani’s project is precise: to read Hegel’s *Philosophy of Right* as a seminal formulation of the Capital-Nation-State triad, a borromean knot of interlaced modes of intercourse that must be confronted as a complex and articulated social formation (II, XVII). The beginning of his wager is precisely the need to cover the other two points of our fearless triad, submitting them to the same critical procedure that takes place in Marx’s *Capital*.

To do so, Karatani mobilizes the concept of “intercourse”, briefly deployed by Marx in *The German Ideology* in reference to Moses Hess’s work, a lingering influence that can be traced back at least to the *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts*. The conceptual role it plays for Marx, as Karatani notes, is twofold. On the one hand, it becomes a way of speaking of exchange in general, beyond commodity exchange, and seeing phenomena as different as trade, warfare and communitarian life as processes that are permeated by acts of socialization through exchange, broadly construed. On the other hand, such a broadening of the concept of exchange leads to a novel way of picturing the social, one in which “relation[s] between man and nature necessarily take place by way of a certain kind of social relation between people”.²⁶ Thus, Hess did not have two separate concepts of relation, one focused on nature and another

Sociality, but rather conceived social relations as always including man and nature, described as a form of metabolism (*Stoffwechsel*).

SUM The concept of metabolism can also be further found in *Capital* and in Marx's unpublished "Ecological Notebooks" in which he delves into the agricultural sciences of his time (particularly Justus von Liebig's work) to deal with the monstrous consequences of ecological disturbances brought forth by the demands posed by accumulation within a capitalist system. As Kohei Saito makes clear, the concept of metabolism (*Stoffwechsel*) in Marx is a device to understand the inflection of economic forms (*Formwechsel*) into matter. ²⁷

This spells out an important motivation for this text, that is, a refusal to see ecology as a mere appendage to a critique of value (or of any social form), which means refusing any portrait of social forms that fails to recognize them as a regime that is already ecological. Instead, we hope to make clear that the concept of intercourse reframes social relationships, showing that they always happen through a material base and imply a certain relationship between man and nature.

To set a rather crude example, to examine the M-C-M' formula through the concept of metabolism means to observe the inflection and realization of that scheme, written abstractly, in matter (**XI**). Moreover, as Saito claims: "Marx's original methodological approach treats the objects of his investigation from both 'material' (*stofflich*) and 'formal' (*formell*) aspects." ²⁸ This is not merely something that appears in Marx's approach to nature but can also be seen in his approach to technology, which combines economic consequences with many attempts of extracting from the actual functioning of machines a way to position them as objects of inquiry within a higher level of abstraction. ²⁹

This interpenetration between the material and the formal, which will be our guiding light throughout this section, can be laid out through the conceptual proximity between intercourse and metabolism insofar as it allows us to look at Karatani's project from a slightly different angle, namely, paying attention to how each of these transcendental logics and their compositions can generate novel ways of visualizing nature. Doing so has two main implications: it allows us to clarify the way each of these modes sees nature and, then, to view them as intricate compositions that could help us further elucidate the way certain apparatuses of vision are materialized and hardwired into social practice.

2. SEEING NATURE THROUGH MODES OF INTERCOURSE

Starting with mode A, we can see that there is an extension of reciprocity towards nature, where magic serves as an example of a mediating practice

playing that role. Such a mediation is precisely what allows something that possesses *anima* to be taken as an object, even if temporarily, an objectifying dimension closely related to the fact that sedentarization entails a particular disruption that was unprecedented in nomadism. In the newly sedentarized communities, the spatial closeness to the dead and the reliance on a world full of entities endowed with *anima* demands that one sketches precisely these devices of mediation to join nature in a relation of reciprocity. Mind, however, that reciprocity does not entail harmony, but it is in itself a way of controlling, even if the object of control is seen as equal to the one controlling it.

This also means that, just like in their social counterpart, reciprocal exchanges with nature often keep stratifications between the two parts within a relation from becoming definitive as reciprocity itself is an arrangement predicated in an oscillation of the giving and receiving part (IX). In fact, the dynamics of gift-counter-gift, in its demand for the other part to reciprocate, be it in gift giving or warfare, implies precisely an oscillation that keeps the possibility of forming a permanent hierarchy between the parts at bay.³⁰ Thus, nature appears as an *agent*, an equal entity with which one can establish a relationship of reciprocity.

Mode B on its own needs to be understood in relation to “plunder and redistribution” which in itself implies a different way of visualizing nature and therefore demands different technical apparatuses that make nature legible to the State and are often rendered in terms of uniformization, from the institution of common forms of measurement to mapping the land for taxation (X). It is precisely because nature appears to the State in the same way dominated communities appear to dominant ones—as targets of plunder—that nature is produced within mode B as a *resource* to be managed, that is, an asset available for plundering but also in need of protection and administration.

James C. Scott³¹ talks about the visual regime of the State as a scheme that possesses four tenets: an administrative ordering which entails a mapping through simplifications; a high modernist ideology which is connected to an ideological reliance on the rational capacity of providing goods and services; an authoritarian state willing to deploy force in order to get its way; and a civil society that lacks the will and/or the means to resist this onslaught. It is not hard to see how each of these logics is implied in Karatani’s synthetic rendering of the logic of mode B as the logic of plunder and redistribution. While the first two tenets spell the management of redistribution as a logistical problem, the last pair is already concerned precisely with the problem of plunder as a procedure that is deeply related to the State’s schema, and these two moments appear precisely as a way of managing resources.

S Thus, plunder and redistribution, when extended to nature, means to visualize nature as a resource to be managed, and to which a legal subjectivity is attached (VII). Mind that, as we have been arguing, the relation between plunder and redistribution on the one hand and resource management on the other is not restricted to nature but can also be seen, for example, in the management of labour in the monumental infrastructural enterprises developed in societies in which mode B prevails.

We should note that such a framework works as a sort of low-resolution scheme and that any further specification requires that many other caveats be made. Still, it is important to keep one crucial point in mind: although these tenets about the State's regime of vision give the impression that we are talking about a rather limited picture of the State, we need to understand that there are no a priori borders that would presuppose a self-enclosed space in which these processes of plunder and redistribution take place. Rather, the relationship between the framing of resources, legal subjectivity and the borders of a State is precisely what is being constantly constructed and eroded through the succession of various modes of carrying out the operations that fall under the logic of plunder and redistribution (II, X, XVII).

By now it should already be clear how our phenomenological approach, along with the proposed reading of Karatani's concept of intercourse, allows for a particular reading of Scott's work. When read in tandem with Katarani, Scott's wager of seeing how State "vision" is materially constructed allows us to insert this vision into a bigger scheme that allows one to clearly see the interplay between different dynamics and attempt to understand the possible compositions between these logics as a method for decomposing and recomposing specific historical formations in terms of the way in which they materialize cognitive schemes reinforced through unconscious social practice (I).

However, we still have not dealt with mode C. While our listing of modes is merely schematic and does not imply a claim of neat historical succession, we must note that in the co-emergence of B and C, insofar as they erode the framework of reciprocity as the dominant form for exchange, there is an important torsion at play: a certain framework of property (legal subjecthood) provided by mode B, that is, a view of nature as a resource, converges with a capacity of tracing relationships between objects in which its owners are irrelevant and the mediation is carried out through equivalence. It is from this perspective of relating objects to objects that we have to look at mode C.

The singularity of mode C can therefore be spotted precisely by the movement through which, within the value logic, objects relate with each other through relations of equivalence that are expressed in terms of a quantitative

Substantiate, a price, that is, as a monetary magnitude. In this sense, to ask how mode C sees nature means looking at how objects become related to other objects and what this objectifying gaze is capable of seeing.

SUM To explore this, we need to refer back to a particular aspect within the logic of value (**IX**), namely, how use values get determined by exchange values. We can look at that first through Saito's claim that "a social contract can only be realized through the social character of matter".³² Note that to claim matter has a social character already means that there is no "zero ground" from which to look at objects for what they really are in terms of certain natural qualities versus what is made of them within a specific regime. Rather, utilities themselves are only visible through the narrow prism of the valorization schema insofar as these use-values represent the possible priceable features of a certain commodity.

This elucidates that the relationship between use and exchange value is not a matter of the social imposing itself into the "really natural" but rather the construction of use values through social practice in a space determined by the quantitative magnitudes of price. Hence, if we take mode C as a pure logical construction, we could say that nature is visualized not as an agent with which one can maintain a relationship of reciprocity or as a resource which has to be managed, but as *matter*. But how can we make sense of the claim that from the standpoint of capital, nature is simply matter?

What this means is precisely that in the commodity-world, the material properties of objects are rendered legible only through the logic of value; therefore, unpriceable nature is incomprehensible or, better yet, nature can only be signified insofar as it appears as priceable in the present or in the visible future. For an abstract schema such as M-C-M', for example, the material features of a given object are only relevant insofar as one of its properties can be crunched into that schema. This means that from the standpoint of valorization, nature does not appear as a realm or as a structured domain with its own network of causes and consequences, it appears rather as different materials with infinite exploitable properties, ready to become meaningful to production as long as they can make a difference in producing value. Non-human processes, such as a cow's digestive process, or uncontrollable natural forces, such as the water cycle, can all be integrated into social relations of production as long as they make a priceable difference that can be legible by any of the circuits of value production we have mentioned in the previous sections: industrial, usurer or merchant capital (**XI**).

3. SEEING FROM MODE C: FOSSIL FUELS BETWEEN USE AND EXCHANGE VALUE

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A group of commodities that appear as a fundamental knot between these three modes of capital and that are also particularly related to our ecological predicament could be fossil fuels, which serve as an enabler of logistics in production and consumption, as the basis of many financial markets and even as fundamental raw materials required for many of the amenities that define our current way of living.

As Elmar Altvater argues, the shift represented by the carbon-hungry industrial revolution marks our epoch in an even larger sense than sedentarization and the large-scale agricultural revolution it precipitated through mode B.³³ For the author, as there is a convergence between fossil fuels and the valorization schema, this metabolic rupture (insofar as it breaks with the direct reliance on solar energy as agricultural societies would have and seeks energy elsewhere) is a pronounced shift that cuts right to the issue of the determination of use values by exchange values.

This convergence is explored by Andreas Malm's work on how fossil fuels became an entrenched part of capitalist development.³⁴ There is no natural efficiency in fossil fuels as an energy source, nor are there any grounds to claim a sort of survival of the fittest in terms of efficiency or productivity. In fact, Malm effectively shows that quite the opposite is true, breaking with a longstanding historiographical tradition that attempted to explain fossil fuel convergence as a natural progress towards efficiency: historically, water mills were more efficient than coal mills during the same periods of the Industrial Revolution, and even though they were superior by all criteria, we are left with fossil capital.

Malm's point is that the natural qualities of fossil fuels only became the standard way of imagining energy because they provided industrialists with unprecedented power over labour because coal, even if its performance was slow in comparison to water power, still allowed for an access to a larger labour pool in bigger cities and also provided a more manageable flow of production. Therefore, the difference between the water mill and the coal-powered factory cannot be substantiated from the point of view of mere efficiency; rather, it only becomes visible from the point of view of value (**I, II, IV, XI**).

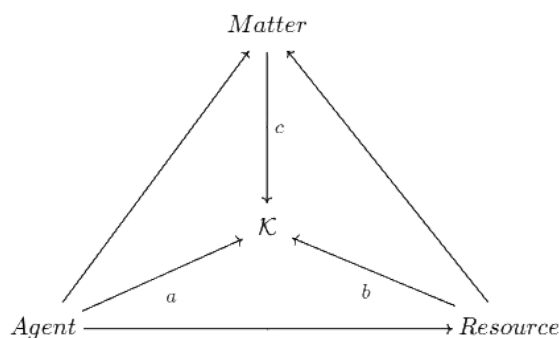
This, for Malm, illustrates the way in which fossil fuels have become increasingly adequate to the formal movements of valorization, setting the stage for a contingent affinity to turn into an even longer tendency. Thus, fossil fuels power valorization cycles as a form of "abstract energy". Abstraction here needs to be conceptualized precisely as a restriction on the concrete that

Sframes the many consequences of a fossil economy only in its own terms, namely, in terms of the abovementioned affinity with valorization. This restriction itself has resulted in an attempt to continuously perceive energy (and demand it from any energetic transition) through features that have been found in fossil fuels: transportability, scarcity and finitude. Not only does the way oil can be pumped somewhere and easily taken elsewhere fit the way capitalism currently manages production, but the scarcity of fossil fuels to be localized in particular places and their overall finitude are also precisely what ensures that the energy powering the capitalist system can itself be priced, and the risk that it can be halted can be hedged on.

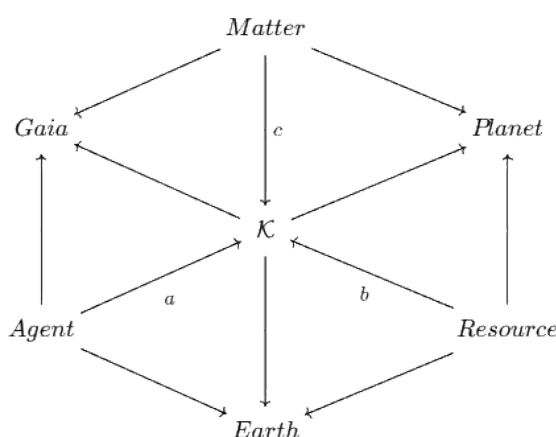
In a way, fossil fuels serve as a good concrete example of mode C's perception and set the coordinates for any discussion on energetic transition as any possible replacement is framed precisely by the precondition that they can be as amenable to the circuit of valorization as fossil fuels, a likely outcome when many of the experiments in renewable energy are already directly or indirectly related to many of the companies that manage fossil fuels. Of course, this is a very particular look into fossil fuels from a very narrow perspective of mode C, but hopefully it is helpful in clarifying the way exchange values determine use values, that is, the way the intelligibility of matter as such is framed through value.

4. CONCLUDING REMARKS ON MODES, NATURE AND ITS FIGURES

To conclude, this text has tackled the concept of intercourse by focusing on its material and formal aspects, hinting at some of the consequences this move brings for ecology and its relation to a critique of political economy. We have navigated through each of the modes and used their respective perspectives to propose three schemes through which nature can be seen: as an agent in mode A, as a resource in mode B and as matter in mode C. As we have argued that any social form views both man and nature from a certain limited viewpoint, any framework that purports to see the way objects are constituted within capitalism should always work through composition.




Although we have largely relied on the pure forms derived out of our transcendental framework and sketched how each of them—as a pure logical construction—would see nature, this might be of use insofar as it can serve as a navigational tool for the question of ecology in a world determined by varied overlaps between these social forms. In this sense, it might also recast the way we assess current discourses on ecology within our contemporary predicament (as in the diagram below) in their attempts to picture nature, that is, to reconstruct it both as an analytically treatable totality and as a site of political intervention from within capitalism through some particular conceptual figures.



From the perspective of the modes we have been working on, we can begin tracing three crucial images of nature that have been deployed as phenomenological frameworks and as drivers for an attempt to navigate ecological politics in our current predicament.

First, as a figure of nature between agency and resource, the *Earth* appears as the place of dwelling out of which humans can make a world of meaning for


 themselves, even if that world of meaning might threaten to erode the background against which it is erected. The problem of the Earth is, on the one hand, the wager to remake dwelling, to be understood as Heidegger's fourfold of earth, sky, divinity and mortality, and how preserving the Earth means preserving the possibility of dwelling. In consequence, this position in particular falls into the myopia of supposing that there is the possibility of separating the astronomical object as a whole material reality and only focusing on the parts of it which we encounter, forgetting about the way in which this material encounter as such is merely a reduction of the concrete reality and not its final horizon. ³⁵

The *planet*, in a way, is the culmination of Earth's ruthless disenchantment and its insertion into a bigger cosmic scheme which shows that its singularity is, in fact, itself contingent amidst the multitude of planets in the cosmos and their indifference towards us and our enterprises. The planetary can only appear somewhere between a resource and matter because it reveals itself as a planet among many and because it refers to material scales around which most of our human conceptual apparatuses feel pale. The challenge it gives us is precisely whether the planet can be an object of politics or not, and if it can, what does it mean to translate the planetary into politics and politics into the planetary scale.

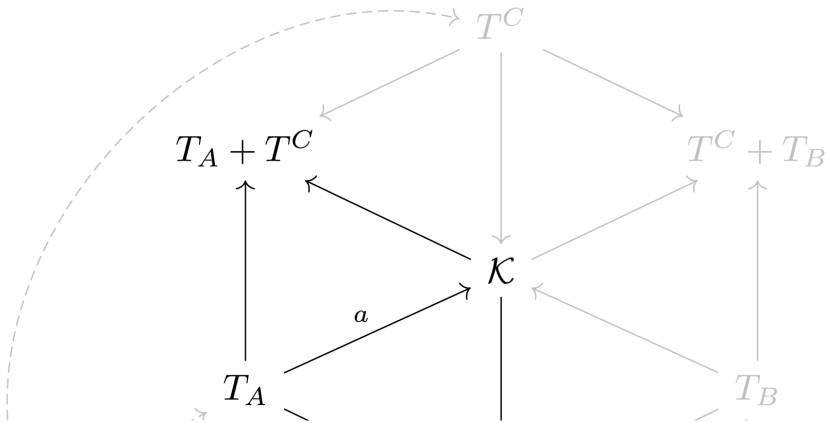
Gaia is also a metaphor that can be seen as an attempt to recover the reciprocity that was presupposed in the Earth but disappears in the planetary. It appears as a combination between the material dimension of nature insofar as it traces a world of organic interconnectedness through a regime of distributed agencies, betting that those agencies fall beyond capital's legibility and span multiple objects. However, it also relies on an instance of direct reciprocity which endows the totality with the possibility of connecting and interfacing with multiple actors under the name of Gaia. The question that remains is to what extent it can mediate between the necessary objectification of resource planning and reciprocity.

Crucially, just as much as these discourses on ecology have latched into themselves certain hypotheses and normative presuppositions of what one's relationship to nature might be or become, the clarity provided by these pure modes might also work as a way to begin posing the question of political experiments that navigate and create new modulations of these already existing grammars. The "ecological sensibility" (IV) latched into our diagram and all of the social forms that compose it should be helpful both as a diagnostic tool and in asking the question of political organization: how do we compose political experiments that make ecology visible not only as a separate discipline or a marginal concern but as an integral part of experimentation as

Such? How do we compose across various ways of apprehending nature? This, perhaps, might illuminate various ways in which different fronts of struggle and their different apparatuses for sensing our current predicament might connect to one another (V).

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IX. DUMONT IN MELANESIA



Louis Dumont tells us that the terms of a given opposition behave differently when related to the whole they compose.³⁶ In fact, according to this proposition, the differentiation between the terms would prove to be inseparable from the reference to the whole: ultimately, the difference in