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## American Capitalism on the Wilderness

The foundation of the early United States was constructed upon ideas of greed and capitalism, ideas that were shaped by the evolving perceptions of the American wilderness by early colonists. The attitudes toward the untamed landscapes transform starting from the wilderness initially instilling fear and defiance but gradually shifting to a space seen as conquerable and malleable. Through the works of Roderick Frazier Nash, John F. Sears, Mark David Spence, Robert W. Rydell, and Matthew Glass, the relationship between the wilderness, capitalism, and selfish ideals, and the American mindset is made clear. From the commodification of nature to the dehumanizing treatment of Native Americans, history has illustrated the profound impact of capitalist values on the nation's perception of both its natural landscapes and indigenous populations.

In the second chapter of *Wilderness and the American Mind*, Roderick Frazier Nash navigates the evolving perspectives of early European colonists during the 17th and 18th centuries regarding the American wilderness. Initially, these settlers regarded the wilderness as a formidable and untamed environment, shaping their approach with a sense of fear. Nash reveals, “with few exceptions later pioneers continued to regard wilderness with defiant hatred” (Nash 24). This emphasizes the enduring fear and hostility characterizing the colonists' view of the wilderness. This relationship acknowledges the challenges and dangers posed by the untamed landscape, contributing to a idea that wilderness was often perceived as a thing to be feared and avoided. However, this perception changes as settlers start viewing the wilderness not as an environment to fear but as a space to conquer and shape. Nash claims, “if men expected to enjoy an idyllic environment in America, they would have to make it by conquering wild country”

(Nash 26). This marks the shift in attitude surrounding the wilderness, evolving it to an active space that must be subdued and shaped to fulfill the promise of a new society which aligns with the growing influence of selfish values on the American mindset. This evolving perspective on the wilderness as an untamed space also undergoes a significant transformation, departing from the Puritan mission of carving a spiritual garden from the wilderness (Nash 35). Instead, the wilderness becomes a potential space for establishing a harmonious human civilization. This shift represents a departure from viewing the wilderness as an obstacle to overcome, transitioning towards considering it as a canvas upon which a new society can be painted. The once chaotic and uncultivated wilderness transforms into a space where a harmonious human civilization can be established, reflecting the changing societal goals and ideals.

In the sixth chapter of *Sacred Places*, John F. Sears explores the cultural significance of Yosemite National Park, delving into the intricate relationship between wilderness and evolving capitalist values. Sears highlights the increasing commodification of wilderness, noting that “in an age when scenery and art were closely identified, Yosemite constituted an unparalleled cultural resource” (Sears 130). This transformation of nature into a cultural commodity is underscored by Sears as he notes, “The raw material of nature was rapidly transformed into a cultural commodity by reproducing and marketing verbal descriptions and pictorial representations of these places” (Sears 123). Sears further explores the cultural shift facilitated by pictures and paintings showcasing the wilderness’s beauty and the development of infrastructure, such as roads and train tracks, mirroring the changing perception of wilderness from an untouched, distant realm to a curated destination for public consumption.

This commodification of wilderness, as portrayed by Sears, aligns with the capitalist values shaping the nation, a theme echoed by Mark David Spence in his writing *Introduction:*

*From Common Ground.* Spence sheds light on the connected relationship between capitalism, selfish ideals, and the treatment of Native Americans. The early colonists' attitudes reveal a sharp contrast between their appreciation of natural beauty and the capitalistic tendencies that unfolded in their treatment of the native people. Spence exposes the capitalistic lens through which outdoor enthusiasts perceived wilderness, considering it "as an uninhabited Eden that should be set aside for the benefit and pleasure of vacationing Americans. The fact that Indians continued to hunt and light purposeful fires in such places seemed only to demonstrate marked inability to appreciate natural beauty" (Spence 4). This further reinforces the American perception of wilderness as a commodity for themselves only and their negative view on the Native population that occupies the land. The conquest of the West, as outlined by Spence, not only reshaped ideas about wilderness but also led to the creation of an extensive reservation system.

Native Americans were gradually pushed to isolated patches of land, and advocates for assimilation argued against reservations, asserting, "an Indian's place was not in the wilderness-except on the odd chance that one had become a 'civilized' tourist" (Spence 4). The treatment of Native Americans within this evolving concept, as discussed by both Sears and Spence, further reinforces the selfish and capitalistic ideals that influenced the nation's relationship with the wilderness. The juxtaposition of Sears' insights into the transformation of Yosemite into a cultural commodity and Spence's examination of the capitalistic lens applied to the treatment of Native Americans collectively illustrates the profound impact of capitalist ideals on the nation's perception of both natural landscapes and indigenous populations. This parallel exploration of the commodification of nature and the dehumanizing treatment of Native Americans highlights the interconnectedness of capitalist values in shaping the American mindset towards both the environment and its native inhabitants.

In the piece *A Cultural Frankenstein? The Chicago World's Columbian Exposition of 1893*, Robert W. Rydell explores the exploitation and commodification of diverse cultures at the 1893 World's Columbian Exposition, shedding light on the nation's transformation influenced by capitalist values. The treatment of various groups, particularly those on display in the Midway Plaisance, illustrates a shift from an early appreciation of natural beauty to a society increasingly shaped by capitalist ideals, resonating with the evolving perspective on wilderness. The fair planners strategically utilized ethnological villages to convey a message of superiority, believing that "the progress of Western civilization could be measured by comparing 'less civilized' people to white Americans" (Rydell 258). This deliberate juxtaposition mirrors the growing capitalist ideals of Americans and the changing perception of wilderness as a curated experience for public consumption. Rydell further notes, "In recent years, much has been written about the Midway Plaisance: how it 'commodified the exotic'; how its ethnological intentions were subverted by its commercial prospects; and how it helped sow the seeds for popular support for American imperial adventures later in the decade" (Rydell 258). This underscores the commercialization of diverse cultures at the exposition, highlighting the intersection of capitalist motives and the evolving perception of wilderness as a commodity.

The writing also reveals Native Americans' struggles for representation, as despite their petition to the U.S. commissioner of Indian affairs, they were placed on display according to the exposition managers' terms. Rydell emphasizes that "Instead of dignified representation, Native Americans experienced degrading exploitation" (Rydell 259), reinforcing the selfish values shaping the exposition and the evolving American society. Rydell's insights demonstrate how diverse cultures were exploited and commodified for entertainment at The Chicago World's Columbian Exposition, portraying the nation's transformation from an appreciation of natural

beauty to a society increasingly molded by capitalist values, where even cultural diversity becomes a marketable commodity. This parallels the themes discussed by John F. Sears and Mark David Spence in their examinations of the commodification of wilderness and the dehumanizing treatment of Native Americans, collectively showcasing the impact of capitalist ideals on the nation's perception of both natural landscapes and indigenous populations.

In *Alexander's All: Symbols of Conquest and Resistance at Mt. Rushmore*, Matthew Glass discusses the complex and contested nature of Mt. Rushmore, focusing on the perspective of the American Indian Movement (AIM), towards the memorial. The commodification of the Black Hills becomes pronounced when examining the carving of Mount Rushmore itself. Glass highlights the public outcry during the carving of the mountain, revealing, "some Lakotas viewed the project as an incomplete symbolic expression" (Glass 168). This act of transforming a sacred landscape into a tourist attraction is the perfect example of America's capitalistic tendencies, echoed by Sears and Spence, as the memorial is turned into a marketable symbol without due regard for its original spiritual and cultural significance to the Native Indian tribes.

Furthermore, the text sheds light on the role of Gutzon Borglum, the sculptor behind Mount Rushmore. Glass suggests that Borglum's actions, set against the broader historical context of exploiting and commodifying Native lands, underscore the capitalistic nature inherent in the development of Mount Rushmore. He notes, "Borglum himself, in spite of his nativist genetic theories and philosophy of history, and his participation in the Ku Klux Klan, portrayed himself as a supporter of the 'noble' Indian" (Glass 168-169). This juxtaposition of Borglum's controversial background with his self-portrayal as a supporter raises questions about the sincerity of his gestures. His actions exemplify the self-centered and capitalistic nature that Sears and Spence argue the American population has come to adopt.

The theme of America's growing capitalistic views is further emphasized through the lens of the American Indian Movement (AIM) activism. Glass outlines how AIM employed symbolic tactics, including occupations, symbolic inversions, and desecration, to challenge the capitalistic foundations of Mount Rushmore. As Glass details, "Mount Rushmore, the shrine of democracy erected on Lakota land, provided AIM with a powerful symbol of the American spirit of conquest. The myths enshrined at Mount Rushmore came to embody for AIM member the legitimization of their own cultures' subjugation" (Glass 171). By positioning it as a "shrine of democracy" on Lakota land, AIM frames the monument as a physical representation of conquest, which highlights the intersection of capitalism and imperialism. Matthew Glass's analysis of Mt. Rushmore and the American Indian Movement's activism highlights the impact of capitalism on the memorial. From the commodification of sacred lands to Gutzon Borglum's controversial role, the Glass exposes the tension between cultural preservation and capitalistic influences in America's history.

Through America's historical evolution, it is made evident that the foundation of capitalistic values has shaped the perception of wilderness and its native inhabitants. From the early colonists' defiance and fear of the wilderness to the commodification of Yosemite and the ruthless exploitation showcased at The Chicago World's Columbian Exposition, the idea of nature mirrors the nation's changing identity. As Mt. Rushmore transforms from a sacred landscape to a capitalist symbol, the clashes between cultural preservation and exploitation become evident. This exploration reveals a broader truth: that the American mindset, in its pursuit of manifest destiny, has led rise to the commodification of land, which further reveals the capitalistic roots that have plagued the foundation of America. As explored through different works, it becomes evident that the foundation upon which the United States was built is a

complex and multifaceted one, aligned with capitalism, revealing a profound impact on both the nation's landscapes and its diverse populations.

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