

Commodifying Nature

History of Human-Nature Relations: Commodification of Nature after 1800

Definition of Commodification:

The process through which society and economy give *exchange* value to something that previously had only *use* value

Two types of commodification in this course:

1. Natural resources become commodities

Resources: Trees become Timber

2. Nature *itself* becomes a commodity: Natural Beauty

i. Consuming a 'view' (Jane Austen)

ii. Nature for display or play: Direct consumption:
Forests become Game parks

Summers' Memo: February 1992

Economist prints World Bank internal memo from WB head Lawrence Summers:
memo was about pollution 'exports'

Summers: Since demand for clean environment is highly income-elastic, high-income country's willingness to pay to export pollution should lead to "welfare-enhancing" trade.

Ergo: As soon as they get rich from importing toxic waste they won't want it.

- i. export generates more income for developing nations than cost of chemicals (due to cheap people)
- ii. export earnings enhance welfare (whose welfare?)

Nature as an input into manufacturing: Is exploitation necessary to capitalism? Does conservation require **revolutionary** change?

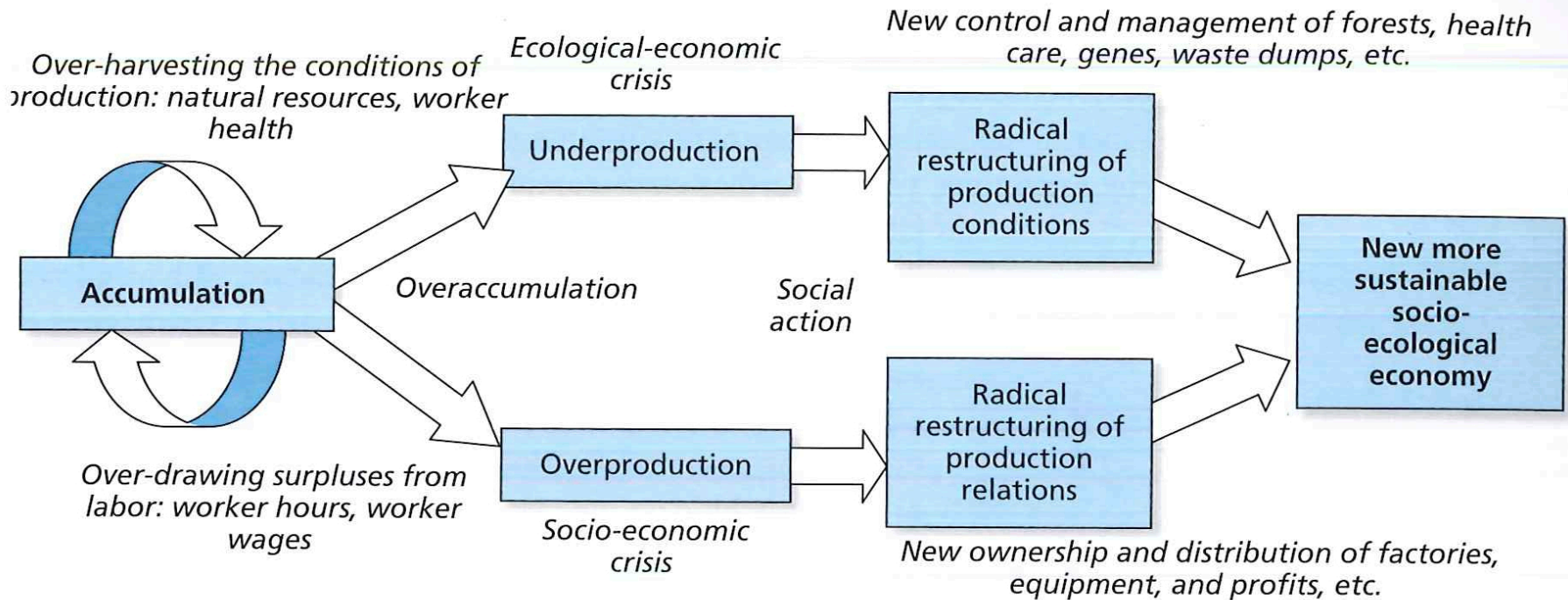


Figure 7.2 Schematic representation of the possible contradictions that capitalism produces and the social and environmental responses they engender, possibly leading the way to a more sustainable and transparent society. *Source:* adapted from O'Connor (1988).

Primitive Accumulation: Definition:
Direct exploitation of nature or labor
without any form of compensation

Narrative story: Grasshopper and
the Ant

Reality: Violent expropriation of
natural resources: Chicago story,
Yellowstone, Serengeti



Grand Canyon of Yellowstone:
Native Americans Expelled 1870s

Teddy Roosevelt in Yellowstone



Commodity Fetishism: Does the everyday experience of commodity consumption reinforce the separation of people and the environment?

What is commodity fetishism?

Commodity fetishism may be defined as:
A representation of Exchange value (the monetary value of the product) as the **ONLY** form of value in a manner that masks 'labor' value and 'nature' value

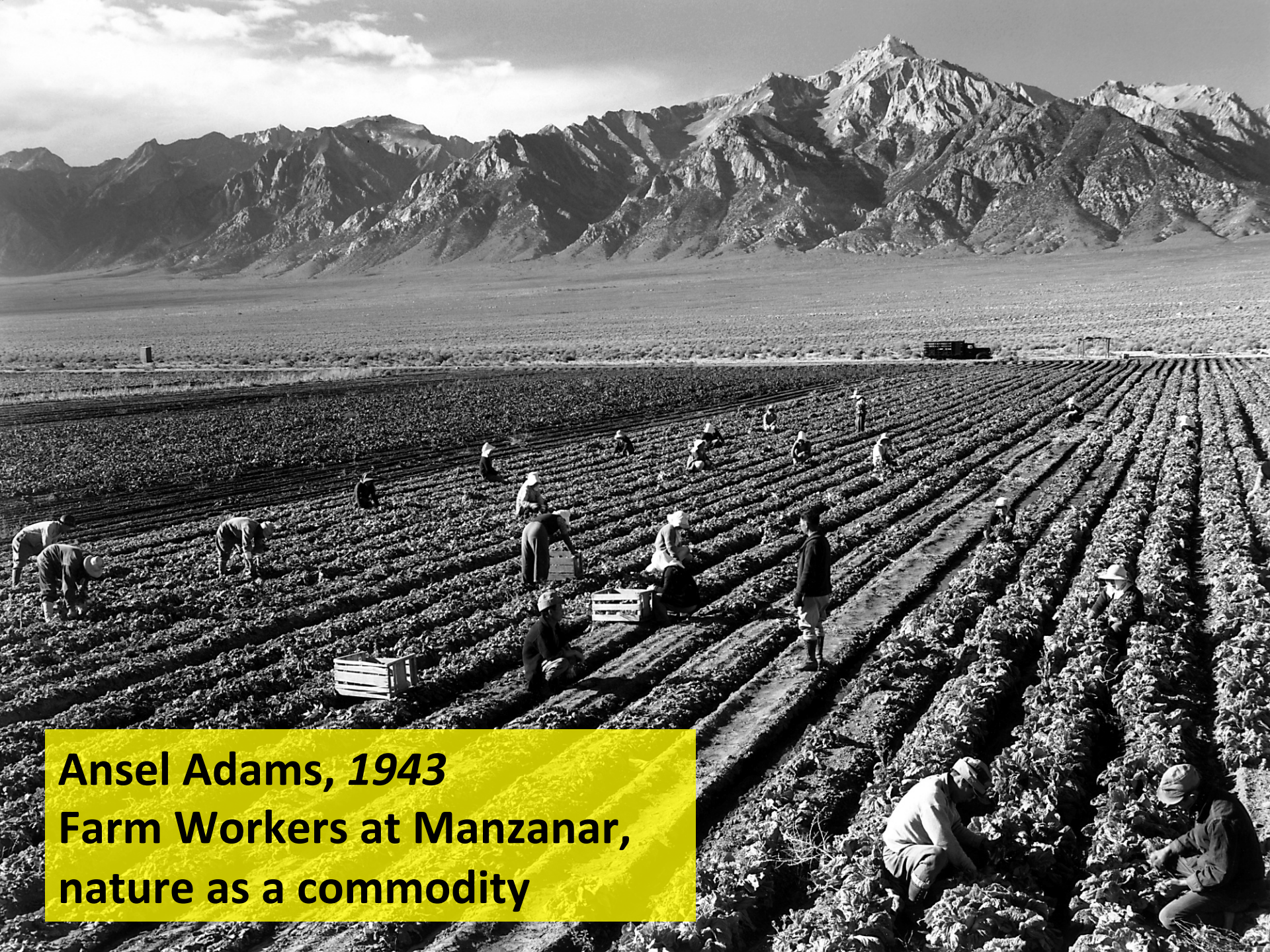
Examples: ? Cocoa, piranha

Commodifying nature makes it an object of exchange

We view the commodity in terms of its exchange value;

we no longer think of its use-value in nature or of the labor used to produce it





Ansel Adams, 1943
Farm Workers at Manzanar,
nature as a commodity

Western Views of Nature: return to the garden?



**Contemporary
Narrative of
'Return to
Nature'**

**(Return to
Eden)**

In Avatar,
Our ability
To relate to
nature is
mediated
through
technology





**Paradox: imposing our presence in nature?
Returning to nature *via* domination
'Eden Lost' as social Narrative: Destroying Eden to Reclaim it?**

Western Philosophy: Francis Bacon is also blamed

- Francis Bacon (1561-1626) was the father of the Scientific method.
- Critics say he promoted a view of nature as a machine.
- See, e.g., *New Atlantis* "a mechanistic utopia"--1624
- Many passages reveal that he thought nature was like women and slaves: They should be bound into the service of men
- Many scholars think such thinking shaped the anti-nature views of Judaism and Christianity, and thus warped human-nature relations in the west

Before 1800 (1620s): idea of human improvement of nature

Bacon: *New Atlantis* Excerpts

In these we practise likewise all conclusions of grafting, and inoculating, as well of wild-trees as fruit-trees, which produceth many effects. And we make by art, in the same orchards and gardens, trees and flowers, to come earlier or later than their seasons, and to come up and bear more speedily than by their natural course they do. **We make them also by art greater much than their nature**; and their fruit greater and sweeter, and of differing taste, smell, color, and figure, from their nature. And many of them we so order as that they become of medicinal use.



Holistic Approaches

- Ecocentrism
 - ecosystem-centered ethics (Leopold)
- Deep Ecology
 - ‘identification’ and kinship ethics

Ecocentrism: ecosystem centered ethics

- **Aldo Leopold's watershed *Land Ethic*, 1949**
- A land-use decision "is right when it tends to preserve the biotic community. It is wrong when it tends otherwise."

Leopold's ecosystem-centered ethics

- Leopold spoke of the land as an organism
 - "the complexity of the land organism" is the outstanding 20th century discovery."
- The Land Ethic: "changes the role of Homo Sapiens from conqueror of the land-community to plain member and citizen of it. It implies respect for his fellow-members, and also respect for the [land-] community as such."

Holistic Approaches -- Key criticism:

- Individuals get hurt when you ignore them in favor of wholes