Canadian Fur Trade Essay, Research Paper

Canadian Fur Trade By: Michael Bell E-mail: mucco100@hotmail.com The Fur Trade in Canada is a huge part of our history and has played a big role in shaping us as a country. There are many aspects of the Fur Trade that must be looked at to see how Canada has been shaped economically and politically in the past and present. The Fur Trade has also affected the lives of people who lived during the Fur Trade as well as people today through the way capital has been controlled and distributed within society. We must look at the many aspects of the Fur Trade to examine who has benefited and who has been harmed from its effects. A look at the rise and fall of the Fur Trade, and a look at the economic and political history of Canada will show who has benefited and who has been harmed. Lets begin with the arrival of Cartier one of the first founder of the New America to see how the Fur Trade began. The early beginning of the Fur Trade started in the early sixteenth century. It began with the finding of the great amount of fish along the banks of the New America that really attracted the Europeans to take an interest. The fishing was so great along the banks that the fish would come to you to be caught. “Swarming with fish which can be taken not only with the net, but in buckets let down with a stone.”(Finlay, 1984. pg17) The fishing was great but it was not enough to attract fishermen from Europe to colonize this new land. Cartier who had become associated with the natives of the land begun to see that they had a great interest in the goods they had with them. The natives were smart and knew that the items like kettles and iron pots were more useful then there own traditional ways. “They found that the goods of the Europeans were in many instances preferable to there own.” (Patterson. pg. 39. 1972) These new items allowed the native to have a more practical way of cooking and heating water then their own time consuming method they had. All of the trading in the beginning was very friendly amongst the Native Americans and the Europeans until the idea of capital came into the mind of the Europeans for profit. This was the beginning of the trading of furs for surplus amongst the Native Americans and the European. Over time there was great excitement about the New America and what it could provide for Europe, which was capital. During the mid seventeenth century there was much trading activity in the New America between the Native Americans and the Europeans. “The period after 1663 was characterized by a rapid expansion or trade.” (Innis. pg 29, 1999) This rapid expansion of trade was the peak of the Fur Trade in the New America. Europe began to create huge amounts of surplus like knives, pots, and clothing items to trade for furs from the Native Americans during this expansion. Trading between the two became very extensive, Europeans decided that they wanted to start to produce fur as a commodity. This meant that they needed fur in large quantities so they could ship it to Europe to be produced into hat, coats, and other manufactured goods. Although trade between the two parties was becoming important, the Europeans were much more advanced technologically, and began to take advantage of their power. Items that the Europeans used for trade with the Native Americans were not always fair for what they were receiving from the Native Americans. “The furs that they obtained in return were not necessarily of equal worth. Some adjustment of values therefor would have been required by the Indians to avoid their suffering loses.” (Ray. pg.69. 1974) The main reason that this kind of unfair trade was happening was because Europeans felt they were superior and they could exploit them in many ways. Capital of the fur was much greater than the items of clothing, guns and other goods were. The Europeans during this time knew that they could cheat the Native American of their fur because they would be tricked into believing that what they were getting in return for their furs was fair and equal. During the peak of the Fur trade you see that Native Americans were viewed as not being equals in any fashion, there was an unequallness of trade, relations, and capital. Another aspect of this time of the Fur Trade and throughout was the dependency of the Native Americans on the Europeans. As mentioned before trading between the Native Americans and Europeans was not always fair. The Europeans would ask for huge amounts of furs in exchange for their goods. The furs were worth much more than the goods they were being traded for, which created huge profits and capital for the Europeans. Debt was used so the Europeans could have power and control over the Native Americans. “In their attempts to assure themselves of a portion of the return of future Indian hunts, the various European trading groups gave the Indians sizable advances of goods hoping that they would be able to collect these debts.” (Ray. 1974 pg. 138) These debts made the Native Americans dependent on the Europeans. This dependency became so bad that the debt could not be paid back and goods that the Natives were so dependent on would not be given to them anymore unless they went to other competing posts. However, when the Hudson Bay Company monopolized the Native Americans got further into debt. “After the Hudson’s Bay Company became a monopoly in 1821, however, trappers in debt had no choice but to return to the same post and to likely acquire further debts with the Company.” (Brizinski. pg.100.1993) The Native Americans were so use to the Europeans goods that they began to lose their culture and their ways of life. Everything that the Native Americans knew became lost in the Europeans ways. Debt created this dependency on the European goods because the Native Americans became so use to the Europeans ways of life that it would be impossible to change. “The Indians have been so long accustomed to use European goods that it would be with difficulty that they could now obtain a livelihood without them.” (Innis. pg. 271.1999) This dependency created a stigma on the Native Americans for not being able to provide for themselves and be deponent on their own. How is a culture like the Native American suppose to rely on their own ways of life when all of what they have ever known has been assimilated into a new unknown European culture. When the Europeans first arrived in the New America the Native American people had no idea of the disease that would come into their people’s lives. Disease that the Europeans brought over from Europe devastated the Native American people and entire tribes. “During the early 1800’s, epidemic diseases such as measles, small pox, and whooping cough continued to take their toll.”(Brizinski 1993 pg.110) The Native American people were not use to these new diseases and because they had no way of curing these diseases, it wiped them out. All of the hunter and trappers of the tribes were all dying so there was no way of producing any fur to trade with. Disease also caused entire families to suffer. “Loss of hunters often meant starvation for other family members.”(Brizinski 1993 pg.110 ) At the end of the fur trade entire Native American population were wiped out due to the diseases the Europeans brought with them in the beginning. There were many contributing factors that led to the fall of the Fur Trade. With the great demand of fur during sixteenth and seventeenth in Europe, fur began to diminish in North America. The Native Americans had no form of income and like mentioned above debt became an increasingly big problem. “As fur resources diminished, bands also accumulated heavy debt.”(Brizinski, 1993 pg.110) This debt problem became so huge at the end of the fur trade that the European post had to supply the Native American tribe with food and other resources. This led as a contributing factor as to what is known today as, welfare. As the furs became increasingly low and the debt of Native Americans on the Europeans increasingly high extreme measures were taken. Native American people began to exploit every resource of fur even if it meant to take from regions that were only used seasonally. “Indians responded to the difficulty conditions by exploiting available food and fur resources as best they could, but this in turn led cynically to over hunting.”(Brizinski 1993 pg.110) The Native American’s at the end of the fur trade took these types of measures because they had no other way of survival. The end of the fur trade signified that the social structure of Native American’s livelihood would be changed forever as they knew It. The lose of all or most of the fur resource’s during that time was seen as a major contributing factor to the end of the fur trade. During the fur trade the Native Americans were not in the same mode of production and because of this, you see that they were not ready for such a drastic change. “A gloomy view of the Indians’ future was a common one in the nineteenth and early twentieth century and has not disappeared yet.”(Patterson 1972 pg. 87) Dependency has a been in the Native American people since the first contact with the Europeans and is still felt today. The Fur trade has also affected the way in which politics have been formed over the past centuries. In the beginning European colonist have always felt superior to the Native American people in the way they live and their beliefs and attitudes. European laws and rules were implemented on the land and the people soon after colonization on the New America. These rules and laws were to their benefit so they would be able to do what they wanted. The Europeans were taking control over the New America in the beginning. “Even before 1876, legislation tried to substitute elected government, on the European model.”(Brizinski 1993 pg.190) This shows that the intention of the Europeans from the beginning was to have total control over all political and economical issues. The Europeans knew that they had to implement the political control over the land and the people in order to control the resources and the people of the New America. Through the control over politic and economics, Europeans began to obtain status that put them higher then the Native Americans. “For Marxist historians, the bourgeoisie is the ruling class that has been arranging man’s exploitation of man for its own benefit.”(Silver 1991 pg. 89) In the past, we see treaties and acts were implemented on the Native American people for their benefit. Many of the treaties and acts that are put in the Native American people are very bias against the Native Americans. We see these types of unfair bias in the way the political government of Canada has treated the Native American people. “The BNA Act is an important legal document in establishing the federal right to make regulations affecting Indians and their lands.”(Brizinski 1993 pg. 155) This types of attitudes have carried on in Canada’s politics and Native Americans are affected greatly from it, past and present. Today we see that the government feels like they are supporting the majority of the Native Americans but society has to see that the fur trade create debt that created dependency of the Native American on the Europeans. The fur trade systematically made the Native Americans become a burden on the government but this only happens due to the government dictating the lives of the Native American people. “They are assuming positions of leadership in organizations, writing and editing books though media giving expressions of their views.”(Patterson 1972 pg.186) Since the beginning of the fur trade, we see that resources are extracted from the land and distributed though out the world and today with a few exception we see the same thing occurring. ” Canada has remained fundamentally a product of Europe.”(Innis 1999 pg. 175) With the way Canada has changed over the last century, it would be wrong to continue the assumption that Canada is still a product of Europe. With the new liberal ideas and government in Canada, it would more accurate that Canada has increasingly become integrated into the American system. The decreasing amount of government intervention in the economy is a representation that Canada is moving away from its community-oriented society. The combination of government ownership, private enterprise in Canada and the diversity of institutions has made this possible. In today’s society, the relationship between these two branches is becoming less integrated. The government is no longer seen as a system that will help the economy but rather as a hindrance upon it. The main goal of private enterprise is to limit the amount of government spending and to increase the amount of tax breaks that industries will receive. The economy may be improving, but at the cost of the middle and lower class, as a result, the rich will get richer and the poor will remain poor or become poorer. Without government intervention and regulation, the poor usually the Native Americans will never be able to pull themselves up into a more respectable life style. The effects of the staple industry are still apparent today, and are still a very large part of the Canadian economy that has continued since the fur trade. Canada has diversified its exports to a small degree, now Canada has one of the largest steel industries in the world. Canada still relies on other countries to invest in and buy Canadian goods to sustain the economy just as they did during the fur trade. “Canada should remain a branch-plant economy with a stake in a continental automotive industry and an export role as resource producer to the world. (Morton 1994 pg. 309) With the current world recovery from the recession of the 70’s and 80’s, Canada will have to find a way to create new techniques to ensure that the economy will not be absorbed into the American economy. The fur trade was the start to the way in which Canada has evolved economically and has stayed relatively the same with resources going out with the Native American people having no say. In conclusion, we see that Native American people have been greatly harmed from the effects of the fur trade. The fur trade made the Native American people dependent on the Europeans and we still see the effects of that today. With a drastic change in social structure and mode of production, the Native American people were not ready to deal with the differences. They were transformed from a hunting gathering society to a mercantile capitalist society in a very short period. Politically and economically the Native American people have not been heard and have not had a say in the way the land is dealt with as well as a voice in government at the higher levels. Native American people have been trying to create their own self-government from the European model government but with little success. The Europeans right from the beginning have always had the upper hand when it came to political and economical power. Bibliography . ] Reference Page Brizinski, Peggy. 1993. Knots in a String. 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