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AUSTRALIAN ECONOMIC HISTORY : AN ALTERNATIVE VIEW

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The 1980 National Aboriginal Education Conference went on record as saying it saw that as an 'area of concern' history textbooks on Aborigines are racist.¹

Australians' economic history is racist in that standard economic texts do not discuss Aborigines at all, or mention them only peripherally.

The economic history of Australia is usually written from one or two perspectives, both European. The first involves the flow of external capital, labour and entrepreneurship into what was essentially an empty land awaiting exploitation. This has led to emotive pictures of Australia's economic development in terms of hardy pioneers driving sheep and cattle into remote parts, and hard-working men clearing land for crops, both groups subject to the usual environmental hazards of droughts, floods and natives.

The second view has led to the picture of the country riding on the sheep's back. In economic terms this meant that the profits earned by wool exports (and later gold) generated capital within the country for economic expansion. This is the Staple theory of economic growth. Neither viewpoint takes into account the Aboriginal people. Nor could they, because they are theories of Capitalism, and nineteenth century Capitalism did not have a human face. The profit motive was supreme. Aborigines were not seen as being at all useful to the process of economic growth once it had got under way.

Up to a point, however, the Aborigine was useful. He could guide settlers and explorers across inhospitable landscapes and lead them to water. Having done this, he had outlived his usefulness and was hounded to the edges of the new economic landscape - to extinction in many places.

In this new landscape the sheep was a greater capital asset than the Aborigine.² The Aborigine was a pest. After all, he could

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not even offer his labour to work for the new economic order as the native populations of other British dominions could. He was a pest, and so he had to be exterminated.

The rationale was simple enough. He had made no impact on the landscape as other native peoples had done, therefore there must be something economically suspect about him. He was, after all, a Stone Age person - a savage, for want of a better term. (I suspect, also, the Aborigines' lack of visible institutions - economic and social - unnerved the early Europeans who used their superior technology to remove this troublesome alternative to their society.)

Sinclair (1976) wrote of the prosperity of the 1870s in terms that could be applicable now:

A group which was more permanently excluded from the sharing of gains from productivity increase were the Aborigines.

For the original black inhabitants of Australia, the penetration of white men into the continent had been a profound culture shock. By the 1870s the intensity of the tragedy resulting from the confrontation with a vastly different technology had probably passed its peak. But it cannot be said that the Aborigines were deriving any obvious material benefit from the continuing economic development of Australia.³

As sympathetic as Sinclair is, his language is too moderate. 'Confrontation' should read 'aggression', 'different' should read 'militarily superior', and while the excesses of whites might have peaked, they continued well into this century.⁴ Just how quickly the whites penetrated into Aboriginal lands can be seen by examining the situation in South Australia. A Protector of Aborigines had to buy flour for Aborigines in 1837.⁵ The Aborigines around Adelaide were dependent on rations within a year of settlement!

After 150 years not a lot seems to have changed. It has not, because the concessions to the survivors of white aggression by the new economic order have been hard to come by, and begrudgingly granted. For example, in Queensland in 1919 the principle of an Aboriginal minimum wage was enshrined in law, only because the First World War had shown the necessity of Aboriginal labour for the functioning of cattle stations. Even so, they received less than white counterparts and the restrictions which went with the classification 'Native', smacked of apartheid.⁶

The extent today to which the Aborigine is on the fringe of the economic system can be traced back not to an inability to cope with the modern order, but to the fact that his economic history is one of attempted extermination, followed by a long period living on the sparse charity of an immeasurably more affluent white society, and then, for some, reluctant admission to the lowest economic status in that society.

To interpret Australia's economic history in terms of what happened to Aboriginal people, it is necessary to adopt an anti-imperialist stance, which is why so many left wing writers, for example, have espoused the cause of the Aboriginal people today. And, unfortunately, because these writers find much to criticise in our present western society, the totality of their views are excluded from wide public audience, with the result that contemporary white Australians receive a completely distorted view of their own history.

Only now are schools beginning to provide an objective analysis of our history, so that, hopefully, a future generation will be able to see the 'Aboriginal' problem in a proper context.

REFERENCES:

- ¹ Report of the Fifth National Aboriginal Education Conference.
The Aboriginal Child at School, Vol.9 No.5 October/Nov.1981, p.7.
- ² Watson, D.: Exploring Australian explorers : the case of Angus McMillan. *Arena*, Vol. 52, 1979. (Watson's article details the pathological vigour with which McMillan, a pastoralist, and his cronies pursued the Aboriginal people of Gippsland, although he is remembered there quite differently by the white population.)
- ³ Sinclair, W.A., 1976: *The Process of Economic Development in Australia*. Melbourne, Cheshire. p.115.
- ⁴ *Advertiser* article 31st August 1982 - a massacre of 100 Aborigines took place in 1928 near Alice Springs.
- ⁵ Rowley, C.D., 1970: *The Destruction of the Aboriginal People*. Pelican, p.77.
- ⁶ Ibid. pp. 255-257

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