ANTH 452

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Midterm Essay

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There are many different lights through which to look at the history of the Russian American colony, the Hudson’s Bay Company (HBC), and the Americanization of the Pacific North West (PNW). There is the liberalism’s viewpoint of looking at things which explains these events in terms of markets and the technological advances and facilitating institutional infrastructures that grow to support these markets, the political realism’s viewpoint of looking at things which explains these events in terms of inter-state relations especially in forming the US hegemony, and the constructivism’s viewpoint of looking at events though the lens of social constructions of reality. These three viewpoints resonate heavily in the actions of manifest destiny, relations with natives, and relations with other states all throughout the history of the PNW.

The biggest underlying theme appears to be that markets drove the development of the Russian American colony, the HBC, and the Americanization of the PNW, taking a liberalism’s view on globalization. In the case of the Russian American colony the market was in fur pelts, especially the sea otter, which could be transported back to Russia and sold in their markets for a high profit. For the HBC the market originated in fur, especially the beaver, which was sold in markets all over the world. Both the sea otter and the beaver were primarily made into fur hats due to their ability to repel water, making them highly prized. The HBC evolved to accommodate other markets such as lumber mills and salmon, where the Russian American colony never moved much beyond fur trapping before selling Alaska to the United States. As the HBC evolved to accommodate these markets, they were joined by others in the area like competing companies and migrants along the Oregon Trail, quickly Americanizing the PNW. Once the California gold rush began in 1849, the markets of the PNW shifted highly to supplying the incoming prospectors needing to supply their gold mining expeditions. Several years later in 1897 during the Alaska gold rush the same markets came back with large numbers of prospectors heading to Alaska to try and get rich quick. Much larger cities like Portland, Seattle, and San Francisco which were already trading ports had a large influx of wealth from the prospectors, and also competed highly with each other over who would get these potential customers. In all of these cases there was a highly abundant supply of natural resources which was coveted by an incoming western population or a demand for resources as a result of other markets coming to fruition, so they set up shop and iterated on technologies, infrastructure, and methods to make the procurement and transport of resources more profitable. Eventually these markets were so desired by the United States that manifest destiny came into play and these areas were taken over in the Louisiana Purchase, the purchase of Alaska from Russia, and California and Texas succeeding from Mexico.

Another large section of importance in the history of the Russian American Colony, the HBC, and the Americanization of the PNW is political realisms: globalization explained in terms of competition among major states and the US hegemony. The United States desired many of the markets in the areas such as modern day Oregon, Washington, Alaska, and California; and solidified the idea of manifest destiny as a reason and means to obtain the land. To acquire these assets the United States had to receive them from the countries that currently owned them, requiring a large amount of inter-state relations. Oregon was created when the area was divided with the British on the 49th parallel in 1848. California was created when it seceded from Mexico in 1848. Texas was created when it seceded from Mexico in 1845. These lands combined with the Louisiana Purchase in 1803 created the framework of manifest destiny, later realized by the settlers moving to these lands and utilizing the natural resources for profit.

There were also several treaties made with the native people by the Russian American colony, the HBC, and the people Americanizing the PNW. Each went through a pattern of communication where they worked closely with the natives when they are first arriving, but as time moves on, they start taking advantage of the native people more and more as the ratio of native people to foreigners grew smaller and smaller.

The history behind why people came to the PNW can be traced to the social and mental constructions built to attract people to the area. This idea of a dedicated person being able to build a good life for themselves by working hard is echoed throughout the USA’s history. The construction of manifest destiny is embodied in the spirit and hard work of the individual person making themselves, and therefore the country, a better place. The California gold rush was a huge attractor of men trying to get rich quickly by working hard and prospecting for gold. The Oregon Trail was exemplified as an easy way for a family to be able to get a large plot of land simply by moving there and starting a farm on the land. The Alaska gold rush was also a giant attractor of men and supplies traveling to Alaska, and the framework to support the prospectors supplying at major trade ports being built throughout the PNW. Americans also took the land from the natives under the auspice of European superiority, a towering example of the social constructions used to form the history of the PNW.

The history of the PNW, from the Russian American colony, through the Hudson’s Bay Company, and finally trough the Americanization of the PNW, can be colorfully described in terms of markets, interstate relations, and social constructions of reality. The market forces culminating in multiple resources rushes spurred the construction of the PNW and laid the foundation for its growth into modern times originated in the fur trade and evolved to supplying the gold rush and beyond. The social constructions of reality made the people want to come to places all over the PNW in hopes of achieving the American dream of wealth through hard work and perseverance that was promised by manifest destiny and people moving west to populate those lands. The interstate communications between nations was also key in manifest destiny, allowing the United States a way to appropriate the lands they desired. All of these ideas come together to give a better understanding of what happened in the history of the PNW and why it happened.