Chapter 6: Displacing Indigenous Peoples

Exercises — Exercises

Q1 Comment on any points of difference between the native peoples of South and North America.

The chapter points to several differences. (1) Social organisation: South and Central America had kingdoms and empires, whereas the native peoples of North America lived in bands and in villages along river valleys. They did not produce a surplus, so no kingdoms or empires arose. (2) Land: North American tribes were content with the food and shelter the land gave and felt no need to 'own' it; quarrels over territory were occasional. (3) Contact with Europeans: the Spanish in South America were overcome by the abundance of gold, while the traders who reached North America came for fish and furs, and the natives willingly helped them. (4) Numbers: in Spanish America in 1800 natives were 7.5 million of 16.9 million people, with 5.3 million of mixed European descent. In the USA in 1820 natives were only 0.6 million of 11.6 million, and mixed Europeans just 0.1 million.

Q2 Other than the use of English, what other features of English economic and social life do you notice in nineteenth-century USA?

Several features of English life can be seen. (1) Settlers brought a market mentality: land, fish and furs were treated as commodities to be bought and sold for profit, much as in English trade. (2) Private property: the constitution protected the individual's 'right to property', which the state could not override, and many migrants from Britain were younger sons, who would not inherit family land, eager to own farms in America. (3) Large-scale farming for the market: cleared land was used for commercial crops such as rice and cotton, sold in Europe, and wild animals were hunted out to protect the farms. (4) Industrialisation: from the mid-century factories and industrial towns multiplied, and by 1890 the USA was the leading industrial power. (5) Social hierarchy: democratic rights and property rights were limited to white men, and slaves and natives were denied equality, echoing colonial attitudes towards 'inferior' peoples.

Q3 What did the 'frontier' mean to the Americans?

For Americans the 'frontier' was the shifting western edge of the territory under US settlement. As the USA expanded by purchase (Louisiana from France, Alaska from Russia) and by war (southern lands won from Mexico), the frontier moved west and the natives were forced to move back. It stood for open, 'vacant' land that pulled European settlers westward for decades, offering farms, minerals such as gold, and the chance of wealth. It also carried the idea of limitless opportunity, which Karl Marx described as 'the last positive capitalist utopia'. Nobody asked the native inhabitants for consent. In 1892 the continental expansion was complete and the area between the Pacific and the Atlantic was divided into states, so the frontier no longer remained. Soon after, the USA acquired its own colonies in Hawaii and the Philippines, becoming an imperial power.

Q4 Why was the history of the Australian native peoples left out of history books?

Until recently Australian history was written as though it began with Captain Cook's 'discovery' of the continent, so the native peoples hardly appeared. Colonisers had treated the land as terra nullius, belonging to nobody, and had signed no treaties with the natives, unlike in the USA, Canada and New Zealand,. Natives were regarded as 'primitive' and as anthropological curiosities rather than communities with distinct cultures. Their numbers had also shrunk, with nearly 90 per cent dying through disease, loss of land and battles. In 1968 anthropologist W.E.H. Stanner called this 'The Great Australian Silence', and Henry Reynolds asked 'Why Weren't We Told?'. From the 1970s historians began to correct this, and natives started writing their own histories.

Q5 How satisfactory is a museum gallery display in explaining the culture of a people? Give examples from your own experience of a museum.

A museum gallery is helpful but only partly satisfactory. It can preserve and show artefacts, art, dioramas and imaginatively designed rooms that explain native culture, as Australian museums now do, and it brings the culture to many visitors who would otherwise never learn of it. But a display freezes a living people into objects of the past. The chapter notes that a native lodge was moved by archaeologists from the mountains into a museum in Wyoming, which separates it from the land that gave it meaning. Native cultures also include oral traditions, a sense of time, sacred landscapes and ways of reading the land, and these cannot be shown behind glass. Displays curated by outsiders may present natives as curiosities, so it matters who tells the story. The National Museum of the American Indian, curated by American Indians themselves, is a better model. For my own visit, a student can note which objects were shown, who explained them, and what was missing.

Q6 Imagine an encounter in California in about 1880 between four people: a former African slave, a Chinese labourer, a German who had come out in the Gold Rush, and a native of the Hopi tribe, and narrate their conversation.

An imagined conversation, grounded in the chapter, might run as follows.

German: I came for the Gold Rush hoping for a quick fortune, but I ended up farming my own land. Back home I had lost mine to big farmers.
Chinese labourer: I was brought to lay the railway lines across the continent. The work was hard and the pay cheap, and now people say we should be kept out.
Former slave: I was bought in Africa to work on a plantation. The war of 1861-65 ended slavery, yet we still have no real liberty, and schools and transport are separated by colour.
Hopi: My people welcomed the first newcomers with open hands, but they dropped trinkets into them. Land is sacred to us and cannot be bought or sold. You cut the forests and killed the bison, and we were moved onto reservations.
German: We were told the land was empty.
Hopi: It never was. Each of us has been treated as less than equal, and your democracy has been only for white men.