

The development of relations of production in the British Columbia salmon fishery.

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The thesis investigates the emergence of capitalist relations of production in the British Columbia salmon fishery, and compares this experience to those relations of production which developed in the British textile and United States steel industries. The development of the wage employee relations of production in the British textile industry, of the late 18th and early 19th centuries, was found to be a resolution to the problem capitalists' experienced in attempting to gain control of production in what was known as the 'putting out' system. The adoption of the wage employee system was facilitated by the invention and introduction of technology appropriate to allow production to be centralized in factories. This meant that production could now be carried out by a class of wage labourers, possessing minimal skills, their tasks fractured into technical divisions of labour, and their production and time under the control of the mill owners. In the U.S. steel industry production was originally under the control and authority of skilled workers who contracted their labour, as a production unit, to the steel mill owners. This system was characterized as a co-operative endeavour where labour and capital were equal partners. In the last decade of the 19th century the availability of technological improvements to the steel making process allowed mill owners to smash these relations of production. In their place were created a highly stratified division of labour in which formerly skilled processes were deskilled, artificial job ladders were created to differentiate and individualize workers, and a wage incentive scheme adopted. The effect was that workers were encouraged to think of their place in the process of production in individual and opportunistic terms. In both the textile and steel industries the change in the relations of production, to a

Description

system of wage labour, marked the success of the capitalist challenge for control of the process of production. In the B.C. salmon fishery the relations of production developed in quite the opposite direction. From 1870, when salmon canning first became a commercial venture on the Fraser River, until approximately 1894, the relations of production were centered around wage labour. The thesis argues that this arrangement reflected the fact that the fishing labour force was made up almost totally of native indians, and that these people were not culturally attuned to competitive motivations to capture as many salmon as possible. By the late 1880s the canning industry was becoming increasingly competitive. As well; a non-native labour force was becoming available, some members of which had taken up fishing. Some of these non-natives had acquired fishing licences which were independent from the canneries, but to whom they sold their fish on the basis of a piece-rate contract. A licence limitation program was instituted in 1889 which forced canneries to rely heavily upon this independent sector of the fishing workforce. These factors were mainly responsible for creating the conditions under which relations of independent commodity production became adopted. When the licence limitation program was abandoned in 1892, and the supply of fishing labour burgeoned, canners found it to their advantage to allow the common property situation of the resource to effect its influence upon the motivation to catch salmon. With no restrictions on entry to 'the commons' to engage in the salmon harvest, the workers, in their competitive relationship with each other, were motivated to catch as many fish as possible. This in turn depressed the value of their production. The situation was one which has been characterized as 'The Great Law of Fishing - Fisheries that are unlimited become unprofitable'. Unlike the textile and steel industries, it was not the capitalist control of the relations of production which created the motivation to capture salmon. Instead it was a consequence of the resource being common to all who wished to participate in its exploitation. The thesis goes on to explain the initiatives taken on the part of capital in the consolidation of the

taken on the part of capital, in the consolidation of the processing sector in 1902. It was argued that as well as this being an effort to rationalize the efficiency of production at the processing level, it also was an attempt on capital's part to gain oligopsonistic control over price and supply of raw salmon. The failure of capitalist interests to adopt stationary capture techniques has been argued to be primarily due to legislative prohibition, as well as due to the significant practical competition provided by the well established mobile capture fleets of salmon gillnetters. However, this did not prevent canneries from utilizing stationary capture sources in the United States, when fishermen's strikes threatened their supplies of Fraser River salmon.

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