CHAPTER TEN

THREE ISLAND FRONTIERS: JAPANESE MIGRATION IN THE PACIFIC

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From the mid-nineteenth century to the late 1930s, frontier areas were being absorbed by states. In these frontiers nationals of the incorporating states confronted native peoples lacking skills. Moreover, without natural immunity to a variety of infectious diseases, the first nation peoples found their numbers depleted as they came into contact with the onslaught of in-migration. Out of this confrontation emerged quasi-caste systems separating groups. Nationals settling on the frontiers relied on a few group indicators to fit native groups and immigrants coming from foreign countries into a quasi-caste system. The most prominent indicator was the level of real wages and standard of living in the country from which the immigrant who was not a national came.

That frontiers were being absorbed by states was the byproduct of technological and political factors. Crucial was a sharp decline in the relative costs of transportation, fueled by the diffusion of the railroad and the steamship, opening up areas hitherto occupied by native populations living in scattered settlements to waves of immigration; the spread of the nation-state system; and a parallel spread of imperialism—stemming from a decline in the relative costs of exerting military force for nation-states that were industrial or becoming industrial—that made it all the more imperative for the governments of nation-states to establish credible national claims to frontiers lest other powers grab these territories (Mosk 2005 and 2011).

What is meant by the term “quasi-caste system”? How does it differ from a caste system? A caste system emerges within in a culture, religious values often forming a cornerstone of the system. In a caste system groups are separated according to occupation. Marriage opportunities are restricted to the caste one is born into. Inherited caste status defines who can aspire to political power in society and who cannot. For instance in the classic Jati caste system of India, there were seven distinct castes differentiated by occupation: artisans and shopkeepers were separate from farmers, and farmers separate from soldiers. Quasi-caste systems are different. In quasi-caste systems there may be more than one culture.
Indeed a lower caste group may be defined by the culture to which it adheres. Moreover, there is no restriction on the type of economic activities members of a caste undertake. Typically a quasi-caste system is created through legal or political means, not through religious doctrine as is the case with the Jati caste system integral to Hinduism.

To demonstrate my thesis concerning the emergence of quasi-caste systems on the frontiers of the late-nineteenth century, I compare and contrast the experience of Japanese migrating to the island frontiers of Hokkaido, Hawai‘i and Vancouver Island in British Columbia. I show that the Japanese were dominant nationals in Hokkaido, treating the first nations Ainu people as subordinates in an emergent quasi-caste system. In Hawai‘i, nationality was ambiguous, shared by native people and Americans who were not active in settlement. As a result, a quasi-caste system did not develop in Hawai‘i, Japanese immigrants avoiding pariah status. In British Columbia, Japanese immigrants were treated as members of a lower caste, ultimately becoming pariahs.

Even before many Japanese entered British Columbia and Vancouver Island, protest over their presence made them targets of a Royal Commission established in 1901. One of the goals of the Royal Commission was to document the level of wages prevailing in Japan, comparing this level with that prevailing in British Columbia. Why were the relative wages of Japanese in Japan of interest to the members of the Royal Commission?

There are two lines of argument familiar to economists that can be used to explain this concern with home country wages, home country standard of living. The first is the convergence wage hypothesis emphasizing the impact of the transfer of persons from their home country to place of immigration upon the labor markets of the two jurisdictions. Immigration from jurisdiction A to jurisdiction B causes the labor supply curve in A to shift out to the right, and the labor supply curve in B to shift to the left. As a result, wage levels prevailing in A tend to fall, and wages in B to rise. In theory this process will continue until wages in the two locales are equalized at which point there is no further economic incentive to move from A to B.

In practice, complete convergence in wages never occurs because most individuals enjoy psychic welfare from remaining in their place of origin. Even within nation states, absolute wage equalization does not occur. Still, there must be a tendency for wages to converge toward a hypothetical level that is vaguely entrenched in the minds of residents of the region of immigration.