# An Empire of Goods: The Anglicization of Colonial America, 1690–1776

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Just before Christmas 1721 William Moore, described in court records as "a Pedler or Petty Chapman," arrived in the frontier community of Berwick, Maine. Had Moore bothered to purchase a peddler's license, we would probably know nothing of his visit. He was undone by success. His illicit sales drew the attention of local authorities, and they confiscated Moore's "bagg or pack of goods." From various witnesses the magistrates learned that the man came to Berwick with "sundry goods and Merchandizes for Saile & that he has Travelled from town to town Exposeing said Goods to Sale and has Sold to Sundry persons."

The people of Berwick welcomed Moore to their isolated community. One can almost imagine the villagers, most of them humble farmers, rushing to Phillip Hubbard's house to examine the manufactured goods that the peddler had transported from Boston. Daniel Goodwin, for example, purchased "a yard and halfe of Stuff for handcarchiefs." Sarah Gooding could not forgo the opportunity to buy some muslin, fine thread, and black silk. She also bought "a yard and Quarter of Lase for a Cap." Patience Hubbard saw many things that she wanted, but in the end she settled for a "pare of garters." Her neighbor, Sarah Stone, took home a bundle of "smole trifles." None of the purchases amounted to more than a few pennies.[1]

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[1] Neal W. Allen, Jr., ed., *Province and Court Records of Maine*, 6 vols. (Portland, Maine, 1975), 6:72–73, 76.

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# I

Colonial American historians have understandably overlooked such trifling transactions. They have concentrated instead on the structure of specific communities, and though they have taught us much about the people who lived in villages such as Berwick, they have generally ignored the social and economic ties that connected colonists to men and women who happened to dwell in other places. But Moore's visit reminds us that Berwick was part of an empire—an empire of goods. This unfortunate peddler brought the settlers into contact with a vast market economy that linked them to the merchants of Boston and London, to the manufacturers of England, to an exploding Atlantic economy that was changing the material culture not only of the well-to-do but also of average folk like Sarah Stone and Patience Hubbard.

For more than a generation, eighteenth-century American historians have taken the mother country for granted. Charles McLean Andrews, who died in 1943, was one of the last scholars to offer a broad interpretation of the empire. He rejected the strident parochialism of earlier writers, insisting instead that the colonial historian should bring "the mother country into the forefront of the picture as the central figure, the authoritative and guiding force, the influence of which did more than anything else to shape the course of colonial achievement." Even those who question various tenets of what has come to be known as the Imperial School admire Andrews's stunning achievement. He wrote on a large canvas, tracing the early development of the mainland as well as the Caribbean colonies. He made sense out of the confusing evolution of British commercial policy. Andrews's four-volume *The Colonial Period of American History,* published between 1934 and 1938, is a brilliant example of a kind of institutional history no longer in vogue.[2]

Andrews did not live to complete his monumental study. The first three volumes of *The Colonial Period of American History* provided a narrative of the founding of the seventeenth-century colonies. The fourth volume focused on the passage and enforcement of the Navigation Acts. As Andrews neared the eighteenth century, however, he

[2] Charles McLean Andrews, *The Colonial Period of American History,* 4 vols. (New Haven, Conn., 1934–38), 1:xi. See also Leonard Woods Labaree's introduction to C. M. Andrews, *The Colonial Background of the American Revolution* (1924; reprint, New Haven, Conn., 1961), p. ix; and Lawrence Henry Gipson, "The Imperial Approach to Early American History," in *The Reinterpretation of Early American History: Essays in Honor of John Edwin Pomfret,* ed. Ray Allen Billington (San Marino, Calif., 1966), pp. 185–200.

sensed that his project was in jeopardy. The organizing themes that had worked so well for the seventeenth century threatened to come unraveled. It was tempting, of course, to view the colonists as patriots in the making, as people preparing for independence. Andrews would have none of that. He well understood the danger of interpreting the events of the early eighteenth century as a rehearsal for revolution. "One period of our history, that from 1690 to 1750, has long been recognized as a neglected period," he explained in 1914, "and it will continue to be neglected as long as we treat colonial history merely as a time of incubation."[3]

The problem was how to make sense out of so many separate polities, so many people of different races and ethnic backgrounds moving over such a vast territory. Andrews despaired of ever telling the colonial side of the story, let alone relating it to events in the mother country. "The task which up to this time has been relatively simple, because the issues have been clear and the direction forward and without detours or complications, now becomes entangled and obscured," he confessed just before his death. "We are called upon to deal with aspects of colonial life no longer mainly institutional, but social, economic, educational, domestic, and religious, and in some respects political. Just here, then, arises the problem of how to write a volume on colonial life in the eighteenth century."[4]

Though Lawrence Henry Gipson took up the challenge, he never quite fulfilled Andrews's dream of placing "our colonial history in the larger history of the world of its time."[5] Younger scholars who were sympathetic with the "imperial" approach redefined the task and, instead of looking to the "larger history of the world," focused on the development of royal government in a specific colony or region. Stanley N. Katz, James A. Henretta, Alison G. Olson, William Pencak, Jack P. Greene, John A. Schutz, and William W. Abbot provided insights into how decisions made—or not made—in England affected the political character of the various eighteenth-century colonies. They help us to comprehend the extraordinary power that a man like the duke of Newcastle exercised over American appointments.[6] But how-

[3] C. M. Andrews, "Colonial Commerce," *American Historical Review* 20 (1914): 47.

[4] C. M. Andrews, "On the Writing of Colonial History," *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3d ser., 1 (1944): 31.

[5] Ibid., p. 27. L. H. Gipson, *The British Empire before the American Revolution*, 15 vols. (Caldwell, Idaho, and New York, 1936–70); Leonard W. Labaree, *Royal Government in America* (New Haven, Conn., 1930).

[6] Stanley N. Katz, *Newcastle's New York: Anglo-American Politics, 1732–1753* (Cambridge, Mass., 1968); James A. Henretta, *"Salutary Neglect": Colonial Adminis-*

ever valuable these works may be, they do not provide much evidence that the average American cared one way or another about the empire. The institutional ties between England and America were fragile. Few royal officials resided in the colonies. The Americans obeyed the Navigation Acts because it was convenient and profitable for them to do so, not because they were coerced. It may be—as Richard L. Bushman suggests in his study of the political culture of eighteenth-century Massachusetts—that membership in the empire involved no more to most colonists than sharing common political symbols with people who happened to live in England.[7] They all professed to love the king, at least so long as he kept away from their pocketbooks, and when he did not, the symbolic ties quickly dissolved.

Failure of nerve alone cannot explain the sudden demise of the Imperial School. After World War II the entire discipline fragmented, and, as it did so, colonial historians turned their attention increasingly to local studies. They adopted quantitative methodologies, and by far the most impressive scholarship produced during this period concentrated on seventeenth-century New England villages. In recent years historians of the Chesapeake have published work of equally high quality. For the most part, these investigations simply ignore the mother country. They depict white colonists busily establishing families, setting up churches, and dividing the land. England was a country left behind, an Old World whose relevance was becoming increasingly tenuous in the lives of eighteenth-century Americans.[8]

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*tration under the Duke of Newcastle* (Princeton, N.J., 1972); Alison G. Olson, *Anglo-American Politics, 1660–1775* (New York, 1973); William Pencak, *War, Politics, and Revolution in Provincial Massachusetts* (Boston, 1981); Jack P. Greene, *The Quest for Power: The Lower Houses of Assembly in the Southern Royal Colonies, 1689–1776* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 1963); John A. Schutz, *William Shirley: King's Governor of Massachusetts* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 1961); and William Wright Abbot, *The Royal Governors of Georgia, 1754–1775* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 1959).

[7] Richard L. Bushman, *King and People in Provincial Massachusetts* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 1985).

[8] An excellent review of these historiographic trends is I. K. Steele, "The Empire and the Provincial Elites: An Interpretation of Some Recent Writings on the English Atlantic, 1675–1740," *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History* 8 (1980): 2–32. Some historians have recently expressed considerable concern over the alleged fragmentation of early American history. They note that the people working in this field have abandoned not only the "imperial" approach but also other frameworks capable of incorporating these proliferating local studies into a larger, coherent interpretation of colonial society. In an attempt to promote at least middle-level generalizations, Jack P. Greene and Jack Pole sponsored in 1981 an international conference of early American historians. In a planning document for this meeting, they observed, "For some time now, it has been clear that the wealth of new information generated annually by students of colonial history has given rise to a severe case of intellectual indigestion. . . . As scholars have concentrated more and more upon smaller and smaller units in their laudable efforts

Richard Hofstadter's *America at 1750,* published in 1971, reflected this historiographic development. Hofstadter provided a thorough analysis of demographic and religious trends in eighteenth-century America, but nowhere in this valuable little book can the reader find a sustained discussion of the links that bound the colonists to the mother country, indeed of what it meant to them to be members of a transatlantic empire.[9] It is perhaps not surprising that John M. Murrin admonished—no doubt, tongue in cheek—that any American historian who ventured into eighteenth-century studies "risks condemnation as an antiquarian, a pedant, a bore, or all three."[10]

Despite such warnings, the empire refused to disappear. Over the last several years, in fact, historians have begun to address some of the very questions that perplexed Charles McLean Andrews, and though their approach is quite different from his, they certainly share his broad vision. In a series of provocative articles, J. G. A. Pocock called for a "new" British history, one that would not concern itself exclusively with how England came to dominate other cultures throughout the world. Rather he urged historians to think of the British empire not as an institutional structure but as a process that brought people of different cultures and backgrounds into contact. In other words, Pocock adopted a complex interactionist model. The new British history, he explained, "must be a plural history, tracing the processes by which a diversity of societies, nationalities, and political structures came into being and situating in the history of each and in the history of their interactions the processes that have led them to whatever forms of association or unity exist in the present or have existed in the past." Pocock admitted that the task would not be easy. He envisioned a kind of Braudelian history of the British empire, and though historians of eighteenth-century America may not be quite up to the challenge of *histoire totale,* they can at least thank Pocock for suggesting a way out

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to recover the context and texture of colonial life in as much detail as the sources and scholarly ingenuity will permit, there has been surprisingly little effort to relate their findings to the larger picture of British-American development over the whole period" (Jack P. Greene and Jack Pole, eds., *Colonial British America: Essays in the New History of the Early Modern Era* [Baltimore, 1984], p. 7). Other conferences have challenged historians in Great Britain and the United States who work in this period to think in more broadly comparative terms, to relate, e.g., social, economic, and demographic trends in the mother country to those in mainland colonies. It is premature to assess what effect these meetings will have on the study of Anglo-American history, but to date few eighteenth-century scholars have shown much interest in producing the kind of grand synthesis that the conference planners apparently envisioned.

[9] Richard Hofstadter, *America at 1750: A Social Portrait* (New York, 1971).

[10] John M. Murrin, "The Myths of Colonial Democracy and Royal Decline in Eighteenth-Century America: A Review Essay," *Cithara* 5 (1965): 52–69, 53–54.

of the morass of local and regional studies that, however eloquently presented, seem of late to be yielding less and less interesting results.[11]

Bernard Bailyn placed the problem of empire in an even broader perspective. In an essay published in 1976, he argued that the most significant element of the eighteenth century was the vast movement of peoples. Everywhere Bailyn looked, he found men and women shifting about, from country to country and, in colonial America, from colony to colony, from seacoast to frontier. Government officials in England and America were simply overwhelmed by the dimensions of the challenge. For one thing the British empire was grossly understaffed. "Before 1768," Bailyn observed, "the minister in official charge of American affairs was the Secretary of State for the Southern Department, a post that was held in the seven years between 1761 and 1768 by no fewer than six individuals, appointed and dismissed in rapid succession for reasons that had nothing to do with American land policy, or with American affairs at all."[12]

Even if these men had been better trained, even if there had been a huge bureaucracy, it is doubtful that British officials could have brought order out of a situation that seemed to them so chaotic. As Bailyn noted, "All of this frantic peopling of half a continent . . . was beyond the control, indeed the comprehension, of those who managed the British government."[13] In other words, this was an empire not of formal institutions but of common men and women making decisions about the quality of their lives, of thousands of people on the move, a human network so large that one wonders how even a historian armed with computers and supported by legions of graduate students could possibly make more sense out of the story than did the poor, beleaguered administrators of the eighteenth century.

Charles McLean Andrews, no doubt, would have welcomed these essays.[14] Both Bailyn and Pocock—as did Andrews himself—force

[11] J. G. A. Pocock, "The Limits and Divisions of British History: In Search of the Unknown Subject," *American Historical Review* 87 (1982): 311–36, and "British History: A Plea for a New Subject," *New Zealand Historical Journal* 8 (1974): 3–21 (reprinted in *Journal of Modern History* 47 [1975]: 601–21).

[12] Bernard Bailyn, "1776: A Year of Challenge—a World Transformed," *Journal of Law and Economics* 19 (1976): 437–66, 456.

[13] Ibid., p. 456. An interesting attempt to trace one strand of this vast eighteenth-century migration to America is Ned C. Landsman, *Scotland and Its First American Colony, 1683–1765* (Princeton, N.J., 1985). See also T. H. Breen, "Creative Adaptations: Peoples and Cultures," in Greene and Pole, eds., pp. 195–232.

[14] One should note that two historians have launched multivolume studies of the British empire in America. Both works concentrate on economic and political development, and though the authors are often provocative, they have not as yet had much to say about the eighteenth century. See Stephen Saunders Webb, *The Governors-General:*

colonial American historians to think of the empire in the broadest possible terms, and even if the promise of this *histoire totale* so far remains unfulfilled, these preliminary statements suggest that the new imperial history will focus on the movement of peoples and the clash of cultures, on common folk rather than on colonial administrators, on processes rather than on institutions, on aspects of daily life that one would not regard as narrowly political. It will be an integrated story, neither American nor English, but an investigation of the many links that connected men and women living on both sides of the Atlantic Ocean. It will anticipate neither the coming of the Revolution nor the rise of industrial society. Rather the new imperial history must interpret people within a context that they themselves would have understood.

## II

John J. McCusker and Russell R. Menard suggest yet another way to reintegrate the American colonies into the history of the British empire. The goals that these two economic historians set for themselves in their new book, *The Economy of British America,* seem modest.[15] They intend to produce a comprehensive assessment of the economic literature of the prerevolutionary period and, where appropriate, to indicate fruitful questions for future research. If McCusker and Menard had provided no more than a review of recent economic scholarship, much of it quite technical and published in journals unfamiliar to many cultural and political historians, they would deserve our gratitude. After all, anyone who helps bridge the gaps separating various subfields in the discipline is performing an important service. But McCusker and Menard have achieved much more. Not only do they synthesize this vast literature in clear, jargon-free prose, but they also present a powerful case for their own interpretation of the economic development of the American colonies, those of the Caribbean as well as of the mainland. This essay will concentrate on their analysis of the eighteenth century, but for the reader interested in the story of the founding of the various colonies, especially in how demo-

*The English Army and the Definition of the Empire, 1569–1681* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 1979); and J. M. Sosin, *English America and the Restoration Monarchy of Charles II: Transatlantic Politics, Commerce, and Kinship* (Lincoln, Nebr., 1980), and *English America and the Revolution of 1688: Royal Administration and the Structure of Provincial Government* (Lincoln, Nebr., 1982).

[15] John J. McCusker and Russell R. Menard, *The Economy of British America, 1607–1789* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 1985).

graphic experience affected economic growth in the seventeenth century, *The Economy of British America* has a great deal to offer.

Throughout their book, McCusker and Menard insist that an interpretative framework called the staple thesis best explains the character and pace of colonial economic development. As with other analytic models, this one makes assumptions about human behavior, especially about *homo economicus,* and it is to the authors' credit that they spell out these assumptions clearly. "Advocates of the staple thesis," explains one economic historian, "maintain that although commercial agriculture was limited by geography, technology, and economic factors, most farmers, attuned to the potentials of the market, were motivated by liberal, entrepreneurial, individualistic, or capitalistic values, seeking to maximize income and profits and willing to take risks and accept innovation."[16] In other words, the Europeans who settled in North America wanted to improve their material lot and were quite willing, indeed eager, to exploit the human and physical resources they found there to gain prosperity.

However commonplace this proposition may sound, the staple theorists treat it with awe. Indeed, from this initial entrepreneurial premise flow complex explanations about the character of the American labor systems, both free and unfree, the dispersion of people across the landscape, the growth of population, and the distribution of wealth. According to McCusker and Menard, the key is exports. In each region the colonists discovered a different way to make money. The Chesapeake planters cultivated tobacco. The Carolinians relied on rice and indigo. The farmers of the Middle Colonies grew rich selling wheat and flour, while New Englanders peddled fish, whale products, and timber throughout the Atlantic world. In each case, Americans sought to maximize income. Sometimes that desire meant purchasing additional slaves; sometimes it persuaded men to invest in sailing vessels. An expanding market linked frontiersmen to city dwellers, colonists living on the periphery of empire to the great merchants of the metropolis. Even slight changes in the prices offered for American goods called forth adjustments throughout the system. As McCusker and Menard observe, the staple thesis "argues that the export sector played a leading role in the economy of British America and maintains

[16] Richard B. Sheridan, "The Domestic Economy," in Greene and Pole, eds., p. 67. See also Daniel Scott Smith, "Early American Historiography and Social Science History," *Social Science History* 6 (1982): 267–91; and David W. Galenson and Russell R. Menard, "Approaches to the Analysis of Economic Growth in Colonial British America," *Historical Methods* 13 (1980): 3–18.

that the specific character of those exports shaped the process of colonial development."[17]

For the purposes of this essay, there is no need to recount the examples that McCusker and Menard offer in support of their interpretation. Suffice it to say that this is a superbly researched volume, one that compels historians who possess no particular interest in the marketing of American exports to think seriously about the significance of an expanding Atlantic market for the development of colonial society and culture in the eighteenth century. These authors remind us of the complex commercial ties that connected even humble American producers to European consumers. This was an impressively sophisticated economic system, constantly changing, always calling forth adjustments. Moreover, proponents of the staple thesis successfully avoid crude forms of teleological argumentation. One can certainly tell the story of the export sector without anticipating the Battle of Bunker Hill or glancing ahead to the Industrial Revolution. The approach that McCusker and Menard adopt is one that might well have pleased Charles McLean Andrews.[18] To be sure, they do not have much to say about political institutions, but, like Andrews, they insist on analyzing colonial economic behavior within a broad imperial context.

Though this is a fine book, one cannot help but wish that McCusker and Menard had pushed their analysis further, that they had explored more fully the implications of their own insights into the workings of the Atlantic economy. The staple thesis may be the source of the problem. These authors are so concerned with the production of American crops that they fail to pay proper attention to the extraordinary growth of manufacturing in eighteenth-century England. After all, the colonists raised staple exports only to exchange them for other goods they wanted more. The mother country had not yet entered the Industrial Revolution, but throughout the kingdom sharp-eyed businessmen were mastering the techniques necessary to turn out small

[17] McCusker and Menard, p. 18.

[18] Some recent studies that attempt to tie colonial economic development to an expanding world market for American staples are Jacob M. Price, *France and the Chesapeake: A History of the French Tobacco Monopoly, 1674–1791, and Its Relationship to the British and American Tobacco Trades*, 2 vols. (Ann Arbor, Mich., 1973), *Capital and Credit in British Overseas Trade: The View from the Chesapeake, 1700–1776* (Cambridge, Mass., 1980), "Economic Function and the Growth of American Port Towns in the Eighteenth Century," *Perspectives in American History* 8 (1974): 121–86, and "The Economic Growth of the Chesapeake and the European Market, 1697–1775," *Journal of Economic History* 24 (1964): 496–511; and Paul G. Clemens, *The Atlantic Economy and Colonial Maryland's Eastern Shore: From Tobacco to Grain* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1980).

consumer goods on an unprecedented scale. Indeed, the flood of these items onto the domestic market was responsible for what some historians have termed the "birth of a consumer society." As Neil McKendrick reminds us, "It is often forgotten that industrial revolution was, to a large extent, founded on the sales of humble products to very large markets—the beer of London, the buckles and buttons of Birmingham, the knives and forks of Sheffield, the cups and saucers of Staffordshire, the cheap cottons of Lancashire."[19] The list of goods could easily be extended. Moreover, this was a period of general prosperity. Because real wages rose as food prices declined, Englishmen of all classes found that they could afford the new manufactures. In addition, the cost of producing many common household items gradually fell. In little more than a generation—sometimes less—shoppers transformed former luxuries into necessities. Even contemporaries were amazed. Some observers condemned the trend as immoral; others like Daniel Defoe celebrated it. But whatever position one took, it was clear that the explosion of consumption was changing the face of English society.[20]

Consumer demand was the driving engine of economic change. Knowledge of the availability of these goods sparked desire, and though humble buyers obviously could not afford quality items, they purchased what they could. Sometimes they aped their betters, drinking tea, for example, instead of beer. They also read of the new goods in country newspapers and smart magazines. Advertising became part of everyday life. Josiah Wedgwood mastered these merchandising techniques, but others knew how to inflame consumer desire. Impatient buyers brought about a total restructuring of the marketplace. Country fairs and occasional hawkers were replaced by commercial

[19] Neil McKendrick, "The Commercialization of Fashion," in *The Birth of a Consumer Society: The Commercialization of Eighteenth-Century England*, by Neil McKendrick, John Brewer, and J. H. Plumb (Bloomington, Ind., 1982), p. 53.

[20] Some titles that have been most helpful in understanding the transformation of the eighteenth-century British economy are Charles H. Wilson, *England's Apprenticeship, 1603–1763* (Cambridge, 1965); Ralph Davis, *A Commercial Revolution: English Overseas Trade in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries* (London, 1967), *The Rise of the Atlantic Economies* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1973), and "English Foreign Trade, 1700–1774," *Economic History Review* 15 (1962): 285–303; T. S. Ashton, *An Economic History of England: The Eighteenth Century* (London, 1955); Leslie A. Clarkson, *The Preindustrial Economy in England, 1500–1750* (London, 1971); Roy Porter, *English Society in the Eighteenth Century* (Harmondsworth, 1982); Harold Perkin, *Origins of Modern English Society* (London, 1969); D. A. Farnie, "The Commercial Empire of the Atlantic, 1607–1783," *Economic History Review* 15 (1962): 205–18; J. V. Beckett, "The Eighteenth-Century Origins of the Factory System: A Case Study from the 1740s," *Business History* 19 (1977): 55–67; and Jacob Price, "The Transatlantic Economy," in Greene and Pole, eds., pp. 18–42.

travelers and, more significant, by stores equipped with "bow-windows" in which local entrepreneurs displayed colorful goods.[21] Shopping became a year-round activity, and the pressure to supply the village merchants with goods forced the business community to develop more efficient communication and transportation. As A. H. John observed, "The growth of a steadier demand for goods, both by consumers and manufacturers, had its repercussions on the manner in which the wholesale market was organized." The great London wholesalers linked producers to scattered retailers, and along the entire chain flowed unprecedented amounts of credit, usually in the form of bills of exchange.[22]

American historians have been slow to appreciate how the creation of this "consumer society" affected the character of the entire British empire. In the volume prepared by McCusker and Menard, for example, colonial consumption rated only a single chapter. The authors apologize for this seeming imbalance, noting that "we have paid more attention to the production of goods and services, to the earning and the distribution of income and wealth, than to spending. We have talked about supply, but not much about demand. This reflects the state of the discipline: colonial economic historians have paid more attention to production than they have to consumption."[23] Their assessment is accurate. The literature dealing with colonial consumption is surprisingly thin.

The problem is not simply lack of statistical evidence. Studies frequently take note of the spectacular American demand for English goods during the eighteenth century. "England's exports to North America," reported Bernard Bailyn, "increased almost eightfold from 1700 to 1773; between 1750 and 1773 it rose 120 percent; and in the five years from 1768 to 1772 it rose 43 percent."[24] However impressive these figures appeared to Bailyn and others, they have not generated much scholarly curiosity.

The explanation for this apparent indifference is obvious. Historians have long favored the analysis of production over that of consumption. This bias, no doubt, could be traced back to the whole Classical School of economics. Marx and other critics of the capitalist

[21] J. H. Plumb, "Commercialization of Leisure," in McKendrick et al., p. 273.

[22] A. H. John, "Aspects of English Economic Growth in the First Half of the Eighteenth Century," in *Growth of the British Overseas Trade in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries*, ed. W. E. Minchinton (London, 1969), p. 178; and B. A. Holderness, "Credit in a Rural Community," *Midland History* 3 (1975): 93–115.

[23] McCusker and Menard, p. 277; Price, "The Transatlantic Economy," pp. 34–35.

[24] Bailyn (n. 12 above), p. 447.

system later picked up this emphasis on production, significantly because by that time demand could be taken for granted.[25] For some political economists of the eighteenth century, mass consumption seemed to threaten the traditional social order. As Albert O. Hirschman recently noted, "a *nouveau riche,* that agent of social disintegration, is typically someone who is decked out in all kinds of novelties." No wonder that shrill criticism of "luxury" accompanied the spread of prosperity.[26] Easy access to manufactured goods confused social boundaries, and the very wealthy found that they had to spend ever greater amounts of income just to distinguish themselves from middling consumers.

## III

In the historiography of colonial America the aversion to consumption runs particularly deep. Indeed, the subject sometimes evoked moral comment, as if the colonists' desire to purchase pretty ribbons or printed cloth revealed weakness in their character. As in England, these judgments considerably increased in the eighteenth century. Members of the colonial elite condemned what seemed to them the improvident expenditures of the lower orders. In 1762 a wealthy New Yorker clucked, "Our people, both in town and country, are shamefully gone into the habit of tea-drinking." Another gentleman traveling through the American countryside some years earlier was horrified to discover that a young family living in a "cottage" had indulged in "superfluous things which showed an inclination to finery . . . such as a looking glass with a painted frame, half a dozen pewter spoons and as many plates . . . a set of stone tea dishes, and a tea pot." Such hardy farmers, the visitor exclaimed, should have purchased "wool to make yarn." They should have realized that "a little water in a wooden pail might serve for a looking glass, and wooden plates and spoons would be as good for use and, when clean almost as ornamental."[27] The point is not to document the condescension of the rich.

[25] I am grateful to Harold Perkin for bringing the role of "demand" in the writings of late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century economists to my attention.

[26] Albert O. Hirschman, *Shifting Involvements: Private Interest and Public Action* (Princeton, N.J., 1982), pp. 49–57. For a comparative perspective, see Jan de Vries, "Peasant Demand Patterns and Economic Development: Friesland, 1550–1750," in *European Peasants and Their Markets: Essays in Agrarian Economic History,* ed. William N. Parker and Eric L. Jones (Princeton, N.J., 1975), pp. 168–205. The moral implications of popular consumption are discussed in John Sekora, *Luxury: The Concept in Western Thought, Eden to Smollett* (Baltimore, 1977).

[27] Alexander Hamilton, *Gentleman's Progress: Itinerarium of Dr. Alexander Hamil-*

Rather it is to remind modern historians how easy it was to slip into this pattern of rhetoric.

But moral judgments—often embedded in liberal economic theory—are only part of the problem. Another major obstacle to fresh analysis of the Anglo-American empire of the eighteenth century is the almost unshakable conviction that the colonists were economically self-sufficient. Modern historians who do not agree on other points of interpretation have found themselves defending this hardy perennial. Before World War II, it was common to encounter in the scholarly literature the resourceful yeoman, an independent, Jeffersonian figure who carved a farm out of the wilderness and managed by the sweat of his brow to feed and clothe his family. This is the theme of patriotic mythology. These were men and women who possessed the "right stuff."[28]

In recent years this self-sufficient yeoman has recruited some enthusiastic new support. James A. Henretta, in an influential essay entitled "Families and Farms," offered perhaps the most coherent argument for this position.[29] These colonial farmers, he insisted, were not agrarian entrepreneurs who focused their energies on maximizing profit. To the contrary, they represented a "precapitalist" way of life. They saw themselves not so much as individuals as members of lineal families or of little communities. Since their primary goals were to provide for the welfare of dependents, to pass productive land on to future generations, and to achieve economic security, these colonial farmers studiously avoided the risks associated with the market economy. They rejected innovation in favor of tradition. They were deaf to market incentives. Within their households they attempted to satisfy as many of their material needs as possible, and when they required something they could not produce, they preferred to deal with neighbors rather than outside merchants. In other words, from this perspective, subsistence was not the result of personal failure or physical isolation. It was a positive expression of precapitalist values, a *men-*

*ton*, ed. Carl Bridenbaugh (Chapel Hill, N.C., 1948), p. 55. On the danger of forcing people in the past to conform to modern economy theory, see Sharon V. Salinger and Charles Wetherell, "Wealth and Renting in Prerevolutionary Philadelphia," *Journal of American History* 71 (1985): 826–40; and Eugene D. Genovese, "Yeomen Farmers in a Slaveholders' Democracy," *Agricultural History* 49 (1975): 331–43.

[28] This historiography is discussed in Carole Shammas, "How Self-sufficient Was Early America?" *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 13 (1982): 247–72. The fullest early statement of this position was Percy Wells Bidwell and John I. Falconer, *History of Agriculture in the Northern United States, 1620–1860* (Washington, D.C., 1925).

[29] James A. Henretta, "Families and Farms: *Mentalité* in Pre-industrial America," *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3d ser., 35 (1978): 3–32.

*talitée,* that was slowly and painfully being eroded by the advance of commercial capitalism. If this is correct, we might as well forget about the consumer society. It hardly seems likely that a few imported English baubles would have turned the heads of such militantly self-sufficient farmers.

This thesis struck a responsive chord among some American historians. They saw the essay as an important statement in a much larger critique of capitalism in the United States, and they claim to have discovered this precapitalist mentality throughout American history, in urban as well as rural situations, in the South as well as the North.[30] For them, colonial yeomen become "cultural heroes," warriors in what James T. Lemon has ironically termed "a desperate rear-guard action" against the encroachment of capitalism.[31] One review article noted, for example, that "the incursion of an external market-oriented world onto the traditional communities of the yeomen farmer" has become the explanation for just about every incident of rural unrest from seventeenth-century Salem Village to nineteenth-century populist Georgia.[32] From this perspective consumption is transformed into the handmaiden of capitalism and American history into a tedious jeremiad against commercialism.

Though these embattled precapitalist farmers flourish in the pages of learned journals, they have proved remarkably difficult to find in the historical record. Colonial historians who have gone in search of precapitalist colonial America have discovered instead entrepreneurial types, men and women shamelessly thrusting themselves into the market economy. Joyce Appleby reviewed this literature and announced that "evidence mounts that prerevolutionary America witnessed a

[30] For example, Robert E. Mutch, "Yeoman and Merchant in Pre-industrial America: Eighteenth-Century Massachusetts as a Case Study," *Societas* 7 (1977): 282, and "The Cutting Edge: Colonial America and the Debate about the Transition to Capitalism," *Theory and Society* 9 (1980): 847–63; Michael Merrill, "Cash Is Good to Eat: Self-Sufficiency and Exchange in the Rural Economy of the United States," *Radical History Review* 4 (1977): 42–72; James Henretta, "Reply to James Lemon," *William and Mary Quarterly,* 3d ser., 37 (1980): 696–700; Christopher Clark, "Household Economy, Market Exchange and the Rise of Capitalism in the Connecticut Valley, 1800–1860," *Journal of Social History* 13 (1979): 169–89. See also Richard L. Bushman, "Family Security in the Transition from Farm to City, 1750–1850," *Journal of Family History* 6 (1981): 238–43; Gregory A. Stiverson, "Early American Farming: A Comment," *Agricultural History* 50 (1976): 37–44.

[31] James T. Lemon, "Spatial Order: Households in Local Communities and Regions," in Greene and Pole, eds. (n. 8 above), p. 102.

[32] Harry L. Watson, "Conflict and Collaboration: Yeomen, Slaveholders, and Politics in the Antebellum South," *Social History* 10 (1985): 273–298, 285. See also Steven Hahn and Jonathan Prude, eds., *The Countryside in the Age of Capitalist Transformation: Essays in the Social History of Rural America* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 1985).

steady commercialization of economic life: trades of all kinds increased; frontier communities quickly integrated themselves into market networks; large and small farmers changed crops in response to commercial incentives; new consuming tastes and borrowing practices proliferated."[33] James T. Lemon experienced no better luck than did Appleby in discovering a precapitalist mentality. This careful student of Pennsylvania agriculture stated that, "far from being opposed to the market, 'independent' farmers eagerly sought English manufactured goods and in other ways acted as agents of capitalism."[34]

Common sense alone makes it difficult to imagine that these scholars could have reached any other conclusion. After all, the market was not an eighteenth-century invention. As Winifred B. Rothenberg reminds us, "Massachusetts did not begin as an experiment in self-sufficiency."[35] The settlers who migrated to America had participated in local and regional markets. In fact, they were certainly familiar with something that looks remarkably like commercial agriculture. Perhaps the trip to the New World dulled the Puritans' entrepreneurial spirit—a doubtful proposition—but it surely did nothing to dampen the profit motive among those planters who colonized the Chesapeake, the Carolinas, and the Caribbean.[36] Even on the Shenandoah frontier of the eighteenth century, one encounters small farmers attempting "to obtain a variety of goods from the outside world, both necessities and luxuries."[37] As the evidence mounts, the "precapitalist" economy looks increasingly like Locke's state of nature: an Edenic society that apparently existed before the dawn of recorded history.

The argument for self-sufficiency encounters other problems as well. Henretta originally posed his interpretation as a dichotomous proposition: either colonial Americans toiled to preserve the "lineal family," or they strove to participate fully in the market economy. But, surely, there is some middle ground. No one seriously maintains that the people who settled New England and the Middle Colonies were unconcerned about the well-being of family members. They knew how

[33] Joyce Appleby, "Value and Society," in Greene and Pole, eds., p. 309.

[34] Lemon, p. 102. See Charles S. Grant, *Democracy in the Connecticut Frontier Town of Kent* (New York, 1961); Darrett B. Rutman and Anita H. Rutman, *A Place in Time: Middlesex County, Virginia, 1650–1750*, 2 vols. (New York, 1984), 1:204–5.

[35] Winifred B. Rothenberg, "The Market and Massachusetts Farmers, 1750–1855," *Journal of Economic History* 41 (1981): 283–314, 312.

[36] See T. H. Breen, "Back to Sweat and Toil: Suggestions for the Study of Agricultural Work in Early America," *Pennsylvania History* 49 (1982): 241–58; Clemens (n. 18 above), pp. 19–20.

[37] Robert D. Mitchell, *Commercialism and Frontier: Perspectives on the Early Shenandoah Valley* (Charlottesville, Va., 1977), p. 152.

difficult it was to survive a hard winter. They planned ahead as best they could. They also worried about their children's futures, about providing education, about dowries for daughters and land for sons. Such human concerns would hardly seem to be the monopoly of precapitalists. Love of family certainly did not cool the enthusiasm of Pennsylvania farmers for commercial agriculture, nor for that matter did the sale of wheat on the world market unloose an outpouring of corrosive economic individualism.[38]

But more is at stake here than family economics. Various historians have relied on the beleaguered subsistence farmer to explain the tensions allegedly connected with social change. The market economy, we learn, disrupted communal relations. The story follows a familiar pattern. The precapitalists resist, but in the end they are overwhelmed by the forces of economic individualism. It happened in Salem Village in the 1690s. It divided the towns of New England during the Great Awakening. It accounts for the strains that set neighbor against neighbor on the eve of revolution. Everywhere the spirit of capitalism erodes the traditional community. What are we to make of this universal explanation? According to Gary Nash, not much. These interpretations, he notes, do not seem credible. Nash writes that, taken together, they "make it appear that the transition to mercantile capitalism was occurring—and causing social trauma—at widely spread points in time within a region smaller than the state of North Dakota."[39] This antimarket analysis reminds one of the old debate over the rising middle class. That group was always on the rise just as the precapitalists were always about to go down for the last time. Such generalized interpretations explain too little by attempting to explain too much.

One historian recently turned the antimarket model on its head. The results were fascinating. In *Commerce and Culture*, Christine Heyrman documented the development of two Massachusetts towns between 1690 and 1750. At the beginning of this period, Gloucester and Marblehead seemed remarkably un-Puritan. Indeed, the people who lived in these two villages often appeared downright nasty, showing more inclination to feud than to live in brotherly love. In time, however, Gloucester and Marblehead were drawn increasingly into the

[38] Breen, "Back to Sweat and Toil," p. 245; Joyce Appleby, "Commercial Farming and the 'Agrarian Myth' in the Early Republic," *Journal of American History* 68 (1982): 833–49; James T. Lemon, "Household Consumption in Eighteenth-Century America and Its Relationship to Production and Trade: The Situation in Southeastern Pennsylvania," *Agricultural History* 41 (1967): 59–70, and *The Best Poor Man's Country: A Geographical Study of Early Southeastern Pennsylvania* (Baltimore, 1972).

[39] Gary B. Nash, "Social Development," in Greene and Pole, eds., p. 236.

Atlantic economy. The townsfolk promoted commercial fishing. Merchants set up businesses. And as these changes occurred, Gloucester and Marblehead did not degenerate into Hobbesian nightmares. To the contrary, they took on the characteristics that one usually associates with traditional Puritan villages. Commerce stimulated a sense of community. It actually strengthened institutional religion. "By the middle of the eighteenth century," declares Heyrman, "the ethos prevailing in both towns, by that time important seaports, was remarkably similar to that in the surrounding agrarian villages. . . . Most people in Gloucester and Marblehead now relied for their livelihoods on trade and the maritime industries, but the drive for profit did not dominate social relationships or redefine attitudes governing economic behavior. Forbearance towards local creditors, a cautious approach to investment, limited aspirations for expansion and innovation, and a concern for communal welfare characterized the outlook of all participants in local commerce, even major merchants and entrepreneurs."[40] To be sure, one cannot be certain that these two towns were typical of the rest of New England society. What Heyrman does make clear, however, is that the spreading market economy did not necessarily destroy community. She provides a fresh perspective on the role of commerce, on the production of exports as well as the consumption of imports.

Despite mounting criticism from many different quarters, the precapitalist, largely self-sufficient farmer somehow clung to life. But not for long. Carole Shammas and Bettye Hobbs Pruitt, two economic historians, soon administered the coup de grace to this mythic eighteenth-century figure. They asked the crucial questions, Did these colonists actually possess the means to be self-sufficient? If there had been no market, could these men and women have fed and clothed themselves?

The answer seems to be an emphatic no. Pruitt's careful research in the Massachusetts archives revealed that most colonists could not have provided for the basic needs of their own families. The problem was not a failure of will. Their farms simply lacked too many items essential to successful mixed husbandry. Some men did not own enough land; others did not possess oxen or plows. "What these statistics clearly indicate," Pruitt concluded, "is that many farms, especially the poorer ones, could not have been self-sufficient in food." The implications of her findings for the Henretta thesis were devastating. The colonists that Pruitt studied engaged in market activities because

[40] Christine Leigh Heyrman, *Commerce and Culture: The Maritime Communities of Colonial Massachusetts, 1690–1750* (New York, 1984), p. 19.

they had to. They had no choice. If they had stubbornly maintained a precapitalist mentality, the farmers of most Massachusetts communities would have starved. This discovery, Pruitt explained, "casts a somewhat different light on their motivations in marketing and exchange and, indeed, on all the internal commerce of the province. . . . Traditionally sharp distinctions between subsistence and commercial agriculture can be set aside as inapplicable to an agrarian economy in which production for home consumption and production for sale or exchange were complementary, not mutually exclusive, objectives." Of course, the farmers of this region did not starve. During the eighteenth century, no one worried much about the possibility of famine. According to Pruitt, the explanation for such complacency was "interdependence."[41] Individual farms might have been too small or too poor to support a family, but by trading for food and fodder with neighbors, by selling the labor of dependent sons to other villagers, these seemingly marginal farmers managed somehow to survive.

Shammas pushed this line of analysis even further. She observed that Pruitt had exchanged self-sufficient farmers for self-sufficient communities. But as Shammas sifted through the probate records, she came to appreciate just how dependent these villagers had actually been on the external market. Few colonial women, for example, could possibly have clothed their families in homespun. The task would have taken more time than most young mothers had available. Moreover, it is doubtful that they would have possessed the tools necessary to spin yarn and then to weave it into cloth. Nor, for that matter, could most households have made beer. Glass and metal goods had to come from outside the rural community. So too ceramics. These farm families may have traded labor for food on the local market, but for the rest of their needs they looked to shopkeepers, to merchants, to manufacturers, to a chain of people that stretched from the rural countryside of Massachusetts all the way to Great Britain. Shammas estimated that nearly a quarter of all expenditures that these families made during a given year "went toward buying goods brought in from outside the province [Massachusetts]."[42] These were not precapitalist farmers sul-

[41] Bettye Hobbs Pruitt, "Self-Sufficiency and the Agricultural Economy of Eighteenth-Century Massachusetts," *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3d ser., 41 (1984): 333–64, 338. See also Bettye Hobbs Pruitt, "Communications," *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3d ser., 41 (1985): 559–62; Mary Beth Norton, "The Evolution of White Women's Experience in Early America," *American Historical Review* 89 (1984): 604–5.

[42] Carole Shammas, "Consumer Behavior in Colonial America," *Social Science History* 6 (1982): 67–86, 81. In another essay, Shammas concludes that "the growth of the colonial population, European Atlantic ports, the British shipping industry, indentured servitude, and chattel slavery all stand as testimony to the voracious appetite of

lenly submitting to the market. They welcomed economic change. Not only did the market provide them with goods that they could not produce themselves, but it also freed them—especially the women—from the backbreaking toil connected with subsistence. Shammas reminds readers who look back with nostalgia at a lost colonial world that self-sufficiency was never a very appealing goal.

## IV

Having liberated ourselves from the myth of self-sufficiency, we can return with fresh appreciation to the world of consumption. Between 1700 and 1770, the population of the mainland colonies rose approximately eightfold, from roughly 275,000 to 2,210,000. During the decade of the 1760s, it jumped almost 40 percent. Such extraordinarily rapid growth must have strained economic and political institutions. At any given time the majority of this population consisted of young people, boys and girls who were consumers but not yet full producers in this agricultural economy. And yet, contrary to Malthusian expectations, the eighteenth-century colonists were remarkably prosperous. They managed to raise the value of their exports to the mother country by some 500 percent during this period. The importation of British goods rose at an even faster rate. In 1700 the average American annually purchased British imports valued at just under a pound sterling. By 1770 the per capita figure had jumped to £1.20, a rise made all the more impressive when set against the population explosion. What this meant is each succeeding generation of colonial American farmers possessed more British imports than their fathers had. Gloria L. Main discovered that even in New England, the poorest region of the continent, "parents of each generation succeeded in raising their children in material circumstances no worse and possibly a little better than that enjoyed by themselves."[43]

These numbers alone reveal why British merchants and manufacturers were increasingly drawn to this robust American market. Over the course of the eighteenth century, the center of Britain's commer-

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Western consumers for new market commodities, and there is no evidence that Americans did not fully participate in that commercial world" ("How Self-sufficient Was Early America?" [n. 28 above], p. 268). Even archaeologists affirm this argument (see Michael D. Coe, "The Line of Forts: Archeology of the Mid-Eighteenth Century on the Massachusetts Frontier," *Dublin Seminar for New England Folklife: Annual Proceedings* 2 [1977]: 44–56).

[43] Gloria L. Main, "The Standard of Living in Colonial Massachusetts," *Journal of Economic History* 43 (1983): 108; Bailyn (n. 12 above), pp. 446–48; McCusker and Menard (n. 15 above), chap. 13.

cial gravity shifted west, away from traditional linkages to the Continent to new ports such as Liverpool and Glasgow that catered to the colonial consumer demand. In other words, as the American buyers became more dependent on British suppliers, the British business community became more dependent on the colonial market. "It was thus hard facts," explains Jacob M. Price, "and not imagination that made British manufacturers so sensitive to the opening and closing of the North American market at the time of the nonimportation agreements of the 1760's and 1770's."[44]

The Americans were only slowly integrated into the British consumer economy. The key decade in this commercial process appears to be the 1740s. Before that time, colonial demand for imports rose, but not very rapidly. Some manufactured items began to appear in inventories early in the century. The range and quality of these items, however, was not particularly impressive. Colonial newspapers carried few advertisements for "the latest goods imported from England," and though various urban merchants introduced new manufactures into the colonial market, the average American in 1720 probably experienced a material culture closer to that of the original settlers than of the revolutionary generation. According to Gloria Main, "wealthy colonials in New England as well as in the Chesapeake lived relatively simply in the early part of the eighteenth century, compared with what was achieved in the half-century to follow."[45]

During the 1740s, the American market suddenly took off. British goods flooded the colonies, and though war occasionally disrupted trade, business always rebounded. Journals carried more and more advertisements for consumer goods. Stores popped up in little New England country villages and along the rivers of the Chesapeake. Carolinians demanded consumer goods; so too did the wheat farmers

[44] Jacob M. Price, "Colonial Trade and British Economic Development, 1660–1775," in *La Revolution americaine et l'Europe*, ed. Claude Fohlen and Jacques Godechot (Paris, 1979), p. 225. See also David Ormrod, "English Re-exports and the Dutch Staplemarket in the Eighteenth Century," in *Enterprise and History: Essays in Honour of Charles Wilson*, ed. D. C. Coleman and Peter Mathias (Cambridge, 1984), p. 114; Davis, "English Foreign Trade" (n. 20 above), pp. 289–90, and *A Commercial Revolution* (n. 20 above), pp. 18–19; Wilson (n. 20 above); and W. E. Minchinton, introduction to Minchinton, ed. (n. 22 above), p. 40.

[45] Gloria L. Main, *Tobacco Colony: Life in Early Maryland, 1650–1720* (Princeton, N.J., 1982), pp. 5–8, 239; Lorena S. Walsh, "Urban Amenities and Rural Sufficiency: Living Standards and Consumer Behavior in the Colonial Chesapeake, 1643–1777," *Journal of Economic History* 43 (1983): 110; Lois Green Carr and Lorena S. Walsh, "Changing Life Styles and Consumer Behavior in the Colonial Chesapeake" (paper presented at the Conference on Britain and America in the Early Modern Era, 1600–1820, Williamsburg, Va., September 5–7, 1985).

and the Indian traders of the Middle Colonies. Everywhere the pace of business picked up. By 1772 the Americans were importing British manufactures in record volume. As in the mother country, this market was driven largely by demand. To pay for these goods the colonists produced more and more tobacco, rice, indigo, wheat, fish, tar—indeed, anything that would supply the income necessary to purchase additional imports. The Staple Colonies maintained direct trade links with England and Scotland, but in New England and the Middle Colonies the consumer challenge forced merchants to peddle local products wherever there was a market. Pennsylvania merchants carried ever larger amounts of wheat and flour to southern Europe. New Englanders relied on the West Indian trade to help pay the bill for British manufactures. As one New Yorker explained in 1762, "Our importation of dry goods from England is so vastly great, that we are obliged to betake ourselves to all possible arts to make remittances to the British merchants. It is for this purpose we import cotton from St. Thomas's and Surinam; lime-juice and Nicaragua wood from Curacoa [*sic*]; and logwood from the bay, &c. and yet it drains us of all the silver and gold we can collect."[46]

This consumer revolution affected the lives of all Americans. To be sure, the social effect was uneven, and the British imports initially flowed into the households of the well-to-do. These are the goods that catch our eyes in modern museums and restored colonial homes. Not surprisingly, we know a good deal about the buying habits of the gentry. Their lives were often well documented, and the fine pieces of china and silver that came into their possession are more apt to have survived to the present than were the more ordinary items that found their way into modest households. The general pattern of cultural diffusion seems clear enough. Poorer colonists aped their social betters, just as wealthy Americans mimicked English gentlemen. However slowly these new tastes may have been communicated, they eventually reached even the lowest levels of society. In her study of colonial

[46] William Smith, *The History of the Late Province of New York . . . 1762*, Collections of the New York Historical Society, vol. 4, pt. 2 (New York, 1829), p. 281. See also Marc M. Egnal and Joseph A. Ernst, "An Economic Interpretation of the American Revolution," *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3d ser., 29 (1972): 3–32; Jacob M. Price, "Buchanan & Simson, 1759–1763: A Different Kind of Glasgow Firm Trading to the Chesapeake," *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3d ser., 40 (1983): 3–41; Edward C. Papenfuse, *In Pursuit of Profit: The Annapolis Merchants in the Era of the American Revolution, 1763–1805* (Baltimore, 1975), p. 15; McCusker and Menard, pp. 268–70; Stephen Botein, "The Anglo-American Book Trade before 1776: Personnel and Strategies," in *Printing and Society in Early America*, ed. William L. Joyce et al. (Worcester, Mass., 1983), p. 80.

Maryland, for example, Lorena Walsh discovered that, "by the 1750s, even the poorer sorts were finding a wide variety of non-essentials increasingly desirable. At the lowest levels of wealth this meant acquiring more of the ordinary amenities families had so long foregone—tables, chairs, bed steads, individual knives and forks, bed and table linens, and now-inexpensive ceramic tableware."[47] A similar transformation of material culture was occurring in other regions.

Perhaps the central item in this rapidly changing consumer society was tea. In the early decades of the eighteenth century, tea began to appear in the homes of wealthier Americans. It may have replaced stronger drinks such as the popular rum punch, and by the 1740s proper ladies and gentlemen regularly socialized over tea. Taking tea became a recognized ritual requiring the correct cups and saucers, sugar bowls, and a collection of pots. By mid-century lesser sorts insisted on drinking tea, and though their tea services may not have been as costly as those of the local gentry, they performed the ritual as best they could. Even the poor wanted tea. One historian found that, during a confrontation with city officials that occurred in 1766, the residents of the Philadelphia poor house demanded Bohea tea. For all these Americans, drinking tea required cups that could hold extremely hot liquids and that, in turn, forced them to import the technically advanced ceramics that originated in Staffordshire. Not until well after the Revolution were American potters able to produce cups of such high quality at competitive prices.[48] What catches our attention is how colonial Americans were increasingly drawn into the marketplace. A decision to buy tea led to other purchases. English glasses held imported wines. English cloth fashioned into dresses and coats looked better with imported metal buttons. One had to serve imported sugar in the appropriate imported pewter or silver bowl.

The consumer revolution also introduced choice into the lives of many Americans. With each passing generation the number of imported goods available to the colonists expanded almost exponentially.

[47] Walsh, p. 111; Carole Shammas, "The Domestic Environment in Early Modern England and America," *Journal of Social History* 14 (1980): 3–24; Carr and Walsh; Rhys Isaac, "Radicalised Religion and Changing Lifestyles: Virginia in the Period of the American Revolution," in *The Origins of Anglo-American Radicalism*, ed. Margaret Jacob and H. James Jacob (London, 1984), pp. 257–67; Richard L. Bushman, "American High-Style and Vernacular Cultures," in Greene and Pole, eds. (n. 8 above), pp. 345–83.

[48] Main, *Tobacco Colony*, p. 247; Rodris Roth, "Tea Drinking in Eighteenth-Century America: Its Etiquette and Equipage," in *Contributions from the Museum of History and Technology*, U.S. National Museum Bulletin 225 (Washington, D.C., 1961), pp. 61–91; Billy Smith, "The Material Lives of Laboring Philadelphians, 1750 to 1800," *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3d ser., 38 (1981): 163–202.

In the 1720s, for example, the newspapers carried advertisements for at most a score of British manufactures. Usually, these were listed in general categories, such as dry goods, and one has the impression that even urban merchants carried a basic and familiar stock. But after the 1740s American shoppers came to expect a much larger selection, and merchants had to maintain ever larger inventories. When Gottlieb Mittelberger, a German minister, traveled through Pennsylvania in the early 1750s, he could not believe how many imported items he saw for sale: wine, spices, sugar, tea, coffee, rice, rum, fine china, Dutch and English cloth, leather, linen cloth, fabrics, silks, damask, and velvet. "Already," Mittelberger declared, "it is really possible to obtain all the things one can get in Europe in Pennsylvania, since so many merchant ships arrive there every year."[49] Individual merchants placed journal advertisements during the 1760s announcing the arrival from the mother country of hundreds of items. During some busy months, more than 4,000 separate goods appeared in the newspaper columns. Advertisers now broke down general merchandise groups by color and design. The consumer revolution exposed the colonists not only to a proliferation of goods but also to an ever escalating descriptive language. No doubt, as time passed, colonial buyers became more discerning, demanding increasingly better quality and wider variety.

For many consumers—particularly for women—the exercise of choice in the marketplace may have been a liberating experience, for with choice went a measure of economic power. One could literally take one's business elsewhere. We have come to think of consumerism as a negative term, as a kind of mindless mass behavior, but for the colonists of the mid-eighteenth century, shopping must have heightened their sense of self-importance. It was an arena in which they could ask questions, express individuality, and make demands. One could plausibly argue that, by exposing colonists to this world of consumer choice, the British reinforced the Americans' already strong conviction of their own personal independence.

The distribution of goods generated complex commercial networks. Merchants linked British manufacturers with American consumers, mediating misunderstandings, providing credit, and cutting through bureaucratic regulation. During the eighteenth century, trade flowed through sophisticated channels, from the potters and weavers of England to the great Atlantic ports, from there to colonial cities or Chesapeake plantations, until, finally, they reached eager colonial

[49] Gottlieb Mittelberger, *Journey to Pennsylvania* (Cambridge, Mass., 1960), pp. 37, 88–89; McCusker and Menard, p. 287; Walsh, p. 110.

buyers. The major merchants of Boston, New York, and Philadelphia occupied the central place in this process. They received imports in bulk from British suppliers. They then broke these cargoes down, sending smaller parcels of goods on coasters to the lesser colonial ports. One historian who studied the business records of the Hancock family waxed eloquent about these chains of commercial communication. Thomas Hancock spent much time arranging with the owners of "tiny coasters" to carry his freight to scattered destinations. "The skippers' receipts," reports W. T. Baxter, "show that the welcome parcels of clothes and hemp, powder and shot, glass and pepper were often bound for townships far up the rivers of Connecticut, and might sometimes be taken thence to western Massachusetts. In our mind's eye, then, we may watch cottons from India and nails from England creeping slowly round the coast and up the waterways, over packhorse trails, past the furthest villages, and so at last into the hands of frontiersmen."[50] Similar routes carried goods from New York to Albany and from there to the Iroquois, from Philadelphia west and then south all the way to North Carolina along the Great Wagon Road, from Charleston west to the upland plantations. As the colonial population grew and as the Americans became more prosperous, these networks became more elaborate.

The merchants of eighteenth-century America seldom complained about the Navigation Acts. To be sure, some mercantile constraints were simply ignored. New England traders did not bother to pay customs on West Indian molasses. Dutch tea somehow managed to appear on colonial tables. But on the whole, smuggling did not amount to much. Most merchants obeyed British trade restrictions. It made good business sense for them to do so. McCusker and Menard concluded that the costs of being in the empire "were largely offset by the benefits: naval protection; access to a large free-trading area; easy credit and cheap manufactures; and restricted competition."[51] To this

[50] William T. Baxter, *The House of Hancock: Business in Boston, 1724–1775* (Cambridge, Mass., 1945), p. 189. Other valuable studies of major American merchants are James B. Hedges, *The Browns of Providence Plantations,* 2 vols. (Cambridge, Mass., 1952–68); Philip L. White, *The Beekmans of New York in Politics and Commerce, 1647–1877* (New York, 1956); Arthur L. Jensen, *The Maritime Commerce of Colonial Philadelphia* (Madison, Wis., 1963); [Joshua Johnson], *Joshua Johnson's Letterbook, 1771–1774: Letters from a Merchant in London to His Partners in Maryland,* ed. Jacob M. Price, London Record Society, Publication 15 (London, 1979).

[51] McCusker and Menard, p. 354. See also Peter D. McClelland, "The Cost to America of British Imperial Policy," *American Economic Review* 59 (1969): 370–81; Gary M. Walton, "The New Economic History and the Burdens of the Navigation Acts," *Economic History Review,* 2d ser., 24 (1971): 533–42; Thomas C. Barrow, *Trade and Empire: The British Customs Service in Colonial America, 1660–1775* (Cambridge, Mass., 1967), chap. 7.

list might be added the convenience and security of trading with familiar contacts in a familiar language. Over time the colonial merchants formed close friendships with British counterparts, and at mid-century the Americans had little incentive to challenge the mercantile system.

However obedient the colonists may have been, the structure of Atlantic trade changed substantially between 1690 and 1776. During the early decades of the eighteenth century, northern merchants usually acted as agents for larger British firms. Sometimes the Americans accepted goods on consignment. The situation in the South was not very different. The great tobacco planters of the Chesapeake sent their crops to Britain on consignment. English merchants sold the tobacco, filled orders for manufactured goods, and then credited the planters' accounts with whatever sums remained. The planters themselves often purchased items for their poorer neighbors. But in either case, the Americans worked through the British merchants. They seldom arranged for shipping; they did not enjoy direct contact with manufacturers.

As the colonial market expanded, especially after the 1740s, American merchants found this arrangement increasingly objectionable. They wanted to enlarge the scale of their operations, and though they were willing to work within the framework of the Navigation Acts, they sought a greater share of the profits. They began to dispatch their own vessels to the mother country. They tried to go around the British merchants and to negotiate with the men who actually produced goods for export. A similar restructuring occurred within the colonies. Merchants working out of smaller American ports broke with Boston and New York. Everywhere colonists were attempting to carve out profitable niches. In 1750, for example, Obadiah Brown, the wealthiest merchant of Providence, Rhode Island, decided that the time had come to strike out on his own. He sent the *Smithfield* to London carrying a three-folio-page order for British manufactures. "With the sailing of this ship with this order," writes historian James B. Hedges, "Obadiah Brown was in a sense proclaiming the mercantile independence of Providence. He was by-passing the great men of Newport and Boston, from whom the Providence shopkeepers had largely purchased their English goods, and he was sending out a ship under his own direction to bring back his own supplies from London and Bristol."[52] In Virginia a few so-called cargo merchants tried shipping tobacco to Great Britain on American vessels.[53] All these efforts were tentative. They involved

[52] Hedges, 1:8.

[53] Jacob M. Price, "The Last Phase of the Virginia-London Consignment Trade: James Buchanan & Co., 1758–1768," *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3d ser., 43 (1986): 64–98. See also Egnal and Ernst; McCusker and Menard, pp. 197–98.

great risks and often ended in disappointment. Whatever the results of these experiments, however, they reveal that the colonists wanted to compete with the British, to tap the lucrative commercial possibilities that the empire had suddenly created.

The large merchant houses of Great Britain did not welcome these American initiatives. Indeed, they responded in ways that nearly bankrupted some colonial traders. In the northern cities, the British dumped goods in auction or vendue sales and, thereby, undercut established local merchants. As Marc Egnal and Joseph A. Ernst explain, "These sales had been an integral part of colonial life before 1748, but most often their role had been to aid in the disposal of damaged or outmoded goods rather than to serve as a major wholesale outlet. Now new merchants began importing directly for auctions to sell off large quantities of goods with only fractional profits on each sale." Moreover, the British started selling goods directly to shopkeepers. "By the 1760s and 1770s," Egnal and Ernst report, "it was not uncommon to find numerous English 'agents' in any colonial city drumming up business for their parent firms and seeking liasons with the smallest shopkeepers along with the largest importers."[54]

In the Chesapeake, the Scots aggressively moved to capture a larger share of the tobacco trade. Factors dispatched to the colonies by Glasgow firms set up scores of stores on the rivers and creeks of the region and, thereby, freed the small planters from reliance on the local gentry for goods and credit. The stores spread like wildfire. In 1743 Francis Jerdone, a merchant in Hanover County, Virginia, announced, "There are 25 stores within 18 miles round me which is 13 more than at Mr. Johnson's death [in 1740] and 4 or 5 more expected next year from some of the outports [of Great Britain]."[55] These structural shifts in merchandising, in the northern as well as the southern colonies, may have irritated Americans who dreamed of commercial fortunes, but however angry they may have been, it seems apparent that this fierce competition inevitably drew colonial consumers closer to the mother country. More stores and lower prices translated into increasing sales.

These colonial stores, wherever they appeared, provided an important link between the common people of America and the mother country. Unfortunately, we do not know much about these scattered places of business. Most were probably small, no larger than a garage in a home today. Such certainly was the store operated by Jonathan

[54] Egnal and Ernst, pp. 15–16.

[55] Cited in Carr and Walsh, p. 31. Rutman and Rutman (n. 34 above), pp. 205–31; Price, "Buchanan & Simson," pp. 4–33; Mitchell (n. 37 above), pp. 154–59; Walsh, p. 116.

Trumbull in rural Connecticut. But despite their modest size, these buildings—sometimes a room in the merchant's home—held an amazing variety of goods. As Glenn Weaver, Trumbull's biographer, explains, a sampling of the merchant's ledger books during the 1730s and 1740s reveals an amazingly full stock of imports: "Pepper, lace, gloves, gunpowder, flints, molasses, rum, *Watts' Psalms,* mohair, drugs, tiles, paper, garlix (a kind of cloth), pots, pans, 'manna,' cord, pails, needles, knives, indigo, logwood, earthenware, raisins, thimbles, buckles, allspice, tea, buttons, mace, combs, butter, spectacles, soap, brimstone, nails, shot, sewing silk, sugar, wire, looking glasses, tape, 'Italian crape,' 'allam,' pewter dishes, etc."[56] One wonders what items were hidden in Weaver's "etc." He seems already to have listed just about everything that a Connecticut farm family might have desired.

The only unusual characteristic about Trumbull's store is that the records of his business have been so well preserved. But stores of similar description could have been found from Maine to Georgia. The stores that Jerdone described in Virginia, for example, carried the same range of goods. Moreover, all these mid-eighteenth-century businesses stayed open the full year, as earlier stores had not, and thus it was possible for the Connecticut farmer or the Virginia planter to shop whenever that activity fit into his busy schedule. As competition increased, colonial shopkeepers began to merchandise their wares more aggressively. When newspaper space was available, they placed advertisements. They also learned to display goods in more pleasing ways, to court customers. The eighteenth-century shopkeeper ignored women at his peril. In 1748 one Maryland factor informed a correspondent of what it took to succeed in this market: "You know the influence of the Wives upon their Husbands, & it is but a trifle that wins 'em over, they must be taken notice of or there will be nothing with them."[57] These pressures escalated. Chesapeake historians Lois G. Carr and Lorena Walsh claim that by the 1750s "some merchants would begin to build substantial brick store buildings equipped with more elaborate shelves and counters for display, and chairs, tables, glassware, and teaware for the genteel entertainment of customers."[58]

Along the roads of mid-eighteenth-century America also traveled the peddlers, the chapmen, and the hawkers, figures celebrated in folklore but ignored almost completely by serious historians. The failure to

[56] Glenn Weaver, *Jonathan Trumbull: Connecticut's Merchant Magistrate (1710–1785)* (Hartford, Conn., 1956), p. 19.

[57] Cited in Carr and Walsh, p. 33. See also Harry D. Berg, "The Organization of Business in Colonial Philadelphia," *Pennsylvania History* 10 (1943): 157–77.

[58] Carr and Walsh, p. 33.

explore the world of these itinerant salesmen is unfortunate, for they seem to have accounted for a considerable volume of trade. The peddlers made up a sizable percentage of James Beekman's customers, and he was one of the most successful import merchants in New York City.[59] In Boston Thomas Hancock took good care of his "country chaps," making certain British merchants and manufacturers supplied them with the items that the colonists actually wanted to buy.[60] These travelers seem to have hawked their goods along city streets as well as country highways. Men as well as women peddled their wares. A New York law setting conditions for this sort of business specifically mentioned "he" and "she," indicating that in this colony at least people of both sexes carried consumer goods from town to town.[61]

But whatever their gender, itinerants sometimes traveled far, popping up everywhere, ubiquitous denizens of village taverns. When Alexander Hamilton journeyed through the northern colonies in 1744, for example, he regularly encountered peddlers. "I dined att William's att Stonington, [Connecticut,] with a Boston merchant name Gardiner and one Boyd, a Scotch Irish pedlar," Hamilton scribbled. "The pedlar seemed to understand his business to a hair. He sold some dear bargains to Mrs. Williams, and while he smoothed her up with palaber, the Bostoner amused her with religious cant. This pedlar told me he had been some time agoe att Annapolis[, Maryland]." In Bristol, Rhode Island, Hamilton and his black servant were taken for peddlers because they carried large "portmanteaux," and the local residents rushed out into the street to inspect their goods.[62] The number of peddlers on the road appears to have been a function of the general prosperity of the colonial economy. In other words, they do not seem to have represented a crude or transitional form of merchandising. As the number of stores increased, so too did the number of peddlers. In fact, the two groups often came into conflict, for the peddlers operating with little overhead could easily undercut the established merchant's price. Shopkeepers petitioned the various colonial legislatures about

[59] White, pp. 390–91.

[60] Baxter (n. 50 above), p. 188.

[61] For example, *The Colonial Laws of New York from the Year 1664 to the Revolution,* 5 vols. (Albany, N.Y., 1894), 4:388–89. On women as traders in early America, see Laurel Thatcher Ulrich, *Good Wives: Image and Reality in the Lives of Women in Northern New England, 1650–1750* (New York, 1980), chap. 2; Linda K. Kerber, *Women of the Republic: Intellect and Ideology in Revolutionary America* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 1980), pp. 148–50.

[62] Hamilton (n. 27 above), pp. 150, 160. See Richard L. Bushman, *From Puritan to Yankee: Character and the Social Order in Connecticut, 1690–1765* (Cambridge, Mass., 1967), p. 113; Rutman and Rutman, p. 231.

this allegedly unfair competition. In turn, the lawmakers warned the peddlers to purchase licenses, some at substantial fees, but judging from the repetition of these regulations in the statutes, one concludes that the peddlers more than held their own against the rural merchants.

The mid-eighteenth century also witnessed a spectacular expansion of credit. Indeed, the entire chain of merchandising from British manufacturers to rural American consumers depended on liberal credit arrangements. Without such a system, the colonists could not have participated in the Atlantic economy. They never possessed an adequate money supply. Specie quickly drained back to the mother country, and though some colonies issued paper currency, these bills did not satisfy the requirements of long-distance trade. But convenience is only part of the story of credit. During this period, British merchants eager to increase business offered credit in larger amounts and on more generous terms than they had ever done before. This decision involved great risks. The British apparently concluded, however, that the profits from the American trade outweighed the bad debts, and they pumped credit through the system. It flowed from the major port cities to the little storekeepers like Jonathan Trumbull, from Glasgow to tobacco factors residing in the Chesapeake. Everywhere the historian encounters people accepting goods long before they had to pay for them.[63] The huge debts that the Chesapeake planters owed on the eve of revolution have attracted scholarly attention, but the character and function of credit relations in other regions have not been examined.[64] Since the loan of money or the issuance of credit raised profound questions about personal honor, it would be interesting to know who received it and under what circumstances it was given. Did credit follow bloodlines? Did credit sustain political networks in rural communities?

One can only speculate about the motivation of the colonial buyer. The psychology of eighteenth-century consumption was complex, and each person entered the market for slightly different reasons. Some men and women wanted to save money and time. After all, producing one's own garments—a linen shirt, for example—was a lengthy, tedious process, and the purchase of imported cloth may have been more

[63] Wilbur C. Plummer, "Consumer Credit in Colonial Philadelphia," *Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography* 66 (1942): 385–409; White, pp. 335–485; Walsh, p. 116; Lois G. Carr and Lorena Walsh, "Inventories and the Analysis of Wealth and Consumption Patterns in St. Mary's County, Maryland, 1658–1777," *Historical Methods* 13 (1980): 81–104.

[64] On the size and meaning of debt, see T. H. Breen, *Tobacco Culture: The Mentality of the Great Tidewater Planters on the Eve of Revolution* (Princeton, N.J., 1985), chap. 4; Emory Evans, "Planter Indebtedness and the Coming of the Revolution in Virginia," *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3d ser., 19 (1962): 511–33.

cost effective than was turning out homespun. Beauty also figured into the calculus of consumption. An imported Staffordshire plate or a piece of ribbon brought color into an otherwise drab environment. Contemporary merchants certainly understood that aesthetics played a major role in winning customers. In 1756, for example, one frustrated English supplier wrote to the Philadelphia merchant John Reynall, "There is no way to send goods with any certainty of sale but by sending Patterns of the several colours in vogue with you."[65] No doubt, some Americans realized that ceramic plates and serving dishes were more sanitary to use than were the older wooden trenchers. In addition, consumer goods provided socially mobile Americans with boundary markers, an increasingly recognized way to distinguish betters from their inferiors, for though the rural farmer may have owned a tea cup, he could not often afford real china. In whatever group one traveled, however, one knew that consumer goods mediated social status. Their possession gave off messages full of meanings that modern historians have been slow to comprehend. Finally, just as it is today, shopping in colonial times was entertaining. Consumer goods became topics of conversation, the source of a new vocabulary, the spark of a new kind of social discourse.

## V

This survey of the birth of an American consumer society returns to the interpretative problems posed by Charles McLean Andrews, to a reassessment of the meaning of empire in the eighteenth century. Even at this preliminary stage of research, it can be appreciated that British imports provided white Americans with a common framework of experience. Consumption drew the colonists together even when they themselves were unaware of what was happening. Men and women living in different parts of the continent purchased a similar range of goods. The items that appeared in New England households also turned up in the Carolinas. The rice planters of Charleston probably did not know that northern farmers demanded the same kinds of imports. They may not have even cared. But however tenuous communication between mid-eighteenth-century colonists may have been, there could be no denying that British manufacturers were standardizing the material culture of the American colonies. Without too much exaggeration, Staffordshire pottery might be seen as the Coca-Cola of the eighteenth century. It was a product of the metropolitan economy that

[65] Cited in Berg, p. 171.

touched the lives of people living on the frontier of settlement, eroding seventeenth-century folkways and bringing scattered planters and farmers into dependence on a vast world market that they did not yet quite comprehend.

Herein lies a paradox that anthropologists and historians such as John M. Murrin, Michael D. Coe, and James Deetz have brought to our attention. The road to Americanization ran through Anglicization.[66] In other words, before these widely dispersed colonists could develop a sense of their own common cultural identity, they had first to be integrated fully into the British empire. Royal government in colonial America was never large enough to effect Anglicization. Nor could force of arms have brought about this cultural redefinition. Such a vast shift in how Americans viewed the mother country and each other required a flood of consumer goods, little manufactured items that found their way into gentry homes as well as frontier cabins. According to anthropologist James Deetz, this transformation of everyday material culture "meant that on the eve of the American Revolution, Americans were more English than they had been in the past since the first years of the colonies."[67]

The extent of this imperialism of goods amazed even contemporaries. In 1771, William Eddis, an Englishman living in Maryland, wrote home that "the quick importation of fashions from the mother country is really astonishing. I am almost inclined to believe that a new fashion is adopted earlier by the polished and affluent American than by many opulent persons in the great metropolis. . . . In short, very little difference is, in reality, observable in the manners of the wealthy colonist and the wealthy Briton."[68] Eddis may have exaggerated, but probably not much. Students of the book trade, for example, have discovered that the colonists demanded volumes printed in England. Indeed, so deep was the Anglicization of American readers that "a false London imprint could seem an effective way to sell a local publication."[69] Newspaper advertisements announced that merchants carried the "latest English goods." By the mid-eighteenth century, these

[66] The term "Anglicization" was originally employed by John M. Murrin ("Anglicizing an American Colony: The Transformation of Provincial Massachusetts" [Ph.D. diss., Yale University, 1966]). James Deetz describes this cultural process as "re-Anglicization" (*In Small Things Forgotten: The Archeology of Early American Life* [Garden City, N.Y., 1977]), and Michael D. Coe writes of the "Georgianization" of eighteenth-century American culture ([n. 42 above], pp. 53–54).

[67] Deetz, p. 38.

[68] William Eddis, *Letters from America*, ed. Aubrey C. Land (Cambridge, Mass., 1969), pp. 57–58.

[69] Botein (n. 46 above), pp. 79, 80.

imported items had clearly taken on symbolic value. Put simply, pride of ownership translated into pride of being part of the empire, a sentiment that was reinforced but not created by the victory of the British army over the French in the Seven Years' War.

So long as the king of England ruled over an empire of goods, his task was relatively easy. The spread of the consumer society, at least before the Stamp Act Crisis, tied the colonists ever closer to the mother country. This is what Benjamin Franklin tried to communicate to the House of Commons. He observed that before 1763 the Americans had "submitted willingly to the government of the Crown, and paid, in all their courts, obedience to acts of parliament." It cost Parliament almost nothing, Franklin explained, to maintain the loyalty of this rapidly growing population across the Atlantic. The colonists "were governed by this country at the expense only of a little pen, ink, and paper. They were led by a thread. They had not only a respect, but an affection, for Great Britain, for its laws, its customs and manners, and even a fondness for its fashions, that greatly increased the commerce."[70] No American, of course, had a greater fondness for cosmopolitan fashion than did Franklin. And in 1763 he could not comprehend why anyone would want to upset a system that seemed to operate so well.

The Anglicization thesis obviously makes it hard to explain the American Revolution. The solution to this puzzle may be suggested, at least in part, by the complex character of nationalism itself. As J. G. A. Pocock noted in reference to another rebellious country, "It can be shown without much difficulty that Ireland became more nationalist and more revolutionary as it was increasingly assimilated to English-derived political and cultural norms, and that, in this case as in many others, revolutionary nationalism is less a means of resisting acculturation than a method of asserting one's own power over the process."[71] Pocock provides an important insight into the American situation. As their debts to the mother country mounted after 1750, the colonists began to fear for the loss of their own independence. "The goods always were most extravagantly dear," cried one Virginia planter to his sister in 1753, "but now [they] . . . got the parties so much in debt to the merchants [that] they might [not] be able to pay this money in years if ever yet."[72] This was not an unusual complaint. For many white

[70] "The Examination of Benjamin Franklin in the House of Commons, February 13, 1766," in *Colonies to Nation: 1763–1789*, ed. Jack P. Greene (New York, 1975), pp. 72–77.

[71] Pocock, "British History" (n. 11 above), p. 610.

[72] Cited in Douglas Southall Freeman, *George Washington: A Biography*, 7 vols.

Americans dependence meant slavery, the deprivation of freedom, a state that they could never tolerate.

The colonists responded to this unhappy state of affairs—one that Parliament exacerbated by taxing the colonists without their consent—by attempting to turn back the clock. They claimed that they wanted to reverse the consumer tide, and in a series of increasingly successful boycotts against British manufactures, they redefined the symbolic meaning of imported goods. In public discourse these items became politicized, badges of dependence. Or, to restate the proposition, during the decade preceding revolution, Americans communicated abstract notions about politics through consumer goods. One's attitude toward tea indicated where one stood on constitutional liberties. The process was slow, sometimes superficial, but it touched people of all classes. Charles Grahame, a respected Maryland leader, explained how goods mobilized public opinion in one colony. At a meeting held in Charles County, "I found our country people on Saturday almost unanimous against that part of the Annapolis Resolves which regarded nonexportation. . . . This point being settled . . . we had a wrangle about importation and though it was once agreed that we should have a partial one of such goods as should be thought by the general meeting of the province proper, yet toward evening the people of the inferior class growing naturally a little tumultuous[,] the question was resumed and it was agreed we should have no importation at all."[73] The little farmers of this Chesapeake county declared their independence from consumer goods just as the working people of Boston did when they dumped the tea into the harbor. Once that symbolic link between England and America had been severed, once common men and women asserted their control over the process of acculturation, the political ties of empire quickly unraveled.[74]

(New York, 1948–57), 1:168–69. See Richard Pares, *Merchants and Planters,* Economic History Review Supplement no. 4 (Cambridge, 1960), p. 50; and Breen, *Tobacco Culture,* chap. 3.

[73] Cited in Ronald Hoffman, *A Spirit of Dissension: Economics, Politics, and the Revolution in Maryland* (Baltimore, 1973), pp. 130–31. On the symbolic meaning of goods, see Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi and Eugene Rochberg-Halton, *The Meaning of Things: Domestic Symbols and the Self* (Cambridge, 1981); Mary Douglass and Baron Isherwood, *The World of Goods: Toward an Anthropology of Consumption* (New York, 1979), chap. 4; Chandra Mukerji, *From Graven Images: Patterns of Modern Materialism* (New York, 1983).

[74] The revolutionary implications of consumption are explored in Timothy H. Breen, "Baubles of Britain: The Meaning of Things" (paper presented to the United States Capitol Historical Society, March 20, 1986), which will appear in Ronald Hoffman and Cary Carson, eds., *Of Consuming Interests: The Style of Life in the Eighteenth Century* (in press).