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"BAUBLES OF BRITAIN": THE AMERICAN AND CONSUMER REVOLUTIONS OF THE EIGHTEENTH CENTURY*

Something extraordinary occurred in 1774. Thousands of ordinary American people responded as they had never done before to an urban political crisis. Events in Boston mobilized a nation, uniting for the first time artisans and farmers, yeomen and gentlemen, and within only a few months colonists who had earlier expressed neutrality or indifference about the confrontation with Great Britain suddenly found themselves supporting bold actions that led almost inevitably to independence.

At mid-century almost no one would have predicted such an occurrence. Some two million people had scattered themselves over an immense territory. They seemed to have little in common. In fact contemporary observers concluded that should the colonists ever achieve political independence, they would immediately turn on each other. "In short", declared one English traveller in 1759, "such is the difference of character, of manners, of religion, of interest, of the different colonies, that I think . . . were they left to themselves, there would soon be a civil war from one end of the continent to the other".¹ John Adams agreed. Reflecting in 1818 on the coming of revolution, he marvelled that the Americans had ever managed to unite. Their own separate histories seemed to have conspired against the formation of a new nation. The colonies, Adams explained, had evolved different constitutions of government. They had also experienced:

so great a variety of religions, they were composed of so many different nations, their customs, manners, and habits had so little resemblance, and their intercourse had been so rare, and their knowledge of each other so imperfect, that to unite them in . . . the same system of action, was certainly a very difficult enterprise.

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¹ Andrew Burnaby, Travels through North America (New York, 1904), pp. 152-3.
Very difficult indeed! And yet in 1776 these colonists surprised the world by successfully forming a new nation. In Adams's words, "Thirteen clocks were made to strike together". Somehow Americans had found a means to communicate effectively with each other, to develop a shared sense of political purpose, to transcend what at mid-century had appeared insurmountable cultural and geographic divisions. The mobilization of strangers in a revolutionary cause eroded the stubborn localism of an earlier period. In other words, it was a process that heightened awareness of a larger social identity. In Benedict Anderson's wonderful phrase, these men and women "imagined" a community, a national consciousness which while not yet the full-blown nationalism of the nineteenth century was nevertheless essential to the achievement of political independence.

Efforts to explain this political mobilization have founded on an attempt to establish the primacy of ideology over material interest. This is not a debate in which the truth lies somewhere between two extremes. Neither the intellectual nor the economic historian can tell us how Americans of different classes and backgrounds and living in very different physical environments achieved political solidarity, at least sufficient solidity to make good their claim to independence. Economic explanations — those that analyse an individual's political loyalties in terms of poverty or profits, absence of business opportunities or decline of soil fertility — are not only reductionist in character but also narrowly focused upon the experiences of specific, often numerically small groups in colonial society. Though we learn, for example, why certain urban workers in Boston or Philadelphia might have been unhappy with parliamentary taxation, we never discover how such people managed to reach out to — indeed even to communicate with — northern farmers and southern planters. In other words, the more we know about the pocket-book concerns of any particular

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eighteenth-century American community, the more difficult it becomes to understand a spreading national consciousness which accompanied political mobilization.

Intellectual historians encounter a different, though equally thorny set of problems. They transform the American Revolution into a mental event. From this perspective, it does not matter much whether the ideas that the colonists espoused are classic liberal concepts of rights and property, radical country notions of power and virtue or evangelical Calvinist beliefs about sin and covenants. Whatever the dominant ideology may have been, we find that a bundle of political abstractions has persuaded colonists living in scattered regions of America of the righteousness of their cause, driving them during the 1760s and 1770s to take ever more radical positions until eventually they were forced by the logic of their original assumptions to break with Great Britain. Unfortunately, intellectual historians provide no clear link between the everyday world of the men and women who actually became patriots and the ideas that they articulated. We are thus hard-pressed to comprehend how in 1774 wealthy Chesapeake planters and poor Boston artisans — to cite two obvious examples — could possibly have come to share a political mentality. We do not know how these ideas were transmitted through colonial society, from class to class, from community to community.

These interpretive issues — those that currently separate the materialists from the idealists — may be resolved by casting the historical debate in different terms. Eighteenth-century Americans, I shall argue, communicated perceptions of status and politics to other people through items of everyday material culture, through a symbolic universe of commonplace "things" which modern scholars usually take for granted but which for their original possessors were objects of great significance.\(^5\) By focusing attention on the meanings of things, on the semiotics of daily life, we gain fresh insight into the formation of a national consciousness as well as the coming of the American Revolution.\(^6\)

The imported British manufactures that flooded American society during the eighteenth century acquired cultural significance largely

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\(^5\) See Mihaly Czikszentmihalyi and Eugene Rochberg-Halton, *The Meaning of Things: Domestic Symbols and the Self* (Cambridge, 1981). Though this is a study of contemporary society, it provides historians with valuable insight into how people interpret the material objects of daily life.

within local communities. Their meanings were bound up with a customary world of face-to-face relations. Within these localities Americans began to define social status in relation to commodities. This was, of course, an expression of a much larger, long-term transformation of the Atlantic world. And though this process differentiated men and women in new ways, it also provided them with a common framework of experience, a shared language of consumption.

But in America something unusual occurred during the 1760s and 1770s. Parliament managed to politicize these consumer goods, and when it did so, manufactured items suddenly took on a radical, new symbolic function. In this particular colonial setting the very commodities that were everywhere beginning to transform social relations provided a language for revolution. People living in scattered parts of America began to communicate their political grievances through common imports. A shared framework of consumer experience not only allowed them to reach out to distant strangers, to perceive, however dimly, the existence of an "imagined community", but also to situate a universal political discourse about rights and liberties, virtue and power, within a familiar material culture. In this context the boycott became a powerful social metaphor of resistance, joining Carolinians and New Englanders, small farmers and powerful merchants, men and women in common cause.7

This interpretive scheme gives priority neither to ideas nor experience. Some Americans undoubtedly boycotted British imports because of political principle. By denying themselves these goods they expressed a deep ideological commitment. Other colonists, however, gave up consumer items because their neighbours compelled them to do so. They were not necessarily motivated by high principle, at least not initially. But the very experience of participating in these boycotts, of taking part in increasingly elaborate rituals of non-

7 The Swadeshi movement in late nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century India provides some intriguing parallels to the American experience. As C. A. Bayly explains, “After 1905, the import of British-made cloth into India and the ensuing destruction of Indian handicraft production became the key theme of Indian nationalism. In the hands first of Bengali leaders and later of Mahatma Gandhi and his supporters, the need to support swadeshi (home) industries and boycott foreign goods was woven through with notions of neighbourliness, patriotism, purity, and sacrifice, all of which provided unifying ideologies more powerful than any single call for political representation or independence”: C. A. Bayly, “The Origins of Swadeshi (Home Industry): Cloth and Indian Society, 1700-1930”, in Arjun Appadurai (ed.), The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective (Cambridge, 1986), p. 285. Also Sumit Sarkar, The Swadeshi Movement in Bengal, 1903-1908 (New Delhi, 1973); Bernard S. Cohn, “Cloth, Clothes and Colonialism: India in the 19th Century” (paper for the Wenner-Gren Foundation, symposium, 1983).
consumption, had an unintended effect. It served inevitably to heighten popular awareness of the larger constitutional issues at stake. In this sense, the boycott for many Americans was an act of ideological discovery. These particular colonists may not have destroyed tea because they were republicans, but surely they learned something fundamental about republican ideas by their participation in such events. Questions about the use of tea in one’s household forced ordinary men and women to choose sides, to consider exactly where one stood. And over time pledges of support for non-importation publicly linked patriotic individuals to other, like-minded individuals. Decisions about the consumer goods tied local communities to other communities, to regional movements and, after 1774, to a national association. Neither the consumer revolution nor the boycott movement can in itself explain an occurrence so complex as the American Revolution. That argument would amount to a new form of reductionism. The aim here is more limited: to explore the relation between the growth of national consciousness and the American rejection of the “baubles of Britain”.

I

The eighteenth century witnessed the birth of an Anglo-American “consumer society”. Though the Industrial Revolution was still far in the future, the pace of the British economy picked up dramatically after 1690. Small manufacturing concerns scattered throughout England began turning out huge quantities of consumer goods — cloth, ceramics, glassware, paper, cutlery — items that transformed the character of everyday life. Merchants could hardly keep up with expanding demand. The domestic market hummed with activity. People went shopping, gawking at the wares displayed in the “bow-windows” that appeared for the first time along urban streets. Advertisements in the provincial English journals fuelled consumer desire, and to those middling sorts who wanted to participate in the market but who did not possess sufficient cash, tradesmen offered generous credit.8

Americans were quickly swept up in this consumer economy. These were not the self-sufficient yeomen of Jeffersonian mythology. Eighteenth-century colonists demanded the latest British manufactures. Few would have disagreed with the members of the Maryland general assembly who once announced, “We want the British Manufactures”.

In order to pay for what they imported, the Americans harvested ever larger crops of tobacco, rice and indigo. Northern farmers supplied the West Indian plantations with foodstuffs. Economic historians have traditionally concentrated on this flow of American exports or, more precisely, on the production of staple commodities in response to European market conditions. The problem with this perspective is that it depreciates the role of consumer demand in shaping the colonial economy. At a time when the American population was growing at an extraordinary rate, per capita consumption of British imports was actually rising. In other words, more colonists purchased more manufactured goods every year. Since this was a young population — half of the colonists were under the age of sixteen — one must assume that adults were responsible for this exploding demand. Their consumption raised per capita rates for the entire society. After mid-century the American market for imported goods took off, rising 120 per cent between 1750 and 1773. Throughout the colonies the crude, somewhat impoverished material culture of the seventeenth century — a pioneer world of homespun cloth and wooden dishes — was swept away by a flood of store-bought sundries.


These ubiquitous items transformed the texture of everyday life in provincial America. Even in the most inaccessible regions people came increasingly to rely on imports. One English traveller discovered to her surprise that in rural North Carolina women seldom bothered to produce soap. It was not a question of the availability of raw materials. Good ashes could be had at no expense. But these rural women were consumers, and they preferred to purchase Irish soap “at the store at a monstrous price”. In more cosmopolitan environments, the imports were even more conspicuous. Eighteenth-century Americans situated other men and women within a rich context of British manufactures. John Adams betrayed this habit of mind when he visited the home of a successful Boston merchant:

Went over [to] the House to view the Furniture, which alone cost a thousand Pounds sterling. A seat it is for a noble Man, a Prince. The Turkey Carpets, the painted Hangings, the Marble Table, the rich Beds with crimson Damask Curtains and Counterpins, the beautiful Chimney Clock, the Spacious Garden, are the most magnificent of any Thing I have ever seen.

Like other Americans, Adams had obviously developed a taste for British imports.

How does one make sense out of this vast consumer society? There is much that we do not know about eighteenth-century colonial merchandizing. Still, even at this preliminary stage of investigation, it is possible to discern certain general characteristics that distinguished the colonial market-place at mid-century: an exceptionally rapid expansion of consumer choice, an increasing standardization of consumer behaviour and a pervasive Anglicization of the American market.

Of these three, the proliferation of choice is the most difficult to interpret. We simply do not know what it meant to the colonial consumer to find himself or herself suddenly confronted by an unprecedented level of variety in the market-place. Perhaps it was a liberating experience? Perhaps the very act of making choices between competing goods of different colour, texture and quality heightened the individual’s sense of personal independence? After all, the colonial

(n. 10 cont.)

of the character of the eighteenth-century American economy that differs substantially from the one advanced here can be found in James A. Henretta, “Families and Farms: Mentalité in Pre-Industrial America”, William and Mary Quart., 3rd ser., xxxv (1978), pp. 3-32.


buyer was actively participating in the consumer economy, demanding what he or she wanted rather than merely taking what was offered.

Whatever the psychological impact of this change may have been, there is no question that Americans at mid-century confronted a range of choice that would have amazed earlier generations. A survey of New York City newspapers revealed, for example, that during the 1720s merchants seldom mentioned more than fifteen different imported items per month in their advertisements. The descriptions were generic: cloth, paper, ceramics. But by the 1770s it was not unusual during some busy months for New York journals specifically to list over nine thousand different manufactured goods. And as the number of items expanded, the descriptive categories became more elaborate. In the 1740s New York merchants simply advertised "paper". By the 1760s they listed seventeen varieties distinguished by colour, function and quality. In the 1730s a customer might have requested satin, hoping apparently that the merchant had some in stock. By the 1760s merchants advertised a dozen different types of satin. No carpets were mentioned in the New York advertisements before the 1750s, but by the 1760s certain stores carried carpets labelled Axminster, Milton, Persian, Scotch, Turkey, Weston and Wilton. One could purchase after the 1750s purple gloves, flowered gloves, orange gloves, white gloves, rough gloves, chamois gloves, buff gloves, "Maid's Black Silk" gloves, "Maid's Lamb Gloves", and even "Men's Dog Skin Gloves". There is no need to continue. Everywhere one looks, one encounters an explosion of choices.

If, as many scholars currently argue, human beings constitute external reality through language, then the proliferation of manufactures during the eighteenth century may have radically altered how Americans made sense out of everyday activities. The consumer market provided them with an impressive new vocabulary, thousands of words that allowed them not only to describe a changing material culture but also to interpret their place within it. Adams demonstrated this point when in his diary he recorded his reactions to the possessions of the wealthy Boston merchant. This language of goods was shared by all who participated in the market. It was not the product of a particular region or class, and thus furnished colonists with a means of transmitting experience across social and geographic boundaries. As we have seen, a visitor could engage the women of North Carolina in a discourse about imported soap. It was a conversation that the women of Virginia and Massachusetts would also have understood.
An example of this kind of cultural exchange occurred in a Maryland tavern in 1744. A travelling physician from Annapolis witnessed a quarrel between an innkeeper and an individual who by his external appearance seemed “a rough spun, forward, clownish blade”. The proprietor apparently shared this impression, because she served this person who wore “a greasy jacket and breeches and a dirty worsted cap” a breakfast fit “for some ploughman or carman”. The offended customer vehemently protested that he too was a gentleman and to prove his status, pulled a linen hat out of his pocket. He then informed the embarrassed assembly that “he was able to afford better than many who went finer: he had good linnen in his bags, a pair of silver buckles, silver clasps, and gold sleeve buttons, two Holland shirts, and some neat night caps; and that his little woman att home drank tea twice a day”. What catches our attention is not the man’s clumsy attempt to negotiate status through possessions — people have been doing that for centuries — but rather that he bragged of owning specific manufactured goods, the very articles that were just then beginning to transform American society. He assumed — correctly, in this case — that the well-appointed stranger he encountered in a country tavern understood the language of shirts, buckles and tea.13

This expanding consumer world of the mid-eighteenth century led almost inevitably to a standardization of the market-place. To be sure, as the previous anecdote suggests, Americans had begun to define status in relation to commodities. In this they were not especially unique. Throughout the Atlantic world choice created greater, more visible marks of distinction. Nevertheless by actually purchasing manufactured imports as opposed to making do with locally produced objects, by participating in an expanding credit network and by finding oneself confronted with basically the same types of goods which were now on sale in other, distant communities, Americans developed a common element of personal experience.

One can only speculate, of course, why colonial shoppers purchased certain items. They may have been looking for status, beauty, convenience or price. Whatever the justification may have been, the fact remains that people living in different parts of America were exposed to an almost identical range of imported goods. In part, this standardization of the market-place resulted from the manufacturing process; after all, there were only so many dyes and glazes and finishes available during this period. The Staffordshire ceramics, for example,

that sold in Charleston were of the same general shapes and colours as the Staffordshireware that sold in the shops of Philadelphia, New York and Boston. Indeed an examination of newspaper advertisements in these colonial ports reveals no evidence of the development of regional consumer taste. British merchants sent to America what they could obtain from the manufacturers; the colonists bought whatever the merchants shipped. It is not surprising, therefore, to discover a Virginian in 1766 exclaiming, “Now nothing are so common as Turkey or Wilton Carpetts”. As we have already discovered, carpets of the same description had just made their appearance in the newspaper advertisements in New York and in the home of the Boston merchant described by John Adams.

The standardization of taste affected all colonial consumers. This is an important point. It is easy for modern historians to concentrate on the buying habits of the gentry. Their beautiful homes — many of which are now preserved as museums — dominate our understanding of the character of daily life in eighteenth-century America. This interpretive bias is not a problem peculiar to the colonial period. The consumer behaviour of the wealthy has always been more fully documented than that of more humble buyers. But however much we are drawn to the material culture of the colonial elite, we should realize that the spread of the consumer market transformed the lives of ordinary men and women as fundamentally as it did those of their more affluent neighbours. Though wealthy Americans purchased goods of superior quality, poorer buyers demanded the same general range of imports. Rural peddlars, urban hawkers, Scottish factors responded to this eager clientele, providing farmers and artisans with easy credit, the ticket to participation in this consumer society. These people became reliant on imported manufactures, so much so in fact that Francis Fauquier, lieutenant-governor of Virginia, could note in 1763, “These imports daily encrease, the common planters usually dressing themselves in the manufactures of Great Brittain [sic] altogether”.

14 Observations about the character and content of eighteenth-century American advertising found in this essay are based on extensive research in the newspapers of Boston, New York, Philadelphia, Williamsburg and Charleston, carried out by the author and Rebecca Becker of Northwestern University.


Tea provides an instructive example of the standardization of consumer taste. Early in the eighteenth century this hot drink became the preferred beverage in gentry households. Polite ladies — perhaps as a device to lure gentlemen away from tavern society — organized elaborate household rituals around the tea service. In fact the purchase of tea necessitated the acquisition of pots, bowls, strainers, sugar-tongs, cups and slop-dishes. One writer in a New York newspaper suggested the need for a school of tea etiquette. The young men of the city, finding themselves “utterly ignorant in the Ceremony of the Tea-Table”, were advised to employ a knowledgeable woman “to teach them the Laws, Rules, Customs, Phrases and Names of the Tea Utensils”.  

Though less well-to-do Americans did not possess the entire range of social props, they demanded tea. As early as 1734 one New Yorker reported:

I am credibly informed that tea and china ware cost the province, yearly, near the sum of L10,000; and people that are least able to go to the expense, must have their tea tho’ their families want bread. Nay, I am told, they often pawn their rings and plate to gratifie themselves in that piece of extravagance.

It did not take long for this particular luxury to become a necessity. “Our people”, wrote another New York gentleman in 1762, “both in town and country, are shamefully gone into the habit of tea-drinking”. And when Israel Acrelius visited the old Swedish settlements of Delaware at mid-century, he discovered people consuming tea “in the most remote cabins”. During the 1750s even the inmates of the public hospital of Philadelphia, the city poor-house, insisted on having bohea tea. All these colonists drank their tea out of imported cups, not necessarily china ones, but rather ceramics that had originated in the English Midlands where they had been fired at very high temperature and thus made resistant to the heat of America’s new favourite drink.

Ordinary Americans adopted tea for reasons other than social

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emulation. After all, it was a mild stimulant, and a hot cup of tea probably helped the labouring poor endure hard work and insubstantial housing. Nevertheless in some isolated country villages the desire to keep up with the latest consumer fads led to bizarre results, the kind of gross cultural misunderstanding that anthropologists encounter in places where products of an alien technology have been introduced into a seemingly less-developed society.23 In 1794 a historian living in East Hampton, New York, interviewed a seventy-eight-year-old woman. "Mrs. Miller", he discovered, "remembers well when they first began to drink tea on the east end of Long Island". She explained that none of the local farmers knew what to do with the dry leaves: "One family boiled it in a pot and ate it like samp-porridge. Another spread tea leaves on his bread and butter, and bragged of his having ate half a pound at a meal, to his neighbor, who was informing him how long a time a pound of tea lasted him". According to Mrs. Miller, the arrival of the first tea-kettle was a particularly memorable day in the community:

It came ashore at Montauk in a ship, (the Captain Bell). The farmers came down there on business with their cattle, and could not find out how to use the tea-kettle, which was then brought up to old "Governor Hedges". Some said it was for one thing, and some said it was for another. At length one, the more knowing than his neighbors, affirmed it to be the ship's lamp, to which they all assented.

Mrs. Miller may have been pulling the historian's leg, but whatever the truth of her story, it reveals the symbolic importance of tea in this remote eighteenth-century village.24

Standardization of consumer goods created a paradoxical situation. As Americans purchased the same general range of British manufactures — in other words, as they had similar consumer experiences — they became increasingly Anglicized. Historians sometimes refer to this cultural process as "the colonization of taste".25 The Anglo-American consumer society of the eighteenth century drew the mainland colonists closer to the culture of the mother country. In part, this was a result of the Navigation Acts which channelled American commerce through Great Britain, a legislative constraint that made it difficult as well as expensive for Americans to purchase goods from

23 See, for example, H. A. Powell, "Cricket in Kiriwina", Listener, xlviii (1952), pp. 384-5.
the Continent. There is no reason to believe, however, that parliament passed these acts in a conscious attempt to "colonize American taste". That just happened. And during the eighteenth century this process is easy to trace. For most people, articles imported from the mother country carried positive associations. They introduced colour and excitement into the lives of the colonists. Their quality was superior to that of locally made goods, silverware and furniture being two notable exceptions. It is not surprising that the demand for British manufactures escalated so quickly after mid-century. The market itself created new converts. Advertisements, merchants' displays, news of other people's acquisitions stoked consumer desire and thereby accelerated the spread of Anglicization. Booksellers - just to note one example - discovered that colonial readers preferred an English imprint to an American edition of the same title. "Their estimate of things English was so high", reports one historian, "that a false London imprint could seem an effective way to sell a local publication".  

Anglicized provincials insisted on receiving the "latest" English goods. They were remarkably attuned to even subtle changes in metropolitan fashion. "And you may believe me", a young Virginia planter named George Washington lectured a British merchant in 1760, "when I tell you that instead of getting things good and fashionable in their several kinds[,] we often have Articles sent Us that could have been used [sic] by our Forefathers in the days of yore". Washington may have envied his neighbours in Maryland. According to one visitor to Annapolis:

> 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 [London]. . . In short, very little difference is, in reality, observable in the manners of the wealthy colonist and the wealthy Briton.

No doubt this man exaggerated, but as he well understood, after mid-century American consumers took their cues from the mother country. Certainly that was the case of the people whom William Smith observed in New York. "In the city of New-York", he wrote

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in 1762, "through the intercourse with the Europeans, we follow the London fashions". 29 Benjamin Franklin saw this development in a favourable light; at least he did so in 1751. "A vast Demand is growing for British Manufactures", he marvelled, "a glorious market wholly in the Power of Britain". 30 The colonists belonged to an empire of goods. The rulers of the mother country could well afford to let the Americans drift politically for much of the eighteenth century, following a policy that has sometimes been labelled "salutary neglect". Like Franklin, the ablest British administrators must have sensed that the bonds of loyalty depended upon commerce, upon the free flow of goods, and not upon coercion. 31

Let me summarize the argument to this point. Before the 1760s most Americans would not have been conscious of the profound impact of consumption upon their society. They were like foot-soldiers who witness great battles only from a narrow, personal perspective and thus cannot appreciate the larger implications of thousands of separate engagements. Of course, the colonists were aware of the proliferation of choice, but for most of them the acquisition of British imports was a private act, one primarily associated with one's own social status within a community or household. Manufactured goods shaped family routines; they influenced relationships within a particular neighbourhood. In symbolic terms these articles possessed local meanings. Certainly before the Stamp Act crisis — a few extreme evangelicals like James Davenport to the contrary notwithstanding — the Americans developed no sustained public discourse about goods. 32

Nevertheless the totality of these private consumer experiences deeply affected the character of eighteenth-century provincial society,

29 Smith, History of the Late Province of New-York, p. 277.
31 See Breen, "Empire of Goods".
32 D. D. Hall, "Religion and Society: Problems and Reconsiderations", in Greene and Pole (eds.), Colonial British America, pp. 337-8. The most famous evangelical of the period, George Whitefield, embraced the latest merchandizing techniques, literally selling the revival to the American people. The crowds flocked to hear Whitefield, while his critics grumbled about the commercialization of religion. One anonymous writer in Massachusetts noted that there is "a very wholesome law of the province to discourage Pedlars in Trade" and it seems high time "to enact something for the discouragement of Pedlars in Divinity also": Boston Weekly News-Letter, 22 Apr. 1742. For connections between the consumer revolution and the Great Awakening, see Frank Lambert, "'Pedlar in Divinity': George Whitefield and the Great Awakening, 1737-1745" (Graduate seminar paper, Northwestern Univ., 1987).
for in a relatively short period following 1740 this flood of British manufactures created an indispensable foundation for the later political mobilization of the American people. Though these highly Anglicized men and women were not fully aware of this shared experiential framework, it would soon provide them with a means to communicate across social and spatial boundaries. Only after political events beyond their control forced them to form larger human collectivities — as was the case after 1765 — did they discover that a shared language of goods was already in place.

II

The importation of British goods on such a vast scale created social tensions that the colonists were slow to appreciate. The very act of purchasing these articles — making free choices from among competing possibilities — heightened the Americans’ already well-developed sense of their own personal independence. The acquisition of manufactures also liberated them from a drab, impoverished, even insanitary folk culture of an earlier period. But consumption inevitably involved dependency. The colonists came increasingly to rely upon British merchants not only for what they now perceived as the necessities of daily life but also for a continued supply of credit. So long as the Anglo-American economy remained relatively prosperous and stable, it was possible to maintain the fiction of personal independence in a market system that in fact spawned dependence. But those days were numbered. An increasingly volatile international economy coupled with parliament’s apparent determination to tax the colonists sparked an unprecedented debate about the role of commerce within the empire. Comfortable relations and familiar meanings were no longer secure. That was the burden of John Dickinson’s troubled remark in 1765, “under all these restraints and some others that have been imposed on us, we have not till lately been unhappy. Our spirits were not depressed”.

As Dickinson’s observation suggests, the colonists’ experiences as consumers no longer yielded the satisfaction that they had at an earlier time. The rising level of personal debt made the Americans’ growing dependence upon British merchants increasingly manifest, and in this context of growing consumer “disappointment”, the meaning of

imported goods began to shift. A semiotic order was changing. Articles that had been bound up with local cultures, with individual decisions within households, were gradually thrust into public discourse, and during the constitutional crisis with Great Britain these “baubles” were gradually and powerfully incorporated into a general moral critique of colonial society that traced its origins in part to radical country pamphleteers such as John Trenchard and Thomas Gordon and in part to the evangelical preachers of the Great Awakening. In other words, a constitutional crisis transformed private consumer acts into public political statements. Britain’s rulers inadvertently activated a vast circuit of private experience and in the process created in the American colonies what they least desired, the first stirrings of national consciousness.

To understand the process of symbolic redefinition one must remember that the merchants of the mother country bore as much responsibility as did the members of parliament for the growing unhappiness of the American consumers. To be sure, during the Stamp Act crisis British merchants petitioned the House of Commons in support of the colonists. But at the same time these businessmen pushed upon the American market more goods and credit than it could possibly absorb. Indeed their aggressive, though short-sighted drive to maximize returns not only substantially increased colonial indebtedness but also alienated American wholesalers who had traditionally served as middlemen between the large British houses and the American shopkeepers. As Governor Francis Bernard of Massachusetts explained to the earl of Shelburne in 1768:

for some years past the London merchants, for the sake of increasing their profits, have got into dealing immediately [directly] with the retailers . . . Instead of dealing with respectable houses[,] the London merchants are engaged in a great number of little shops, and for the sake of advantages derived from trading with people who cannot dispute the terms . . . they have extended their credit beyond all bounds of prudence, and have . . . gluttoned this country with goods.


Parliament exacerbated these structural tensions within the American market. Though its efforts to raise new revenues after 1764 did not cripple the colonists' ability to purchase imported goods, parliament did remind the Americans of their dependence. If the colonists continued to purchase items such as glass, paper and paint from British merchants — which seemed quite likely since they could not produce these articles themselves — then the Americans would inevitably have to pay unconstitutional taxes. As Dickinson noted sarcastically in his influential Letters from a Farmer, "I think it evident, that we must use paper and glass; that what we use must be British; and that we must pay the duties imposed, unless those who sell these articles are so generous as to make us presents of the duties they pay". 38

Considering the growing ambivalence of the colonists towards consumer goods — these items were immensely desirable, but also raised unsettling questions about economic dependency — it is not surprising that the Stamp Act crisis sparked a boycott of British manufactures. 39 During the anxious months of 1764 and 1765 urban Americans endorsed non-importation as the most likely means to bring about the Stamp Act's repeal and alleviate the burden of personal debt. As "Philo Publicus" explained to the readers of the Boston Gazette, "We have taken wide Steps to Ruin, and as we have grown more Luxurious every Year, so we run deeper and deeper in Debt to our Mother Country". After observing how extravagantly the people of Boston decorated their parlours, how they piled their sideboards high with silver plate, how they collected costly china, this writer concluded, "I wonder not that my Country is so poor, I wonder not when I hear of frequent Bankruptcies". 40

The boycott seemed an almost reflexive reaction to constitutional crisis. Of course, in 1765 angry Americans had little other choice. After all, there was no colonial Bastille for them to storm; George III and his hated ministers lived in safety on the other side of the Atlantic.

But however circumscribed the range of responses may have been, the boycott served the colonists well. Participation in these protests provided Americans with opportunities to vent outrage against the policies of a distant government — much as Americans and others who boycott South African goods do today — and though it was not clear whether anyone in the mother country actually listened, the very act of publicly denying themselves these familiar imports began to mobilize colonists of different regions and backgrounds in common cause.

The success of this first boycott should not be exaggerated. Most activities were restricted to urban centres, and though non-importation momentarily upset the flow of Anglo-American trade, it did not bring the British economy to its knees. Nevertheless, however limited its economic impact may have been, this initial confrontation reveals a mental process at work which in time would acquire extraordinary significance. As early as 1765 many colonists had begun to realize that patterns of consumption provided them with an effective language of political protest. In that sense, Americans discovered political ideology through a discussion of the meaning of goods, through observances of non-consumption that forced ordinary men and women to declare where exactly they stood on the great constitutional issues of the day. British manufactures thus took on a new symbolic function, and the boycott became a social metaphor of political resistance. If the mainland colonies had not already been transformed into a consumer society, the Stamp Act protesters would have found it extremely difficult to communicate effectively with each other at this moment of political crisis. The purchase of British manufactures was the one experience that most of them shared, and by raising the possibility that they could do without these goods patriotic Americans strained the bonds of Anglicization.

Revolution did not occur in 1765. The bonds of empire withstood the challenge, and as soon as parliament repealed the Stamp Act the Americans returned to the import shops. The confrontation with the mother country had eroded but not destroyed the traditional meaning of consumer goods. Newspaper advertisements carried the familiar words “just imported from England”, a clear indication that many colonists still took their cultural cues from Great Britain. Until that connection could be severed, independence was out of the question. This does not mean that Americans deserted the political principles that they had mouthed during the Stamp Act protest; most certainly they were not hypocrites. The boycott had provided colonists with a
behavioural link between a political ideology and local experience, and when it was abandoned ideas about liberty and representation, slavery and virtue were temporarily dissociated from the affairs of daily life.

The Townshend Act of 1767 returned consumer goods to the centre of American political discourse. This ill-conceived statute levied a duty upon imported glass, paper, tea, lead and paint.\textsuperscript{41} Patriotic leaders throughout the colonies advocated a campaign of non-consumption, and though this boycott would ultimately disappoint some of its more fervent organizers, it revealed the powerful capacity of goods in this society not only to recruit people into a political movement but also to push them — often when they were unaware of what was happening — to take ever more radical positions. As in the Stamp Act crisis, imported British manufactures provided a framework in which many colonists learned about rights and liberties.

During the period of protest against the Townshend Act, roughly between 1767 and 1770, colonists began to speak of consumer goods in a highly charged moral language. Of course, these Americans were not the first people to condemn the pernicious effects of luxury and self-indulgence. That concern had vexed moralists for centuries. Nevertheless during the Stamp Act crisis a dominant theme of the political discourse had been debt. The purchase of British manufactures undermined the personal independence of the American consumers and thus made them fit targets for tyrannical conspirators. But after 1767 the thrust of patriotic rhetoric shifted from private debt to public virtue. By acquiring needless British imports the colonial consumer threatened the liberties of other men and women. “Every Man who will take Pains to cultivate the Cost of Homespun”, advised a writer in the \textit{Boston Gazette}, “may easily convince himself that his private Interest, as well as [that of] the Publick, will be promoted by it”.\textsuperscript{42} In other words, how one spent one’s own money became a matter deserving public scrutiny.

The artefacts of a consumer culture took on new symbolic meaning within a fluid political discourse, and before long it was nearly impossible for Americans to speak of imported goods without making reference to constitutional rights. The politicization of consumption was clearly evident in the 22 December 1767 instructions of the


\textsuperscript{42} \textit{Boston Gazette}, 11 Jan. 1768.
Boston town meeting to its representatives in the general assembly. We, your constituents, they announced, are worried about "the distressed Circumstances of this Town, by means of the amazing growth of Luxury, and the Embarrassments of our Trade; & having also the strongest apprehensions that our invaluable Rights & Liberties as Men and British Subjects, are greatly affected by a late Act of the British Parliament"; they urged their representatives "to encourage a spirit of Industry and Frugality among the People".\(^{43}\) Colonists living in different parts of America called for a boycott not just of those few imports specifically taxed by the Townshend Act but, rather, a long list of British manufactures, everything from clocks to carriages, hats to house furniture, even mustard.\(^{44}\) The lists contained scores of items, a virtual inventory of the major articles of the mid-century consumer culture. The colonists seemed determined to undo patterns of consumption that had taken root in the 1740s, to return perhaps to a simpler period of self-sufficiency, which in fact had never existed, but which in this political crisis seemed the best strategy for preserving liberty. In this social context it made sense for colonial writers to declare: "Save your money and you can save your country".\(^{45}\)

The Townshend boycotts — ineffective though they may have been in forcing parliament to back down — helped radical colonists to distinguish friends from enemies. Strangers communicated ideology through the denial of consumer goods. Rhetoric was not enough. One had to reveal where one stood. The non-consumption movement forced individuals to alter the character of their daily lives, and as they did so, they formed collectivities of like-minded colonists, acts which inevitably reinforced their own commitment to radical politics. The leaders of Windham, a small village in south-eastern Connecticut, scheduled a town meeting in response to correspondence they had received from Boston. This letter from the outside urged the people of Windham to join in a boycott; in other words, to think of politics in terms that extended far beyond the boundaries of the community. This invitation caused the villagers to take note of their "surprising fondness . . . for the use and consumption of foreign and British manufactures". After a full discussion of the issues, they publicly pledged "to each other that we will discourage and discountenance

\(^{43}\) A Report of the Record Commissioners of the City of Boston Containing the Boston Town Records, 1758 to 1769 (Boston, 1886), pp. 227-8.


to the utmost of our power the excessive use of all foreign teas, china
ware, spices and black pepper, all British and foreign superfluities
and manufactures”. This covenant helped the townspeople to sort
themselves out. One group of Windham inhabitants was now pre-
pared to expose another group as “Enemies to their Country”, and
once this decision had been taken, both sides probably thought more
deeply about political loyalties than they had ever done before. And
the villagers spread word of their resolution, appointing a committee
“to correspond with committees from the several towns in the County
in order to render the fore-going proposals as extensive and effectual
as may be”. The confrontation with British imports was extending
the political horizons of ordinary people in this small Connecticut
village. Though they could not possibly correspond directly with
distant Americans, they expressed their “earnest desire that every
town in this Colony and in every Colony in America would explicitly
and publicly disclose their sentiments relating to the Non-importation
Agreement and the violations thereof”.46 Without question, one
encounters in Windham the makings of an “imagined community”,
the seeds of national consciousness.

By mobilizing people ordinarily excluded from colonial politics,
the non-consumption movement of this period greatly expanded the
base of revolutionary activities. The Townshend boycott politicized
even the most mundane items of the household economy and thereby
politicized American women. Decisions about consumption could
not be separated from decisions about politics. Within this electric
atmosphere mothers and wives and daughters monitored the ideologi-
cal commitment of the family. Throughout the colonies women
altered styles of dress, wove homespun cloth and stopped drinking
tea. At one wedding in Connecticut, countrywomen appeared in
garments of their own making and insisted upon having “Labrador
tea”, a concoction brewed from indigenous herbs. Other women in
New England participated in spinning and weaving competitions,
community rituals of great symbolic complexity. The actual home-
spun was invested with political significance. But so too were the
women themselves. Their efforts at the wheel, like those of Mahatma
Gandhi in another era, became local representations of a general
ideology that connected the people of these communities — at least
in their political imaginations — to unseen men and women in other
American communities.47

The boycott of consumer goods also drew young people into the political debate. The students of Harvard, Yale and the College of Rhode Island, for example, appeared at commencement during the late 1760s wearing homespun suits. Though such displays irritated royal officials — that was the fun of it — they also transmitted political meanings through non-consumption to other young people. This was an important element in the process of developing a national consciousness. In a society in which the average age was about sixteen, the young could not be taken for granted. A large percentage of the American population in 1776 had not even been born at the time of the Stamp Act crisis, and if college students had not been recruited into the boycott movement, they might not later as adults have appeared at Bunker Hill.

The circle of participation widened to include even the poorer members of colonial society, the kinds of people who were as dependent upon the consumer society as were their gentry neighbours. They collected rags required for the manufacture of “patriotic” paper. Goods — or in this case the denial of goods — were mobilizing an entire populace. Peter Oliver, the Boston loyalist who later wrote an acerbic history of the Revolution, noted that during the protest against the Townshend duties, the city’s radicals circulated:

A Subscription Paper . . . Enumerating a great Variety of Articles not to be imported from England, which they supposed would muster the Manufacturers in England into a national Mob to support their Interests. Among the various prohibited Articles, were Silks, Velvets, Clocks, Watches, Coaches & Chariots; & it was highly diverting, to see the names & marks, to the Subscription, of Porters & Washing Women.

Oliver found the incident amusing, an example of how a few trouble-makers had duped the poorer sorts. But the porters and washerwomen of Boston knew what they were doing. Affixing one’s signature or mark to a document of this sort was a personal risk that they were willing to accept. Like the village women and the graduating students, these people had been mobilized through goods; it is difficult to see how independence could have been achieved without them.

The protest against the Townshend duties generated group activities that might best be termed “rituals of non-consumption”. These

were focused moments in the life of a community during which continuing social relations were often, quite suddenly politicized. The spark for these events was usually a letter sent by some external body urging the villagers to support the boycott. In some towns large numbers of men and women took oaths before their neighbours swearing not to purchase certain items until parliament repealed the obnoxious taxes. These ceremonies possessed a curious religious character, much like the covenant renewals in the early Congregational churches of New England. In other communities specially selected committee-men carried subscription papers from house to house.\(^{51}\) In Boston the “Subscription Rolls, for encouraging Oeconomy, Industry, our own Manufactures, and the disuse of foreign Superfluities” were kept in the office of the town clerk. According to a notice in the Boston Gazette, “The Selectmen strongly recommend this Measure to Persons of all ranks, as the most honorable and effectual way of giving public Testimony of their Love to their Country, and of endeavouring to save it from ruin”.\(^{52}\) Whether they lived in Boston or an inland village, ordinary colonists were obviously under considerable pressure to sign. But the decision was theirs to make. By pledging to support non-consumption they reaffirmed their moral standing in the community. They demonstrated that they were not “enemies to their country” — a country that in fact they were only just beginning to define.

Perhaps the most effective political ritual associated with non-consumption, at least in New England, was the funeral. More than any other event connected with the life cycle, the funeral in eighteenth-century America had become an occasion of conspicuous consumption. Wealthy families distributed commemorative rings. Gloves were given out, and custom mandated that all attendants wear mourning dress made of the best imported cloth that they could afford. Indeed opulent funerals were in themselves an indication of the spread of the consumer society. “Such was the fashion”, one colonist explained, that bereaved families imagined that if they disappointed their friends and neighbours, “they should have made themselves obnoxious to the censures of an ill-natured and malicious world, who would have construed their frugality into niggardliness”.\(^{53}\)


\(^{52}\) Boston Gazette, 30 Nov. 1767 (my emphasis).

During the protest against the Townshend duties, such extravagant displays suddenly seemed inappropriate. A shift in the symbolic meaning of British imports called forth a change in funeral etiquette. And since these were highly visible events, they inevitably confronted those persons who had not thought deeply about imperial politics with an ideological message. The freeholders and inhabitants of Boston agreed "not to use any Gloves but what are manufactured here, nor any new Garments upon such Occasion but what shall be absolutely necessary".54 Everywhere one saw signs of retrenchment at funerals, a trend that one anonymous writer declared "affected every true patriot with particular satisfaction".55 As might be expected, the loyalist historian, Peter Oliver, denounced the politicization of funerals. He saw the hand of the radicals behind these restrictions. "Under Pretence of Oeconomy", he announced, "the Faction undertook to regulate Funerals, that there might be less Demand for English Manufactures". Oliver recognized that expensive funerals had at an earlier time "ruined some Families of moderate Fortune", but from his perspective the patriot funeral raised even greater problems. "One Extreme was exchanged for another. A Funeral now seemed more like a Procession to a May Fair; and Processions were lengthened, especially by the Ladies, who figured a way . . . to exhibit their Share of Spite, & their Silk Gowns".56 Funerals had moved from the private to the public realm, and as was recently the case in the black townships of South Africa, they became powerful political statements. It is perhaps not surprising, therefore, that the members of the Continental Congress enthusiastically endorsed this particular means of mobilizing mass support, pledging in September 1774 that:

on the death of any relation or friend, none of us, or any of our families will go into any further mourning-dress, than a black crape or ribbon on the arm or hat, for gentlemen, and a black ribbon and necklace for ladies, and we will discontinue the giving of gloves and scarves at funerals.57

The repeal of the Townshend Acts in 1770 retarded the growth of national consciousness in the American colonies. Parliament’s apparent retreat on the issue of taxation revealed the symbolic function that consumer goods had played in the constitutional discourse. As

55 Massachusetts Spy, 6 Jan. 1774.
56 Oliver, Origin and Progress of the American Revolution, p. 62.
political tensions within the empire eased, these articles no longer carried such clear ideological meanings. Repeal, in fact, unloosed a frenzy of consumption. Though the tax on tea remained, the colonists could not be deterred from buying British manufactures. Between 1770 and 1772 they set records for the importation of foreign goods. Radical leaders such as Samuel Adams warned the Americans that the threat to their political liberties had not been removed. He begged them to continue their resistance, to maintain the boycott. But few listened. Commerce returned to the old channels, and as it did so, goods again became associated with the Anglicization of American society. It is no wonder that Adams grumbled in a letter to his friend Arthur Lee that the colonial newspapers were once again filled with advertisements for "the Baubles of Britain". 58

The non-importation movement of the late 1760s had in fact been only a partial success. The merchants of Philadelphia accused the merchants of Boston of cheating. People everywhere found it more difficult than they had anticipated to do without the thousands of items imported from the mother country. The most notable successes of the period had been local, something that had occurred within regionally clustered communities. For all the rhetoric, it had proved hard to communicate to very distant strangers. 59 George Mason understood the problem. "The associations", he explained, "almost from one end of this continent to the other, were drawn up in a hurry and formed upon erroneous principles". The organizers of these boycotts had expected parliament to back down quickly, certainly within a year or two, but that had not happened. The results did not discourage Mason, however, for as he explained in December 1770, "had one general plan been formed exactly the same for all colonies (so as to have removed all cause of jealousy or danger of interfering with each other) in the nature of a sumptuary law, restraining only articles of luxury and ostentation together with the goods at any time taxed", the results might have been different. 60 Americans had not yet discovered how to communicate continentally.

In 1773 parliament stumbled upon an element of mass political mobilization that had been missing during the Townshend protest. By passing the Tea Act, it united the colonists as they had never been

59 Jensen, Founding of a Nation, chs. 10-12.
before. The reason for this new solidarity was not so much that the Americans shared a common political ideology, but rather that the statute affected an item of popular consumption found in almost every colonial household. It was perhaps the major article in the development of an eighteenth-century consumer society, a beverage which, as we have seen, appeared on the tables of the wealthiest merchants and the poorest labourers. For Americans, therefore, it was not difficult to transmit perceptions of liberty and rights through a discourse on tea. By transforming this ubiquitous element of daily life into a symbol of political oppression, parliament inadvertently boosted the growth of national consciousness. "Considering the article of tea as the detestable instrument which laid the foundation of the present sufferings of our distressed friends in the town of Boston", the members of the Virginia house of burgesses declared in August 1774, "we view it with horror, and therefore resolve that we will not, from this day, either import tea of any kind whatever, nor will we use or suffer, even such of it as is now at hand, to be used in any of our families". 61 And in the northern colonies, people now spoke of tea-drinkers not simply as enemies of our country — a term which in the 1760s had referred to one’s colony or region — but as enemies "to the liberties of America". 62

The public discourse over tea raised issues about the political effects of consumption that had been absent or muted during the previous decade. The language of goods became more shrill, hyperbolic. During the Stamp Act crisis, colonists associated consumption chiefly with personal debt. After parliament passed the Townshend duties, they talked more frequently in a moral vocabulary. By denying themselves the "baubles" of the mother country, they might thereby preserve their virtue. But in 1774 they spoke of tea as a badge of slavery, as a political instrument designed by distant tyrants to seize their property. "A WOMAN" argued in the Massachusetts Spy that:

in the present case the use of tea is considered not as a private but as a public evil . . . we are not to consider it merely as the herb tea, or what has an ill-tendency as to health, but as it is made a handle to introduce a variety of public grievances and oppressions amongst us.

Tea, A WOMAN concluded, is a sign of "enslaving our country". 63 In an impassioned appeal to the citizens of Charleston, South Carolina,

62 "New York Sons of Liberty Resolutions on Tea", 29 Nov. 1773, ibid., p. 70.
63 Massachusetts Spy, 6 Jan. 1774; also ibid., 13, 20 Jan., 25 Aug. 1774.
one speaker — probably Christopher Gadsden — insisted that a non-importation agreement would “prove a means of restoring our liberty”. “Who that has the spirit of a man”, he asked:

but would rather forego the elegancies and luxuries of life, than entail slavery on his unborn posterity to the end of time? . . . Nothing but custom makes the curl-pated beau a more agreeable sight with his powder and pomatum, than the tawney savage with his paint and bear’s grease. Too long has luxury reigned amongst us, enervating our constitutions and shrinking the human race into pigmies. 64

And finally, another writer in this period bluntly reminded newspaper readers in New England that “the use of Tea is a political evil in this country”. 65

Throughout America the ceremonial destruction of tea strengthened the bonds of political solidarity. Once again, we must look to local communities for the embryonic stirrings of national consciousness. It was in these settings that a common commodity was transformed into the overarching symbol of political corruption. By purging the community of tea leaves — an import that could be found in almost every American home — the colonists reinforced their own commitment to certain political principles. But they did more. The destruction of the tea transmitted an unmistakable ideological message to distant communities: we stand together. The Boston Tea Party is an event familiar to anyone who has heard of the Revolution. 66 In many villages, however, the inhabitants publicly burned their tea. Everyone was expected to contribute some leaves, perhaps a canister of tea hidden away in a pantry, a few ounces, tea purchased long before parliament passed the hated legislation, all of it to be destroyed in flames that purged the town of ideological sin. “We hear from [the town of] Montague”, reported the Massachusetts Spy:

that one of the inhabitants having inadvertently purchased a small quantity of tea of a pedlar, several of the neighbours being made acquainted therewith, went to his house and endeavoured to convince him of the impropriety of making any use of that article for the present, while it continues to be a badge of slavery.

The visiting committee easily persuaded the man “to commit it to the flames”. The group then ferreted the pedlar out of the local tavern, seized his entire stock of tea and “carried [it] into the road, where it was burnt to ashes”. 67 In Charleston, Massachusetts, the

65 Massachusetts Spy, 23 Dec. 1773.
67 Massachusetts Spy, 17 Feb. 1774.
town clerk announced that he would oversee the collection of all tea in the community: “And that the tea so collected, be destroyed by fire, on Friday next at noon day, in the market place”. He declared that any persons who failed to participate in this activity “are not only inimicable to the liberty of America in general, but also show a daring disrespect to this town in particular”. From Northampton County on Virginia’s eastern shore came news that a committee had collected 416 pounds of tea. Moreover “Some gentlemen also brought their Tea to the Court House, and desired it might be publicly burnt, in which reasonable request they were instantly gratified”. And from Wilmington, North Carolina, a traveller reported, “the Ladies have burnt their tea in a solemn procession”.

The seizure and destruction of tea became an effective instrument of political indoctrination, forcing the ignorant or indifferent people of these communities publicly to commit themselves to the cause of liberty while at the same time reinforcing the patriots’ commitment to a radical ideology. The individuals involved were often ordinary men and women. Had they not become associated with tea, they might have remained anonymous colonists, going about their business and keeping their political opinions to themselves. But they were not so lucky. Early in 1774 Ebenezer Withington, a “labourer” living in Dorchester, allegedly found some tea on a road that ran along the ocean. Soon thereafter he was called before a meeting of “Freeholders and other Inhabitants” where Withington confessed in writing before his neighbours that:

I found said Tea on Saturday, on going round the Marshes; brought off the same thinking no Harm; returning I met some Gentlemen belonging to the Castle [the British fort in Boston Harbour], who asked me if I had been picking up the Ruins? I asked them if there was any Harm; they said no except from my Neighbours. Accordingly, I brought Home the same, part of which I Disposed of, and the Remainder took from me since.

The townspeople decided that Withington had not realized the political significance of his act. The people who had purchased tea from him were warned to bring it to the village authorities immediately for destruction or risk having their names published as enemies of the country. The Dorchester committee — and committees in other towns as well — performed the same political function that local militia units would serve during the Revolution. They provided

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68 Ibid., 6 Jan. 1774.
70 [Schaw], Journal of a Lady of Quality, p. 155.
71 Massachusetts Spy, 13 Jan. 1774.
ideological instruction, and by so doing made it difficult even for the poorest persons either to remain neutral or retain old loyalties.  

Sometimes tea sparked an incident that mobilized an entire village. By their own admission, the inhabitants of Truro, an isolated village on Cape Cod, had not kept informed about the gathering political storm in Boston. Then, one day, some tea apparently washed ashore near Provincetown, and the men who discovered it sold small quantities to a few Truro farmers. That purchase precipitated a crisis. A town committee questioned these persons and concluded “that their buying this noxious Tea was through ignorance and inadvertence, and they were induced thereto by the base and villainous example and artful persuasions of some noted pretended friends to government from the neighbouring towns; and therefore this meeting thinks them excusable with acknowledgement”.

But individual confession was not sufficient to exonerate the community. The people of Truro had failed to educate themselves about the dangers to their constitutional liberties and, of course, had left themselves vulnerable to scheming persons who peddled tea, the symbol of oppression. The town meeting decided, therefore, to form a special committee which would draft a resolve “respecting the introduction of Tea from Great Britain subject to a duty, payable in America”. After deliberating for half an hour, the members of this committee returned with a statement which was at once defensive and radical:

We, the inhabitants of the town of Truro, though by our remote situation from the centre of public news, we are deprived of opportunities of gaining so thorough a knowledge in the unhappy disputes that subsist between us and the parent state as we could wish; yet as our love of liberty and dread of slavery is not inferior (perhaps) to that of our brethren in any part of the province, we think it our indispensable duty to contribute our mite in the glorious cause of liberty and our country.

People asked immediately what in fact they could do to demonstrate that their ideological hearts were in the right place. “We think”, the committee responded, “that most likely method that we can take to aid in frustrating those inhuman designs of administration is a disuse of that baneful dutied article ‘Tea”.

The inhabitants of this village communicated their political beliefs not only to the radical leaders of Boston and to the members of the Massachusetts general assembly

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73 Massachusetts Spy, 31 Mar. 1774.
but also to themselves through tea. By dropping this popular import they overcame the peculiarities of local experience and linked up with other Americans, distant strangers whose crucial common bond with the farmers of Truro at this moment was their participation in an eighteenth-century consumer society.

During the summer of 1774 patriot spokesmen throughout America called for some form of boycott. Boston’s leaders, for example, urged the people of Massachusetts to sign a Solemn League and Covenant pledging to break off “all commercial connection with a country whose political Councils tend only to enslave them”. Loyalists castigated this “infernal Scheme”. In this atmosphere almost any manufactured article could spark a dispute. The League in fact threatened to bring the political battles of the street into the home, “raising a most unnatural Enmity between Parents & Children & Husbands & Wives”. People living in other parts of America now looked to the Continental Congress for guidance. As George Mason had recognized in 1770, a successful boycott required the united and co-ordinated efforts of all the colonists. When the congressional delegates convened in September 1774, they passed legislation almost immediately, creating the Association, a vast network of local committees charged with enforcing non-importation. This was a truly radical act. In an attempt to halt further commerce with Great Britain, Congress authorized every county, city and town in America to establish a revolutionary government. As Henry Laurens explained in September 1774:

From the best intelligence that I have received, my conclusions are, that So. Carolina, No. Carolina, Virginia, Maryland, Pensylvania [sic], New Jersey, New York, Connecticut, Rhode Island, Massachusetts [sic], New Hampshire, one chain of Colonies extending upwards of 1,200 Miles & containing about three Millions of White Inhabitants of whom upwards of 500,000 [are] Men capable of bearing Arms, will unite in an agreement to Import no goods from Great Britain, the West India Islands, or Africa until those Acts of Parliament which Strike at our Liberties are Repealed.77

The colonists responded enthusiastically to the call. The committees monitored consumption, identifying local patriots by the garments they wore and by the beverages they drank, and demanding

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74 American Archives, comp. Force, 4th ser., i, pp. 397-8; Jensen, Founding of a Nation, pp. 468-75; Schlesinger, Colonial Merchants, pp. 319-26; Gross, Minutemen, pp. 47, 50-1.
75 Oliver, Origin and Progress of the American Revolution, p. 104.
76 Jensen, Founding of a Nation, pp. 506-7.
public confessions from those who erred. In Virginia counties everyone was expected to sign the Association, a promise before one’s neighbours — almost a statement of one’s new birth as a consumer — not to purchase the despised manufactures of the mother country. According to James Madison, these signings were “the method used among us to distinguish friends from foes and to oblige the Common people to a more strict observance of it [the Association]”.78 As in earlier boycotts, people sorted themselves out politically through goods. A committee in Prince George’s County announced, “That to be clothed in manufactures fabricated in the Colonies ought to be considered as a badge and distinction of respect and true patriotism”.79 The local associations also educated ordinary men and women about the relation between consumer goods and constitutional rights, in other words, about the relation between experience and ideology. A committee in Anne Arundel County, Maryland, helped Thomas Charles Williams understand that by importing tea he had “endangered the rights and liberties of America”. Proceedings against Williams were dropped, after he proclaimed that he was “sincerely sorry for his offense”.80 Silas Newcomb of Cumberland, New Jersey, was more stubborn. The members of the local association failed to convince the man of his error in drinking “East-India Tea in his family”, and they were finally compelled “to break off all dealings with him, and in this manner publish the truth of the case, that he may be distinguished from the friends of American liberty”.81

III

The colonists who responded to Boston’s call in 1774 were consciously repudiating the empire of goods. Within barely a generation the meaning of the items of everyday consumption had changed substantially. At mid-century imported articles — the cloth, the ceramics, the buttons — had served as vehicles of Anglicization, and as they flooded into the homes of yeomen and gentry alike, they linked ordinary men and women with the distant, exciting culture of the metropolis. By participating in the market-place, by making choices among competing manufactures, the colonists became in some important sense English people who happened to live in the provinces. By

80 Ibid., p. 1061.
81 Ibid., ii, p. 34.
taxing these goods, however, parliament set in motion a process of symbolic redefinition, slow and painful at first, punctuated by lulls that encouraged the false hope that the empire of goods could survive, but ultimately straining Anglicization to breaking-point. Americans who had never dealt with one another, who lived thousands of miles apart, found that they could communicate their political grievances through goods or, more precisely, through the denial of goods that had held the empire together. Private consumer experiences were transformed into public rituals. Indeed many colonists learned about rights and liberties through these common consumer items, articles which in themselves were politically neutral, but which in the explosive atmosphere of the 1760s and 1770s became the medium through which ideological abstractions acquired concrete meaning.

When the colonists finally and reluctantly decided that they could do without the "baubles of Britain", they destroyed a vital cultural bond with the mother country. "The country", explained James Lovell to his friend Joseph Trumbull in December 1774, "... seems determined to let England know that in the present struggle, commerce has lost all the temptations of a bait to catch the American farmer". Lovell may have exaggerated, but he helps us to understand why in 1774 the countryside supported the cities. Consumer goods had made it possible for the colonists to imagine a nation; the Association made it easier for Americans to imagine independence.

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82 Cited in Jensen, Founding of a Nation, p. 561.