[illegible] suspicion today that however much local ministers may have once railed against the corrupting influence of luxury, they did not really discourage the members of their congregations from buying goods that yielded so much personal satisfaction.

One item in particular drew my attention. A small teapot—no more than five inches high—told a complex tale. Decorated with a soft cream glaze, it carried a message written in brick-red lettering: "No Stamp Act." Some English entrepreneur during the 1760s—probably a clever potter from the Midlands—had apparently followed a developing political crisis in the colonies, and just in time to help the Americans protest parliamentary taxation without representation, he produced an object that spoke to me of irony and desire, of customary markets that had suddenly become dangerously politicized. For a brief moment, a delicate teapot transported many thousands of miles and sold in a local shop became a vehicle for helping provincial consumers protest the policies of the British government. It survived the violence of war and the abuses of time, reminding those who reflect on such matters today that common goods once spoke to power.

Small, brightly colored teapot produced by an enterprising English potter for colonial American consumers who were organizing resistance to parliamentary taxation. *Courtesy of the Colonial Williamsburg Foundation, Wallace Gallery, Williamsburg, Virginia.*

T.H Breen, The Marketplace of Revolution (N.Y: Oxford U. Press), 2004

I

By all odds the American Revolution should be remembered as a relatively minor event in the long history of the British Empire. After all, like the insurgencies of unhappy peoples from Ireland to India, the rebellion in colonial America involved a staggering mismatch between the world's most potent military power and ordinary subjects whose ideological passions often blinded them to the harsher realities of the contest. That the story of the Revolution did not end in crushing disappointment invites modern Americans to revisit a society that so spectacularly defied experience and history. Those who celebrate their achievement might well inquire how the colonists overcame local jealousies and mutual ignorance, profound fear and clashing identities, so that on the eve of independence leaders of the rebellion could speak credibly to strangers scattered over a huge geographic territory about a common political vision.

It is easy, of course, to take popular mobilization for granted or to treat it as an almost providential occurrence. From this perspective the rising of challenge to British authority—acquires an almost miraculous character. It is a narrative of freedom-loving men and women coming effortlessly together under the banner of rights, inspired at every turn by brilliant leaders of the sort the country has not seen for a very long time. Even contemporaries marveled at the level of solidarity they witnessed. As the Reverend Charles Chauncy, Boston's most respected minister, remarked in a letter addressed to the English philosopher Richard Price following the first meeting of the Continental Congress, "I cannot but look upon it [as] an occurrence in our favor truly extraordinary, that so many colonies, so distant from one another, and having each their separate interest, should unite in sending delegates to meet in one general body upon the present occasion."[1]

The Marketplace of Revolution explains popular mobilization from an entirely different point of view. In fact, it breaks with most previous accounts of this period, putting forward a new interpretation of what precisely was radical about the politics of the American Revolution. Instead of assuming the existence of political collectivities, it asks how such a dispersed population generated a sense of trust sufficient to sustain colonial rebellion. It explores how a very large number of ordinary Americans came to the striking conclusion that it was preferable to risk their lives and property against a powerful British armed force than to endure further political oppression.

Mobilization on this level did not come easy. Neither luck nor providence had much to do with the story. Over a decade of continuous experimentation, American colonists discovered a means to communicate aspirations and grievances to each other through a language of shared experience. Between 1764 and 1775, they built a sense of mutuality slowly and tentatively, and in the process of reaching out beyond familiar boundaries of class and gender, they developed radically inclusive structures of resistance. They created brilliant forms of collective and extra-legal political action, overcoming discouraging moments of alleged betrayal to bring forth an imagined national community unanticipated at the start of the revolutionary crisis.

Like revolutionaries throughout the world, they had to learn to trust each other. Simply mouthing a vocabulary of rights and freedom was not sufficient to persuade people that they could rely on others about whom they knew very little. Trust was the product of mutual education. It required the free flow of information; it could not be coerced. Although in the early days trust proved distressingly fragile, Americans persuaded themselves by 1774 that other Americans could be counted on to do what they had actually promised to do, quite simply, to make genuine sacrifices for a common cause.

Trust-building involved more than strategic considerations. As ordinary Americans affirmed their trust-worthiness through revolutionary acts that were then quickly reported in the popular press, they discovered that the language of rights and liberty was more than rhetoric. Within a framework of local groups that came to identify with similar groups in distant places, people translated personal sacrifice into revolutionary ideology. The

point here is that if we begin an investigation of revolution with ideology—as many historians have done—we inevitably discount the social conditions that energized these ideas for the men and women who stood to lose the most in a conflict with Great Britain.

The purpose in concentrating attention on political mobilization is not to insist that the revolutionary generation possessed virtues demonstrably superior to our own. Of course, they did not. Ordinary people who denied the sovereignty of Parliament and who united in armed resistance against the British Empire were subject to the same doubts and failings found in most human societies, then and now. To transform the colonists into heroic figures—the kinds of patriotic characters who so often appear in the myths that modern Americans tell themselves about a revolutionary world that we have lost—really serves only to diminish their accomplishment. If it could somehow be demonstrated that these particular men and women were in touch with principles and values purer than those of our own society, they would have very little of significance to say to us. We would be reduced to Old Testament Jeremiahs, perpetually lamenting our own fall from political grace.

Analysis of the coming of independence is not a call to worship. It provides an opportunity to comprehend just how colonists who were by turns frightened, bigoted, chauvinistic, ambitious, jealous, proud, and misinformed managed to imagine a larger political community containing people whom they had never met and who at times must have seemed more foreign to their own immediate concerns than did the British. It is in the context of the messy experience of everyday life that they have something to teach a current generation which seems uncertain of its ability to construct meaningful political solidarities. From this earlier narrative of mobilization and resistance we learn something valuable about overcoming the divisions that compromise our own ability to cooperate effectively for the general political welfare, however defined.

The Marketplace of Revolution thus provides a richer intellectual understanding of the capability of ordinary men and women to reform the character of larger political structures, even ones of global dimensions. Against staggering opposition, it is still possible to come together to create powerful collectivities which might ameliorate the conditions of our shared civic lives. At the commencement of the new millennium, therefore, we return to the years before the signing of the Declaration of Independence not to reaffirm myths about national origins but rather to discover something about our own ability to transform political society through collective imagination.

II

A reinterpretation of the coming of the American Revolution must deal with timing. Although it may seem obvious, we should remember that separation from Great Britain occurred at a precise historical moment. However plausible alternative dates may appear with hindsight, it did not happen during the Glorious Revolution of 1688, or at the conclusion of the Seven Years' War in 1763, which removed forever the threat of French encroachment, or, despite the spontaneous street violence associated with the Stamp Act crisis, in 1765. No one seriously advocated independence in 1768, even though Charles Townshend's Revenue Acts provoked hostility throughout the colonies. Nor, in fact, did the Tea Act of 1773 do the trick. What may seem today as irresistible momentum carrying a colonial society toward national independence could at any moment have been halted, diverted, or thwarted. British administrators need not have pursued a policy so doggedly confrontational. By the same token, Americans from different regions could have followed separate paths, concluding, for example, that those who spoke for Boston were troublesome radicals deserving whatever punishments Parliament cared to mete out. Reminding ourselves of the contingency of events is another way of drawing attention to the force of human agency—real people making choices about the politics of empire—in shaping the flow of activities that we lump together as the coming of the American Revolution.

What gave the American Revolution distinctive shape was an earlier transformation of the Anglo-American consumer marketplace. This event, which some historians have called a "consumer revolution," commenced sometime during the middle of the eighteenth century, and as modestly wealthy families acquired ever larger quantities of British manufactures—for the most part everyday goods that made life warmer, more comfortable, more sanitary, or perhaps simply more enjoyable—the face of material culture changed dramatically.[2] Suddenly, buyers voiced concerns about color and texture, about fashion and etiquette, and about making the right choices from among an expanding number of possibilities.

This was surely not a society of self-sufficient yeomen farmers. People purchased the items they most desired at local stores; they often demanded and received liberal credit. Each year the volume of imports increased, creating by 1750 a virtual "empire of goods." England experienced the same consumer revolution as did the American colonists. But there was a major difference. In a colonial marketplace in which dependency was always an issue, imported goods had the potential to become politicized, turning familiar imported items such as cloth and tea into symbols of imperial oppression.[3] And since Americans from Savannah to Portsmouth purchased the same general range of goods, they found that they were able to communicate with each other about a common experience. Whatever their differences, they were consumers in an empire that seemed determined to compromise their rights and liberties.

The Marketplace of Revolution argues, therefore, that the colonists' shared experience as consumers provided them with the cultural resources needed to develop a bold new form of political protest. In this unprecedented context, private decisions were interpreted as political acts; consumer choices communicated personal loyalties. Goods became the foundation of trust,

willingness to sacrifice the pleasures of the market provided a remarkably visible and effective test of allegiance.

Before this moment, no massive political movement had organized itself around the denial of imported goods. In other words, although it does not receive the same acclaim from historians as does the system of checks and balances put forward in the Constitution, the consumer boycott was a brilliantly original American invention. As General Thomas Gage, a British military leader who wanted to nip rebellion in the bud, exclaimed, "I never heard of a people, who by general agreement, and without sumptuary laws to force them, that ever denied themselves what their circumstances would afford, and custom and habit prompted them to desire."[4] But that is precisely what the colonists did. They made goods speak to power in ways that mid-century consumers and merchants had never anticipated.

The term boycott is, of course, an anachronism, since it first came into the language during the nineteenth century in recognition of the activities of an English land agent in Ireland, Charles C. Boycott. Such considerations need not deter us. We are dealing with popular political movements that were boycotts in all but name. Within the structures of voluntary associations formed to enforce non-importation of British manufactures, men and women found that they could judge for themselves whether or not other Americans were in fact fulfilling pledges of mutual support. Failure to comply exposed possible enemies who publicly demonstrated by their continued purchase of imported goods that they could not be counted on during a crisis. A strategy of political resistance centered on the marketplace quickly transformed myriad private acts of consumption into self-conscious public declarations of resistance. The non-importation agreements throughout colonial America provided an effective means for distinguishing supporters from those people who suffered humiliation as "the friends of government." In more positive terms, one's relation to everyday goods became a measure of patriotism. "What is true grandeur," asked a writer in the *New-London Gazette*, "but a noble patriotic resolution of sacrificing every other consideration to the Love of our Country. And can he be a true lover of his country . . . who would be seen strutting about the streets, clad in foreign [British] fripperies, than to be nobly independent in the russet grey?"[5]

Commercial rituals of shared sacrifice provided a means to educate and energize a dispersed populace. These events helped participants discover the radical political implications of their own actions, even as those same rituals demonized people who inevitably held back, uncertain and afraid, victims of new solidarities they never quite understood. Indeed, the boycott movement invited colonists traditionally excluded from formal political processes—the election of representatives to colonial assemblies, for example—to voice their opinions in a raucous, open public forum, one that defined itself around subscription lists, voluntary associations, organized protests, destruction of goods, and incendiary newspaper exchanges. What we encounter in colony after colony is a radically new form of politics, a politics practiced out-of-doors, in which women and the poor experienced an exhilarating surge of empowerment. Although during the two decades following the winning of national independence—the so-called constitutional period—well-to-do leaders had second thoughts about encouraging such groups to speak out, we should appreciate the powerfully egalitarian potential of that earlier moment. The non-importers of the 1760s and 1770s were doing more than simply obstructing the flow of British-made goods. They were inviting the American people to reinvent an entire political culture.

III

The book is structured around the politicization of a consumer marketplace. Chapter 1 sets forth a general argument about large-scale mobilization, the *sine qua non* of a successful rebellion. Although the analysis starts with the punch line, as it were, I aim to demonstrate not only how shared consumer experience facilitated new forms of collective political action but also why historians have so long downplayed the significance of imported goods on the eve of independence.

Part I, entitled "An Empire of Goods"—chapters 2 through 5—examines in detail different aspects of the new eighteenth-century marketplace, showing among other things how colonial Americans made sense of the flood of imports that found its way into even the most humble provincial households. What should become clear from this discussion is that a spectacularly new material culture provided a social and economic framework—a realm of intensely personal experience—in which people could work out for themselves the implications of core liberal values which we now associate with modernity.

The key element in this mid-eighteenth-century transformation might best be termed the invention of choice. This proposition may seem bizarre. After all, making choices appears to be an expression of the human condition. From a social and political perspective, however, *choice* has a legitimate history. British imports offered American colonists genuine alternatives, real possibilities to fashion themselves in innovative ways. After the 1740s they began articulating status and beauty through choice; it affected the character of relations within family and community. Even more, it introduced dynamic categories of comfort and taste into the lives of middling sorts of people, forcing them to recalculate the allocation of hard-earned family resources. In this social environment, the invitation to make choices from among competing brands, colors, and textures—decisions of great significance to the individual—held within itself the potential for a new kind of collective politics.

Part II, "A Commercial Plan of Political Salvation"—chapters 6 through 8—traces how this private world of personal choice became the foundation for new political solidarities during the decade following the Stamp Act

was achieved slowly, only after many disappointments and alarms over real and imagined defections. By 1774 people who had come to trust each other proclaimed their common rights and liberties. As these final chapters remind us, the American Revolution was the first large-scale political movement in recorded history to organize itself around the relation of ordinary people to manufactured consumer goods. It was an inspired strategy. Indeed, from this perspective we can see that national independence was in no small measure the consequence of widespread political resistance within a new consumer marketplace, a phenomenon that might best be described as the revolutionary politics of pursuing happiness.

THE MARKETPLACE OF REVOLUTION

1

Tale of the Hospitable Consumer: A Revolutionary Argument

How shared consumer experience facilitated new forms of collective political action

Colonial rebellions throughout the modern world have been acts of shared political imagination. Unless unhappy people develop the capacity to trust other unhappy people, protest remains a local affair easily silenced by traditional authority. Usually, however, a moment arrives when large numbers of men and women realize for the first time that they enjoy the support of strangers, ordinary people much like themselves who happen to live in distant places and whom under normal circumstances they would never meet. It is an intoxicating discovery. A common language of resistance suddenly opens to those who are most vulnerable to painful retribution the possibility of creating a new community. As the conviction of solidarity grows, parochial issues and aspirations merge imperceptibly with a compelling national agenda which only a short time before may have been the dream of only a few. For many American colonists this moment occurred late in the spring of 1774.

Before the Parliament of Great Britain enacted the Boston Port Bill, Americans did not know for certain whether talk of political solidarity involved much more than statements of good intentions. However consoling such rhetoric may have been during earlier imperial clashes—during the Stamp Act resistance of 1765, for example—the situation now demanded a more tangible demonstration of support. Most people understood that failure to come together would mean that colonial Americans would find themselves in a situation much like the eighteenth-century Irish, a subjugated people within the British Empire. The destruction of tea in Boston Harbor had sparked this particular confrontation with Parliament, and while the people of Boston understood full well that the provocation would not go unpunished, they entertained hope that Parliament might show compassion. Like other colonists from Georgia to New Hampshire, they waited. Reports of the Tea Party crossed the Atlantic, king and ministers debated

months of uncertainty, the British response finally reached Massachusetts. Its severity shocked even the most sanguine colonists. Parliament closed the great port. All commerce ceased; hundreds of laborers lost their jobs.[1] Boston suddenly found itself a city under siege, seemingly alone and facing a doubtful political future.

The stunning news from England immediately raised another, even more unsettling issue. The problem was not so much occupation by the British army or the collapse of the local economy but rather the reaction of other Americans. No one in Boston could be sure that these distant strangers would in fact come to their aid. For almost a decade men and women scattered along the Atlantic coast had protested against British taxation; some had rioted, others had signed petitions, and a few had written quite eloquently about constitutional and human rights. But this time the political stakes were much higher. Colonists in Virginia and South Carolina, New York and Pennsylvania, could have labeled the citizens of Boston extremists, troublemakers, people unworthy of support at a moment when organized resistance could easily spark full-scale armed rebellion. That view of the events in Massachusetts was widespread in England. As Richard Price, a respected philosopher and friend of America, explained in his *Observations on the Nature of Civil Liberty*, parliamentary leaders believed that "the malcontents in the Colony of Massachusetts were a small party, headed by a few factious men, that the majority of the people would take the side of government as soon as they saw a force among them capable of supporting them, that, at worst, the Colonies in general would never make a common cause with this province, and that the issue would prove, in a few months, order, tranquility and submission."[2] On both sides of the Atlantic the fate of Boston became a crucial trial of American solidarity.

Within weeks of the announced retaliation, an unprecedented outpouring of public support revealed that the inhabitants of Boston need not have feared political isolation. Throughout America ordinary colonists spoke up, pledging generous assistance for a city about which they really knew very little. Connecticut farmers sent livestock to feed the poor people of Boston. The inhabitants of other Massachusetts villages, many of them obscure farming communities, pledged hard currency to assist those "who are suffering by means of the Boston Port Bill." Pennsylvania patriots promised large shipments of grain, while South Carolinians dispatched hundreds of barrels of rice. In Charleston a committee of thirteen gentlemen declared that it had begun collecting "donations for the relief of our distressed brethren in this town [Boston], now suffering for the common cause of all America, under the most cruel, arbitrary and tyrannical act of the British Parliament."[3] From Georgia to New Hampshire, towns raised money, usually through voluntary charitable subscriptions. Some efforts showed unusual imagination. A group identified in a newspaper as the "young" men of Charleston, South Carolina, proposed staging a play entitled *Busiris, King of Egypt*. The producers promised that funds gathered from the sale of tickets—small amounts of rice were accepted in lieu of cash—would go toward the relief of Boston, and advertisements assured those unfamiliar with the plot of *Busiris* that it concerned "an injured gallant people struggling against oppression, resigning their All to fortune, and wading through a dangerous bloody field in search of freedom."[4]

Enthusiastic and spontaneous declarations of solidarity often accompanied these donations. People living in distant communities who could have remained silent chose forcefully to record their conviction that Boston's adversity directly affected their own political freedom. During a meeting held on August 8, 1774, for example, the freeholders of Rowan County, North Carolina, concluded that "The Cause of the Town of Boston is the Common Cause of the American Colonies."[5] The logic of the declaration is noteworthy. The Carolina farmers assumed almost reflexively that they spoke for a national community that in fact existed only in their own imaginations; in response to British oppression they construed an America that included Boston as well as Rowan County.

Everywhere people proclaimed a shared sense of political identity, resolving, as did the freemen and inhabitants of Baltimore County, Maryland, "that the town of Boston is now suffering in the common cause of *America*."[6] The farmers of Harvard, Massachusetts, an isolated community located many miles to the west of the great port, found the pressure of the moment almost insupportable. As the Reverend Joseph Wheeler, moderator for the Harvard town meeting, recorded in the official minutes, the people regarded the Boston crisis "a matter of as interesting and important a nature when viewed in all its Consequences, not only to this Town and Province, but to America in general, and that for ages and generations to come, as ever came under the deliberation of this Town."[7] Like so many of their colonial contemporaries, the people of Harvard found themselves swept up by external events. The experience expanded their political horizons, linking local decisions for the first time not only to an imagined concept called "America in general" but also to future generations who presumably would praise Wheeler and his neighbors for their brave stand in support of Boston.

The flood of public support from so many distant places heightened Boston's resolve. Out of fear and uncertainty had come a sense of confidence about a united effort. The patriot leaders of that city had taken a huge risk when they sanctioned the destruction of the hated tea. But by August 1774 they had discovered that however great their current distress, Boston would not stand alone against the empire. "Notwithstanding all the wicked arts that have been practiced to create division and animosity among the friends of their country," declared "A Tradesman" in the *Massachusetts Spy*, "we have the happiness to see the cause of virtuous freedom, still supported by a continental unanimity. There is scarce a town or city to be found, but what feels for our distress, and is determined to assist us.—Every post who rides, and almost every gentleman who journeys hither, is loaded with such sympathizing expressions and such manly assurances, as cannot fail to inspire us with fortitude."[8] And the Reverend Charles Chauncy declared

I cannot help assuring you as an evidence that the Colonies continue united in supporting the common cause, that they are almost daily sending to this town [Boston] for its relief, flour, Indian corn, beef, pork, mutton, butter, cheese, and in a word every thing necessary for the comfort as well as support of life."[9]

From a modern perspective that takes for granted the mobilization of the American people, impassioned declarations of shared political purpose come as no surprise. We know that the colonists—certainly by the summer of 1774—were on the road to national independence. Reflecting on the events of this period, John Adams declared, "Thirteen clocks were made to strike together," a sentiment that historians have repeated for a very long time.[10] Adams was not alone. Dr. David Ramsay, an officer in the Continental Army and the author of the most insightful contemporary account of the Revolution, explained in 1778, "Our enemies seemed confident of the impossibility of our union; our friends doubted it; and all indifferent persons, who judged of things present, by what has heretofore happened, considered the expectation thereof as romantick." Union was something of a miracle. Only an Enlightenment God could have brought together thirteen separate polities, "frequently quarreling about boundaries, clashing in interests, differing in policy, manners, customs, forms of government, and religion, scattered over an extensive continent, under the influence of a variety of local prejudices, jealousies, and aversions."[11] The Reverend Samuel McClintock of New Hampshire came to share this growing sense of wonder. It was truly remarkable, McClintock explained in 1784, "That people so widely separated from one another by their situation, manners, customs, and forms of government, should all at once be willing to sacrifice their private interests to the public good, and unite like a band of brothers, to make the cause of one state, and even of one town, a common cause."[12] It is precisely this kind of providential language about the construction of a shared sense of political purpose that we should resist. It suggests that the discovery of a "common cause" during the summer of 1774 was somehow inevitable, a kind of divine blessing defying close analysis.

Like the people of Boston who were none too sure about receiving aid from outside Massachusetts, we can easily put forward an alternative narrative, a seemingly counterfactual account of these years in which there seemed no possibility that thirteen separate colonial clocks could be made to strike as one. Indeed, thoughtful contemporaries on both sides of the Atlantic predicted that Americans would never unite in common cause. Not surprisingly, the men who governed the empire took a measure of comfort from such intelligence, concluding on the basis of apparently reliable testimony that profound religious, cultural, and political diversity precluded the creation of effective union. In a 1759 account of colonial society, the English traveler Andrew Burnaby rehearsed what was by then a familiar argument, dismissing out of hand suggestions that Americans might be contemplating independence from Great Britain. He specifically drew attention to "the difficulties of communication, of intercourse, [and] of correspondence," evidence which strengthened his conviction that "fire and water are not more heterogeneous than the different colonies in North America." Left to their own devices, Burnaby declared, "there would soon be a civil war, from one end of the continent to the other."[13]

Thomas Pownall, a former royal governor of Massachusetts and an astute student of political economy, shared Burnaby's general assessment of colonial society. In his widely respected *Administration of the Colonies*, originally published in 1764, Pownall explained precisely why the American people could never hope to form an independent government. Their mental horizons were too narrow, too much the product of local history and culture, for them ever to cooperate with those who happened to live in other provinces. "The different manner in which they are settled," Pownall assured readers, "the different modes under which they live, the different forms of charters, grants, and frame of government . . . will keep the several provinces and colonies perpetually independent of, and unconnected with each other, and dependent on the mother country."[14]

Americans accepted the force of this analysis. In a pamphlet intended to persuade the British government to retain Canada following the Seven Years' War, Benjamin Franklin sounded a lot like Burnaby. And well he might. At the Albany Congress of 1754 Franklin had proposed a loose confederation of mainland colonies, and to promote the spirit of cooperation, he circulated in the provincial press his famed severed-rattlesnake cartoon, which warned all Americans that they should "Join or Die." But to his immense frustration, even the threatening reptile failed to generate union. At the end of the day, not a single colony endorsed Franklin's plan to reconstitute the governance of empire. Writing in 1760 Franklin seemed to have learned from that earlier experience. The colonies, he now informed an Anglo-American audience, "have different forms of government, different laws, different interests, and some of them different religious persuasions and different manners." These conditions served powerfully to inhibit any meaningful union, even for "their common defense and security against their enemies."[15] The Reverend Ezra Stiles, future president of Yale College and an admirer of Franklin, could hardly imagine a meaningful colonial union. In his *Discourse on the Christian Union*, published in 1761, he summarily rejected the proposition that the southern colonies had much in common with their northern neighbors. "As to the three southern provinces," wrote Stiles, "their climate not suiting European constitutions, they will not figure as to numbers for perhaps yet a century or more, until the present race is hardened and get the better of a noxious region."[16] It is no wonder, then, that another of Franklin's correspondents, Dr. William Clarke of Boston, announced that the British colonies would never unite until "we are forced to it, by the Supreme Authority of the Nation," a comment that if nothing else demonstrated Clarke's failure to comprehend the futility of using state power to coerce either loyalty or identity.[17]

Long after Americans had forgotten the Albany Congress, they assumed without much debate that social diversity would overwhelm the creation of

a powerful identity separate from that of Great Britain. John Adams, who later would rhapsodize about the synchronization of thirteen clocks, advanced a particularly sober assessment of the mobilization of the American people on the eve of independence. He, too, found it difficult to comprehend the mental process that had allowed virtual strangers to cooperate in a political cause. The colonists' separate histories seemed to have conspired against the formation of a new nation. The American settlers, Adams observed, had evolved quite different constitutions of government. But that was not all. Ethnicity, religion, customs, manners, and habits—all these cultural elements had set the colonists seriously at odds, and if one also took into account the rarity of "their intercourse" and their imperfect "knowledge of each other," one began to appreciate that the achievement of meaningful political solidarity "was certainly a very difficult enterprise."[18] As late as November 1774 Thomas Hutchinson—the royal governor of Massachusetts whom the Americans had forced into exile—was trying to reassure colonial administrators in Great Britain that "a union of the Colonies was utterly impracticable." Experience had taught Hutchinson that "the people were greatly divided among themselves in every colony, and that there could be no doubt that all America would *submit,* and that they *must,* and moreover would, *soon.*"[19]

These commentators cannot be faulted for failing to chart accurately the course of late eighteenth-century history. They only seem deficient because we know that Americans did in fact manage to unite in precisely the manner that these men claimed impossible, creating, in the words of David Ramsay, a country "for which we would choose to live, or dare to die."[20] On the topic of social diversity, however, they were right on the mark. Americans who contributed food and currency in support of Boston in 1774 defined themselves in many different ways: as members of distinct communities, as Methodists but not as Congregationalists, as rice planters but not as growers of wheat or as producers of tobacco, as wealthy urban merchants but not as struggling rural farmers, or as persons of German or Scottish but not English heritage. The list of identities could be extended almost infinitely. Diversity characterized everyday life in all the colonies, and even in the self-contained villages of New England, a region celebrated for homogeneity, travelers frequently encountered African Americans and occasionally, in the mid-eighteenth century, Native Americans.[21]

Local perceptions powerfully shaped the colonists' views of an outside world, for, as Adams fully understood, the experience of living in a specific place—a tightly bounded little community where shared genealogies and historically sanctioned customs gave meaning to human existence—cross-cut other, larger possibilities for personal identity. And so, at any given moment during the run-up to revolution, men and women were not simply Anglicans, Quakers, or Presbyterians. They were Anglicans from the Northern Neck of Virginia or New York City, the Carolina Low Country or the Maryland Eastern Shore. Colonial Presbyterians may have shared a perspective on church government, but a Presbyterian living outside Boston probably did not have a lot in common with a newly arrived Scots-Irish Presbyterian in central Pennsylvania or North Carolina. A Quaker from Rhode Island was not quite the same social being as a Quaker from Philadelphia. These competing senses of self were woven into the fabric of mid-eighteenth-century America, sometimes generating severe strains and ongoing jealousies, sometimes coexisting as people of diverse interests and backgrounds went about their normal business. It is important to remember, therefore, that the fabrication of broader forms of political identity during this period—indeed, the ability to imagine total strangers as a "band of brothers"—occurred against the background of persistent diversity. The rhetoric of common cause, however defined, had constantly to struggle against feelings of distrust and suspicion fueled by cultural and social difference.

Adams's remarks—as well as those of so many of his contemporaries—focus attention on another perplexing aspect of popular political mobilization. It happened quite swiftly. Colonists who had previously been strangers developed over a relatively short period of time—little more than a decade—a self-conscious commitment to a common cause, to a set of shared principles and strategic goals that energized resistance. Explaining the speed of the process represents a major challenge for anyone studying the coming of independence. At mid-century such unity struck bright, well-informed observers as highly improbable, even impossible. By 1774, however, the unthinkable had become reflexive, something that large numbers of Americans could imagine. By that time few questioned that the cause of Boston was genuinely the American cause. The invention of identity was a collective act of self-discovery that intensified over a decade of tumultuous confrontation with Great Britain. And although it is tempting to explain this achievement with arguments based on a shared history and environment, political mobilization on this vast scale does not seem in fact to have owed much to the formative experiences of the seventeenth-century European settlers or to the mythic qualities of the free air of the New World or to the rigorous demands of living on the frontier. The ability successfully to imagine oneself as part of a larger political community developed precisely because ordinary men and women working with the cultural resources at hand willed that community into existence.

These observations suggest that a persuasive explanation of political mobilization on the eve of the American Revolution must meet certain criteria. First, it must map out in some detail the process of political imagining that allowed strangers in Britain's mainland provinces to reach out to each other and form new collectivities.[22] Second, it must take into account the huge number of people who in one form or another participated in this movement. It may seem self-evident that political mobilization involved a large segment of the population. In point of fact, however, historians sometimes treat a few articulate colonial leaders as proxies for the mass of forgotten people who had to learn within their own little communities and extended clans the meaning of political trust. Convincing these ordinary colonists to cooperate was no easy task. Nevertheless, as we should continually remind

dence, and if frightened, sometimes deeply conservative men and women had not found a way to translate the experiences of family and neighborhood into a broader political context and a language of mutual responsibility, Boston would have received no meaningful assistance in its protest against the policies of Great Britain.[23] As a writer in the *South-Carolina Gazette* noted in 1770 with considerable insight: "The greatest difficulty lies in setting a huge massy body in motion. To point out to mankind their real interest, is easy enough; but to convince them of their duty, and to persuade those who are activated by different views, and subject to different passions, to lay aside their prejudices, to give up a strong attachment to their immediate interests, and to act in mutual concert, for the good of the whole, is an arduous task."[24] Unless an interpretation of the coming of the American Revolution comprehends the political mobilization of that "huge massy body," it does not tell us very much at all.

II

These interpretive issues have, of course, received scholarly attention. The most appealing explanation for the mobilization of the American people is simply that they came to share a powerful but loosely defined bundle of ideas about liberty and property, what might best be labeled a compelling political ideology. When Parliament threatened to tax the colonists without representation, they sensed almost instinctively how to respond, and, as the familiar narrative runs, during moments of grave imperial crisis they drew upon commonly held ideas about the abuse of power and the decay of virtue to sustain popular resistance.

Recently, intellectual historians have defined the content of these popular notions with greater rigor, insisting that what was at stake in popular mobilization was not a set of everyday notions about rights and freedom but rather a complex political ideology that the colonists allegedly borrowed from eighteenth-century opposition figures in England such as John Trenchard and Thomas Gordon. Early in Sir Robert Walpole's administration—during the 1720s—these writers began warning their readers of authoritarian forces plotting to undermine Great Britain's traditional balanced constitution. Unless virtuous citizens came forward in the manner of a Cato or Cincinnatus—allegedly selfless Roman republicans—to preserve the country's ancient liberties and unless they forswore luxury and self-indulgence, rapacious ministers in the central government would surely gain total power over the people, becoming virtual tyrants. Trenchard and Gordon listed the danger signs: substitution of a standing army for local militias, state censorship of a free press, and efforts by stock-jobbers and financiers to corrupt the common good in the name of private commercial gain. This conspiratorial ideology, often labeled "republicanism" or "civic humanism," condemned liberal values frequently associated with individualism and modern capitalism, and, according to some leading historians, it provided disgruntled Americans from colonial Georgia to New Hampshire with a consistent package of "assumptions, beliefs, and ideas—the articulated world view—that lay behind the manifest events of the time."[25]

The ideological interpretation has stimulated a fruitful debate among historians of political thought, some of whom have concluded that Lockean liberalism and reformed Protestantism contributed as fully to the colonists' "articulated world view" as did the civic humanism of writers such as Trenchard and Gordon.[26] Whatever the precise character of popular political ideas may have been, the intellectual explanation for mobilization—indeed, for the creation of a broadly shared political identity—evades hard issues. It does not, for example, effectively address questions of diversity, process, or timing. As we have already noted, communication among scattered colonists developed over a period of little more than a decade. It involved imagination and mutual discovery. Only after a series of crises provoked by an increasingly aggressive Parliament did Americans manage to achieve the degree of mutual trust required to sustain a successful bid for independence.

Intellectual historians seem to take for granted a key element in popular political mobilization, an ability to reach out across boundaries of space and class to establish a larger, more formidable solidarity. Moreover, the presence of certain ideas in a society, no matter how widely or passionately held, does not necessarily generate specific forms of political resistance. It is one thing to believe that corrupt placemen controlled the British Empire and quite another to translate that conviction into a broadly shared strategy for collective protest. And finally, ideological historians tend to reify assumptions and beliefs, assigning extraordinary powers of motivation to abstract ideas without first demonstrating how these ideas provided an emotional link between the experiences of everyday life in diverse communities and families and the larger collectivity of Americans who actually achieved independence from Great Britain.[27] The goal is not to drain a popular resistance movement of intellectual content. The colonists understood why they challenged traditional authority and risked their lives. But to transform local grumbling into full-scale rebellion they had first to assure themselves that in an emergency distant strangers would come to their support. Abstract principles—the stuff of popular political ideology—made sense within a framework of trust, a vast web of assumed reciprocities that required time and patience to negotiate.

One can appreciate the appeal of the ideological interpretation. After all, studies of the material experience of everyday life in colonial America have yielded even less insight into the dynamics of political mobilization. No doubt, various free, white Americans believed that they had in some measure been wronged by economic practices that paid them less than they thought they deserved for their labor or crops. But however irritating these issues may have been, they do not appear to have shaped significantly either the character or intensity of political commitment beyond the boundaries of the local community. Loyalists and patriots came from all social

backgrounds. What passed for class consciousness in the colonies was more likely to divide people than to generate a meaningful sense of solidarity. It is not that pocketbook concerns did not count for something in colonial America; they surely did. But they did not count for something in any systematic way. We must conclude, therefore, that it would have been very hard for Americans to have forged the kind of mutual trust that political mobilization requires solely on the basis of perceived economic grievance.

For the ordinary colonist, of course, the challenge of sorting out his or her relationship to the material culture involved more than a calculation of narrow work-related interests. Historians have begun to appreciate that during this period Americans of all sorts struggled to incorporate a flood of British manufactured goods into their daily lives. How they interpreted these artifacts—often small personal items promising beauty, comfort, and status—figures centrally in the construction of an entirely new explanation of revolutionary mobilization. What needs to be stressed at this point in the discussion of consumer politics is that the literature of material culture in colonial America tends to treat the purchase of these goods as evidence of the extension from Europe to the American mainland provinces of the conditions of a "polite" society, or as essential elements in defining new bourgeois rules of etiquette, or as aspects of a much larger story of the rise of middle-class gentility.[29]

Without question, as Americans acquired these goods, they also acquired knowledge of how polite, tasteful middle-class people in London as well as Boston, Charleston, and Philadelphia were expected to use them. We know that the rituals of self-presentation changed dramatically during the last half of the eighteenth century. The problem that these studies raise for the analysis of political mobilization is that the spread of gentility and refinement—indeed, all the major attributes of middle-class society—did not in any clear way depend on the Revolution. Even if the colonists had failed utterly in their bid for independence, they presumably would still have worried about how to appear in public without committing an embarrassing *faux pas*. From the perspective of the history of gentility, goods were largely devoid of political meaning, and efforts to link the private pleasures of possession to large-scale mobilization would seem a non-starter.[30]

III

Considering the apparent divorce between politics and material culture, it comes as something of a surprise to discover that the colonists themselves took a quite different view of the politics of the relationship. For them the goods of the new marketplace invited an imaginative response that among other things helped explain the sudden change in imperial policy that had occurred following the conclusion of the Seven Years' War. Americans spun out an inventive story that might be called the "Tale of the Hospitable Consumer." It was a profoundly anthropological project, one that effectively linked the interpretation of a new consumer marketplace to collective politics. Although the exact origins of popular explanations are difficult to isolate, we can with reasonable confidence begin the investigation of the new commercial narrative in the early 1760s. It was during this period that colonists first focused attention on why British authorities had redefined the rules that had governed the empire for as long as anyone could remember. In this context, the Sugar Act of 1764 seemed so precipitate, so destructive to the normal flow of trade, so ill-conceived that it defied easy explanation. But Americans accepted the interpretive challenge, probing connections between parliamentary oppression and the consumption of British goods.

The first version of the story appeared in Boston. Although the author of the anonymous pamphlet of 1764 entitled *Considerations upon the Act of Parliament* did not proclaim a full-blown conspiracy, he suggested that Americans themselves somehow bore responsibility for deteriorating relations with England. During the Seven Years' War, the colonists not only had lived too well but had done so too publicly. Their opulent consumption of British manufactures strongly impressed "the gentlemen of the army and others, at present and lately residing in the maritime towns." These genial outsiders learned that Americans "spend full as much [on] the luxurious British imports, as prudence will countenance, and often much more."[31]

The next year, the consumer interpretation of parliamentary taxation took on fuller definition. John Dickinson, a respected Pennsylvania lawyer, traced the imperial crisis in part to a stunning misinterpretation in Great Britain of American buying habits. "We are informed," Dickinson noted in *The Late Regulations*, "that an opinion has been industriously propagated in *Great-Britain*, that the colonies are wallowing in wealth and luxury." That conclusion, he insisted, represented a pernicious misreading of colonial culture. Whatever English scribblers might claim, the streets of America were not paved with gold, and in any case, impoverished colonists could not possibly pay new taxes. During the Seven Years' War, European visitors had witnessed an abnormally prosperous economy, artificially fueled by large military expenditures. Americans, Dickinson claimed, were ordinarily and mostly quite poor. British observers had been misled because the colonists, "having a number of strangers among us," were too generous and hospitable for their own good. The Americans had "indulged themselves in many uncommon expences." This "imprudent excess of kindness" was simply an ill-conceived attempt to impress British visitors.[32]

Like Dickinson, Benjamin Franklin could not tolerate what he came to see as gross British misrepresentations of colonial American culture. Few polemicists could match Josiah Tucker, dean of Gloucester, for his ability to irritate Franklin. Tucker achieved a modest reputation as a political economist, and although some of his writings anticipated the work of Adam Smith, he was known chiefly in America during this period as an outspoken defender of Parliament's colonial policy. In one particularly provocative piece published in 1766 entitled *A Letter from a Merchant in London to His Nephew*

[illegible], the dean belittled American protests against taxation without representation. "Remember, my young Man," explained Tucker's imaginary merchant, "the several Expostulations I had with your deceased Father on the prodigious Increase of American Luxury. And what was his Reply? Why, that an Increase of Luxury was an inseparable Attendant of an Increase of Riches; And that, if I expected to continue my North American Trade, I must suit my Cargo to the Taste of my Customers; and not to my own old-fashioned Notions of the Parsimony of former Days, when America was a poor Country."

The entire patronizing performance angered Franklin, who was then living in London. In the margins of his personal copy of Tucker's *Letter,* the American scribbled comments such as "This is wickedly false," "An absolute Falsehood," and "A Fib, Mr Dean." When he came to the passage abrading the colonists for high living, however, Franklin adopted a more moderate tone. "This should be a Caution to Americans how they indulge for the future in British Luxuries," he jotted on the edge of the page. "The People who have made you poor by their worthless, I mean useless Commodities, would now make you poorer by Taxing you," warned Franklin, but as he did so, he admitted that the colonists themselves bore some of the blame for Tucker's condescending analysis. After all, he concluded, echoing a central theme of the tale of the misunderstood American consumer, "The Luxury of your Tables, which could be known to the English only by your hospitable entertaining, is by these grateful Guests now made a Charge against you, & given as a Reason for taxing you."[33]

Other American writers soon took up the consumer narrative, adding innovative elements of their own. In 1768 an anonymous New York pamphleteer situated Anglo-American consumer experience within a larger historical framework. Readers of *The Power and Grandeur of Great-Britain*—one of the more impressive political discussions of this period—learned that the original New World settlers had overcome "a thousand discouragements" and only recently had managed to establish themselves as "a numerous people." Whatever hardships they endured, the struggling colonists had contributed generously to English prosperity. As loyal consumers on a distant shore, they purchased "merchandize of an almost infinite variety, numberless useful and useless articles [that] are now yearly furnished to three millions of people." The profits of this trade inevitably flowed back to England. Even during the mid-century wars against France, commercial revenues increased. For the privilege of obtaining these goods, uncomplaining colonists ransacked "the seas and the wilds of America . . . to make payment for them, and the improved lands are cultivated chiefly for the same purpose." Like other colonial authors, the New Yorker described the Seven Years' War as the crucial moment in the development of an empire of goods. In its aftermath, Britain turned the ingenuity of American consumers into a justification for parliamentary taxation, based on the reports of visitors "who saw a great display of luxury, arising from the wealth, which many had suddenly acquired during the war."[34]

At this point, the author added a sociological dimension to an evolving consumer explanation of political crisis. It was not so much that the reports of extravagant American market behavior had been erroneous. Rather, the colonists were parvenu consumers who had failed to master the etiquette of a polite society. "It is an old observation," the pamphleteer confessed, "that those who suddenly plunge into unexpected riches, in ostentation greatly exceed those who either derive them from their ancestors, or have gradually acquired them by the ordinary course of business." Contemporary imperial policy, therefore, was the product of shoddy cultural anthropology. The British refused to appreciate that, despite their superficial glamour, eighteenth-century Americans remained provincial bumpkins too poor to pay parliamentary taxes and too untutored to display their wealth tastefully.[35]

In 1768 William Hicks of Philadelphia heightened the conspiratorial element in the developing narrative. It was no accident, he announced, that ordinary English people accepted inflated estimates of colonial prosperity as truth, for, as he could testify, unnamed sources had made it their business to disseminate distorted reports of economic conditions in colonial America. Hicks protested that "the estimates of our wealth which have been received from ignorant or prejudiced persons, are, in every calculation, grossly erroneous. These misrepresentations, which have been so industriously propagated, are very possibly the offspring of political invention, as they form the best apology for imposing upon us burthens to which we are altogether unequal." This interpretive framework—what was becoming for Hicks a consumer conspiracy—carried extremely sinister implications for the colonists' happiness within a commercial empire. Boldly linking consumption and politics, Hicks asked American readers to remember exactly how Parliament had first reacted to the false reports of colonial wealth. Had that body not immediately imposed new taxes? Were not these revenue acts an ominous hint of future assaults on American rights? The plot was self-evident. The British wanted to keep the Americans poor, marginal consumers just able to pay the rising taxes but never "suffered to riot in a superfluity of wealth." Industrious colonists could surrender their dreams of the good life, in other words, their just expectations of sharing the splendid material culture of Britain. "Whatever advantages may hereafter present themselves, from an increased population, or a more extended trade," lamented Hicks, "we shall never be able to cultivate them to any valuable purpose; for, howmuch soever we may possess the ability of acquiring wealth and independence, the partial views of our selfish brethren, supported by the sovereignty of Parliament, will most effectually prevent our enjoying such invaluable acquisitions."[36]

Narratives of commercial misunderstanding—by this time a fluid assemblage of popular notions about consumption and politics—resonated through the colonial newspapers, indicating that the tale of the naively hospitable American consumer and the insensitive British visitors, of luxury and poverty in a rapidly changing provincial economy, had become a staple of

[illegible] culture on the eve of independence. Writing for the *New-London Gazette*, "Incutius Americanus" reminded readers that the Seven Years' War had been responsible for "an insatiable itch for merchandizing; and the folly and extravagance of the people in imitating the customs and dress of foreigners." Self-indulgence had been the colonists' undoing. "Our extravagant dress and luxury had this fatal effect . . . that Europeans concluded we were a people abounding with wealth, and well able to furnish largely for defraying the national debt."[37] The *Boston Evening-Post* noted that the British belief in "our being in affluent and flourishing circumstances, was grounded upon a mistake or the misrepresentation of travellers or others."[38] By 1771 the argument for disjuncture between appearance and reality had become standard fare in the colonial journals. "A Friend of the Colony of Connecticut" explained in the *New-Haven Post-Boy* that "a large consumption of unnecessary foreign articles . . . has given us the false and deceitful appearance of riches, in buildings, at our tables, and on our bodies. Which has attracted the attention if not raised the envy of our neighbors, and perhaps had its influence in making the late grievous unconstitutional revenue acts."[39]

Even as the challenge to British authority intensified and the possibility of armed conflict loomed, Americans still maintained that the imperial crisis was somehow related to their own enthusiastic participation in a new Anglo-American marketplace. One striking example appeared in 1774. The Reverend Ebenezer Baldwin of Danbury, Connecticut, published a short sermon explicitly directed to ordinary farmers living in isolated communities, who were therefore "not under the best advantages for information from the news papers and other pieces wrote upon the controversy." How had it come to pass, Baldwin asked this rural audience, that Americans were contemplating armed resistance against the British Empire? For answers one needed to look no further back in time than the Seven Years' War. "As America was much the seat of the last war," Baldwin recounted, "the troops sent here from the mother country, opened a much freer communication between Great Britain and the Colonies, [and] the state of the colonies was much more attended to in England, than it had been in times past."

Sustained contact and conversation with British visitors during this period seemed to present a real possibility for them to learn how colonial American culture actually worked. In fact, however, familiarity generated only superficial observations. The outsiders failed singularly to appreciate just how much the social dynamics of America differed from those of England. "In a country like this," Baldwin reminded the farmers, "where property is so equally divided, every one will be disposed to rival his neighbor in goodness of dress, sumptuousness of furniture, &c. All our little earnings therefore went to Britain to purchase mainly the superfluities of life." Baldwin should be credited with a highly original insight. Economic leveling in the colonies stimulated status competition; consumer goods were the primary means by which men and women sorted themselves out in an open society. "Hence the common people here make a show, much above what they do in England," Baldwin asserted. Here was the source of a profound cultural misunderstanding. "The luxury and superfluities in which even the lower ranks of people here indulge themselves," the Connecticut preacher explained, "being reported in England by the officers and soldiers upon their return, excited in the people there a very exalted idea of the riches of this country, and the abilities of the inhabitants to bear taxes. The ministry [in Great Britain] soon conceived hopes that a large revenue might be raised from America."[40] Whatever their former excesses as consumers may have been, Baldwin thought that Americans could still save the political situation. All they had to do was reform their buying habits, putting aside the imported goods that had made them seem richer than they were. The moment had arrived for the "lower ranks" of provincial society to appreciate that their private decisions in the consumer marketplace had helped to precipitate and could influence the greatest political event of their lives.

Versions of this commercial narrative enjoyed strong popular appeal even on the eve of independence. In 1774, for example, "A Citizen of Philadelphia" submitted a story of ingenuous American consumers to several urban newspapers. This form of the evolving story was both more elaborate and less sophisticated. To be sure, the writer recounted, the Seven Years' War brought British troops to America. These men had not been average soldiers, however, for, as "A Citizen" explained, the officers came from England's upper class, "many of them sons of the best families." But the tale included an innovative element. Other eminent Englishmen who might today be described as amateur anthropologists accompanied the military to the New World. It was an extraordinary group. "Gentlemen on their travels extended their routes to America," "A Citizen" assured colonial readers, "and even Peers of the realm landed on our shores." Sudden attention from such distinguished personages flattered the grateful Americans, who worked hard to make a favorable impression on their elite guests. They really outdid themselves. "A Citizen" recaptured their effusive hospitality: "We lavished the fruits of our industry, in social banquets—We displayed a parade of *wealth*, beyond the bounds of moderation and prudence; and suffered our guests to depart, with *high ideas of our riches*." As the prodigal Americans soon learned, these socially prominent officers and gentlemen lost no time informing well-connected friends in England about the affluent consumers they had encountered in the colonies. Perhaps these reporters meant no harm; perhaps they did not consciously engage in conspiracy. There was no disputing, however, that as England "was oppressed with a heavy load of debt, . . . how natural then was it for Parliament to hunt out fresh resources?"[41]

The narrative of consumer display survived the Revolution, receiving yet another reformulation in David Ramsay's *History of the American Revolution*. Published in 1789, this impressively researched account of the War for Independence strove to avoid the shrill partisan tone that marred so many early patriot histories. Like other Americans who reviewed the conflict with Great Britain, the South Carolina physician and army veteran found it difficult to understand why Parliament decided to tax the colonists in the first place. He located the answer in Britain's willingness to accept "exaggerated

accounts of the visible prosperity of the American people. "It was said," Ramsay explained, "that the American planters lived in affluence, and with inconsiderable taxes, while the inhabitants of Great-Britain were borne down." The source of this serious misunderstanding seems to have been British soldiers serving in America. "Their observations were founded on what they had seen in cities, and at a time when large sums were spent by government, in support of fleets and armies, and when American commodities were in great demand." Generous colonists spared no expense in welcoming their British allies during the long struggle against France. "To treat with attention those, who came to fight for them," Ramsay asserted, "and also to gratify their own pride, the colonists had made a parade of their riches by frequently and sumptuously entertaining the gentlemen of the British army." The failure of these strangers to comprehend the realities of everyday life in America was probably predictable. After all, these officers, "judging from what they saw, without considering the general state of the country, concurred in representing the colonists, as very able to contribute, largely, towards defraying the common expenses of the empire."[42]

What may have been the final rendering of the tale of the misunderstood consumer appeared in Jeremy Belknap's *History of New-Hampshire*. Despite its somewhat parochial title, Belknap's splendid study offered a well-researched and wide-ranging interpretation of the coming of the American Revolution. The second volume, published originally in 1791, expanded on Ramsay's account of effusive colonial hospitality during the Seven Years' War. "The military gentlemen of Britain," Belknap observed, "who had served here in the war, and on whom a profusion of grateful attention had been bestowed, carried home reports of our wealth." Although he apparently found no evidence of "Peers of the realm," Belknap insisted that the British visitors were not the only ones responsible for creating confusion in England about American affluence. Colonial travelers in Europe also bore some of the blame. "The sons of our merchants and planters, who went to England for their education," Belknap wrote, "exhibited specimens of prodigality which confirmed the idea." But however inappropriate the students' behavior may have been, the fact remained that the great contest against France had transformed the appearance of provincial society. Too many American consumers suddenly acquired too many British manufactures. "During the war," the historian concluded, "there had been a great influx of money; and at the conclusion of it, British goods were largely imported; by which means, the cash went back again with a rapid circulation."[43]

These various versions of the consumer narrative joined other more familiar, sometimes competing discourses that Americans invented to explain to themselves why relations with Great Britain had soured so suddenly. Although such other tales circulated widely throughout the colonies during this period—for example, stories of pervasive political corruption in England—this largely overlooked account of eager, misunderstood colonial consumers possesses unusual interest. It represents an imaginative, often entirely plausible response to two distinct crises in the Anglo-American world of the mid-eighteenth century. The colonists had to accommodate not only the demands of a new consumer marketplace that inundated the homes of free men and women with alluring imported manufactures, but also an aggressive Parliament that threatened to destroy a delicate commercial system that made it possible for Americans to pay for these goods.

The consumer narrative that enjoyed such popularity for over two decades effectively linked these separate challenges. For one thing, it established a shared chronology, a sense of timing that helped to explain why the American Revolution occurred at one historical moment rather than another. Commercial change accelerated during the Seven Years' War, setting the stage for a cultural misinterpretation so profound that the Americans could never again persuade Parliament that they were in fact impoverished. The account turned on the consumption of English manufactures by ordinary Americans who were overly hospitable, remarkably self-indulgent, and socially insecure. Versions of the story came from all regions of the continent, from different classes and backgrounds, from people who seemed in retrospect to have felt a little guilty that their own excesses had broadcast such confusing signals. The narrative of consumer life insisted that it was not the goods themselves that undermined American liberty but rather their misuse; not the acquisition but the vulgarity. And most important, it suggests how for the members of a revolutionary generation the experience of participating in an exciting new material culture may have been connected to political mobilization.

It is not surprising that references to the hospitable consumer quickly disappeared from popular accounts of the coming of the American Revolution. An event so fundamental to how the people of a struggling new republic defined themselves as a culture and society seemed to require heroic explanations that stressed the colonists' deep commitment to principle, God's special affection for the new nation, and the remarkable capacity of democratic institutions to protect individual rights and liberties. During the nineteenth century, these various interpretive strands were woven into a compelling patriotic interpretation of national independence. Stories of colonial consumers falling all over themselves in an effort to impress upper-class visitors from Great Britain flew in the face of the egalitarian rhetoric that in Jeffersonian America heralded the arrival of the common man.

The overly eager colonial consumer went missing from the pages of history for other reasons. The dominant figure in this particular narrative ran afoul of an even more compelling mythology. The self-sufficient farmer is a romantic character that still exercises great influence over how Americans distinguish themselves from the members of other cultures, presumably those less committed to free enterprise and individualism. Although Thomas Jefferson was surely not the first writer to champion the self-sufficient yeoman, he gave this legendary cultivator a powerful boost, and as Americans enshrined the small independent agrarian—a virtuous freeholder who stood apart from the allegedly corrupting influence of commercial capitalism—the notion of revolutionary consumers as somehow centrally involved in the protests against British rule must have seemed increasingly

more recent times, the concept of self-sufficiency has attracted ideological support, from the right as well as the left, with some commentators extravagantly praising economic self-sufficiency and others labeling consumption a vacuous, wasteful activity that somehow embodies the more objectionable features of modern capitalism. Neither perspective has much tolerance for eighteenth-century colonists who shamelessly lived beyond their means.[44]

* historiography (economic) erroneous idea that Am = self-sufficient

Although economic historians have not celebrated the myth of self-sufficiency, they too have made it even harder to appreciate the social and political importance of consumption in the period before the Revolution. For a long time scholars in this field concentrated almost wholly on problems associated with production. The organization and recruitment of a colonial labor force, the rates of return on capital, and the costs of disposing American exports on a world market have seemed far more enticing than has the merchandising of European goods in the New World. The so-called staple model reflects this interpretive prejudice. It currently provides the most sophisticated framework for analyzing how eighteenth-century Americans situated themselves in a world export market, showing among other things how they calculated profits and losses within a commercial system designed fundamentally to supply European buyers with staples such as tobacco, rice, and naval stores.[45]

Only within the last several decades have economic historians begun to take more seriously the significance of the growing demand for manufactured goods not only in defining broad market relations but also in providing powerful incentives for increasing worker productivity. They have established that even eighteenth-century households enjoying modest income levels apparently found ways to purchase new articles. As Jan de Vries, a leading economic historian, was able to document persuasively, in early modern Europe demand for these goods stimulated supply, and peasant behavior suggests that willingness to work harder was a function of personal desire. Ordinary men and women decided to participate aggressively in an economic system that suddenly offered them—and not just a few aristocratic buyers—the pleasures of a richer material culture. Indeed, according to de Vries, production strategies were "integrally related to consumption decisions."[46] Agricultural families in the Netherlands and England responded creatively to opportunities presented by an expanding system of exchange, adding, whenever possible, "new goods to their range of consumption."[47]

American historians have come to similar conclusions about the character of the eighteenth-century economy. Like their counterparts in Europe, colonial farmers and planters seem to have accommodated themselves as quickly as possible to the imperatives of a burgeoning world market that offered a broad range of consumer goods in exchange for agricultural surplus. After surveying the colonial marketplace of the eighteenth century, economic historians John McCusker and Russell Menard concluded, "The colonial populace participated in the economy by both producing and consuming, by getting *and* spending."[48] To describe this complex international system as "pre-industrial"—as critics of modern capitalism have done—only compounds the general interpretive confusion. The term is not meant to point out the obvious absence of factories in colonial America but rather to convince modern readers that pre-industrial Americans somehow resisted the encroachment of commercial capitalism and, in the process, managed to preserve a system of communal values fundamentally at odds with economic individualism. The merits of this proposition will be considered in another section. It is sufficient here simply to observe that pre-industrial economies are not usually associated with large-scale consumption.

And finally, we must remind ourselves that focus on production at the expense of consumption raises an additional problem for the study of political mobilization. Within colonial American society, production was inevitably a divisive category. Each staple had its own calendar, its own marketing system, its own technical vocabulary, and its own way of organizing labor.[49] Separate work experiences reinforced local cultural difference, and if, for example, the American Revolution had depended on the ability of the great planters of the Chesapeake colonies to communicate with New England husbandmen about difficulties of marketing tobacco, or on discussions between Carolina rice planters and Pennsylvania wheat farmers about the morality of unfree labor, it is unlikely that independence would ever have been achieved, at least not in the unified form that we have come to take for granted.

IV

Reflections on "getting *and* spending" in late colonial America encourage a quite different interpretation of the "Tale of the Hospitable Consumer." The provincials who so generously entertained British visitors during the Seven Years' War made a strikingly original contribution to the history of organized political protest. Everyone who has studied the American Revolution knows something about the destruction of tea in Boston Harbor. But general accounts of the coming of independence often ignore the massive nonimportation movement that had commenced a decade earlier and had gradually broadened and intensified, so that by 1773 the experience of being a consumer in Britain's great empire of goods provided a powerful link between everyday life and political mobilization. Later Americans who translated republican theory into a viable constitutional government usually receive high marks for political invention. And well they should. The so-called Founding Fathers not only put republican government on a firm footing—something that classical theorists had thought impossible—but also brilliantly recast an ancient debate about the balance of power. But the colonists who are the object of our attention deserve similar credit for advancing a genuinely innovative strategy for promoting communication and mutual trust among so many persons of different regions and backgrounds. Although a few isolated boycotts may have taken place in other countries before this period, the Americans were the first to appreciate the extraordinary capacity of

ordinary consumer goods—in this case, durables and semi-durables—to bring strangers together in common cause. It was a spectacularly successful new form of political action. The colonists' creative political engagement with commercial capitalism made the American Revolution a truly modern event.

Consumer protest swept colonial society in three waves, each crest breaking with greater force. Americans first employed non-importation to oppose the Stamp Act during the winter of 1765–66. Since the British quickly retreated from this form of taxation, the colonists did not have sufficient time to organize a large-scale boycott, and as a result of inexperience and unreliable communication, the initial early effort to politicize the marketplace seemed somewhat tentative, a number of local experiments rather than an example of coordinated resistance. The strategy had much to recommend it, however, and few doubted that if the British again taxed the colonists without representation, Americans would disrupt the flow of commerce. The second major imperial crisis arrived sooner than most contemporaries anticipated. Passage of the so-called Townshend Acts in 1767 sparked enthusiastic renewal of non-importation, as colonists from Boston to Charleston intensified pressure on local merchants to close the American market to British exports. Although the boycott did not operate as effectively as many participants had hoped, it successfully mobilized large numbers of ordinary consumers in a popular movement that expanded their political horizons.

In 1770 Britain's rulers tried once again to mollify the colonists. With repeal of most Townshend duties, the entire American boycott lost momentum, and for a brief moment it appeared as if cooler heads on both sides of the Atlantic would prevail. Tranquility was short-lived. The Tea Act of 1773 again focused American attention on the politics of consumption, and during this final phase of non-violent protest ever larger numbers of colonists expressed their political solidarity with other Americans by rejecting British goods. By this time, they fully understood what Samuel Adams meant when he warned the Virginian Arthur Lee that the cause of liberty depended on the ability of the American people to free themselves from "the Baubles of Britain."[50]

Over a decade of ever more serious confrontations with Parliament, the boycott had become the distinguishing mark of colonial protest, what cultural anthropologists would call its signature. Within this provincial society a consumer market defined political resistance. The protests of 1774, however, differed strikingly from those of the Stamp Act period. The early boycotts demanded the *non-importation* of common consumer articles. During this phase, the colonists put pressure on local merchants to proscribe the sale of British exports, to keep the desired goods off the streets, as it were. But following the closing of Boston Harbor, ordinary Americans realized that they could not safely delegate the policing of the marketplace to a professional group whose very livelihood depended on continued consumption. During the final months before the battles of Lexington and Concord, *non-consumption* replaced non-importation, and revolutionary consumers took charge of their own market behavior.

The centrality of the boycott to the coming of the American Revolution should put to rest lingering doubts about late colonial self-sufficiency. Only a people thoroughly involved in a complex market economy could possibly have appreciated the capacity of consumer goods to mobilize strangers in political protest. Appeals for non-importation certainly did not represent a rejection of eighteenth-century commercial capitalism. Indeed, even as they organized ever more effective boycotts of British goods, colonists called for investment in American manufacturing. They wanted the "Baubles" that made daily life more comfortable. The problem, alas, was that the best, most desirable items came from Great Britain, and their purchase carried heavy political burdens in the form of unconstitutional taxes and regulations.

V

In the absence of consumer desire, rejection of British goods would have had no political sting. The boycotts worked so effectively as a vehicle for large-scale mobilization precisely because they linked two separate eighteenth-century revolutions, one economic, the other political.[51] The first of these predated the clash with Parliament by at least three decades. Importation of British manufactures took off sometime during the 1740s. The alluring marketplace for cloth, ceramics, and metal goods presented colonists with an unprecedented range of choices. The process of self-fashioning suddenly became more challenging as Americans selected from among competing colors, textures, and weights. Shopkeepers offered easy credit, and eager consumers took the bait. In fact, however bitterly Americans complained about the alleged misrepresentation of their buying habits, it seems likely that the British visitors during the Seven Years' War accurately described the material culture that they had encountered in the New World. The boycott movement presupposed this broad experience of defining self within a social environment of accelerating consumption.

consum revolut + politica revolut

Growing reliance on imported consumer goods at mid-century heightened the colonists' shared sense of identity with Great Britain. They had many reasons, of course, to celebrate their Britishness, not the least of which was Britain's military successes against the French. Historians sometimes describe these eighteenth-century expressions of provincial loyalty as "colonial nationalism" or as "British nationalism."[52] Within this mental framework American farmers and planters could claim a limited measure of legislative autonomy without thereby threatening their standing within the larger imperial structure. To be sure, personal relations within small communities remained the primary source of social meaning for most colonists. But beyond the local level, Americans generally subscribed to what might be called a semiotic order of empire, a system of political symbols that included the Hanoverian monarchy, the balanced constitution, and the common law. Indeed, it was possible for mid-eighteenth-century Americans to imagine themselves in a genuine partnership with England that provided

subjects with commercial prosperity, military security, and individual liberty.[53] For ordinary people, the palpable experience of participating in an expanding Anglo-American consumer market bolstered these often inchoate feelings of identity. Even colonists of modest means copied British fashions, following as best they could at a distance of several thousand miles what the people of London were currently acquiring.

Nothing about the colonial American experience with British exports distinguished it at mid-century significantly from that of Scotland or Ireland, parts of the British Empire that participated just as enthusiastically in the new consumer market. The Scots provide a particularly instructive comparison on how an economically and politically dependent people accommodated themselves to a sudden flood of English manufactured goods. Like some Americans discussed later in this volume, Scottish writers initially greeted the explosion of consumer opportunities with dismay. William Mackintosh remembered, for example, that at the beginning of the century a visit to a friend's house early in the day would result in an offer of a "Morning Drought." But by 1729 expectations and customs had changed, and Mackintosh, who obviously enjoyed a good whiskey, lamented, "I am now ask'd if I have yet had my Tea." It was not unusual for members of his generation to blame such silliness on the Union of 1707, which had promised general commercial prosperity in exchange for the surrender of national sovereignty.[54]

But others, including most of the brilliant political economists identified with the Scottish Enlightenment, viewed the challenge of the consumer marketplace more positively. They wove material progress into a four-stage evolutionary theory that explained the development of modern society from the dawn of time to the modern commercial age. Rather than rejecting the new consumer goods, they associated them with the rise of civility and politeness, key indices of human advancement. As one historian of eighteenth-century Scotland observed, "It was the historic achievement of the Scots to have created a philosophical and literary culture of great complexity which was designed to explain the metaphysical, moral, political, religious and historical foundations on which commercial civilization itself was founded and would teach men and women how to live virtuous and happy lives."[55] Abundant English goods sparked in Scotland a "revolution in manners" rather than political upheaval, and instead of resisting commercial intrusion, enterprising landowners and improving lairds tried to increase agricultural productivity so that they could more readily participate in the world of English fashion.[56] Consumer goods also transformed the material culture of Ascendancy Ireland, where per capita consumption rose at least 50 percent during the eighteenth century. Jonathan Swift and other so-called Irish patriots railed against public displays of imported luxury items, which they attributed largely to "Irish women," but however much English manufactures made the Protestants of Ireland love what they "ought to hate," these goods only occasionally acquired symbolic importance in Irish opposition to London's firm political hand.[57]

Colonial Americans took a different course. Indeed, during the 1760s and 1770s something unprecedented occurred in Britain's mainland colonies. In response to parliamentary taxation, Americans managed to politicize common consumer goods and, by so doing, suddenly invested manufactured items with radically new symbolic meaning. Had it not been for a crisis in the imperial constitution, the story of American consumer experience could well have paralleled Scotland's, becoming little more than a narrative of manners and politeness. In this particular provincial setting, however, the very commodities that were everywhere beginning to transform traditional social relations provided a language for popular political resistance. British imports became political emblems, markers of semiotic change.[58] As an anonymous South Carolina writer recounted in 1769, Americans had once looked upon Great Britain as the source of valued manufactured goods, and because of this historic connection they called England "by the endearing epithet, mother." During that earlier period of mutual respect and cooperation, "we went to the merchants' stores with pleasure, and purchased there the manufactures of Great-Britain, with no grudging hand," but unhappily Parliament had chosen to disrupt the era of good feelings, and "now, we look upon her wares, in a manner as poison to us . . . [which] must be used very sparingly, and with the utmost caution.[59] Such a profound shift in the perception of everyday material culture—an entire visual environment of transformed meanings—served in the words of one economist to awake "the public citizen who slumbers within the private consumer."[60]

It is important to establish that we are documenting a key moment in the history of liberal thought. Within the framework of the new consumer market, Americans worked out a genuinely radical political ideology, an achievement for which they seldom receive proper credit. They managed to situate a complex discourse about rights and liberties, virtue and power, within a familiar material culture. The goods themselves did not generate these ideas. Concepts long associated with John Locke and his many students were already present in this provincial society, the product of local histories and intellectual borrowing, and by the 1760s colonists everywhere took for granted certain assumptions about constitutional government, common law, and the contractual origins of social and political authority. What they did not know, however, was whether other Americans shared these beliefs or, if they professed to do so, shared them with the same sincerity. This element of doubt might be called the problem of the distant stranger.[61] One knows the person is out there, but not whether he or she shares a bundle of core values passionately enough to be counted as an ally.

The point is that the successful mobilization of ordinary people required communication of conviction, a credible means of voicing the intensity of personal commitment. In this context, the language and experience of the consumer marketplace helped strangers persuade each other—and perhaps themselves as well—that they were worthy of trust.[62] Indeed, Americans found that they had repeatedly to demonstrate ideological zeal through

organized public sacrifice, through the denial of the "Baubles of Britain." By transmitting news of local boycotts to distant colonists, they proved themselves true patriots, "Sons of Liberty," and plausible members of a larger imagined community. As in religious structures, participation in public rituals could be interpreted and communicated as authentic evidence of belief. This close connection between ideology and the forms of protest, between interpretation and strategies of resistance, helps explain why leaders of a colonial rebellion insisted that patriotism required the rejection of British imports. Action had to accompany principle. It is not hard to find examples of Americans grounding political ideas in the rhetoric of consumer sacrifice. In a speech published in 1774, the South Carolinian Christopher Gadsden drew attention to a powerful emotional link between ideology and behavior. The people of South Carolina—and those in other colonies who happened to read Gadsden's printed text in the newspapers—claimed that they loved freedom. But how much? How intense was their commitment? Would they be willing in order to advance the liberty of other Americans whom they had never met to "forego the elegancies and luxuries of life" if by so doing they liberated "posterity" from political slavery "to the end of time?" Like other Americans of his generation, Gadsden declared it self-evident that "a non-importation agreement will . . . prove a means of restoring our liberty."[63]

The rituals of non-consumption did more than simply transmit from region to region, city to city, the seal of ideological conviction. They radicalized American political culture on the eve of independence in ways that no one at the time could have foreseen. The unintended results of the boycotts were perhaps more significant—and the least appreciated aspect of consumer mobilization. Colonial politics had long been an aspect of public life restricted to white male property owners, and although this group of potential voters was surprisingly large by contemporary European standards, it represented at mid-century only a fraction of the free adult population. Moreover, before the Revolution, no one seriously advocated a more open and inclusive system.[64] The boycott movement, however, shifted the basis of political participation, not in legislative elections or in choosing town officials but rather in the extra-legal structures established throughout America to discourage the purchase of British manufactures.

In this extraordinary political environment it quickly became apparent that if efforts to restrict the sale of imported goods were to have any chance of success, they would need the support of *all* consumers, women as well as men, poorer sorts as well as wealthy lawyers and merchants. Focusing attention almost exclusively on formal electoral politics, on the response of the various colonial legislatures to the demands of royal governors and British administrators, for example, obscures the development of a new kind of popular politics, one that encouraged ordinary consumers—precisely because they were consumers—to take a public stand on the most pressing issues of the day.

The Anglo-American consumer economy of the eighteenth century was in many ways strikingly egalitarian. Anyone with money could purchase what he or she desired. From the very beginning, women played a central role in the expansive world of goods, and after 1764 it became absolutely essential to enlist their enthusiastic participation in the boycotts. To be sure, market sacrifice was more difficult for women than for men. As wives and mothers, they had families to clothe and not a lot of free time to devote to spinning and weaving. It was certainly much easier for them to purchase imported British fabric from the local shopkeepers. Whatever inconvenience the non-importation movement may have presented, however, the invitation to redefine private household decisions as public political acts seemed an exciting prospect for women of all classes and backgrounds. They sensed that they had gained a measure of real power in the public sphere. As three women writing in the *Boston Gazette* in 1767 observed, the traditional rhetoric of politics had changed, "The Ladies of America having been diverse Times addressed as Persons of Consequence, in the present œconomical Regulations."[65]

The creation of so many committees to enforce the boycotts also raised hard questions about the constitution of political authority in a liberal society. These were for the most part voluntary bodies functioning outside the structures of formal government, and during the early stages of the protest against parliamentary taxation the colonists expected the merchant community to organize the non-importation effort. By the late 1760s, however, ordinary men and women were taking a more active role in controlling the consumer market, and as they came forward in ever larger numbers they triggered a far-reaching debate about democratic procedure. How could a movement that claimed to speak for the "people" demonstrate persuasively that it did in fact enjoy popular support? Elections sponsored by colonial officials were out of the question. Crown appointees would never have sanctioned such potentially treasonable organizations.

The answer turned out to be the simple but ultimately deeply radical act of signing subscription rolls. Signing one's name to subscription lists was not in itself a new phenomenon; documents of this sort had a long history in England and colonial America. In this context, however, expressions of support for economic resistance of British policy amounted to a plebiscite, a bold, even courageous recording of the popular will. People who were ineligible to vote in colony elections affixed their names and marks on papers carried from house to house or posted in public gathering places. Numbers, of course, mattered, for the lists of signatures collected in Charleston, New York, and Boston legitimated the rhetoric of protest leaders who insisted that they spoke for the "people." As anyone who has ever signed a petition knows, adding one's name to a list that will be scrutinized by friends and neighbors is not an act lightly taken. Indeed, it amounts to a declaration of ideological commitment, and for ordinary people, who were seldom asked to sign political documents, participation in the subscription drives—in communal pledges of self-denial—facilitated the transition from private unhappiness to public resistance. With a stroke of the pen they exchanged the comfort of anonymity for identification with the common good.

After 1773 such lists circulated in small country towns and at rural county courthouses, as new converts joined the boycott movement in the name of the rights and liberties of the American people. Their decision to sign a piece of paper gave the non-consumption movement a transforming force that no one could have predicted during the Stamp Act crisis. Signers became enforcers, and the first major order of the Continental Congress of 1774 was the establishment of the Association, a huge network of local committees charged with halting once and for all the purchase of England's "Baubles." Comparisons with other eighteenth-century revolutions immediately suggest themselves. Citizen groups in America did not assassinate prominent loyalists. Nor did they incite angry farmers to destroy the homes of the ruling gentry. In this distinctively bourgeois rebellion, the ideological police ferreted out hidden canisters of tea and suspicious pieces of cloth.

Out of these collective experiences colonial Americans forged new political identities. The process was always about to come undone, but the people who joined the boycott movement gradually expanded their personal horizons. In the rhetoric accompanying non-importation, one encounters ever bolder self-descriptions as organizers and participants addressed their "Brethren of the Continent" and announced in local statements that they spoke in the authentic "voice of all America" or for the "whole body of the people." If these sentiments were not yet the stuff of full-blown nationalism, they forcefully reveal that the process of mobilization involved a rethinking of political self-identity, something that occurred well before the winning of national independence.[66] Put another way, the spirit of nationalism was as much a cause as a result of revolution.

By the same token, the discovery of solidarity and the fabrication of mutual trust created deep divisions as former friends and neighbors who refused to aid the boycotts and who thereby exposed their ideological unsoundness found themselves reviled in public as "enemies of America." The formation of a larger imagined community forced men and women to draw boundaries, to construct mechanisms capable of distinguishing them from those who were not full members of the new community, and in this painful sorting out of us and them, a person's relation to the imported consumer goods determined where others marked the line of exclusion. By 1773 the mere possession of British imports signaled possible disloyalty to the common cause. As one writer who called himself "A Consistent Patriot" explained in the *Massachusetts Spy*, "The importation and use of Tea, abstractedly considered, may be innocent; and he who in ordinary times, has an inclination to import or use it, has a right to the protection of the laws." But, of course, no one considered consumption abstractly. Only enemies of the people now used tea, for "when the importation is connected with the ruin of government, its trade—and what is infinitely more valuable, its liberty;—when it is designed for that purpose and will infallibly have that effect, we ought to consider and treat it as we would THE PLAGUE."[67]

VI

An argument about popular mobilization on the eve of independence raises an obvious question about method, about a plan of attack. Where exactly does one look for revolution? For radical politics? What counts for evidence? These are issues of some importance since this book explores the everyday experiences of ordinary people—the kinds of men and women who joined in revolutionary protests—during a period of accelerating social and economic change. It focuses on how these Americans struggled first to comprehend a consumer-oriented market and then, during the 1760s and 1770s, to resist the powerful empire that for half a century had brought beauty and comfort, pleasure and convenience, into their lives. Although the "Tale of the Hospitable Consumer" includes the testimony of wealthy and privileged persons, it concerns itself for the most part with persons of more modest means who were caught up in two separate revolutions, one commercial, the other political.

This interpretation of the coming of the American Revolution owes less to modern theorists than to Samuel Johnson, the famed eighteenth-century writer who on a journey to the Western Islands of Scotland asked how largely invisible men and women on the margins of empire made sense of their lives. How, in fact, did they participate in history? His reflections were as relevant for the American colonists as for the Scottish crofters. "It must be remembered," Johnson observed, "that life consists not of a series of illustrious actions, or elegant enjoyments." For most people, the challenge of surviving from day to day was more difficult, more problematic, a seizing of little joys along the way. "The greater part of our time passes in compliance with necessities," he reflected, "in the performance of daily duties, in the removal of small inconveniences, in the procurement of petty pleasures." Indeed, such prosaic activities suggested to Johnson a generalization about human society: "The true state of every nation is the state of common life." Although Johnson expressed only passing interest in American affairs, he understood that those who fail to take proper account of the "small inconveniences" and "petty pleasures" of life can never persuasively explain great events.

> The manners of a people are not to be found in the schools of learning, or the palaces of greatness, where the national character is obscured or obliterated by travel or instruction, by philosophy or vanity; nor is public happiness to be estimated by the assemblies of the gay, or the banquets of the rich. The great mass of nations is neither rich nor gay; they whose aggregate constitutes the people, are found in the streets, and the villages, in the shops and farms.[68]

Where best to locate the "true state of common life" has, of course, presented historians of the American Revolution with a difficult problem. Much of what we have learned about the imperial crisis and the colonists' reaction to it comes from carefully crafted pamphlets that learned men, many of them lawyers, prepared in defense of American rights and liberties. These rich discussions of constitutional law, republican theory, and

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Strength out of Dependence: Strategies of Consumer Resistance in an Empire of Goods

No one knows when precisely American public opinion first realized that imported goods provided powerful political leverage within the empire. Such discoveries usually result from a slow, cumulative conviction that the taken-for-granted of everyday life has possibilities that no one only a few years earlier quite perceived. But insomuch as there was a moment when inchoate thoughts about consumer dependence crystallized into firm belief, it occurred in mid-February 1766. On the eleventh of that month the rulers of Great Britain received a lecture from a celebrated American about the radical potential of the goods exported across the Atlantic. The British House of Commons, sitting as a committee of the whole, had just launched a painful review of what seemed to many members a flawed colonial policy. Violent American resistance to the Stamp Act had taken them by surprise, and now, confused and angered by the turn of events, they gathered information on how best to respond to an imperial crisis brought on by their own decision to collect new revenues in America.[1] Not until the third day of the proceedings did they summon Dr. Benjamin Franklin. Everyone knew in advance that he would be the star witness.

On this stage Franklin performed brilliantly, as, of course, he knew he would. He had carefully rehearsed his lines. The initial question—a seemingly straightforward declaration of identity—set the theatrical tone for a marathon exchange.

> Q. What is your name, and place of abode?
> A. Franklin, of Philadelphia.

The ambitious provincial had long ago learned how to play the part of the authentic American before an audience of English gentlemen of the sort elected to Parliament. His claim to be "Franklin, of Philadelphia"—a plain-speaking man from the colonies—betrayed a rhetorical strategy more artful

than disingenuous. The people present that chilly afternoon recognized him for what he was: a distinguished scientist, prosperous entrepreneur, and cosmopolitan philosopher. Had he been anything less—had he not already crafted the character of the successful representative of an expansive Anglo-American culture—Franklin would probably have not been called at that critical moment to speak for the colonies.[2]

Whatever his qualifications, Franklin experienced rough handling from the House of Commons. Over several grueling hours, he endured some 174 questions, 89 of which he classified as antagonistic.[3] Try as they would, however, his interrogators could not control the proceedings. The nimble witness painted before their skeptical eyes a portrait of an expansive commercial empire, unprecedented in world history. Franklin warned Britain's rulers that unless they reconsidered taxing the colonists without representation and reformed new coercive modes of enforcement, they risked destroying the American goose that had laid so many golden eggs.

After an initial period of sparring, Franklin took charge of the exchange. The House of Commons wanted to know, for example, whether the colonists had merely used the passage of the Stamp Act as a convenient excuse to challenge imperial authority. Perhaps the Americans had long contemplated steering an independent political course. Perhaps recent revenue policies had only exacerbated tensions already present. Franklin dismissed that line of thought as nonsense. Before 1763, he insisted, the "temper" of the colonists toward Great Britain had been "the best in the world." What made their loyalty all the more impressive in his opinion was that it cost the Exchequer so little. Obedience never depended on "forts, citadels, garrisons or armies." The mere communication of command generated swift results in distant provinces, for, as the members of Parliament had obviously forgotten, the Americans "were governed by this country at the expense only of a little pen, ink and paper. They were led by a thread."

The image of imperial authority as a mere thread was inspired. This most gentle form of social and political control—English threads, not Spanish or French chains—explained the extraordinary might of the British Empire. The entire system drew strength not from military force but rather from shared values. The colonists, Franklin confessed, had "an affection, for Great-Britain, for its laws, its customs and manners, and even a fondness for its fashions, that greatly increased the commerce." And then, in a flash of rhetorical legerdemain, Franklin leapt from metaphorical "threads" of authority to the real manufactured threads that sustained the Atlantic economy, to the wool and cotton fibers woven into fashionable cloth which for a generation or more had transformed the very bodies of ordinary Americans into colorful emblems of a flourishing commercial empire. Statistics told a story of success. "I think the inhabitants of all the provinces together, taken at a medium, double in about 25 years," he explained. Stunning demographic growth only began to suggest the true potential of colonial trade. American demand, Franklin assured the members of Parliament, "increases much faster, as the consumption is not merely in proportion to their numbers, but grows with the growing abilities of the same numbers to pay for them. In 1723, the whole importation from Britain to Pennsylvania, was but about 15,000 Pounds Sterling; it is now near Half a Million."[4]

Commercial figures of this sort were, of course, old news. But Franklin interpreted the numbers in a strikingly innovative manner, pushing the political logic of everyday consumer demand in a direction that suggested that colonial buyers were neither as vulnerable nor as dependent as their British rulers may have imagined. In fact, the Stamp Act crisis had cast relations between Great Britain and the American colonies, between colonial consumers and English producers, in an entirely new light. No one had planned such a dramatic shift in political perspective. Reassessment of imperial identity simply evolved out of a confrontation with an aggressive House of Commons, an unintended consequence of an ill-conceived policy. And now, as a result of these events, the Americans began to appreciate that Britain's extraordinary commercial success in the New World had given them a voice in imperial affairs.

According to Franklin, those eager colonial customers who had been so willing for so long to part with their money, who accepted ever higher levels of debt as the inevitable burden of fulfilling material desire, and who had come to regard the exercise of choice in the marketplace as a right rather than a privilege could without a second thought reject the manufactured goods that flowed across the Atlantic. Indeed, the process had already begun. In some major port cities, American dry-goods merchants responding to popular political anger had canceled orders for imported manufactures. The market protests were growing. The colonists in a commercial empire had somehow forged a brilliantly innovative strategy. Before this time no other dependent people had so fully come to appreciate that their own economic dependence could be effectively translated into organized resistance, uniting anonymous consumers from Portsmouth to Savannah in a common enterprise that was itself a product of a commercial empire.

Some members of Parliament that February afternoon must have wondered whether they had heard the American expert correctly. Surely, Franklin must have exaggerated the ability of so many colonial buyers to withhold their traditional custom. What was the meaning of the Pennsylvania trade statistics that he had just read into the official record if not to expose the colonists' utter reliance on imported British manufactures? But on this point Franklin remained adamant, insisting that "I do not know a single article imported into the Northern Colonies, but what they can either do without, or make themselves."

The astounding claim that the Americans might be willing to forgo the pleasures of fashion sparked a predictable exchange, one well worth quoting in full since it marked a critical historical moment when British legislators explicitly confronted a new element in the imperial equation, one that the colonists themselves had just begun to appreciate: Private consumer decisions made thousands of miles away from the source of manufacture might under certain political circumstances become an engine of organized popular resistance.

Q. Don't you think cloth from England absolutely necessary to them?
A. No, by no means absolutely necessary; with industry and good management, they may very well supply themselves with all they want.
Q. Will it take a long time to establish that manufacture among them? And must they not in the mean while suffer greatly?
A. I think not. They have made a surprising progress already. And I am of opinion, that before their old clothes are worn out, they will have new ones of their own making.
Q. Can they possibly find wool enough in North-America?
A. They have taken steps to increase the wool. . . . The people will all spin, and work for themselves, in their own houses.
Q. If the act is not repealed, what do you think will be the consequences?
A. A total loss of the respect and affection the people of America bear to this country, and of all the commerce that depends on that respect and affection.
Q. How can the commerce be affected?
A. You will find, that if the act is not repealed, they will take very little of your manufactures in a short time.
Q. Is it in their power to do without them?
A. I think they may very well do without them.
Q. Is it their interest not to take them?
A. The goods they take from Britain are either necessaries, mere conveniences, or superfluities. The first, as cloth, &c. with a little industry they can make at home; the second they can do without, till they are able to provide them among themselves; and the last, which are much the greatest part, they will strike off immediately. They are mere articles of fashion, purchased and consumed, because the fashion in a respected country, but will now be detested and rejected. . . .
Q. Is it their interest to make cloth at home?
A. I think they may at present get it cheaper from Britain, I mean of the same fineness and neatness of workmanship; but when one considers other circumstances, the restraints on their trade, and the difficulty of making remittances, it is their interest to make every thing.
Q. What used to be the pride of the Americans?
A. To indulge in the fashions and manufactures of Great-Britain.
Q. What is now their pride?
A. To wear their old cloaths over again, till they can make new ones.[5]

Whether Franklin changed the minds of any members of Parliament during his presentation can never be known with certainty. No doubt, he confirmed much of what they had heard from well-placed constituents such as the cloth manufacturers of the Midlands who worried about the loss of American business and who petitioned against the government's new revenue policies.[6] But, whatever its immediate impact, Franklin's interrogation was a bravura performance, linking familiar commercial arguments in new ways suggesting that the colonists' putative economic dependence could be interpreted as a source of political strength. This line of reasoning had been implicit in the standard eighteenth-century writing on the British Empire, volumes that repeatedly drew attention to the central role the colonies played in Britain's—read England's—stunning economic growth.[7] Until the early 1760s, however, no one had so brilliantly seen the threat of organized market disruption as an effective device for gaining the full attention of England's ruling class. Within several weeks, the House of Commons repealed the hated Stamp Act. As Franklin's friend William Strahan said of Franklin's contribution to the decision, "In Truth, I almost envy him the inward Pleasure, as well as the outward Fame, he must derive from having it in his Power to do his Country such eminent and seasonable Service."[8]

As so many Americans discovered during the imperial crisis, however, preaching the language of market sacrifice was a lot easier than actually adopting the simple life. Basking in the political victory he had done so much to bring about, a relaxed Franklin dashed off a letter to his long-suffering wife, Deborah, who had never left Philadelphia. The contrast between this short note and the formal testimony before Parliament was striking. The correspondence revealed with surprising candor the fragility of the strategy of self-reliance and commercial denial that Franklin had just trumpeted before the House of Commons. "As the Stamp Act is at length repeal'd," he declared, "I am willing you should have a new Gown, which you may suppose I did not send sooner, as I knew you would not like to be finer than your Neighbours, unless in a Gown of your own Spinning." Still maintaining a jolly tone, Franklin reflected that if the hated revenue act had remained in force, he would have been forced to wear either homespun clothes or, more likely, old garments that he had long ago consigned to storage. "I told the Parliament," he recounted, "that it was my Opinion, before the old Cloaths of the Americans were worn out, they might have new ones of their own making. And indeed if they had all as many old Clothes as your old Man has, that would not be very unlikely; for I think you and George [Franklin's black servant] reckon'd when I was last at home, at least 20 pair of old Breeches." Personal decisions made over a long period—choices of color, texture, and cut—suddenly acquired different symbolic possibilities. The "old Cloaths" had taken on new meaning; the private choices in the marketplace spoke of shared public sacrifice in a political cause.

Or so it seemed. At precisely the mid-point of his letter, Franklin suddenly assumed an entirely different tone. The wording of his abrupt transition—"Joking apart"—called into question the character of much of his testimony a few weeks earlier before Parliament. What exactly was Franklin's colonial joke? That American consumers were really prepared to produce gowns of their own spinning? That men such as Franklin would actually agree to appear in public in breeches long since gone out of fashion or were a bit tight around the belly? Franklin seemed relieved that events had saved him and the members of his immediate family from having to make such hard market decisions, and the man who found it nearly impossible to resist the "Baubles of Britain" informed Deborah that a ship from London would soon deliver "a fine Piece of Pompador Sattin, 14 Yards cost 11s. per Yard. A Silk Negligee and Petticoat of brocaded Lutestring for my dear Sally, with 2 Doz. Gloves. . . . I send you also Lace for two Lappet Caps, 3 Ells of Cambrick . . . 3 Damask Table Cloths, a Piece of Crimson Morin for Curtains, with Tassels, Line and Binding. A large true Turkey Carpet cost 10 Guineas, for the Dining Parlour." The list contained many other exciting consumer items, including "some oil'd Silk, and a Gimcrack Corkscrew."[9]

As Franklin had observed not many years earlier writing as "Father Abraham," given the choice the colonists would happily rush to the marketplace. As individuals they celebrated the comforts of a new and expanding material culture. Franklin was no exception. Of course, as he warned

the House of Commons, it was possible for the colonists to imagine denying themselves the manufactured goods that had made them feel prettier, warmer, cleaner, more fashionable, even more British. But it was not a welcome sacrifice. Indeed, what his letter to Deborah indicated—and what it would take many ordinary American consumers a decade fully to comprehend—the manufactured threads that held the commercial empire together were much stronger than even the most fervent colonial protesters understood at this early stage of political controversy. The desire to experience private pleasure always strained against the appeal to support a common cause. Until the colonists forged a greater sense of confidence that other colonists living in other places could be trusted to forgo British imports, they found it hard to translate rhetoric about the renunciation of the market into genuine self-denial and seriously to join utter strangers throughout America in resisting a powerful military adversary.

The interpretation of the coming of the American Revolution advanced in this section invites a thoroughgoing reconsideration of popular mobilization. Parliament's attempts to raise revenue in the colonies sparked a profound symbolic transformation in which objects of everyday life—the myriad "Baubles of Britain"—suddenly acquired new shared meanings.[10] Within this political environment private decisions about mundane purchases became matters of public judgment. Or, as one might state in a more familiar modern vocabulary, American men and women slowly, often painfully discovered that highly personal actions carried inescapable political significance, so that what once had seemed no more than matters of individual choice about comfort and appearance provided the cultural resources necessary during the run-up to independence to forge effective revolutionary solidarities. The argument is most definitely not that the language of liberty and rights failed to resonate across traditional boundaries of class and geography. It obviously did so. But such rhetoric was not a sufficient cause of revolution. Without a foundation of widespread trust—a bond linking distant strangers and tested repeatedly through rituals of consumer sacrifice—the principled declarations that dominate our own memory of national independence would not have been able to sustain broad structures of political resistance or have produced a meaningful sense of common purpose.

II

Even before Franklin warned Parliament about the economic power of self-sacrificing American consumers, indeed, well before the colonists seriously entertained the possibility of separation from the mother country, everyday imported goods from Great Britain had begun to take on new political possibilities. The manufactured articles that flooded the imperial marketplace after 1740 had always symbolized a mutually advantageous commercial relationship between English producers and colonial consumers. Sometime during the late 1750s, however, the social context in which goods acquired shared meanings changed. It was during the period immediately following the successful conclusion of the Seven Years' War that Americans developed a fuller consciousness of their status as colonists within the British Empire, and in this more uncertain climate, they interpreted the articles of consumer experience with new eyes.

The transformation of colonial identity within a larger imperial structure occurred incrementally, almost without anyone being fully aware that a far-reaching shift was taking place. But whatever the pace of change, personal reassessments of empire gradually gathered momentum in public debate. People who had for a very long time taken membership in the British Empire for granted or had viewed it uncritically as the wellspring of liberty, prosperity, and security began to appraise in unprecedented language the burdens as well as the benefits of being British subjects. It was in this period of initial reassessment, roughly from 1757 to 1764, that many Americans concluded that they were in fact simply colonists—perhaps *nothing more* than colonists—subjects of the crown who did not quite measure up to the men and women who happened to reside in England. Put another way, the study of revolutionary mobilization forces a recognition that colonists could not have imagined national independence until they had first experienced the psychological burden of political dependence.

A new, more sober sense of colonial identity surfaced in the wake of extraordinary military triumph. The stunning victory over the French forces in Canada in 1759 raised popular expectations about America's central role within the empire to an extravagant pitch. It was against this inflated background that colonists would later express such bitter disappointment when a prosperity artificially fueled by war suddenly collapsed following the cessation of hostilities. Their reactions to the news of Britain's successes on the battlefield had been almost entirely positive. Ignoring the threat of a post-war cooling of the economy, Americans gloried in a highly flattering self-image. By their own lights they had done their part in turning back the French, and if the colonists could not quite claim full partnership within an ascendant British Empire, they reasoned plausibly that they deserved a kind of junior membership that awarded them unquestioned respectability.

Although no evidence survives suggesting that colonists belted out the lyrics of James Thomson's recently composed song "Rule, Britannia" with the same gusto as did contemporary English patriots, Americans who shared in the burst of post-war euphoria enthusiastically adopted what some historians have termed the rhetoric of "colonial nationalism" or "emulative patriotism." It was an aggressive language of Britishness that resonated with equal persuasiveness among the Protestants of Ireland as well as the Scots.[11] As one exuberant colonial newspaper editor of this period declared in his inaugural issue, it was the responsibility of provincial journals such as the *New-Hampshire Gazette* to reinforce, perhaps even to construct from whole cloth, a compelling sense of an American imperial identity "as *British Brothers*, in defending the Common Cause."[12] For some Americans, imperial patriotism merged with the prophesies of evangelical ministers. The war had

taken on the trappings of a religious crusade. Major General James Wolfe's victory over a French army on the Plains of Abraham (1759) sparked widespread millenarian hopes, since, as the Canadian victory appeared abundantly to confirm, the Lord favored the interests of his Protestant subjects over those of their authoritarian, Catholic rivals.[13]

The bombast of mid-century colonial nationalism coexisted uneasily with a different theme. Behind the Americans' bold declarations of shared Britishness lurked a gnawing suspicion that their putative "*British Brothers*"—in other words, an English public—would never accept the colonists as equals within the empire. As various cabinet members sketched plans for a more rigorous regulation of colonial affairs, the provincial celebration of a common imperial identity increasingly rang hollow. It was in this political environment that some writers proposed that being colonial meant in fact being regarded by the English as somehow inferior to those people who enjoyed the good fortune of having been born in the mother country.[14] The prospect of possible relegation to second-class status within the British Empire was deeply humiliating. Indeed, the threat of rejection so nettled several highly educated colonists that they protested in crudely racist language that the English now thought of the Americans as little more than black Africans. Only wounded pride could explain such an extreme reaction. "We won't be their negroes," snarled a young, ambitious John Adams, writing in the *Boston Gazette* as "Humphrey Ploughjogger." Like others of his generation, Adams maintained that Providence had never intended white Americans "for Negroes . . . and therefore never intended us for slaves. . . . I say we are as handsome as old English folks, and so should be as free."[15] James Otis Jr., the brilliant Boston lawyer, inquired, "Are the inhabitants of British America all a parcel of transported thieves, robbers, and rebels, or descended from such? Are the colonists blasted lepers, whose company would infect the whole House of Commons?"[16] Like the anonymous author of a piece that appeared in the *Maryland Gazette*—an essay originally published in a Boston journal—colonists throughout America found themselves asking an embarrassing question of immense political and cultural consequence: "Are not the People of *America,* BRITISH Subjects? Are they not *Englishmen*?"[17]

The sense of doubt animating these rhetorical questions invites further explanation, especially if we are to grasp the context in which private decisions about consumer objects took on new political meaning. After all, colonial Americans had not always complained about comparative standards of good looks or fears of English rejection. Although their extraordinary sensitivity about such matters may strike us as absurd, Adams was in fact quite serious. If nothing else, his plaintive words remind us how difficult it is for modern Americans to comprehend what it meant for people of his generation to imagine themselves as *colonists.* It is a category that we take for granted.[18] The problem is that we do not really regard the colonists in this country as ever having been colonists, certainly not in the same way that twentieth-century Ghanaians or Nigerians, for example, were once colonists. Unlike them, we downplay the burden of a colonial past, real or imagined, electing rather to treat it as a period during which colonists—hearty yeomen all—were somehow preparing for nationhood. Within this narrative, American colonialism has lost its sting. It evokes a popular form of architecture, a quaint Georgian world that we have lost, or perhaps merely an invitation to enjoy a patriotic vacation.

For our purposes, such benign images of early American society serve largely to obscure a significant shift in popular political consciousness that occurred only at the very end of the so-called colonial era. To give colonialism a harder edge, therefore, let us stipulate that the 1780s were in fact a genuine *post-colonial* period in the history of the United States.[19] This possibility represents a kind of thought experiment designed to drive home the point about the relation between political consciousness and perceptions of dependence. As with Europe's former colonies in Asia and Africa, our post-colonial moment would have been a time of profound cultural strain in American society when a newly empowered people struggled to free themselves from the weight of imperialism and to establish an authentic voice with which to express national aspirations. Historians of the United States have seldom welcomed the analytic vocabulary of post-colonialism.[20] Instead, they have generally situated the years following the Revolution within a progressive political story that anticipates a burgeoning new republic, and few have seen much value in asking exactly how the citizens of this independent nation may have confronted—as did the peoples of India and Kenya, for instance—their recent colonial past.

Whatever the merits of this unfamiliar framework, we must accept that it raises provocative questions about the relationship between popular political ideas about power on the eve of independence and traditional assumptions about a long, largely undifferentiated era known commonly as the colonial period of American history. For example, had a genuine post-colonial mentality expressed itself in the United States after 1783, we might now feel obliged to determine more accurately than we do at present the precise content of America's colonial experience. We might want to know more about the defining characteristics of the colonial society against which the revolutionaries reacted. From the perspective of a post-colonial culture, it would surely make little sense to define the colonial period as everything that happened between the founding of Virginia in 1606 and the Declaration of Independence in 1776. Rather, in terms of the history of political consciousness, our colonial period would shrink to a few years following the defeat of the French in 1757. We would recognize that it was during these years that ordinary Americans became more fully aware of themselves as being colonists, as being politically and economically dependent on a powerful European state. Of course, one might properly observe in passing that the rulers of eighteenth-century Great Britain did not bring to white colonists the same oppressive violence that their nineteenth- and twentieth-century successors would visit on the indigenous peoples of Africa and Asia. But comparative repression is not our project. We must remember that however mild the hand

of imperial power may now seem, we still have to explain how—and why—these particular colonists managed to organize what was in fact a successful colonial rebellion.

As John Adams and James Otis appreciated, it was only within a relatively short span of time that the term *colonist* had acquired ominous possibilities. It had suddenly ceased to be a relatively innocuous category, a mere geographic designation. The discovery of colonial dependence after the Seven Years' War forced itself onto the political imagination, requiring accommodation and negotiation even by those men and women who, unlike Adams and Otis, did not fret so much about English measures of handsomeness. The reassessment of exactly what counts as the "colonial experience" is of paramount importance to our reinterpretation of popular mobilization, since it was within this intense, newly problematic setting that imported manufactured articles, what Samuel Adams would label the "Baubles of Britain," crystallized previously inchoate assumptions about colonial dependency and compelled colonial Americans to reassess the implications of liberal choice in an imperial marketplace.[21] Store-bought goods served as what Michel Foucault has labeled "dense transfer points," sites of the production of meaning about relations of power.[22]

III

The grimmer face of colonialism first appeared in many households in the form of tighter family budgets. As one historian has observed, "the single most significant factor" in shaping the colonists' reaction to British regulatory policies "was the depression that by 1764 had fastened a clammy grip on trade in every colony, and which would not fully release it until the decade had ended."[23] The withdrawal of so many British troops from the American theater of war depressed local commerce, for without the soldiers—the very men who had sustained "the tale of the hospitable consumer"—the demand for goods and services decreased quite rapidly.[24] The colonists had to adjust not only to a contracting domestic market but also to heavy taxation levied to pay off debts incurred during the long conflict. After the French surrender, British officials grumbled that the colonists had failed to provide the level of funding needed to ensure victory, thus leaving the hard-pressed English rate payers with a huge public debt. The charges were unfair. Colonies such as Massachusetts had spent large sums during the war, and it was not until the late 1760s that the provincial governments were able to liquidate public obligations taken on a decade earlier.[25]

To make matters worse, during the post-war period international trade stagnated, forcing some prominent merchant houses into bankruptcy. A tightening of credit throughout the Atlantic world contributed to a lowering of commodity prices. Among the hardest hit was tobacco. In 1764, according to one Maryland newspaper, "The bankruptcies in Europe has made such a scarcity of money, and had such an effect on credit, that all our American commodities fall greatly."[26] As with most economic reverses, everyone predicted that business conditions would soon return to normal, restoring the prosperity of former times, but recession gradually settled into genuine depression. These developments exacerbated chronic problems associated with an insufficient money supply.[27] By the middle of the decade the situation had become bleak, especially in the major port cities, where higher rates of unemployment and rising prices for basic supplies such as firewood created severe social pressures.[28] Although few Americans feared starvation, the prolonged downturn touched their everyday lives in many different ways. Some may have been disappointed in the results from the sale of a crop; others may have known a tradesman thrown out of work. Even ordinary people found that personal debts often outpaced income. As the frustrated members of Maryland's assembly explained, unless the colony's planters found new sources of revenue—something that seemed to the representatives highly unlikely—they would have no means of "discharging a continually increasing Debt contracted by Woollens and [Britain's] other Manufactures, so that should the Trade of the Colonies, even that which we have no immediate Hand in, be continued to be cramped, the evident Consequence must be that we should not have Credit to purchase such considerable Quantities of British Manufactures as we now do."[29] Or, as a writer in the *Providence Gazette* stated, "It is seldom, indeed very seldom, that any people have had more at stake than we at present have."[30]

At stake for the colonists, of course, were the many material comforts to which they and the members of their parents' generation had become accustomed. How best to preserve their newfound well-being turned on how Britain's empire of goods was supposed to operate, a subject that came to preoccupy many American writers. They accepted the fact that within recent memory a profound division of labor had evolved. On the one hand, the mother country purchased raw staples from America; on the other hand, the colonies provided a closed market for British manufactures. Any policy that disturbed this delicate economic structure—additional commercial taxes or the growth of consumer debt—threatened the entire balance of Atlantic trade and all the cultural and political expectations that the relationship sustained. In 1764 Oxenbridge Thacher, author of a pamphlet published in Boston, patiently reviewed the recent economic experience of the colonies. One can almost feel his sense of frustration. What had happened to notions of commercial reciprocity within the empire? Why are we being treated so poorly? What more can the Americans do? "Everybody knows," he declared, "that the greatest part of the trade of Great-Britain, is with her colonies. . . . The colonists, settled in a wide and sparse manner, are perpetually demanding the linen, woollen and other manufactures of Great Britain. . . . And while they can pay for those of Great Britain, with any proper remittances, their demands will be perpetually increasing. Great Britain besides, is the mart which supplieth the colonies with all the produce of the other countries in Europe, which the colonies use." With a nice touch of irony, Thacher added, "[D]oubtless even the luxury of the colonists is the gain of G. Britain."[31]

In fact, the British really did have the best of the deal. Thomas Fitch, governor of Connecticut, stated the terms of the colonial trade-off as well as any American during this period. "The Colonies and Plantations in *America,*" he wrote in 1764, "are, indeed, of great Importance to their Mother Country and an Interest worthy of her most tender Regard." As the colonists grew in number and in prosperity, they would inevitably purchase more British imports. Rightly considered, therefore, imperial trade implied reciprocity, not dependency. "In the Colonies there is a Vent for and a Consumption of almost all Sorts of *British* Manufactures . . . whereby the Revenue of the Crown and Wealth of the Nation are much increased, at the Expense of the Colonies."[32] From the American perspective, the wisest imperial policy—well before the crisis over the Stamp Act in 1765—was not one that interrupted the flow of consumer goods but one that allowed the colonists the freedom and opportunity to earn the money they needed to pay for them. And, as people like Fitch explained, rising debts and new regulations were making that goal harder every year. Something had to be done.

The economic slump did not immediately translate into organized market strategies of protest. It did, however, draw attention to the politics of individual consumer decisions. Indeed, changing commercial conditions persuaded many Americans that their relationship with Great Britain—their status as colonists within an empire—may have come at a higher personal cost than earlier generations had appreciated. They were not receiving value for money. The private pleasures associated with consuming imported manufactures now raised disconcerting issues directly connected to a growing level of colonial indebtedness, to a constant drain of hard currency to the mother country to pay for an ever increasing volume of goods, to the enforcement of the Navigation Acts, which prohibited British colonists from entering foreign markets, and to a rising number of bankruptcies.[33] Imported items themselves were, of course, just as desirable as they had ever been, bringing color, warmth, and beauty to men and women who had worked hard for their money. But private enjoyments had a social price. Each purchase—no matter how justified in terms of the finances of a given household—spoke not simply of self-fulfillment but also of responsibilities to communities of local purchasers who happened to be experiencing straitened times.[34] As "The Farmer" argued with reference to Pennsylvania, the very survival of the colony hung in the balance. "Whether this province will continue to languish," the writer declared, "or whether folly, luxury, and vanity have taken such deep root, that wisdom and reason cannot eradicate, must be left to time only to make manifest; the best is to be hop'd for, and every honest man, no doubt, wishes that the good sense of the people will rouse them from their lethargy."[35] The people of good sense apparently reasoned dispassionately about consumer desire. "Philo Publicus" echoed the plaintive cry. "We have taken wide Steps to Ruin," insisted the Boston author, "and as we have grown more Luxurious every Year, so we run deeper and deeper in Debt to our Mother Country. . . . Industry and Frugality are Virtues which have been buried out of Sight; 'tis Time, High Time to revive them."[36]

What we are witnessing is the first stage of a shift in how ordinary people interpreted consumer goods within an imperial environment which before they had largely taken for granted or regarded as an altogether good thing. This was the moment during which imported manufactures took what might be called a political turn. The initial impulse was not to blame the British government or even the major importers for the economic depression. Rather, colonists began asking whether they—as individual consumers—actually needed so many yards of cloth, such a wide selection of weights and colors, indeed, whether it might make more sense to curtail personal expenditures before acquiring new debt. In this context, goods did not cause a change in collective behavior. They did, however, act as a catalyst for reassessment, a mental link between the personal and the political, a framework in which to reinterpret a shifting imperial landscape.[37]

As colonists brought a rough form of cost-benefit analysis to membership in a commercial empire, they focused not so much on the details of their own debts—in other words, on the pounds and pence actually owed to local storekeepers for imported goods—but rather on everyday patterns of market behavior that in a depressed economy suddenly threatened to turn independent consumer choice into slavish dependence. As "Pelopidas" explained to readers of the *Boston Gazette,* "it is known to every man in business, that our trade with Great-Britain is greatly against us, that our money is daily exported to pay for manufactures, that our debt to them is notwithstanding annually increasing, and will, if suffered to go on, be the instrument of making us slaves to that people."[38] Decisions made by individuals increasingly became matters of public concern; consumer desire could not so neatly be separated as it once was from its political consequences. To appreciate just how quickly private acts had become matters for legitimate public review, one only has to look at a letter published in the *Boston Gazette* in 1754—in other words, well before the onset of the postwar depression—for in this piece it was forcefully maintained that no group had a right to monitor household consumer habits. "Now I would ask," the writer announced, "whether it be consistent with that Honour which every English Householder claims as his Right, to oblige him to expose the private Œconomy of his Family, to the View of the World?—Has it not always been justly deem'd Impertinent for one Man to busy himself with the Family Concerns of Another? Would it not be an intolerable Insult for him to demand of his Neighbour an Account of his private Conduct & Family Expenses?"[39] Less than a decade after these words appeared in print, people raised a quite different question. How, if the common good is at stake, could a neighbor refuse to bear witness against private excess?

Americans initially pinned responsibility for the economic downturn on ordinary men and women who purchased so many goods without properly reflecting on the moral and political effects of their actions. In an article published in several different newspapers in 1764, "The Farmer" lamented that "luxury and extravagance abound, and have taken deep root, even to such a degree, that when two hundred pounds, about ten years ago,

would have maintain'd a common family for the current year, three times that sum is now become necessary." If the economy had not turned sour, the colonists might have gone on spending at a high rate, even enjoyed doing so. But, according to this commentator, as "trade droops and sinks her head; wisdom cries alou'd to retrench and use our utmost industry, frugality and economy."[40] The situation called for reform of personal values, not government intervention nor the mobilization of entire communities. Consumers who had apparently once taken "luxury and extravagance" in their stride now had to adjust their buying habits in ways that echoed the mandates of an earlier Puritan ethic but during a post-war recession represented a largely secular remedy for an unwelcome reversal of fortune.

That appeals for economic reform merged so easily with conventional moral values is not surprising. Before the start of the Seven Years' War, when the prospects for the colonists looked considerably brighter, American writers employed an emotionally charged condemnation of luxury to discourage ordinary people from buying so many imported goods, especially high-quality textiles, which allowed them to reinvent themselves in a marketplace that celebrated choice and to assume airs that belied their humble origins. In this provincial setting insistence on frugality was a kind of class rhetoric intended to reinforce a traditional social hierarchy.[41] As the colonial economy lost momentum, however, Americans found that the moral vocabulary of an earlier era could serve other ends. Retrenchment was viewed less as a means of keeping ordinary people in their place than as a vehicle for reviving the general prosperity. Consumer virtue even acquired a patriotic tone, for men and women who saved their money during a difficult patch thereby contributed to an imagined common good. The colonists insisted that "Our enemies very well know that dominion and frugality are closely connected; and that to impoverish us, is the surest way to enslave us. Therefore, if we mean still to be free, let us unanimously lay aside foreign superfluities, and encourage our own manufacture. SAVE YOUR MONEY AND YOU WILL SAVE YOUR COUNTRY!"[42]

A writer in the *Pennsylvania Chronicle* who signed his contributions with the pen name "Œconomicus" developed these themes in particularly persuasive prose. He noted that "the expenses of living, which have of late increased among us much faster than our abilities to defray them," had reduced many families in "the foremost rank" to "real poverty and distress." Œconomicus did not think that such hardship resulted solely from self-indulgence in the consumer marketplace, but sybaritic habits were surely a large part of the problem. In fact, an objective observer could see that "in some instances" rising personal indebtedness could be traced to "idleness and the pursuit of pleasure." This author was most familiar with conditions in Pennsylvania. In that colony "a temperate, industrious, religious people, with money at command for every emergency, are now become voluptuous, idle, profligate, involved in debt, and almost left without the prospect of recovery." The solution to this sad state of affairs called for nothing less than a moral recommitment to consumer virtue, a call for each man and woman to practice within individual households "industry and frugality, a disuse of foreign superfluities, and a limitation of our desires to the real necessaries and comfortable conveniencies of life."[43]

This type of discourse represented a significant shift in how people thought about luxury in the marketplace. If the older rhetoric condemning consumer self-indulgence aimed to preserve the proper order of society and to dissuade ordinary people from participating too enthusiastically in the new empire of goods, this more patriotic appeal had the potential to generate a quite different interpretation. For if the lower orders of society really had it in their power to effect such marvelous results—nothing less than balancing trade between Great Britain and the colonies—they could not be treated as marginal actors in the politics of empire. Ordinary people may not have counted for much, but they were beginning within this commercial context to count for something. As men and women would soon discover, moral power in the consumer marketplace was no less effective for being moral. No one planned to invite other social groups into a public conversation over debt. But language has its own peculiar logic, suggesting at moments of social strain consequences that contemporaries never intended. And so the call for frugality in a secular sphere sparked thoughts about a more expansive political culture, not one defined in traditional terms of suffrage but rather one best described as a kind of politics out-of-doors, which was driven by consumer choice. It would be some time before calls for personal sacrifice spawned large-scale boycotts. So much as a historian can ever confidently declare that a popular movement originated at a particular moment, however, this is surely one of them.

The popular rhetoric surrounding what we might call the character of the virtuous consumer fits uneasily in an impressive historical literature that has sought to define a dominant ideology that enabled the colonists to make sense of a changing imperial environment.[44] Much of what the Americans had to say about the challenge of a depressed provincial economy sounds like the language of Reformed Protestantism. Like the early New England Puritans, colonists during the post-war years advocated a bundle of traditional religious values. From their perspective, it seemed quite clear that ordinary men and women should encourage frugality, simplicity, and diligence. But this eighteenth-century moral vocabulary had been drained largely of religious content. The goal of social reform in the marketplace was the restoration of general prosperity, not the defeat of idolatry. It was not that these people no longer concerned themselves with spiritual matters. They cared very much about such topics, and most attended churches of one denomination or another.[45] When they discussed the decayed state of the imperial economy, however, they employed a familiar religious vocabulary in strikingly secular ways. After all, anyone with money in his or her pocket could qualify as a virtuous consumer, even if that person happened to be an unlikely candidate for admission into a religious group.

The market discourse of the period also echoed key assumptions about a commercial economy and the spread of capitalist values that historians

have come to associate with civic humanism or Classical Republicanism.[46] The fear of losing one's independence, a condition that seemed to promote corruption and threaten liberty, haunted writers of republican persuasion. These authors, we are told, feared commerce, especially the highly speculative variety that became more common during the eighteenth century, arguing that it brought on a culture of luxury, which in time would surely deprive self-indulgent and effeminate citizens of their ability to resist tyranny.

While it is true that colonists who appeared in the public journals demanded public virtue, they did not define virtue in the same way as the republican theorists who, we are told, played such a central role in the coming of revolution. Colonial commentators situated virtue solidly within the new consumer marketplace; it was preeminently a bourgeois virtue. When "A Farmer" praised the "honest man," he had in mind a person able to exercise self-restraint when tempted by a brilliant array of imported British goods. Virtue was a function of liberal choice—in this case, of consumer decisions to forgo private pleasures in order to advance the public welfare. The virtuous consumer did not reject the market, much less capitalism, but he or she had the strength of character to appreciate that private vices such as buying more than the purchaser could afford might compromise the larger public virtue of the community.[47] From this perspective, consumer debt was a problem not because it exposed a weakness for exciting imported goods—after all, it was quite natural to want to look prettier, feel warmer, and keep up with popular fashion—but rather because consumer excess reduced colonial buyers to slavish dependence on their creditors. Daniel Dulany, a prominent Maryland lawyer who protested the constitutionality of the Stamp Act in 1765, provided insight into the mentality of the virtuous consumer. "A prudent Man," Dulany explained, "constrained to abridge his Outgoing, will consider what Articles of Expense may be retrenched or given up, without Distress or Discomfort, and if, after this saving, he still finds that his Expenses exceed his Income, he will then consider of what Articles he can provide a Supply by the Application of domestic Industry."[48]

IV

Even before the outbreak of violent resistance to the Stamp Act in 1765, colonists had begun to discuss strategies that would ensure a continued access to the basic comforts of material life and, at the same time, reduce their dependence on imported goods from Great Britain. It was a tall order. They appreciated the need to reform participation in the consumer marketplace in ways that increased their political leverage within a commercial empire. But like anyone intent on having one's cake and eating it too, Americans were not yet prepared to contemplate radical changes in a comfortable style of life. In this situation some colonists trumpeted the kind of defiant arguments that Franklin would echo before the members of Parliament. Americans pledged to become more frugal, more diligent, and more self-reliant; they would search out alternative sources of goods. The challenge was clear enough. As one contributor to the *New-Hampshire Gazette* asked a local audience of virtuous consumers, "What then must be done?—Can we give up our Favourite Diversions, our Luxury either in eating or drinking, and take care of our Families?—Can we go plainer in Clothes, lay by our Laces, Ribbons, gaudy Flowers, and that most trifling of all Things, GAUZE[?] . . . Can we in New-England do without this?"[49]

Although it is premature in our discussion of the politicization of manufactured goods to explore the gendered aspects of consumer reform, one can see that brave talk of economic self-reliance was bound over time to focus public opinion on the household, on the ability and willingness of women to produce a supply of cloth sufficient to free colonial families from dependence on store-bought textiles. When the boycott movement reached its height later in the decade of the 1760s, women discovered that they had a voice in revolutionary politics, which modern historians interested largely in the activities of official committees and elected assemblies have failed to hear. By the same token, however, one might note that attacks on "Laces, Ribbons, [and] gaudy Flowers" touched the lives of women more directly than it did men, and it is perhaps not surprising that male writers almost unthinkingly assumed that it was up to their wives and daughters to make the greatest sacrifices in the consumer marketplace.

Indeed, from the first stirring of discontent, American consumers found it hard to define with confidence the precise content of self-denial. Even as the colonists began associating a flood of British imports with their own political dependency, they encountered a problem with the elusive language of the marketplace. As we have seen in our discussion of the traditional moral condemnation of luxury, the descriptive categories of eighteenth-century consumption were distressingly fluid.[50] One family's necessities often struck the members of other families as extravagance or as opulence, certainly as examples of the kinds of self-indulgence that might easily be dropped from a shopping list for the welfare of the community. As colonists devised various responses to post-war depression, they struggled to distinguish between superfluities and conveniences, between fineries and necessities. Someone was bound to claim that he or she could not do without a certain item. "What are called in North America luxuries," Daniel Dulany confessed, "ought for the most part to be ranked among the comforts and decencies of life." He predicted that however Americans defined the lexicon of demand, they would be willing to relinquish everyday goods that brought them pleasure if they could be guaranteed "a supply of necessaries . . . by domestic industry."[51] Like Franklin, who during his interrogation before Parliament struggled with such semantic distinctions, Dulany attempted to give precise meaning to what was in fact a highly unstable vocabulary of popular consumer sacrifice.

Whatever confusions bedeviled popular discourse, the colonists had no trouble seeing the commercial advantage that would undoubtedly result from the development of domestic manufacturing. The goal, of course, was

to make the very articles that drained so much hard currency away from the American market. At least initially, colonists talked most excitedly of real centers of production, and it took several years before political decisions made in London forced them to refocus attention on the need to increase productivity within the home. In the post-war discussions, however, they dreamed bold dreams, ignoring the lack of sufficient capital and technological expertise required to launch large-scale ventures. In their desire to achieve greater self-sufficiency in the manufacture of basic items such as cloth, optimistic predictions of success far outran the possibility of satisfying an ever expanding consumer demand. Newspapers regularly encouraged a "recourse to domestic economy."[52] This type of reform, they believed, would shift the colonial workforce away from agriculture toward manufacturing. And confronted with a chronic imbalance of Atlantic trade, Americans seemed to have no other rational choice. "Tho' our Abilities to pay for the Manufactures of England greatly decrease," explained one writer in the *New-Hampshire Gazette,* "yet the Price, especially of Woolens, rise upon us, and the Importation and Consumption increase beyond Imagination."[53]

Observers bravely searched the provincial landscape for examples of the new self-reliant economy. Experiments of this sort were thin on the ground. Several journals praised a "Company of Gentlemen" for establishing "a New Woolen Manufactory" on Long Island, and reports from the site assured readers from "any of the Provinces . . . [that] they may be supplied with Broad-Cloths, equal in Fineness, Colour, and Goodness, and cheaper than any imported." With no apparent sense of contradiction, the owners announced that they would welcome "any Persons who are [in] any Way vested in the Woolen Manufacture." The list of current job openings included "Woolcombers, Weavers, Clothiers, Shearers, Dyers, Spinners, Carders, or [people] understanding any Branch of the Broad-Cloth, Blanket, or Stroud Manufactory."[54] The large number of positions for skilled laborers suggested that perhaps the colonists would have to wait a long time before realistically competing with the makers of British textiles, and although an occasional advertisement informed "the Publick" of the availability of a variety of locally produced articles such as "Linen, Stockings, Mittens, Men's Caps . . . &c., &c.," the patriotic rhetoric betrayed defensiveness about quality as well as availability. The reformers were simply not sure that ordinary American consumers would accept a cheap substitute even if by so doing they would be helping to restore the prosperity experienced during the height of the Seven Years' War. As one promoter of "HOME MANUFACTURED GOODS" exclaimed nervously, "Happy Country! That can supply itself with these Articles, and a People so public spirited as to encourage and be satisfied with them."[55]

During this early stage in the debate over the appropriate character of public sacrifice in the marketplace, Dulany expanded on the argument for local manufacturing. Even he seemed to be straining to make the case. "Let the manufactures of America be the symbol of dignity, the badge of virtue," he insisted, "and it will soon break the fetters of distress. A garment of linsey-woolsey, when made the distinction of real patriotism, is more honorable and attractive of respect and veneration than all the pageantry and the robes and the plumes and the diadem of an emperor without it. Let the emulation be not in the richness and variety of foreign productions, but in the improvement and perfection of our own."[56] The problem was that most colonial consumers knew quite well the difference between inferior goods made in America and the finer weights and colors from Great Britain they saw in the stores. "O. Z.," a writer from Rhode Island, summed up the situation with extraordinary bluntness. "The People of this Colony are daily taught," he noted, "from innumerable Lessons or Instances that are but too conspicuous in the numerous Shops, Stores, and Warehouses, how backward and ignorant we are in the manifold Branches of Manufacture, necessary or superfluous."[57] In such circumstances, abstract appeals about the state of the economy, even those invoking a new language of economic patriotism within the empire, were not capable of breaking long-standing habits of consumer desire. An organized sacrifice of pleasure in the marketplace—in other words, a strategy capable of uniting colonists across the boundaries of class and region—required more than reminders of hard times.

However quixotic the hope for a rapid build-up of domestic manufacturing in provincial America—one writer even claimed that "all these different branches [of manufacturing] have little or no existence but in news-papers"—the rising concern over the politics of consumer spending for British imports did have a curious impact on one aspect of public life.[58] For a very long time, especially in New England, moralists had complained that funerals had the unfortunate effect of beggaring poor and middling families. In anthropological terms these rituals had become scenes of intense, often vulgar competition, as surviving relatives attempted to outspend other families on the accoutrements that fashion deemed essential for such occasions. It fell to the widows and widowers to supply a host of mourners with rings, gloves, and scarves, all of which had come from England. Moreover, those concerned with social appearances at wakes purchased lavish amounts of imported wine.

These extraordinary episodes of conspicuous consumption occurring at moments of genuine bereavement came to the attention of the Massachusetts House of Representatives. In 1741 this body concluded that since "the giving of scarves, gloves, wine, rum and rings, at funerals is a great and unnecessary expense," the government had no other choice but to intervene. Henceforth, there would be no more distribution of scarves or rings, and the representatives insisted that only six people attending a funeral, in addition to the minister and six pallbearers, could receive special gloves. If the members of any family ignored these guidelines, or if they served imported wine or rum, they risked paying the state an enormous fine of fifty pounds sterling.[59] As with many reforms of this type, ordinary people in Massachusetts seem to have taken their chances on being caught, and they organized funerals in a manner they viewed as a reflection of their own gentility. In 1753 a newspaper that made a name for itself by criticizing the

governing elite ran an essay entitled "Of the Extravagance of our Funerals," a piece that railed against the general insistence upon "a pompous Interment." The author, who identified himself as "Shadrech Plebianus," seemed offended by "the fashionable Apparatus [which was now required to be] buried Alamode." He laid the blame for consumer excess at the feet of the colony's wealthier families. Since "People in the inferior Stations of Life are extremely apt to imitate those who move in a more elevated Sphere: It ought to be the Endeavour of the latter to set them the laudable Example of suppressing this fantastical and inconvenient Piece of Luxury."[60]

Such appeals to bury the dead "with suitable Decency and Decorum" seem to have fallen largely on deaf ears. That is, they did so until economic depression threatened the prosperity of Britain's post-war commercial empire. Suddenly, in this altered imperial context, calls for the reform of funereal customs acquired unmistakable political overtones, and warnings about the moral implications of luxury were woven into a broader discourse that now included uneasiness about colonial economic dependency. Contemporaries understood that the terms of the local debate had shifted. In 1764 "P. P." lectured readers of the *Boston Gazette* that the general decay of commerce necessitated a reduction of the cost of funerals. If people could be persuaded to practice frugality at such moments, thus merging concerns about the common goods with private expressions of grief, then "each individual being ransomed from the tyranny of fashion, will be free to act as his circumstances may require, and such *freedom* can scarce be purchas'd too *dear*, as it has the necessary tendency to deliver a community from *bondage*."[61] The major issue before the public was the colony's growing debt to Great Britain. Although no one thought that retrenchment of expenses for memorial rings and scarves would in itself restore the balance of imperial trade, such measures represented a welcome start; they communicated a shared commitment to solving a problem that affected everyone, rich and poor. As "Incola" explained, colonists must avoid "unnecessary Consumptions, particularly in Funerals." The new "*Frugal*" methods of burying the dead would benefit many families by saving "some Thousands [of pounds] Sterling . . . which would otherwise be Remitted to Great-Britain for those Expensive and *Superfluous Habits* formerly used at Funerals."[62]

Advocates of less expensive interments turned the language of an eighteenth-century consumer society against itself in innovative ways that only a people fully engaged in the pleasures of the market could appreciate. No one claimed that "frugal funerals" represented a return to old customs; no one invoked memories of thrifty members of a founding generation. Rather, according to the people who contributed to the local newspapers, simple burials represented a new fashion. "It is now out of Fashion to put on Mourning at the Funeral of the nearest Relation," announced one Boston writer, "which will make a Saving to this Town of Twenty Thousand Sterling per Annum.—It is surprising how suddenly, as well as how generally an old Custom is abolished."[63] Others, sounding a lot like newspaper advertisers for trendy goods, praised funerals staged "in the new establish'd Method."[64]

More than any other item associated with this ritual, gloves seem to have symbolized an incipient revolt against consumer dependency. The imported white gloves that families provided for mourners not only cost a lot of money but also represented a colossal waste. After all, a pair of funeral gloves could only be worn a single time. If New Englanders insisted on distributing gloves at funerals, then they ought to purchase those made in America. Such gloves would not reflect the cosmopolitan tastes of contemporary London. They would be warm, sensible, "suitable to the Climate." In fact, if one wanted to demonstrate a genuine commitment to the restoration of a balanced trade with Great Britain, one might affix on the funeral gloves "some peculiar Mark of Distinction." One person recommended that a proper emblem of colonial self-sufficiency might be "a Bow and Arrow, or a Pine Tree, in *lieu* of the usual stitching on the Back."[65] Pallbearers in Dorchester received special commendation for refusing "the usual Present of Gloves, to prevent a needless Expense to the Relations."[66]

However radical the New England funeral reformers may have sounded in terms of the manipulation of fashion, their instincts about social class remained solidly traditional. They assumed that the poorer sorts would naturally follow the lead of their betters, so that it was the responsibility of local gentlemen to set a model of frugality which the less fortunate could emulate. "S. A." revealed how during a period of imperial adjustment one might condemn the errors of the past—adopting a standard trope of Enlightened discourse—and at the same time preserve the prerogatives of the ruling elite. Noting how quickly the people of Boston had apparently accepted the new mode of interment, he could not ignore "the *stupidity of former times!* And what amazing treasures have been *thrown away,* in 100 years past, to support a *needless,* a *foolish* and *hurtful custom!*—Surely then, those *worthy gentlemen*, who have been instrumental in *shaking off* a *senseless & impoverishing fashion,* deserve the esteem & thanks of the public." In fact, S. A. believed that the wisdom of the well-born had saved those in the "*lower stations of life*" from "*inevitable ruin*."[67] It is not clear whether Boston's poor interpreted the changing fashion in funerals in these terms. In time, as we shall see, quite ordinary people took the lead in demanding consumer sacrifice in the name of liberty. For the moment, however, colonists seem to have agreed that the dead deserved equal treatment at bargain rates. According to "Hannah Prudence," "People of all Ranks and Conditions have come into the new Mode of attending the Funerals of their deceased Friends."[68]

To state with certainty how many New England families adopted the new guidelines for politically correct funerals is not possible. The newspapers, of course, reported a remarkably wide-spread rejection of the old customs. In January 1765 one commentator declared, "It is, I think about four months since this prudent regulation took place in *Boston;* in which time, I suppose there have been more than 100 funerals, and among that number (so far as I can learn) there has been but one or two families that have not strictly conformed to the new and laudable custom." Such impressive results provided a

clear message. "It may fairly be concluded, that all ranks and orders of persons among us, do highly approve of it [the new frugal funerals], as a *prudent,* a *necessary,* and a *saving article* of reformation."[69] However many proper funerals may have been organized during this period, observers took the opportunity to introduce an entirely new figure into the realm of popular opinion. They celebrated the deceased man or woman not simply for having led a pious and honest life but also for holding a frugal and patriotic interment. At the moment of death, they revealed themselves as politically sensitive consumers. Mrs. Elizabeth Clarke was such a person. "Her Remains were decently interred on Friday last," announced the *Boston Evening-Post,* "in the frugal and laudable Manner lately introduced among us, and which prevails beyond Expectation in the Colonies."[70] A report from Concord declared, "This Day the Funeral of a Person of distinction was attended here in a new Mode, which gave universal Satisfaction to Persons of Character and others who attended the same. It's hoped other Country Towns will follow the Example which Boston has set us."[71] But these events paled in comparison to the burial of the Reverend Mr. Callender, the minister of the Baptist church in Boston. Whatever his virtues in life, Callender enjoyed a noble passing.

> The Town had the Satisfaction of seeing in this Instance, a Funeral conducted conformable to an Agreement lately entered into, by a great Number of the most respectable of its Inhabitants.—A long Train of Relations followed the Corpse (which was deposited in a plain Coffin) without any sort of Mourning at all:—Mr. Andrew Hall, the chief Mourner, appeared in his usual Habit, with a Crape round his Arm; and his Wife, who was Sister and nearest Relation to the Deceased, with no other Token of Mourning than a black Bonnet, Gloves, Ribbons, and Handkerchief.—The Funeral was attended by a large Procession of Merchants and Gentlemen of Figure, as a Testimony of their Approbation of this Piece of Œconomy, and as a Mark of their Esteem for a Family who have shown Virtue enough to break a Custom too long established, and which has proved ruinous to many Families in this Community.[72]

Although this new consumer ritual drew most support from Massachusetts, it had cultural significance far beyond the number of frugal funerals actually held. Local newspapers carried tales of the reform; they advocated the need for immediate retrenchment. The stories of simple burials and groups of "respectable" people who had encouraged them appeared in the journals of Connecticut and Philadelphia.[73] Readers in Charleston, South Carolina, may have learned from the Boston paper how New England families responded to the growing colonial indebtedness and, by extension, to the sting of dependence by refusing to wear imported gloves. An author in the *New-Hampshire Gazette* informed his audience that "The public Prints of a neighbouring Province have presented us with a *Frugal,* truly laudable, and now usual Manner of *Burying their Dead.*"[74]

Reports of this kind are not usually the stuff of traditional political history. But for our purposes, it would be a mistake to adopt such a perspective. We should enlarge our sense of the political. Certainly, for ordinary people the shared news of heroic self-denial, especially as it affected the members of families not unlike their own, was profoundly political. The journals of the period spoke of voluntary collectivities of Americans adopting innovative strategies of resistance. In this setting it did not really matter that the new mode of funerals had little direct impact on the overall imbalance of colonial trade. Tales of reform took on histories of their own, connecting distant strangers through a common language of consumer sacrifice. In this spirit one Boston commentator announced, "[A]s the present wise establishment relating to *funerals,* has taken deep root in this town, so it is likely it will spread not only through *our country towns,* but also through all the *neighbouring provinces.*"[75]

Short-lived strategies of funereal retrenchment as well as airy dreams of domestic manufacturing were like so many dry leaves stirring restlessly before an autumn storm. For all their discontents, Americans did not really want to forgo the pleasure of the consumer marketplace. We might describe their anticipation of material happiness as the Franklin dilemma, for, like the cosmopolitan figure who informed the members of Parliament that Americans might easily do without so many imported goods, they hoped that the current crisis would quickly pass. The good times would return. And, at that moment, the hard-pressed colonists would not have to recycle their old clothes, now perhaps a little snug around their waists, or join with other Americans whom they had never met in sacrificing the articles that had come to define their relationship with Great Britain. They would somehow avoid being "cloathed like their predecessors the Indians, with the skins of beasts, and sink into like barbarism."[76]

Events took a different course. The Sugar Act of 1764 represented an ominous hint of a regulatory policy that would reduce the colonists to a status that they found most objectionable. It reminded them that they were indeed becoming second-class subjects of the crown, in a word, colonists but not partners in a robust empire of goods. The legislation outlawed the colonists' lucrative trade with the French Caribbean and thus destroyed a triangular exchange that had become a vital source of the hard currency needed to pay English merchant houses for imported consumer goods. Britain's rulers, it seemed, did not fully comprehend the workings of the American market.

The burden of unconstitutional taxes and additional commercial regulations would in time suggest to the colonists new, more effective strategies of resistance and spark innovative forms of popular mobilization. Driving these collective responses was the firm conviction—first planted, ironically, by mid-eighteenth-century British commercial writers—that the colonists derived political strength in part through their own dependence upon the imported consumer goods.[77] From their perspective, it was Britain, not America, that had the most to lose if the colonists ever managed to curtail their own demand. Before anyone spoke of a declaration of independence, they consoled themselves in the knowledge that if Parliament did in fact break the commercial bonds that had linked them for so long, then "America, after many revolutions, and perhaps great distresses, will become a mighty empire."[78]

V

The vaguely defined though persistent imperial malaise that pervaded the post-war period suddenly came into sharper focus on March 22, 1765. It is no exaggeration to state that passage of the Stamp Act instantly transformed the political landscape of Britain's Atlantic world. After that date, colonists would never again view their imperial connection quite the same way as they had at mid-century. It was not that they espoused ideas of national independence. Rather, from their perspective, Parliament's shocking decision to levy taxes without representation called into question political assumptions about shared political identity—the stuff of colonial nationalism—and replaced these inchoate feelings of pride and loyalty with harsher emotions such as anger, confusion, and disappointment. The Stamp Act brought home to many Americans, already nervous about accumulating consumer debt and tighter commercial regulation, the full burden of colonial dependency. Indeed, the details of the statute—a stamp duty collected by crown officials on a wide variety of papers used in everyday business and legal transactions—seemed less significant to the colonists than did the rude discovery of a doctrine of inequality that now apparently informed imperial policy. In major provincial ports men and women protested what they interpreted as a direct attack on liberty and property; newspaper articles warned of dreadful conspiracies designed to reduce all free Americans to slavery. As William Smith Jr. of New York announced, "This single stroke has lost Great Britain the affection of all her Colonies."[79]

Others echoed Smith's reaction. Like more modern people who have experienced what they regard as a break in the flow of time—the destruction of the World Trade Center or the assassination of President John Kennedy, for example—colonists felt the sudden weight of history upon their shoulders. In their own lives, the Stamp Act forced an immediate and difficult reassessment of the meaning of empire. Few responses were as poignant as those of John Hancock, then an ambitious young Boston merchant. In his private letterbook where he preserved copies of commercial correspondence, Hancock recorded in turn waves of fear and defiance, dismay and uncertainty. On October 14, 1765, he informed the partners of a London firm that supplied him with consumer goods, "I have come to a Serious Resolution not to send one Ship more to Sea, nor to have any kind of Connection in Business under a Stamp. . . . I am Determin'd as soon as I know that they are Resolv'd to insist on this act to Sell my Stock in Trade & Shut up my Warehouse Doors & never Import another Shilling from Great Britain." Hancock insisted, "I am free & Determined to be so & will not willingly & quietly Subject myself to Slavery." One might conclude that Hancock's intemperate rhetoric was intended merely to alarm the English businessmen. But, in fact, he was genuinely disturbed by the sudden crisis. In a moving personal postscript to this letter, Hancock added a pledge that his correspondents could not have read: "This Letter I propose to remain in my Letter Book as a Standing monument to posterity & my children in particular, that I by no means Consented to a Submission to this Cruel Act, & that my best Representations were not wanting in the matter."[80]

The Reverend Jonathan Mayhew also appreciated the need to bear witness against the radical new imperial legislation. This respected Boston minister who had long served a wealthy congregation blasted the Stamp Act, and in a sermon entitled *The Broken Snare,* Mayhew reviewed exactly how Parliament's breach of trust had affected colonial society.

> This continent, from Canada to Florida, and the West-India Islands, most of them at least, have exhibited a dismal mixed scene of murmuring, despondence, tumult and outrage; courts of justice shut up, with custom-house and ports; private jealousies and animosities, evil furnishings, whisperings and back-bitings, mutual reproaches, open railing, and many other evils, since the time in which the grievous act . . . was to have taken place.[81]

Another thoughtful contemporary, the Reverend Jeremy Belknap, agreed with Mayhew's analysis, ruefully noting that news of the passing of the Stamp Act had produced despair throughout the colonies. As he explained, "The direct and violent attack on our dearest privileges at first threw us into a silent gloom; and we were at a loss how to proceed. To submit, was to rivet the shackles of slavery on ourselves and our posterity. To revolt, was to rend asunder the most endearing connexion, and hazard the resentment of a powerful nation."[82]

How many other colonial Americans shared such a profound sense of anger and betrayal at this moment is difficult to gauge. Leading clergymen and lawyers, merchants and planters, registered their opinions in public debates. They drew up formal petitions to the king and Parliament; they organized a gathering known as the Stamp Act Congress, which attempted, albeit unsuccessfully, to give voice to the grievances of all the colonies. But ordinary people made the depth of their own hostility to the new imperial legislation abundantly clear as well. They thoroughly intimidated crown officials appointed to distribute the stamped papers; they rioted in the streets of several American cities, sometimes pulling down entire houses. As members of a mob, they burned effigies of government agents associated with the hated duties. While colonists had occasionally employed violence to protest policies that they deemed obnoxious—the pressing of local seamen into the Royal Navy, for example—they had never before demonstrated such destructive passions. For a brief period rank-and-file resistance closed the courts of law and brought normal commerce to a standstill. Moreover, American newspapers and pamphlets displayed remarkable ideological conviction. There was no question that colonists who refused to pay the revenue did so on the basis of coherent political principles. They assured themselves as well as their friends in England that Parliament had acted in an unconstitutional manner that effectively annulled the natural and charter rights of all Americans. They knew exactly what they meant when they cried out, "No taxation without representation."[83]

However widespread the popular anger may have been, the Revolution did not in fact occur in 1765. This curious non-event begs explanation. After

all, the elements that one assumes were necessary to transform colonial protest into full-scale rebellion seem to have been present at that moment: a radical ideology of colonial resistance, organized violence against the established government, and widespread anxiety that new taxes would exacerbate economic hardship. But, instead of provoking a general call to arms, the crisis passed, and we now interpret the protest against the Stamp Act as simply an early chapter in an eleven-year run-up to national independence. Several factors may account for the revolutionary dog that did not bark in the night. First, Parliament repealed the hated legislation on March 18, 1766, and for those Americans who cherished the opinion that compromise might stave off more serious confrontation, the retreat seemed to suggest a possible return to happier imperial relations. Second, a political culture shared time-out-of-mind with the English people—a stock of symbols and traditions associated with Britain's balanced constitution and the Glorious Revolution of 1688—proved impressively resilient, and many Americans clung to the hope that a compassionate king would at the end of the day intervene in their behalf.

But there is more than this to the story of the timing of revolution. Although a conservatism born of hope and tradition may go a long way toward explaining why popular defiance to the Stamp Act did not spark a full-scale revolt, it tends to obscure another equally persuasive account of why it took so long to translate what William Smith Jr. in 1765 called a momentous "stroke" into a broad-based continental cause. However much Americans may have detested the new revenue act and however passionately they defended their rights and liberty, they had not yet learned to reach out effectively to each other across the boundaries of social class and physical geography, so that while the Boston mob destroyed buildings and the rioters in New York City terrified crown officials, the protesters in neither locality had developed a sense of mutual trust that would allow them to assume almost reflexively that other Americans living in other places would support them if Great Britain decided to crush colonial resistance. In other words, what was missing from the equation in 1765 was a structure of political mobilization that would sustain solidarity among virtual strangers separated by bad roads and historical experience.

Imported manufactured goods played a central role in the process of reimagining the boundaries of political community. From our perspective, of course, it is easy to take a strategy of resistance based on the voluntary non-importation of British goods for granted. We recognize boycotts as a legitimate means of bringing pressure on those who would ignore popular grievances. But during the Stamp Act crisis the notion that imported items could be made to speak to power was entirely new. Consumer articles that had flooded into American households after 1740 provided colonists of entirely different backgrounds with a means of conversing about common political problems. No doubt, in other colonial situations over the last two centuries other aspects of shared experience—a common religion and ethnic identity spring to mind—served a similar function as did imported goods in British North America. But it is extremely important in understanding the various forms of resistance to colonial dependency to maintain a sharp focus on the particular historical context in which solidarities developed. Imported goods resonated with political possibilities precisely because they had come to define so persuasively Britain's mid-century relationship with its "consuming colonies." In an imperial economy in which colonists worked ever harder to produce exports to pay for a rising demand for essential consumer items manufactured in England itself, it seemed almost inevitable that imported goods would come to symbolize economic dependence and political complaint. Or, put another way, colonial Americans learned, however slowly, to talk to each other about politics through organized disruptions of the consumer marketplace.

As we have seen, these goods had already begun to take on new, increasingly problematic meanings during the period following the Seven Years' War. After 1765 the reinterpretation of the articles of everyday material culture acquired a more overt political character. Consider, for example, a seemingly straightforward list of goods that appeared in a Boston newspaper shortly after a mob had destroyed a house owned by Thomas Hutchinson, an extremely wealthy Boston merchant who had been appointed lieutenant governor of Massachusetts Bay. The *Evening-Post* asked subscribers to be alert for certain items that had gone missing on the night of the attack.

> A Silver Hilt of a Sword which had been wash'd with Gold . . . two mourning Swords: a chafed Gold Head of a Cane, with the Lieut. Governor's Crest; a Lady's chafed Gold Watch, Hook & Chain; a new fashion'd Gold Chain and Hook for a Lady's Watch: a Set of large Silver Plate Buttons for a Coat & Breeches; 2 Sets ditto covered with Silver Wire, and very uncommon; several Funeral Rings . . . Gauze Handkerchiefs & Sattin Apron, both flowered with Gold; Silk Shoes; brocaded Silk, Padusoy Damask Lustring Gowns & Petticoats; laced Petticoats . . . Bundles of old Gold and Silver Lace . . .[84]

What catches the eye is not the traditional moral condemnation of luxury. A new element has been introduced. The objects of desire have taken on an unmistakable political character, so that the possession of various goods that might once have reflected cosmopolitan taste or economic success now present themselves to ordinary readers as badges of political corruption. They understood the new critical language of "Funeral Rings."

Other colonial voices made even more explicit the link between imported goods and political dependence. The author of *A Discourse, Addressed to the Sons of Liberty* (1766) compared the situation in which Americans found themselves to that of "a young raw gamester sitting at a table between sharpers." On the one side of the colonist sat the "statesman," on the other, the merchant. Both wanted nothing more than "to strip and plunder" the naive provincial consumer in this unequal game. But alas, the American brought so little hard money to the contest that it made no sense for the other two players to divide the spoils. Both aimed at taking the entire stake. There was hope, however. As "Pro-Patria" explained, the American consumer could avoid being fleeced, if only he would act. The writer

asked "a Solemn Assembly" gathered "Near the Liberty-Tree, in Boston," "What if the youth should discover their designs, resolve to keep better company, and take up his hat and walk off?" He could in effect boycott the commercial game. And if he did, could anyone blame the poor American "cully" for such resolve? "Whatever you may think," Pro-Patria continued, "this conduct, and no other, can bring about our deliverance; [for] as long as our backs are cloathed from *Great-Britain*, they [the imperial statesman and merchant] will lay what burthens upon them they please." *A Discourse*—a work clearly aimed at a popular audience—did not advocate revolt against consumer goods. The point was that "at a table between sharpers" Americans would be best advised to make these necessary articles for themselves. As he confessed, "[We have] trafficked so long abroad, for what could be found at home, that we are upon the point of selling, like *Esau*, our valuable and inestimable birthright for a mess of pottage."[85]

Another writer, who identified himself as "a Friend to the Liberty of his Country," took a more sober view of the challenge. He warned that the dreaded Stamp Collectors would soon demand whatever hard currency the colonists had managed to put aside for their own enjoyment. Without money the daughters of America would have to "sacrifice your gold beads, jewels, ear-rings, &c. until you are made bare and naked to your shame." Like Franklin, this writer did not welcome the sacrifice that unconstitutional taxation had forced on the colonists. The Stamp Act shattered the old symbols of empire. They once had represented a shared British identity. But by compromising the Americans' ability to purchase the goods they desired, Parliament had revealed an intention to treat the colonists like second-class subjects, in other words, like colonists. "For being called Englishmen," complained this Friend of Liberty, "without having the privileges of Englishmen, is like a man in a gibbet, with dainties set before him, which would refresh him and satisfy his craving appetite, if he could come at them, but being debarr'd of that privilege, they only serve for an aggravation to his hunger." He concluded, "O my poor brethren in the gibbet of America, that cannot come at the dainties of Europe, I pity you with all my heart and soul."[86] The Stamp Act had obviously put a heavy price on the pursuit of material happiness.

Any attempt to establish with precision the origins of non-importation as a mode of political resistance would be futile. During the 1720s the famed Irish satirist Jonathan Swift published "A Proposal for the Universal Use of *Irish* Manufacture, &c." in which he asked rhetorically, "What if . . . [the Irish Parliament] had thought fit to make a Resolution, *Nemine Contradicente*, against wearing any Cloath or Stuff in their Families, which were not of the Growth and Manufacture of this Kingdom?"[87] Nothing came of the suggestion. Nor was there a positive response to an appeal in a Boston newspaper in 1746 for the formation of an association whose members would pledge "not directly or indirectly, [to] buy or procure, or cause or permit to be bought or procured any Tea into our respective Families."[88] Rather than search for possible precedents for a consumer boycott movement, we should recognize that the creation of groups dedicated to achieving specific social, religious, or economic goals had a long history in British America. The colonists regularly formed associations to discuss new scientific ideas, to raise money for libraries, to finance the building of churches, and to fight fires. None of these communal efforts received support from local governments.[89] And although the non-importation movement that took root during the Stamp Act crisis was larger and less exclusive than were these earlier endeavors, it may have seemed quite unexceptionable for men and women angry about taxation without representation to think in terms of voluntary organizations, in other words, of a framework of neighbors joining neighbors to address a common problem. Sacrifice in the consumer marketplace—like the acquisition of goods in the first place—required a conscious choice.

Although Parliament passed the Stamp Act in March 1765, news of this event did not reach American ports for almost two months. Popular protest against the statute and even more specifically against the local agents appointed to collect the stamp duties took many forms, one of which, as we have seen, was rioting in the streets. The urban merchants quickly found themselves at the center of a political controversy that threatened to spin out of control. If they elected to conduct normal commercial relations with their counterparts in England, they would be forced to purchase the stamped papers now required to get goods through customs. Organized resistance in the major colonial cities made capitulation of this sort a virtual nonstarter, and while some leading American merchants wanted desperately to avoid further involvement in the imperial dispute, others sanctioned elaborate non-importation agreements. Signed at meetings where only members of the merchant community had a voice, these resolutions may have been intended to head off the possibility that people not identified with commerce would push for non-consumption, a protest strategy that would have awarded to ordinary men and women a large measure of direct control over the sale of British goods in America. A group of New York merchants seized the initiative. On October 31 about two hundred of them gathered at the Long Room of George Burns's tavern, where they pledged to cancel all orders for manufactured articles until Parliament repealed the Stamp Act. They also persuaded local retailers of dry goods to join them in declaring that if the British government did not back down, New Yorkers would not accept any British imports after January 1. Merchant assemblies in other cities soon adopted the central provisions of the New York plan, and within only six weeks commercial leaders in Philadelphia, Albany, Boston, Salem, Marblehead, Newburyport, Portsmouth, and Plymouth had formally endorsed a limited non-importation plan.[90] On November 25 an appeal published in a Boston newspaper urged the "Merchants and Traders of the Massachusetts Bay" to emulate "the patriotic Conduct of the Gentlemen in Trade in New-York." If they came forward, the writer announced, the New Englanders would find themselves participating in a movement that was spreading rapidly, for, "a beginning being made, the Spirit will

Ketch from Town to Town, and Province to Province, than which nothing can more contribute to a speedy Redress of our Grievances."[91]

As the imperial crisis unfolded, the merchant community advanced various arguments in support of non-importation, some of which, not surprisingly, sounded transparently self-serving. Even before passage of the Stamp Act, many colonial merchants found themselves running up ever larger debts to their British suppliers, and if nothing else, an organized boycott of imported goods held out the possibility of reducing outstanding obligations while also providing a welcome opportunity to unload inventories that because of dull colors or unfashionable designs had been rejected by the consumer. One writer in Pennsylvania reported that "there is a full sufficiency of English goods now on the continent for a least seven year's consumption, and it would be for our advantage (the Stamp Act aside), if none were imported for half that time; then we might collect and pay our debts, which are already so heavy that we groan under them."[92] It is doubtful that colonial warehouses actually contained such a huge stock, but even in more guarded moments merchants assured commercial colleagues that it made sense in an uncertain business climate not to order new goods for at least twelve months.[93] In fact, in a perverse way the hated legislation benefited the American people, since the taxes prevented "an increase of our debt to the mother country, which we have now no means of defraying."[94]

A second justification for limited non-importation—in other words, a commercial effort that would cease as soon as Parliament repealed the act—was the merchants' assurance that the strategy would put serious economic pressure on British manufacturers. The argument turned on an insightful analysis of the new consumer marketplace. When prospects for exporting goods to the colonies dried up, British producers would be forced to lay off workers, and as the situation in England's industrializing centers deteriorated, unemployed laborers would join the Americans in protest against unconstitutional stamp duties. An article in the *Boston Evening-Post* explained exactly how the process would operate. Everyone knew that "we have enough [people] in Great Britain to plead our case," the journal reported. Although these allies were not powerful aristocrats or members of Parliament, they represented a "*respectable body*" of the English public. And it was certain "they will appear in our behalf . . . [since] if the trifling offence of wearing a piece of French silk can raise so large a body as 100,000 Spitalfield weavers that would attack the very P——t, what will be the consequence, when a very large part of the manufacturers of Great-Britain have nothing to do?"[95] If the workers took to the streets over non-importation, imperial reform could not be far behind.

In some accounts the notion that closing off the American market would have an adverse effect on the British economy took a sharper edge. "A Son of Liberty," for example, insisted that "such a measure might distress the manufacturers and poor people in *England,* but that would be their misfortune. Charity begins at home . . . and besides, a little distress might bring the people of that country to a better temper, and a sense of their injustice toward us."[96] Assertions that a hard-pressed working class in England would aggressively come forward in defense of American rights were generally unfounded. To be sure, some groups did lobby Parliament. While petitions from manufacturers and merchants who feared that non-importation did not have as great an impact on government policy as American enthusiasts claimed, it did spark a modest outcry, just enough grumbling, in fact, to sustain a colonial fantasy that Americans really did have friends in England.[97]

Champions of non-importation laced an older, more religious rhetoric about the virtues of self-sufficiency with bold new interpretive possibilities. Americans had been raised on the belief that diligence and hard work were positive attributes; individuals who applied themselves to their callings prospered. Their economic success freed them from dependence on others. While some critics of the Stamp Act echoed these familiar arguments, urging ordinary men and women to "a disuse of all foreign superfluities, and a limitation of our desires to the real necessaries and comfortable conveniencies of life," others began to link the emergence of American manufacturing to colonial independence.[98] No one, of course, anticipated the creation of a separate republic. Rather, within communities already worried about the burdens of colonial status within a commercial empire, appeals for home industries took on a political character. This construction was surely an unintended consequence of public discussion about non-importation. The merchants wanted American consumers to flock back to the dry-goods stores as soon as Parliament repealed the stamp duties.

Whatever their intentions, however, the seeds of new meanings had been planted. "Colbert" asked readers of the *Pennsylvania Gazette* seriously to reflect "on the dependent State they must ever be in, if they do not engage in, or encourage Manufactories."[99] A person identified only as "A Friend to *this* Colony" announced in the pages of the *New-London Gazette* that the "floods of English goods [that] have been poured in upon us" revealed a far-reaching conspiracy to destroy the local economy. To add insult to injury, these imports were apparently not worth the sacrifice required to obtain them, for "if [we] examine them we shall find them poor and miserable, such as could find no buyers in Great-Britain, but they are, it seems, good enough to be sent here to cheat *this* country with." The message to second-class colonial consumers was clear. "'Tis time we begin to prefer the goods of our country to the pride and vanity of individuals."[100] Other newspapers picked up this theme. A New Hampshire journal observed, "[W]e are told that the people of a neighboring government are setting us the example, having in bodies declared against wearing or consuming any thing but what is manufactured in America." This was an idea whose time had come. After all, "we shall have little reason to continue any trade that has hitherto brought poverty and a scourge upon us." Even more significant, economic independence might be the harbinger of an even grander destiny, for, as everyone knew, "all states and empires have been raised and have flourished by their œconomy and industry; but have declined and sunk into poverty and contempt by indolence and

luxury. May it then be the business of America, to raise herself to opulence and wealth by the internal power she has of doing it."[101]

Doubts about the capacity of Americans to produce all the consumer goods that they desired—and no one really believed that homespun cloth would make a difference—persuaded some advocates of non-importation to turn weakness into strength. Drawing upon a mid-century commercial literature popular in Great Britain and upon arguments initially advanced during the general recession following the Seven Years' War, colonists assured each other during the Stamp Act crisis that the English actually needed them more than they needed the English.[102] The key element in this inspired line of reasoning was the Americans' utter dependence on British manufactures for the comforts of everyday life. Although few colonists welcomed the prospect of even a limited experiment with consumer sacrifice, they came to the conclusion that the indisputable statistical evidence of their growing indebtedness to Britain and their insatiable craving for fashionable products translated into real power within the British Empire. Indeed, their heady sense of themselves as vital agents in sustaining England's prosperity convinced colonists that repeal of the stamp duties was just a matter of time. It was in the mother country's best interest, one New Englander insisted, to guarantee that the Americans' hard-earned monies would be safe from unconstitutional taxes, for then "we should always send for as many goods as we could consume." Moreover, rising colonial imports would cement political loyalty, since "this demand for the English manufactures would increase as our numbers, and our union with, and subjection to Great-Britain would be the being of this trade."[103]

Left unspoken in this piece, of course, were the negative implications of the proposition. Others were more blatant. Writing in a Philadelphia journal, "Philoleutherus" scoffed at those who feared that commercial resistance might bring British "ships of war . . . [which would] seize and make prizes of all our vessels." To such nattering, he responded, "Those who imagine this an objection of any weight, shew great ignorance of our strength. Whatever courtiers may pretend, Great-Britain is in fact more dependent on us than we on her. . . . It is well known that by our consumption of her manufactures we maintain a large proportion of her people."[104] Even the lawyer John Dickinson appreciated the newfound powers of the colonial consumer. At the height of the Stamp Act resistance, he declared boldly, "I think it may justly be said, that THE FOUNDATIONS OF THE POWER AND GLORY OF GREAT BRITAIN ARE LAID IN AMERICA."[105] The point is not that non-importation turned people's thoughts as early as 1766 to political independence. That most certainly did not occur. But by the same token, we should consider that at moments of severe political tension writers—the sort of persons who contributed to the popular press—constructed the best case they could from the rhetorical materials at hand. And, whatever their immediate agenda, they surely made it seem almost inevitable that this colonial tail might soon wag the imperial dog.

In these several different ways non-importation encouraged colonists to reimagine their place within an empire of goods. For our purposes, however, it did a great deal more. It invited provincial consumers to think of the objects of market desire—the things in themselves—increasingly in terms of political principle. This mental link is fundamental to an understanding of how imported goods in this context became emblematic of abstract notions such as freedom. In other words, during this early phase of protest it gradually became apparent that consumer sacrifice would help Americans preserve what they defined as their basic rights and liberties. Although those who promoted non-importation focused almost exclusively on the behavior of the merchants, monitoring the willingness of these leaders to stop new orders for British goods, they began in published pieces to equate the pleasures of possession with broader, more public issues of constitutional misrule, a move that accelerated a symbolic process that would in time allow discontented Americans to conflate a perceived loss of freedom with their own participation in the consumer marketplace. As one Philadelphia essayist observed, whatever the ill effects of the Stamp Act, it had at least "awakened a whole continent, till then, going on in luxury, and sinking into a forgetfulness of their liberty."[106] In another journal "Œconomicus" warned that individual consumer purchases that spiraled into irresponsible debt threatened the common good. The stress here is on the political rather than the moral aspects of the issue. "Every person who owes more than he can certainly pay," declared the author, "is in a state of thraldom, and cannot, in speech or action, exercise the rights of a freeman. How carefully then should we, who entertain such high sentiments of the blessings of liberty, avoid every step that may involve us in debt, and thereby deprive us of this boasted liberty!"[107]

Not surprisingly, the non-importation efforts had a haphazard quality. Enforcement never matched public declarations of intent. The fact of the matter was that, despite lip service to moral reform and political fortitude, the merchants of the northern ports never found the new strategy of resistance particularly appealing. From the start of the controversy they worked to mend imperial fences, knowing full well that serious, sustained violence would only compromise accounts already strained to the limit. "A Trader" in Boston warned of the terrible consequences of a long-term boycott of British goods. "This [action]," he announced, "will involve a very great number of honest and industrious mechanics in want and misery, and their misfortune and want will spread to the next class, which is the day labourers and of great utility to the public." Unrest would spread to the mariners and finally "destroy the interest of the farmer." Soon a stand on principle in the marketplace would generate anarchy.[108]

Perhaps as a means to head off such unrest, the merchants—as a group—drew attention to their social standing as gentlemen, in other words, as representatives of the local elite who felt empowered to speak *to* and *for* ordinary Americans. It was no accident that newspaper reports during the height of

the Stamp Act protest emphasized the respectability of the members of various urban merchant committees. In an announcement typical of the period, the *New-York Mercury* noted, "We hear that most of the Gentlemen in Town, have entered into a Resolution not to buy any European Manufactures." And, as gentlemen, they were not inclined to open their books for public examination. They did, however, present themselves as models of proper behavior, as examples of integrity in a time of troubles, and if someone of lower social standing registered doubt, that person was likely to be informed that good merchants were men of good character. Lest skeptics dismiss such tautology as nonsense, popular writers counseled their readers on how to identify the bad merchant. Ostentatious living was a telltale sign. "When I enter the Doors of a Gentleman in Trade," insisted "Philo Publicus," "and observe the Decorations of the Parlour, the shining Side Boards of Plate, the costly piles of China . . . [and when I] see the Mistress of [the house] dress'd in Apparel which can be worn by none with Propriety but those who live on their Income; I say when I observe all this . . . I wonder not when I hear of frequent Bankrupts."[109] A "Plain American" informed readers in Connecticut that bad traders were those who "put on this gay Attire to allure our Countrymen to buy their Trifles." The writer, it seemed, was just warming to his task.

> The industrious, frugal, and exemplary Trader, who sends the Produce of his own Country to foreign Ones, and imports in Exchange Gold and other Things which our Soil does not produce, is a [William] PITT to his Country. But the lazy, gay, designing Fop is a Pest to our Land: By the Help of Friends he gets Credit for a Shop of Fineries, Nicknacks, and Toys; in the Folds of which he latently imports our Shackles; he opens his Shop of Rarities, puts a Quantity on his Back, struts about with his Ruffles, Silks and Satins, a large Box full of the Snuff of Deceit and Flattery to bate well meaning People.[110]

Even the "good" merchants were unenthusiastic supporters of non-importation. That they laid the foundation for a later, much broader mobilization of ordinary colonists seems counterintuitive, if not simply incredible. After all, the merchants were by the very nature of their calling suspicious of competitors, especially those based in other American ports where the arrival of British imports could not be directly monitored. Under these unpromising conditions, political cooperation at a distance was bound to be fragile, for what appeared to one group of merchants as fair market advantage was likely to strike others as betrayal of the common interest. To reduce uncertainty, the merchants did what other Americans were doing with ever increasing attentiveness. They read the newspapers. These provincial journals, which were themselves the creatures of the new eighteenth-century consumer marketplace, provided intelligence about commercial agreements negotiated in other places. They reproduced the exact wording of every resolution touching upon trade; they announced the precise number of merchants who signed pledges of non-importation. A reader in Boston, for example, could learn from a single issue of the *Evening-Post* that the merchants of New York had taken the lead in halting normal trade with Great Britain. Another section of the same paper carried news that the "merchants and traders" of Philadelphia had passed five resolutions aimed at bringing about the Stamp Act's repeal.[111] Readers in New York and Philadelphia scoured the local press for reports of merchant agreements in Boston.[112]

Doubts about enforcement persisted, of course, but the newspapers made it possible for Americans to imagine that virtual strangers were actively supporting each other in ways that would substantially intensify the commercial and political pressure on Parliament.[113] For our purposes, it is important to remember that the topic of the day was the disruption of the consumer trade; the language focused on the transit of goods. But at stake was the first, highly tentative attempt to establish networks of trust, a necessary pre-condition of effective political resistance against a powerful empire. Contemporaries fully appreciated the role of the newspapers in promoting larger solidarities. In 1766 "A Son of Liberty" writing in a Philadelphia journal declared that "the PRESS hath never done greater service since its first invention." He recognized the value of pamphlets, to be sure, but these publications hardly had the widespread impact of the newspapers. "The argumentative pieces, letters, and addresses in the News Papers," he claimed, "have had a singular use in the great and good cause."[114]

However well the newspapers served the short-term concerns of the merchant communities, they also brought the latest news of the day to ordinary Americans, most of whom were fully literate. In this way they helped open up colonial political debate, for the journals implicitly invited their readers to assess the performance of the extra-legal bodies—in this case, self-selected groups of urban merchants—that had taken on responsibility to work for the common good, however defined. The non-importation agreements drafted during the autumn of 1765 were intended to persuade the members of Parliament and the friends of American commerce in England that they had made a dreadful mistake by accepting the Stamp Act. The merchants had in effect situated themselves within an Atlantic conversation. They concentrated their effort as provincial lobbyists on a British audience that actually determined the character of imperial policy. But within the American cities another group was taking shape, one that would be known simply as the "public," and at this early stage of colonial protest it focused its attention on the merchants who claimed that non-importation was a strategy that would bring about the swift repeal of the Stamp Act.[115] It was the public who watched for evidence of cheating: perhaps spotting a shipment of English dry goods that no one had anticipated or perhaps noting a warehouse that seemed to be the center of unusual consumer activity. That was as far as it went. Nothing about the non-importation efforts could rightly be described as democratic or even, in terms of inter-colonial organization, dependent on the popular will. Nevertheless, the reluctant merchants of 1765–66 had inadvertently opened the door to wider popular participation in resistance to an empire of goods.

Advocates of non-importation soon realized that if the new strategy of resistance had any chance of success, it would have to enjoy the full support

of the women of colonial America. Perhaps no one at the time should have been surprised by this political discovery. After all, as we have seen in our discussion of mid-eighteenth-century consumer culture, women played a central part in making decisions about the purchase of British manufactures. Jan de Vries, a leading economic historian of this period, has demonstrated persuasively that families throughout western Europe and North America restructured household labor so that ordinary men and women could obtain a wide range of goods that had just appeared on the market, and as they did so "the wife [found herself] in a strategic position, located . . . at the intersection of the household's three functions: reproduction, production, and consumption."[116] In a social environment in which imported manufactures suddenly came to symbolize the burden of colonial dependence, therefore, women were inevitably thrust into the political debate. As one Pennsylvania writer explained in 1767, without the support of "the *American* Ladies"—single and married—the non-importation movement would surely fail. After all, their "approbation and assistance would give spirit to our efforts . . . for we all know how much it is in their power to retrench superfluous expenses."[117]

Whatever the political payoff, the males of colonial society do not seem to have welcomed the inclusion of their wives and daughters in the public forum. Men adopted a defensive, sulky tone in print, as if unforeseen events had forced them to issue an invitation about which they felt profoundly ambivalent. Some statements echo an earlier, religiously charged rhetoric depicting women as more likely than men to give in to temptation: Had they not insisted on purchasing crimson capes and other items of gaudy apparel, they would not now be recruits in the protest against the Stamp Act. Once people had linked consumer pleasure with colonial dependence, however, the provincial gentlemen had grudgingly to accept new voices in the public forum. "Country-women," "Philo Publicus" intoned, "will allow me to wish a general Reformation among them.—May they lay aside their Fondness for Dress and Fashions, for Trinkets and Diversions, and apply themselves to manage with Prudence the Affairs of the Family within, which their Husbands are busied in providing the Means. May none think themselves above looking into every Article of Expense,—nor exempt from performing any Part of Family Business, when properly called to it."[118]

That such frivolous Eves might tear themselves away from the joys of consumer life seemed a lot to ask, but "The Farmer" tried, employing none too subtle language in the attempt. "Tell the fair Ladies . . .," he announced, "how much more amiable they will appear in decent plain dresses made in their own country, than in the gaudy, butterfly, vain, fantastick, and expensive dresses brought from Europe, to pay for which (did they know the whole truth) their industrious parents or husbands must greatly labor and toil."[119] In New Hampshire more practical arguments apparently carried the day. "H. J." told the "Fair Sex . . . that it is high Time to lay aside all Extravagancies in Apparel." Some women had bravely accepted the challenge, for it was reported that "some even of the *delicate Madams* . . . actually have made up Cotton Shifts, of our own Manufacture which is vastly preferable in this Cold Climate, to the finest of Hollands, besides much cheaper and stronger." And surprise, surprise, "what is still a greater Inducement to them to go on, they say that their Husbands like them full as well or better in a Cotton Smock, as in a Holland one."[120]

In this defensive political climate, some men felt compelled to describe the "good" wife. She was a person who would sacrifice her pleasures for the general welfare without thereby upsetting gender relations within the household. Again, we must remember that colonial Americans would probably not have raised these issues with such force had they not selected non-importation as the preferred strategy of protest in an empire of goods. In 1767 "Atticus" explained to the readers of the *Pennsylvania Chronicle* that "the mistress" of the household should properly serve as the guardian against promiscuous consumption. Such a marvelous helpmate "has [it] much in her power, towards preventing the entrance or growth of luxury." It was a major responsibility. She oversaw "the management of the table, the furniture, and the feminine part of the apparel [which] are more particularly within her province; and, those are articles in which, in this young country, there is no small danger; besides these, her willingness to be content with moderate things, in all other instances, will often have great influence." Fortunate indeed was a man to have a wife who demonstrated such self-restraint in the face of so many consumer temptations. He would be wise to expand her area of influence within the family, pronouncing judgment "in every branch where her observations can be proper!"[121]

How American women responded to these instructions within the privacy of their own families cannot easily be determined. In public, however, they participated in much-publicized spinning meetings, where, among other things, they celebrated the domestic production of cloth. These rituals often drew large crowds, for people of all sorts seem to have enjoyed assemblies that were at once patriotic and non-violent. The social standing of the spinners seems to have been important in giving legitimacy to the event. A Boston newspaper, for example, reported that the eighteen "Daughters of Liberty" who had gathered recently in Providence, Rhode Island, were all "young Ladies of good Reputation." Not only that, they were well chaperoned. According to various New England journals, the women "assembled at the House of Doctor *Ephraim Brown* . . . in Consequence of an Invitation of that Gentleman, who hath discovered a laudable Zeal for introducing Home Manufactures." Safely situated in the doctor's house, they worked all day, from "Sunrise until Dark," and amazed everyone by their reluctance even to take a break from spinning. Readers throughout the region learned that the gracious host had "provided an elegantly plain Dinner, and other Refreshments for the fair Company; but they expended but very little Time in dining." Such industry in such a good cause inspired other women; spinning meetings became a kind of contest to discover which group could produce more cloth over the course of a day. "We hear another Meeting of these *Daughters of Liberty*, with many more, is intended to be

held at the Court House . . . ," noted the *Connecticut Courant*, "there to spin a handsome Piece of Linen."

But whatever the likes of Doctor Brown may have had in mind when they organized these gatherings, the local women "of good Reputation" sensed that the occasions provided them a measure of power in personal as well as political affairs. Before the meeting at Providence broke up for the day, the "Daughters of Liberty" unanimously resolved that "the Stamp Act was unconstitutional, [and] that they would purchase no more *British* Manufactures unless it be repealed." They also admonished the young men who no doubt were mooning around the assembly that consumer sacrifice involved more than just women. In fact, the spinners pledged that they would "not even admit the Addresses of any Gentlemen should they have Opportunity, without [unless?] they determined to oppose its [the Stamp Act's] Execution in the last Extremity, if Occasion required."[122] Out of genteel settings came amazingly radical demands. In any case, the times were changing for America's "*delicate Madams*"; at least they were for members of the middle class. In a widely circulated newspaper story, a woman who had experienced "the Spirit of Patriotism"—almost in evangelical terms—made a remarkable decision about political resistance. "A Lady of this Town [Newport, Rhode Island]," a New York journal exclaimed, "though in the Bloom of Youth, and possessed of Virtues and Accomplishments really engaging, and sufficient to excite the most pleasing Expectations of Happiness in the marriage State, has declared, that she should choose rather to be an Old Maid than that the Operation of the illegal Stamp Act should commence in these Colonies."[123]

Colonial males did not quite know what to make of charming women willing to forgo marriage and all its pleasures for the sake of political principle. From time out of mind, only men could rightly claim to be patriots, persons like the Roman hero Cincinnatus who put down the plow and gave his all to defend the common good. American women had not taken up the sword in the cause of liberty, but they were so determined to have their voices heard that some writers concluded that they too could be genuine patriots, a revision of gender stereotypes that reveals just how much the men in this traditional society needed the women to make non-importation actually work. In a curious letter entitled "An Address to the Ladies—From an Inferior," an author who adopted the name "Tabitha Strawbonnet" insisted, "Since the Days of the Romans, I have heard my Master say no so spirited and noble an Example of Patriotism, Male or Female, can be found as the Ladies in North America have shown." Strawbonnet may well have been a man, for later in the piece the writer observed—again suggesting how sexual politics and imperial politics had become confused—that the young males of Boston "love & admire you not half so much for your Beauty, and in gaudy Apparel, as for plain good Sense, Virtue, and Neatness."[124] But if this scribbler thought he was poking fun at women consumers, the Reverend Jonathan Mayhew, Boston's most respected Congregational minister, was quite serious about female patriotism. In a review of the Bay Colony's efforts to render the Stamp Act inoperative, he had special praise for the many "devout women" who were, "I imagine, so far metamorphosed into men on this sad occasion, that they would have declined hardly any kind of manly exertions, rather than live to propagate a race of slaves, or to be so themselves. In short, such was the danger, and in their opinion, so great and glorious the cause, that the spirit of Roman matrons in the time of the Commonwealth, seemed to be now equaled by the fairer daughters of America."[125]

The most tough-minded declaration of the political aspirations of colonial women during this period appeared originally in the *New-York Mercury* early in 1765. Signed "Sophia Thrifty," this piece achieved unusual persuasive power by drawing upon the real experiences of ordinary colonists. Whoever the author may have been, she rejected the kind of nervous playfulness that informed so many essays touching on the relation of the sexes. She welcomed the spread of colonial "patriotism" through "all ranks of people." And at such a critical historical moment, it genuinely annoyed her to hear Americans—presumably males—declare that women were by nature addicted to extravagance. In what kind of households did critics like this live? Had they come into contact with real women? "I can assure you," the writer continued, "that we Matrons, who are mothers and mistresses of families, and know that our husbands and sons must prosper or decline, with our flourishing or sinking country, will not hesitate a moment about resigning every thing inconsistent with the general welfare. On the contrary, we will sacrifice, cheerfully sacrifice the most darling appurtenances of the toilet on the altar of public emolument." And what was more, "Sophia Thrifty" rejected as utterly specious the argument that young women were empty-headed consumers whose only goal in life was snagging a man. If women behaved in this manner it was "not so much to please themselves, as to dazzle some of yours. While you men will be silly enough to admire a brilliant figure beyond a prudent girl, and prefer external ornament to intrinsic merit; we women will be polite enough to spread the most alluring snare." In fact, the patronizing tone of so many public statements about the inability of women to resist consumer temptation struck this writer as insulting twaddle.

> What should induce you to think, gentlemen, that those of us who are daily witnesses to the difficulty of procuring an estate, or even of providing for a large family, should be incapable of feeling for our country, for our husbands, for our offspring, amidst the impending distress universally apprehended.—You all allow us to have a good deal of spirit. Let me inform you, we have a good deal of publick spirit. We are not unconcerned spectators of the general calamity. We are not indifferent whether our native country sinks or swims. We don't set our trinkets and baubles in competition with the prosperity of North-America.

The looming imperial crisis required that for every "Cato" who stood up for colonial rights and liberty, the women of America would produce a "Cornelia."[126] In a way that no one could have predicted, a protest that organized itself around the rejection of consumer goods was encouraging some

people, some of the time, to entertain rebellious thoughts about the shape of society. And in the coming years the door that the "Daughters of Liberty" had pried open, just a little, would open further, inviting into the public forum other Americans who just happened to be consumers.

VI

The predictable question to ask about non-importation is whether it actually worked. Did the canceling of so many orders in Boston, New York, and Philadelphia force the members of Parliament to reconsider an imperial policy that took for granted their right to tax the colonists without representation? The answer is no. The trade statistics show no appreciable drop in the value of British imports shipped to American ports during this period. But it would be a mistake to claim that because the colonists still loved fashionable consumer goods—because, like Benjamin Franklin, they did not want to squeeze into old breeches that no longer fit—that the whole enterprise had been a failure. The experience had taught some valuable lessons. It had not been a good idea to place so much responsibility for enforcement on the merchant community, a group that had every interest in encouraging Atlantic commerce.

If Americans really hoped to redefine their relationship with Parliament and with an empire that seemed increasingly to insist on colonial dependence, then they had to find a means to move from non-importation agreements to broader, more inclusive forms of popular mobilization. The people had to take charge of enforcement. It was a daunting challenge, and in the days following repeal of the Stamp Act, few colonists were willing to contemplate sacrificing the manufactured goods that made life so enjoyable. When Parliament again passed taxes that the Americans deemed unconstitutional, however, they returned once more to the consumer marketplace, forging new links with distant strangers who understood, now more than ever, how thinking about goods invited ordinary men and women also to think about politics.

A celebratory artifact manufactured in England for the American market. *Teapot with lid. "Stamp Act Repeal'd." English, 1766. Cream colored earthenware, lead-glazed and hand-painted. Photograph by Mark Sexton. Courtesy of the Peabody Essex Museum, Salem, Massachusetts.*

7

Making Lists—Taking Names: The Politicization of Everyday Life

The Townshend Revenue Act of 1767, a bundle of taxes levied on imported articles such as glass, painter's colors, paper, and tea, triggered a frenzy of list making throughout colonial America. The lists themselves testify to how Parliament's tough stand on revenues brought about an extraordinary reordering of the symbolic meaning of British goods in this society. The reassessment of an older material culture had begun during the prolonged economic depression following the Seven Years' War, acquiring sharper articulation during the Stamp Act protests, but at this urgent moment the mental process rapidly accelerated, compelling colonial consumers quite literally to invent new forms of local knowledge. In this highly charged atmosphere, lists of imported manufactures that had once suggested only personal pleasures acquired overtly political possibilities.

Within a very short period of time—perhaps no more than the years from 1767 to 1771—private decisions in the consumer marketplace came to be widely reinterpreted as acts meriting close public scrutiny. As "Philo Patriae" announced in the pages of a Connecticut journal:

> Certainly, 'tis ten thousand times more eligible to enjoy freedom in this state, than to be slaves in large and well *glazed* houses, with fine cloaths, tea, wine or punch; and to have the pleasure of swallowing English beer and cheese; rustling in silks and ribbons, or glittering with jewels: all which we shall neither use nor wear any longer than our [British] masters judge they need them to *protect, defend and secure us.*[1]

Throughout America, committees and voluntary associations, many of them extra-legal groups claiming to speak in the name of the "public," constructed lists of prohibited goods as well as lists of people who purchased them; subscription lists favoring non-importation circulated door to door. Consumer polls were taken. These innovative strategies designed to gauge and enlist public support for non-importation unwittingly opened up political