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Agrarian Class Structure and Economic Development in Colonial British North America: The Place of the American Revolution in the Origins of US Capitalism

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Social and economic historians have debated whether the rapid growth of agricultural and industrial commodity production in the United States was a continuation of *or* a radical break with *the economic and social patterns of British colonial North America. At issue is whether the social and economic preconditions for capitalist industrialization existed before, or emerged only after the American Revolution and the establishment of an independent US state. The two major interpretive models – the 'staples/commercialization' and 'frontier/demographic' models – provide insights into the process of economic development in colonial North America. However, their inability to root their analyses in specificities of different forms of social labour leave them inadequate. This essay attempts to root the patterns of economic growth and development in the dynamics and transformation and preservation during the American Revolution of different social property relations (independent household production, petty-commodity production, plantation slavery) in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.*

Keywords: plantation slavery, independent household production, capitalist agriculture, colonial North America, American Revolution

INTRODUCTION

Social and economic historians have debated whether the rapid growth of agricultural and industrial commodity production in the post-independence United States was a *continuation of* or a *radical break with* the economic and social patterns of British colonial North America. At issue is whether the social and economic preconditions for capitalist industrialization existed before or emerged only after the establishment

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of an independent US state. Put another way, the debate grapples with the place of the American Revolution in US economic development. Was the revolution merely a political upheaval that had little or no impact on the dynamics of production in the US; or was the revolution a crucial turning point, at least in some regions, in US economic development? The thirteen British colonies on the eastern seaboard of North America were predominantly agrarian societies – urban centres were relatively small, and crafts and manufactures undeveloped. Thus, considerable scholarly disagreement centres on the structure and dynamics of agricultural production in the northern and southern colonies. This essay builds upon the arguments I have made in earlier work (Post 1995, 2003) to determine the impact of the American Revolution on the origins of capitalism in the US.

Those historians who argue for a continuity of pre- and post-independence economic and social development before and after the American Revolution have focused on the integration of the British mainland colonies into the expanding Atlantic economy of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Bushman (1967), Gray (1933), Grant (1961), Loehr (1952), Lemon (1967) and Schumacher (1948) have all claimed that both family-based agriculture in the northern colonies and plantation slavery in the southern colonies were forms of capitalist production: both family farmers and slave-owning planters responded to market opportunities and specialized output, accumulated land and tools, and introduced new tools and methods. More recently, 'market historians' such as Winifred Rothenberg (1992) have used new data sources and more sophisticated econometric techniques to assert that northern farmers – like their southern counterparts – were profit-maximizers who enthusiastically engaged in market production when opportunities were present.

Those who argue for a sharp economic discontinuity before and after the revolution and the establishment of the US state have emphasized the independence of most rural producers from the market place. While recognizing that plantation slavery was integrated into the world market, historians beginning with Percy Bidwell (1923) claimed that northern family farmers and the majority of non-slave-owning southern farmers were essentially subsistence producers, who provided the overwhelming majority of their needs through their own labour rather than market exchange. At best, these farmers sold surpluses to buy the handful of goods they and their neighbours could not produce themselves. In the past two decades 'social historians' such as Clark (1990), Kulikoff (1992, 2000) and Merrill (1986) have examined probate records and farmers' account books to argue for the persistence of non-commercial production and exchange in much of the northern and southern countryside through the early nineteenth century. Other historians, following Eugene Genovese (1967), have argued that plantation slavery, while thoroughly integrated into the world market, was a non-capitalist form of social labour.

Out of this debate, two synthetic interpretive models have emerged among historians of the colonial British North American economy. On the one hand, McCusker and Menard (1985) have applied the 'staples-commercialization' model to argue for the continuity of economic and social development before and after independence. On the other hand, Smith (1980, 1982) has elaborated a 'demographic-frontier' model to argue for a distinct pattern of social and economic development in colonial British North America.

The 'staples' model (McCusker and Menard 1985, Chapter 1) is rooted in Adam Smith's (1776/1937) claim that the expansion of the market leads all producers to seize new opportunities to 'truck and barter' through the specialization of output, accumulation of capital and technical innovation. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the growth of colonial exports to Britain and other parts of the burgeoning Atlantic world economy shaped agricultural production in the British mainland colonies. Growing demand for colonial cash crops – staples – in the British metropolis made colonial settlement and investment profitable, and provided the framework for market-oriented colonial rural producers to organize production.

Uneven regional development in the mainland colonies, especially the dominance of family farms in the northern colonies and slave plantations in the southern colonies, was the result of the particular characteristics of different staple crops. Farm staples like grains and livestock tended to promote the development of small-scale, relatively capital-intensive family farms with dense linkage networks to manufacturing and commerce. Plantation staples like tobacco, rice, indigo and sugar led to the development of large-scale, relatively labour-intensive plantations with few linkage networks. While responding to the growth of the Atlantic world market in different ways, dictated by different staples, both regions experienced *intensive* economic development, manifested in rising labour productivity and per capita incomes, which laid the basis for commercial and industrial development in the US during the nineteenth century.

The 'demographic-frontier' model is rooted in Malthusian population theories. According to Smith (1980), the British North American colonies experienced little *intensive* economic development despite their integration into the Atlantic world market. Output of mostly agricultural products grew together with the expansion of population and rural settlement. Put simply, the mainland British colonies experienced *extensive* growth through the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries – the multiplication of agricultural acreage and output with little or no changes in labour productivity or output per capita.

An extremely low labour to land ratio, based on the continuous reproduction of the frontier through the expropriation of Native American populations, made possible early household formation and marriage, relatively high fertility rates, and little change in per capita output through the colonial period. Migration to unoccupied lands on the frontier provided a homeostatic mechanism that allowed rapid population growth without parcellization of landholdings or growing social inequality in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Most settlers, especially family farmers, took advantage of relatively easy access to land to engage primarily in subsistence production for their households and neighbours. To meet subsistence needs, most farmers engaged in non-specialized general farming with relatively little or no change in agricultural tools or methods after initial settlement of a region. In sum, the rapid and intensive growth of agricultural and industrial production in the nineteenth century represented a sharp *discontinuity* with social and economic dynamics of the colonial period.

Both the commercialization-staples and demographic-frontier models provide insights into the development of different forms of rural social labour in British North America in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. However, neither approach adequately accounts for the actual dynamics of the rural economy of the British mainland colonies, nor explains the origins of capitalist industrialization in the nineteenth-century United States. This stems, ultimately, from the failure to root their analysis is the specificities of *social property relations* in British colonial North America, and the impact of class struggle during the American Revolution on agrarian class structure.

As Brenner (1985a) pointed out in his original critique of commercialization and demographic accounts of European economic development before the industrial revolution, both approaches *assume* 'a market/supply-demand mechanism . . . the response of the agrarian economy to economic pressures, whatever their source, is more or less taken for granted.' However,

> such attempts at economic model-building are necessarily doomed from the start precisely because, most crudely stated, it is the structure of class relations, of class power, which will determine the manner and degree to which particular demographic and commercial changes will affect long-term trends in the distribution of income and economic growth – and not vice versa. (Brenner 1985a, 11)

Agrarian class structure – the specific relations between producers and tools and land (labour process) and between producers and non-producers (class relations) – creates the 'rules of reproduction' that shape how individual producers respond to market and population fluctuations (Brenner 2007). Put simply, only by specifying social property relations can we effectively grasp the impact of either the world market or demographic trends on the dynamics of agricultural production in British North America.

To make our argument more concrete, we first examine both the commercialization-staples and demographic-frontier models in light of the actual development of different forms of rural social labour on the North American mainland in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. This historical interrogation of both models will, we hope, highlight their limited explanatory power. We then reprise our previous analysis of agrarian social property relations and economic development in British colonial North America, examining how the structures of plantation slavery in the southern colonies and independent household production in the northern colonies shaped the trajectory of these regional economies. Finally, we will examine the processes of class struggle and 'state building' during and after the American Revolution and their regionally uneven impact on agrarian class relations. This specification will allow us to analyze how the outcome of rural class conflict in the 1780s and 1790s reshaped rural class structure in the north, but preserved agrarian class relations in the south.

THE COMMERCIALIZATION-STAPLES MODEL

In their synthetic history, *The Economy of British America, 1607–1789*, McCusker and Menard (1985) employ the staples model to argue that colonial North America experienced the *intensive* development of commodity production and exchange. Initially developed to explain Canadian economic development, McCusker and Menard 'locate the origins of the staples approach in the *Wealth of Nations*' (1985, 19). Like all variants of what Brenner (1977) and Wood (1997) have called the 'Smithian-commercialization' model of social and economic development, McCusker and Menard see producers – whether slave-owning planters or family farmers – responding to market opportunities by specializing output, introducing new techniques and accumulating land and other forms of capital based on their available land, labour and capital.

The growing demand for agricultural products in Britain spurred colonial settlement in the new world, creating the Atlantic world market in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. British colonial settlers responded to these market opportunities in a context of abundant land and natural resources but scarce labour and capital. This context gave the colonists 'strong comparative advantage in the production of resource-intensive commodities, or staples, for export' (McCusker and Menard 1985, 20). Depending upon the particular characteristics of the dominant staple crops, different types of agricultural production units developed with different effects on the domestic colonial economy:

> Some staples have powerful 'spread effects' and encourage development in the domestic economy. Others do not . . . two interrelated aspects are critical in determining the extent of an export's effects: the production function, that is, the proportions of land, labour, capital, and entrepreneurial skill required to produce a staple; and the propensity of the product to create 'linkages' by inducing investment in other parts of the economy. (McCusker and Menard 1985, 23–4)

Crops such as sugar, indigo, rice and tobacco were 'plantation crops' that encouraged the development of large-scale, labour-intensive production units. The plantation crop regions – the Caribbean and the southern mainland colonies – relied heavily on different forms of legally coerced labour, either indentured servants or slaves, depending upon their relative supply and price. Plantation staples, as a rule, 'generated few forward linkages of the sort that promoted urban development':

> Tobacco did not require much processing or elaborate storage facilities, and its relatively low bulk did not encourage an extensive internal transport network. Mercantilist restrictions and a marketing system focused on Britain kept the supply of shipping and commercial services firmly in the hands of metropolitan merchants. At best, colonial merchants functioned as factors for British firms, collecting the staple and retailing imports. Slavery also inhibited growth: it limited consumer demand, encouraged plantation self-sufficiency, and

> channeled entrepreneurial energies into staple production. (McCusker and Menard 1985, 132–3)

By contrast, 'farm staples' such as wheat and other grains and livestock encouraged the development of small-scale, more capital intensive agriculture. In the northern farm staple colonies – in particular the Middle Colonies of New York, Pennsylvania and New Jersey – small farms relying primarily on family labour became the dominant agricultural unit of production. The processing and shipment of grains and other farm staples to growing markets in the Caribbean, Britain and Europe, along with the demand for labour-saving tools encouraged forward and backward linkages with urban manufacturers and merchants (McCusker and Menard 1985, Chapters 5 and 9).

While the specific characteristics of different staples induced patterns of regional unevenness between the less urbanized plantation regions (Caribbean, southern mainland colonies) and the more urbanized farm regions (New England and Middle colonies), their common integration into the expanding Atlantic world market fuelled intensive growth throughout British North America:

> Led by a growing demand for colonial exports, linked to an expanding commercial empire, protected and promoted by a strong imperial system, and endowed with an abundance of natural resources, the British colonies prospered . . . The domestic sector of the colonial economy, led by the foreign sector, organized itself to distribute imports, to produce goods for the export sector, to supply the mercantile services necessary to the movement of both, and to provide through subsistence production goods that could not be obtained on the market. These activities became more and more profitable for the colonists. (McCusker and Menard 1985, 51–2)

McCusker and Menard (1985, Chapter 3) claim that output grew more rapidly than population – that productivity of labour rose – in British North America through most of the seventeenth and eighteen centuries, producing rising per capita income. In sum, the staples-commercialization model sees a continuity of *intensive economic development* from North America's first English settlements in the seventeenth century through nineteenth-century industrialization.

While correctly locating the origins of British colonial settlement in North America in the expansion of the Atlantic world economy, historical data do not support McCusker and Menard's analysis of economic development in colonial British America. McCusker and Menard are unable to make a compelling argument for *intensive economic development* in colonial North America before the American Revolution. McCusker and Menard's claim that the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries saw rising productivity and per capital incomes rests on an extremely shaky empirical foundation. They and other 'commercialization' model historians of colonial British North America also present considerable evidence that contradicts their claim that family farmers and slave-owning planters responded to growing market opportunities as profit maximizers who specialized output, accumulated land and capital, and introduced labour-saving tools and methods.

McCusker and Menard (1985, 52–8) claim that per capita income grew consistently in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries – the most important indicator of *intensive economic development* before the American Revolution. Their discussion of per capita income growth begins with an acknowledgement that reliable data on colonial output do not exist. However, they construct 'surrogate measures of the colonial economy' (1985, 53) based on a number of questionable assumptions. First, they assume that population and output grew at the same rate, giving the colonies a much higher rate of growth (2,400 per cent) than Britain (50 per cent) between 1650 and 1770. Recognizing that this assumption cannot sustain a claim of rising per capita income and *intensive economic development*, McCusker and Menard engage in what they admit are 'little more than guesses . . . that the colonial economy must have expanded at a faster rate than the population'. Their reason is that 'productivity and the standard of living in the colonies got better during the colonial era, which argues quite forcefully for real per capita growth in the economy'. They then go on to produce data based on the assumption that per capita income in the colonies must have grown at a faster rate (0.6 per cent per annum) than in Britain (0.3 per cent per annum) between 1650 and 1770 'if only because the colonies started out so far behind' (1985, 55).

With no data to support their claims that per capita income and labour productivity actually grew, McCusker and Menard merely *assume* what needs to be *demonstrated* – a real growth in labour productivity and per capita income through specialization, accumulation and innovation. The geographic expansion of technically unchanging agricultural production to new and more fertile soils – a key feature of the economy of British North America in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries – explained the rising standards of living that the majority of white settlers (but probably not African slaves) experienced during the colonial period. McCusker and Menard are unable to provide empirical data to support their claim that the British colonial economy experienced *intensive economic development* in the form of rising labour productivity and per capita income. Instead, they rely on 'indirect indicators' of intensive economic development: the specialization of output, the introduction of new tools and methods, and the accumulation of land and capital.

McCusker and Menard and other market-commercialization historians recognize that few if any agricultural producers in colonial North America, including the southern slave-owners whose plantations were established to produce a staple crop for the world market, actually specialized in market production:

> Outside of a few areas – the sugar islands, perhaps the rice district of the Lower South, and the shadow of the major colonial cities – farm units in early British America were not fully commercialized. They did not specialize in a narrow range of crops nor did they purchase on the market most necessary goods and services. Rather, marketed crops and purchased commodities accounted for only a small part of total income and expenditure. The majority of each farm's productive resources was devoted to self-sufficient activities . . . (McCusker and Menard 1985, 297)

James Lemon, a 'market' historian of colonial southeast Pennsylvania agriculture, argues that despite their proximity to Philadelphia, the largest urban market in colonial North America, most farmers in the region 'produced a wide range of crops and livestock for home use and for sale' (1976, 151). These farmers grew wheat, rye, oats, barley, buckwheat, fruit and potatoes for household consumption; flax and hemp for household manufacture of clothing and rope; and turnips, grasses, legumes and corn to feed cows, oxen, swine and other livestock which they and their neighbours consumed (Lemon 1976, 150–76). At most, the better-off family farmers in southeastern Pennsylvania marketed no more than 40–50 per cent of their total output, well below the 60 per cent that most agrarian historians believe indicates a high degree of market dependence (Danhof 1969). While northern family farmers, especially in the mid-Atlantic region, marketed large quantities of agricultural products, they *were not dependent upon successful market competition for their economic survival*.

Nor is there any evidence of agricultural specialization in the region of British North America most integrated into the Atlantic world market – the tobacco plantations of the Chesapeake. While the majority of African slaves' labour on the plantations was devoted to producing tobacco as a market staple, slaves spent a considerable amount of their time engaged in the production of animals and crops for consumption on the plantation. On most tobacco plantations, planters organized their slaves to grow corn and raise hogs, providing most of the slaves' basic food ration. Many masters also granted garden plots to their slaves, on which they grew a variety of vegetables and root crops and raised large numbers of chickens and ducks during their 'free' time (Post 2003, 319; McCusker and Menard 1985, 127–8).

The empirical evidence on the size of landholdings also contradicts the claims of the 'commercialization' historians that North American colonial farmers accumulated increasingly larger land holdings. Increased population and the division of landholdings among all male heirs led to *the parcellization of land holdings*. The parcellization of land holdings and social differentiation among northern colonial rural households was most pronounced in New England, where initial plots distributed to proprietors (original settlers) tended to be smaller than in the mid-Atlantic colonies. Greven (1970, Parts II and III) and Lockridge (1970, Chapters 4, 5, 8) detail how partible inheritance in the context of growing populations led to a progressive subdivision of landholdings and rising land prices in older areas of settlement in two Massachusetts towns over the course of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Even the Middle Colonies, where original household landholdings were considerably larger than in New England, experienced parcellization of landholdings in the eighteenth century. In New England, landholdings were subdivided to the point where they could no longer support a rural household and land prices began to rise by the third generation. Rural households in southeastern Pennsylvania experienced the effects of land parcellization and rising land prices after four generations (Lemon 1976, 73–6, 87–92). While the availability of inexpensive land expropriated from the Native Americans short-circuited the process of parcellization and prevented demographic collapse, there is little evidence of the accumulation of capital in the form of landed property before the American Revolution.

The commercialization-staple historians also recognize that colonial North American agriculture experienced little technical innovation before the nineteenth century, citing 'the stubborn refusal of American farmers to adopt the progressive techniques of European agriculture' (McCusker and Menard 1985, 254). Agriculture in one of the most commercialized regions of British North America remained technically stagnant during the colonial period. Farmers in the hinterlands of Philadelphia used hand sickles rather than the labour-saving cradle to harvest wheat, and did not adopt the Dutch fan, which removed chaff, or other labour-saving devices. These farmers engaged in *extensive cultivation*. Inadequate and improper fertilization, primitive crop rotations schemes, and the use of light ploughs that made shallow furrows resulted in low yields per acre. The best-off farmers in southeastern Pennsylvania only adopted 'up and down husbandry' (the rotation of clover and grass with grains) and the systematic use of fertilizers – methods common in English agriculture since the mid-sixteenth century – in the 1780s (Lemon 1976, 30, 163–78).

Tobacco cultivation on the slave plantations of the Chesapeake also remained technologically stagnant through most of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. As on the sugar plantations of the Caribbean, the slaves on the tobacco plantations of the North American mainland were organized in labour processes that maximized the use of human labour. The natural characteristics of tobacco precluded the type of gang labour based on a detailed division of labour that developed on sugar and cotton plantations. Instead, slaves on tobacco plantations worked in groups of two or three and were assigned daily work quotas. Overseers would supervise the slave work groups to ensure they met their daily quotas of seasonally shifting tasks. The planting and harvesting of tobacco was done by hand, and cultivation and weeding involved the use of simple hand hoes. The resulting technical stagnation of tobacco cultivation resulted in an unchanging ratio of three acres of tobacco planted, cultivated and harvested per slave through the end of the eighteenth century. Unchanging tools and soil exhaustion, encouraged by the availability of inexpensive land expropriated from the Native Americans, made the geographic expansion of slavery – the addition of more slaves and more land in a fixed ratio – the most rational way to expand output in the slave plantation colonies of British North America (Post 2003, 314–16).

The historical realities of colonial North American agriculture directly contradict the expectations of McCusker and Menard's staples model. Ultimately, the inability of this model – like all variants of the commercialization model – to make sense of actual historical development is rooted in its *assumption* of what has to be explained. Commercialization models of economic development

> have been fundamentally circular: they have assumed the prior existence of capitalism in order to explain capitalism's distinctive drive to maximize profit, they have presupposed the existence of a universal profit-maximizing rationality. In order to explain capitalism's drive to improve labour productivity by

technical means, they have presupposed a continuous, almost natural, progress of technological improvement in the productivity of labour. (Wood 1999, 3)

With little or no evidence to support them, McCusker and Menard assume that all producers will respond to the growth of the market in the same manner – as profit-maximizers specializing output, accumulating capital and innovating technologically. Failing to distinguish market *opportunity* from market *coercion*, McCusker and Menard and other 'market' historians cannot explain why family farmers in the northern British colonies were under no *compulsion* – and slave-owning planters in the southern colonies *were unable* – to respond to the expansion of the market through specialization, accumulation and innovation. Only an analysis of the specificity of the *non-capitalist social property relations* that shaped the colonial countryside will allow us to grasp how and why agricultural producers in different regions of British North America responded to the expansion of the Atlantic market.

THE DEMOGRAPHIC-FRONTIER MODEL

Daniel Scott Smith (1980) drew upon the research of Greven (1970), Lockridge (1968, 1970) and other historians of colonial New England and mid-Atlantic agriculture to produce the demographic-frontier model of colonial economic development. Working within a Malthusian framework, Smith argues that demographic factors – most importantly the ratio of labour to land – shaped economic and social development in British North America. Colonial America had a very low labour to land ratio. The decimation of Native American populations through force and disease made large swathes of fertile land available for English settlement. Abundance of land in relationship to labour produced what Smith calls an 'economic steady-state . . . with essentially fixed techniques of production . . . and no . . . sustained increase in per capita output' (1980, 15).

The easy availability of land for white settlers encouraged early formation of households and nearly universal marriage for women, producing relatively high fertility rates in British North America through most of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The result was an approximately 3 per cent per annum population growth through natural increase rather than trans-Atlantic migration. Abundant land allowed English settlers, in both the northern and southern colonies, to engage in a technically unchanging, diversified agriculture:

> There was little, or even no economic growth in per capita terms, at least after the colonies found their economic base in the early decades of settlement. The economy grew rapidly, of course, but so did population. The principal reason for a ceiling on per-capital output or income is ironic and directly related to the Malthusian frontier man-to-land ratio: the ceiling was also a very high floor. The resource richness of the economy explains the paradox that while US per-capita economic growth rates in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries were only average compared to European rates of economic growth, the incomes of Americans were higher than those of Europeans at every date until recently. (Smith 1980, 17)

Put another way, the low ratio of labour to land after Native Americans had been 'removed' made possible the creation of a non-capitalist economy marked by extensive growth in British North America. The growth of staple production – agricultural surpluses of grains and meat in the northern farm colonies; tobacco, rice and indigo in the southern plantation colonies – was 'not an engine of economic transformation' in the colonial period (Smith 1980, 18).

As in all pre-capitalist economies, British North America experienced *some* of the Malthusian limits that resulted from growing population pressure on the land. As population grew and land holdings were divided among all surviving male heirs ('partible inheritance'), the long-settled regions of rural British North America experienced the same tendency toward the fragmentation of landholdings that marked peasant agriculture in Britain before the sixteenth century and most of continental Europe in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries (Greven 1970, Parts II and III; Lockridge 1968; Brenner 1985a, 13–18). However, there was no Malthusian 'B phase' – land parcellization reaching a point where declining yields per acre lead to demographic crises and sharp drops in population – in any region of colonial North America. The continuing expropriation of Native American land short-circuited the parcellization of landholdings, preventing declining yields and demographic collapse. Continuous migration to lands made available through 'Indian removal' acted 'as a homeostatic balancing mechanism retarding the expansion of wealth inequality':

> The most effective short-run equilibrating mechanism in the Malthusian system was out-migration from the full-settled area to the frontier. Sufficient out-migration would thus reduce inequality (in income if not wealth) by raising wages and lowering land prices in the settled region. The population would also be redistributed toward the relatively more egalitarian frontier, an environment of lower land prices and higher wages. (Smith 1980, 19)

The 'economic steady state' of extensive growth ended in the early nineteenth century. The end of intermittent warfare, which disrupted international trade between 1689 and 1815, and the development of industrial technology initiated the transition from extensive to *intensive* economic development in the US after 1800 as labour shifted 'from lower productivity agriculture to the more productive new industrial sector' (Smith 1980, 18).

The major strength of the demographic-frontier model of economic development in British North America is that it accurately *describes* the dynamics of colonial agriculture – the absence of specialization, accumulation and technical innovation. However, the demographic-frontier model fails to *analyze* the structural foundation of *extensive growth* in British North America. The physical abundance of land and other natural resources is the only causal explanation of why colonial agricultural producers were able to maintain their incomes without specializing, accumulating and innovating. Extensive growth is *assumed*, not explained, in the Malthusian framework. As a result, the demographic-frontier model cannot explain why similar demographic conditions – the low labour to land ratio – resulted in radically different forms of agricultural production before and after the American

Revolution. As Brenner points out, one of the fatal flaws of demographic explanations of economic development in pre-industrial Europe is:

> That it simply breaks down in the face of comparative analysis. Different outcomes proceeded from similar demographic trends at different times and in different areas of Europe. Thus we may ask if demographic change can be legitimately treated as a cause, let alone the key variable. (1985a, 21)

In North America, low labour to land ratios gave rise to safety-first family farming and world market-oriented plantation slavery before independence. The same demographic conditions gave rise to a very different form – commercial family farming – in the northeast by the early nineteenth century. With such diverse outcomes, we must again question the explanatory power of demographic trends.

Nor does the demographic-frontier model provide an adequate explanation of the shift from extensive growth before 1800 to intensive development after. Smith's (1980) account of the shift relies on the growth of market through the stabilization and growth of the world economy after the end of the Napoleonic Wars in 1815, and the shift of labour from agriculture to industry. Put simply, the demographic-frontier model explains the end of the 'Malthusian era' as the result of changing market conditions. Smith's analysis of the transition from extensive growth ('traditional economy') to intensive development ('modern economy') is similar to the explanations of the origins of capitalism presented by Sweezy (1976a, 1976b) and Wallerstein (1974) for Europe, and Kulikoff (1992, 2000) for the post-independence US. For these historians, expanding market opportunities lead agricultural producers to specialize output, and growing opportunities for employment in urban industry leads them to introduce new labour-saving technology.

The growth of markets and industry can only promote such a transformation of agriculture if two conditions exist. First, the producers must be dependent upon commodity production for their economic survival. Specifically, the acquisition, maintenance and expansion of landed property *relies on* successful market competition. Put another way, the market must appear as a sphere of coercion – forcing owners to specialize, accumulate and innovate. Second, owners must be able to expel labour from production in order to introduce new and more complex tools and machinery. If labourers cannot be deprived of means of subsistence, the introduction of labour-saving technology will be difficult, if not impossible. The existence of these conditions depends not on the expansion of market production or changing demographic conditions primarily, but on the existence of specific, *capitalist* social property relations. As we will see, capitalist social property relations did not shape agricultural production in either the northern or southern British colonies on mainland North America.

AGRARIAN SOCIAL PROPERTY RELATIONS IN COLONIAL BRITISH NORTH AMERICA

The development of different forms of agrarian social labour in British North America is historically paradoxical. The British colonial empire was unique among the European empires that developed in the Americas in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. As Wood argues, 'England . . . first saw the emergence of a capitalist system, and it was England that first created a form of imperialism driven by the logic of capitalism . . . it was English colonization . . . that was responding to the imperatives of capitalism' (2003, 73–4). Drawing upon Brenner's (1993, Part One) analysis of the emergence of the 'new' English merchants in the seventeenth century and their role in organizing British overseas expansion, Wood (2003, Chapters 4–5) argues that British colonialism sought to develop profitable forms of commodity production in the colonies rather than plundering precious metals, trading with Native populations or profiting from state-sanctioned mercantile monopolies as did other contemporary European colonial powers. The British pioneered 'white settler colonialism' and its genocidal wars against the Native Americans in the New World in order to establish agricultural commodity production and to provide alternative employment for the growing relative surplus population of landless former peasants at home. Despite the specifically capitalist impulse behind British colonialism in North America, however, they *were unable to reproduce agrarian capitalist social property relations in their mainland colonies that became the US.*

The key to this paradox was the inability of British merchants and landlords and their allies among local colonial elites to establish an *effective social monopoly of landed property* (Post 1995, 415–17; Wood 2003, 102–9). The British state granted legal title to large tracts of North America to settler-colonists. Once the Native Americans had been forced into the interior – through force, fraud or disease – enterprising merchants and planters were granted land in the southern colonies, religious minorities were given townships to distribute among themselves in New England, and 'proprietors' with links to British landlords and merchants were given land grants in the mid-Atlantic colonies. While land titles were granted and then sold to aspiring colonial landlords and merchants, the Imperial government and their colonial allies were unable to enforce these claims outside of limited areas near the Atlantic coast (Bidwell 1925, Chapter 5; Gray 1933 I, Chapter VXII).

Vast geographic distances and the relatively small size of the British military precluded reproducing the pattern of seventeenth-century British colonization of northern Ireland in North America – direct colonial rule and the establishment of capitalist agriculture. Regular British troops only arrived in North America in 1754 and were stationed along the frontier to fend off attacks from the French and Native Americans (Weigly 1984, Chapter 2). Britain ruled its North American possessions indirectly, relying on the domestic merchants, landowners and planters who dominated the elected colonial assemblies. While the planters, merchants and landlords sought to enforce legal claims on land in the interior, they were forced to rely on colonial militias, composed primarily of independent farmers and artisans who resisted the commodification of landed property.

While most military historians argue that the militia was effective in policing Native American populations near areas of colonial settlement, it was ineffective in either prolonged campaigns against Native Americans or other European powers, or in preventing European settler populations from illegally occupying lands on the frontier. Colonial assemblies routinely organized expeditionary forces made up of landless men, under the command of professional officers, for extended military campaigns to remove Native American populations from the frontier. However, the colonial ruling groups were ineffective in policing the free, white population. Although the militias were capable of suppressing slave revolts and conspiracies, they were rarely deployed against legally free populations. Often under the command of elected officers and composed of small farmers and artisans, colonial militias were unwilling and unable to enforce legal claims to land against other small farmers and artisans (Cress 1982, 4–11; Weigly 1984, Chapter 1).

The existence of unoccupied land in the interior, available at little or no cost other than the labour required to clear the land and begin the production of agricultural use-values, made the establishment of capitalist social property relations impossible. The existence of this frontier was the product not simply of a low labour to land ratio, but the inability of the imperial and colonial authorities to effectively exclude settlers from taking up unoccupied land without payment of market-determined prices or rents.

Plantation Slavery in the Southern Colonies

By the 1620s, English settlers in Virginia had found a profitable staple crop in tobacco, a weed the Native Americans had used for religious rituals (Gray 1933 I, 21–2; Morgan 1975, 110–15). Native Americans were quickly pushed back into the interior and the initial English settlers, often friends and relatives of London's 'new merchants', began a mad scramble to stake their claims in the midst of rising demand for tobacco in England and continental Europe:

> Land that would grow tobacco was everywhere, so abundant that people frequently did not bother at first to secure patents for the amounts they were entitled to. Instead, men rushed to stake out claims to men, stole them, lured them, fought over them – and bought and sold them, bidding up the prices to four, five, and six times the initial cost. (Morgan 1975, 114)

While tobacco would continue to be cultivated on small farms with household labour, large plantations quickly displaced smaller production units in the coastal Tidewater regions where the planters were able to establish a social monopoly on land. Tobacco exports grew over 18-fold between 1628 and 1669, from approximately 500,000 pounds to 9,026,000 pounds (Gray 1933 I, 213). The only limit on tobacco cultivation appeared to be the availability of labour for the new plantations.

With plentiful land beyond the emerging Tidewater plantation districts available for occupation at little or no cost, legally free wage labour was effectively precluded in the tobacco plantations (Domar 1970; Menard 1977; Morgan 1975, Chapter 5). Unable to enslave the Native Americans, English tobacco planters initially brought indentured servants from England and other parts of Europe to labour on their plantations in the Chesapeake and Barbados, the first sugar colony in the Caribbean (Beckles 1989, Chapters 1–3). Drawn primarily from the growing relative surplus population of displaced peasants in England and Ireland, indentured servants, for the most part, agreed to sell their capacity to work for a period of five to seven years in return for passage to the Americas. Upon arrival in Barbados or Maryland and Virginia, the planters would purchase the servants' contracts (terms of indenture) (Smith 1947, Chapters 1–10). The servants' person and capacity to labour became the property of their masters for the duration of their terms of indenture. At the end of their terms, if they survived five to seven years of strenuous labour and an inhospitable disease environment, the servants became 'freemen', collected their 'freedom dues' (small amounts of cash, work animals, tools, weapons), and moved to unsettled lands to become self-sufficient farmers in the Maryland and Virginia interior (Morgan 1975, Chapters 6–8).

The rapid shift from European servitude to African slavery in Barbados and the Chesapeake in the late seventeenth century is a subject of considerable historical controversy. Menard (1977, 2006), Galenson (1981, 1984) and Beckles (1989, Chapter 5) have developed a 'commercialization' model of the transition from servitude to slavery in British America. The growth of production of plantation staples like sugar and tobacco led to a proportional growth in demand for labour. Slowing population growth and rising wages in Great Britain, combined with growing opportunities for landownership among former servants in Virginia and Maryland, reduced the supply of labour, and drove up the price of servants after 1650. The abolition of the Royal African Company's monopoly on the African slave trade in 1698 and the growth of private slave trading by English merchants radically increased the supply of slaves. Faced with the rising price of indentured servants and the falling price of slaves, the planters in Barbados and the Chesapeake made the rational, market-based choice to substitute the less expensive slaves for the more expensive indentured servants.

Clearly, the shifting relative prices of servants and slaves that Menard, Galenson and Beckles document in Barbados and the Chesapeake in the late seventeenth century are undeniable. However, as in most variants of the commercialization model, they tend to explain the shifts in the relative supplies and prices of servants and slaves in terms of the *structurally unconstrained personal choices* and *opportunities* of the servants. Increased opportunities to work as wage labourers in Britain, and for Barbadian ex-servants to opt for transportation to the mainland colonies to become independent landowners explain the changing supply and price of servants.

A more fruitful approach would identify the class conflict in Barbados, Virginia and Maryland as the cause of the changing options and opportunities for servants and planters.[1] Bacon's Rebellion of 1676, the multi-racial revolt of servants and ex-servants against the planters' attempts to increase the number of servants and

[1] Beckles (1989, 98–114) discusses servant resistance in Barbados in the seventeenth century. There was no equivalent of Bacon's Rebellion – a full-scale rebellion that radically undermined the foundations of indentured servitude – in Barbados. However, there were numerous examples of unsuccessful conspiracies and extensive day-to-day resistance (flight from the plantations, slowing down the pace of work, stealing, arson, etc.) among the Barbadian servants. Future research is needed to determine how this resistance, over time, made indentured servitude unviable, and led the planters to opt for African slaves.

their terms of service, made reliance on indentured servitude untenable in Virginia (Morgan 1975, Book III). Faced with falling tobacco prices and growing costs of transporting tobacco to Britain as the result of the Navigation Acts which gave British merchants a monopoly on colonial trade, planters in the 1660s and 1670s sought to reduce the cost of labour in a variety of ways. Individual planters reduced food rations, heightened punishments for insubordination and extended servants' terms of indenture. Collectively the tobacco planters dominated the Virginia assembly, which imposed poll taxes on newly freed servants and granted legal title to large swathes of land on the frontier – often already occupied by former servants – to large landowners. According to Morgan,

> the servants who became free after 1660 found it increasingly difficult to locate workable land that was not already claimed. In order to set up their own households in this vast and unpeopled country, they frequently had to rent or else move to the frontiers, where they came into conflict with the Indians. Many preferred safety in the settled area even through it meant renting land from the big men who owned it . . . Perhaps more important than the actual rent obtained by Virginia's landlords was the effect of the artificial scarcity of land in keeping freedmen available for hire. If a man could not get land without paying rent for it, he might be obligated to go back to work for another man simply to stay alive. (1975, 220, 223)

Growing tensions between the planters and their servants and the armed ex-servants grew through the 1660s and 1670s. Revolts among servants broke out in 1661, 1663 and 1665, and two conspiracies involving both servants and freedmen were uncovered in 1674 (Morgan 1975, 246–7). The spark that ignited full-scale rebellion was Governor Berkeley and the colonial assembly's concluding a peace treaty with the Native Americans in 1676, effectively closing off much of the frontier to the former servants. Under the leadership of Bacon, a frustrated planter and land speculator, the armed servants and ex-servants quickly overthrew the colonial authorities. The Virginia colonial militia was composed of former servants 'who would be . . . unlikely . . . to make effective instruments for suppressing the insubordination of their own kind' (Morgan 1975, 247–8).

In the wake of Bacon's Rebellion, indentured servitude ceased to be an effective method of supplying labour for the tobacco plantations of the Chesapeake. African slaves became the alternative for the planters, not simply because of their relatively lower costs but because they entered Virginia and Maryland without social allies in either Britain or the colonies (Fields 1990). Whether or not slavery was a form of exploitation inherently superior to servitude because it gave the planters lifetime command of the labour (and progeny), as Morgan (1975, 297–300) claims and Menard (1977, 359–60) disputes, African slavery allowed planters to cement their class power through an alliance with former servants. By the late seventeenth century, the vast majority of non-slave-owning whites in the southern mainland colonies were independent farmers. Most settlers of European origin were legally free property owners and voters. Only African slaves remained unfree. For the first time in history, freedom and un-freedom corresponded to differences in physical appearance, allowing the invention of *race* as a means of justifying and explaining the unique class position of African slaves. 'Whiteness' provided the ideological cement of this alliance of slaveholders and independent farmers through the 1850s, making non-slaveholding farmers willing to defend slavery through militia service and participation in slave patrols (Morgan 1975, 15–18).[2]

Once slavery was established as the dominant form of social labour on the tobacco plantations of the Chesapeake, tobacco production expanded rapidly – growing more than tenfold from 9,026,000 pounds in 1669 to over 100,000,000 pounds each year in the 1770s (Gray 1933 I, 213–14). This rapid expansion, fuelled by continued demand in the Atlantic world market, proceeded on the basis of the *non-capitalist social property relations of plantation slavery*.[3] While capitalists purchase the *labour power*, the capacity to work, of workers for a specified period of time, masters purchase *the labourer*, the person of the worker. The purchase of labour power allows the worker to enter the capitalist production process as a *variable* element of production. The masters' purchase of the labourer converts the direct producer into 'means of production in human form'. The 'capitalization of labour' requires the slave to enter the production process as a *constant* element of production. Labourers, land and tools all appear to the planter as fixed and inflexible costs.

The slaves' position as a constant element of the production process, who must be maintained whether or not they laboured, severely restricted the masters' ability to adjust the size of their labour force through technical innovation. Having invested in means of production in human form, the masters were burdened with a relatively inflexible ratio of labour to land and tools. Put simply, the masters could not readily reduce the size of their slave labour force to adopt labour-saving technologies in the face of changing market imperatives.

The status of slaves as a form of fixed capital provided few opportunities for slave-owning planters to introduce new labour-saving technology, even when such innovation would allow planters to cut costs in response to market imperatives. The introduction of new crops or expansion to new regions provided the main opportunity for planters to break the fixed relationship between labour, land and tools through the introduction of new tools and implements. Once the new ratio of labour, land and tools had been established with a new crop or in a new region, it remained relatively unchanged. Unable to reduce the size of their slave labour force through mechanization, the planters were *compelled* to organize the plantation production process through closely supervised and coordinated cooperative work that maximized the use of human labour.

[2] Menard (2006, Chapter 6) analyzes how an alliance between planters and non-slaveholding former servants was cemented on the basis of 'whiteness' in Barbados. While the absence of unoccupied lands on the frontiers of the plantation districts precluded the emergence of a class of independent farmers in the Caribbean, non-slaveholding whites were legally free, enfranchised and became overseers and supervisors on the plantations.

[3] The following paragraphs draw upon Marx's (1976) discussion of capitalist social property relations and discussions of slave social property relations in Hindess and Hirst (1975, 125–48) and, in particular, Tomich (1990, Chapter 4) as summarized in Post (2003, 310–16).

The effects of master–slave social property relations were clearly evident in the organization of the labour process in tobacco production. As we have seen, tobacco planters in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Virginia and Maryland strove to create a coordinated labour process that maximized the use of human labour (Berlin 1998, 118–19; Gray 1933 II, 215–17, 545–6; Kulikoff 1986, 324–5, 384–6, 408–12). Tobacco plantations were organized around the task system, where the ten or more slaves on the plantation were broken into groups of two to three and assigned daily work quotas. White overseers would supervise the slave work groups in seasonal tasks.

Planters increased the volume of production and cut costs to compete successfully on the Atlantic world market by increasing the intensity and pace of work and moving production to more fertile land. The nearly universal tendency toward soil exhaustion in the plantation regions of the Americas, resulting from the availability of inexpensive land appropriated from the Native Americans, heightened the necessity of geographic expansion (Berlin 1998, 121–23; Gray 1933 I, 217–18, 233–4; Kulikoff 1986, 47–9, 63–4, 92–9, 142–61).

The master–slave social property relation also produced the near universal tendency of New World slave owners to make their plantations self-sufficient in food and other productive inputs. In order for masters to realize their investments in slaves, the slaves must be compelled to work all year round. Agriculture is not well suited to providing year round, continuous work. There are sharp discontinuities between the time human labour is required to plant, harvest and cultivate crops (labour time) and the time required for natural-biological processes to bring crops to maturity (production time) (Mann 1990, Chapter 2). The gap between production and labour time in tobacco created the need for planters to find other employment for their slaves during the staple crop's slack season. Especially 'after the crop was hung in the tobacco house', in the late fall, 'masters had to manufacture new work for their slaves if they expected them to continue to labour' (Kulikoff 1986, 412). The slaveholders were able to organize the growing of corn and the raising of hogs, allowing most of the slaves' basic food ration (ground corn and pork) to be produced directly on the plantation rather than purchased. The slaves were also granted garden plots which they tilled during their 'free' time, growing vegetables and root crops, and keeping chickens and ducks (Kulikoff 1986, 337–40, 392–93, 411–13).

While the expanding Atlantic world market powered the expansion of commodity production in southern British colonies, the *non-capitalist* structure of plantation slavery's social property relations accounts for the pattern of *extensive development* that characterized southern economic growth in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The specific master–slave relation precluded the introduction of labour-saving tools and methods in tobacco cultivation. Unable to develop the productivity of labour through the capitalization of production, slave-owning planters increased output through geographic expansion. The multiplication of slaves and land, without any substantial change in the ratio of land and labour, resulted in extensive growth in the south before independence – growing output without any change in per capita income or output.

Independent Household Production in the Northern Colonies

British settlement of the North American northern mainland began in the sixteenth century, after Native Americans were forcibly removed from the eastern seaboard.[4] To facilitate colonial settlement and commodity production, imperial authorities made land grants either to settlers creating townships (New England) or to large mercantile companies that sold land to large landowners (mid-Atlantic). Despite growing social inequality among rural households and the steady increase in the sales of grain, timber and meat to northern cities and towns and in the plantations of the Caribbean, northern farmers were *non-capitalist* independent household producers whose possession of landed property did not depend upon successful commodity production (Bidwell 1925, 49–62, 115–17, 126–33; Greven 1970; Lockridge 1970).

Northern colonial rural households' capacity to engage in independent household production (and that of most southern non-slaveholding rural households) was rooted in the inability of colonial landowners to enforce their legal claims to landed property much beyond the densely settled coastal areas. The existence of unoccupied land within easy reach of most settlers, combined with the inability of landowners to craft state institutions that could impose legal titles, made the creation of a social monopoly of land impossible in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Most settlers, often migrating with groups of co-religionists, kin or former neighbours, could not obtain legal title to the land, and illegally occupied ('squatted' on) lands owned by private owners. As long as the colonial militias – which were small and composed mostly of small farmers and artisans – could not or would not enforce the legal claims of private owners, rural households were able to establish, maintain and expand their landholdings without extensive commodity production (Henretta 1991, Chapters 3 and 7; Nobles 1989, 647–50, 654–61).

The landowners' inability to enforce legal title to land was evident in the countryside surrounding Philadelphia. From the 1690s, the Pennsylvania Assembly attempted to promote an 'orderly settlement' of southeastern Pennsylvania through the sale of large tracts of land to private landholders, who were expected to resell or lease land to actual settlers. However, none of these attempts succeeded:

> After the turn of the eighteenth century the practices of 'indiscriminate location' and squatting were widespread, and the warrant and survey system came into use. In the back country especially, settlement now preceded survey, and settlers market out their own land before applying for survey warrants . . . settlers usually sought survey warrants for their own security . . . Acquiring a deed took much longer, however, usually between five and twenty years and sometimes as long as seventy-five years. Although this delay limited the Penns' [the proprietors of the Pennsylvania colony – CP] incomes, warrants provided certainty of tenure for settlers . . . (Lemon 1976, 55)

[4] The following paragraphs draw upon Post (1995, 403–6, 415–17).

Squatters' 'claims clubs' organized land occupations to resist attempts to force settlers to either purchase land or pay rents in the 1730s, 1740s and 1750s. Colonial and private authorities – land surveyors, sheriffs, 'rangers' and 'overseers' – were unable to remove the claims clubs. In 1765, the Penn family and their allies ceased all attempts to enforce their legal title to lands in the hinterland of Philadelphia, and adopted the 'application system', which gave those occupying land legal title ('warrants') and significantly lowered the price of land (Lemon 1976, 49–61).

Brenner (1977, 73–5; 1985a, 46–63) and Friedmann (1980, 162–64, 167–8, 170–84) argue that rural household producers are only compelled to specialize output, accumulate land and capital, and innovate technically when they are compelled to 'sell to survive'. The economic survival of northern rural households – their ability to obtain, maintain and expand their possession of landed property – *was not conditioned upon the profitable sale of agricultural goods*. As we have seen in our discussion of the absence of productive specialization and technical innovation above, the absence of market-based prices or rents for land, high taxes or debts that must be paid in cash with interest allowed northern independent landowning farmers to engage in 'safety-first' agriculture where they marketed only physical surpluses. The social property relations of independent household production provided the material basis for the rural social forms the social historians (Henretta 1991; Kulikoff 2000; Merrill 1986; Clark 1990) described. The ability of rural households to reproduce their possession of landed property without recourse to commodity production shaped exchange relations with other farmers, artisans and merchants, and the importance of kinship and community to the social structure of the colonial northern countryside. Free from the compulsion to produce for the market to maintain their land ownership, northern colonial farm households were able to devote the bulk of their land and labour to production for their own consumption, providing the basis for the dense web of kinship and communal relations that structured neighbourly exchange of goods and labour among households. Households and communities, secure in their possession of landed property, could pursue safety-first agriculture – producing food, livestock and crafts for their own and their neighbours' consumptions and marketing only surpluses. Put another way, non-market access to land made possible both general farming and household manufacturing.

In the northern British colonies, independent householders' capacity to reproduce their landed property independent of commodity production exempted them from any compulsion to specialize, innovate and accumulate. However, independent household production was a form of social labour that that was neither stagnant nor without distinctive social dynamics. The long-settled regions in the north, like most of early modern Western Europe outside of England, displayed tendencies toward the parcellization of land and social differentiation of rural households (Brenner 1985a, 54–63; 1985b, 284–319). Growing population, partible inheritance (the division of the family landholdings among all male heirs), and the technical stagnation inherent in independent household production led to a division and sub-division of landholdings from one generation to another. This parcellization of landholding created some plots too small to support a rural household (Greven 1970; Lockridge 1970; Lemon 1976, 74–92).

As in pre-industrial Western Europe, land parcellization and rising land prices produced inequalities in landholdings among rural households in the long-settled northern British colonies. In many parts of New England and the middle colonies, landless populations appeared by the early to mid-eighteenth century as the worst-off rural households sold their meagre landholdings to their better-off neighbours (Bidwell 1925, 54–9; Greven 1970, Part III; Lockridge 1970, Chapters 7–8; Henretta 1991, 176–9). However, social differentiation experienced by rural producers under independent household production was quite different from that experienced under capitalist production. First, there were clear limits on social differentiation. In the 1740s, after nearly a century of continuous occupation, social inequality in one Massachusetts town was quite limited:

> The richest five percent of the townsmen were still no more than well-off farmers with a few attendant millers or innkeepers, and they owned only about fifteen percent of the property; the richest ten percent of the townsmen owned twenty-five percent [of property] . . . Born into a family with four or five children, the mythical 'average' man would marry in his middle twenties and die in his fifties. He would know little of plague and less of famine. (Lockridge 1970, 141–2)

Nor did growing social differentiation of rural households lead to consolidation of landholdings, a prerequisite for the introduction of new labour-saving tools and methods. As in pre-industrial Western Europe, large landowners' 'units of property were themselves broken into many, many parcels of cultivation, scattered through the fields, miniscule in size' (Brenner 1985b, 305).

In pre-industrial Western Europe – outside of England, which experienced the breakthrough to capitalist agriculture in the mid-sixteenth century – the parcellization of landholdings led to declining yields and periodic demographic crises (Hobsbawm 1967; Brenner 1985a, 1985b). Independent household producers in the northern colonies avoided the Malthusian cycle of population growth/parcellization of land/demographic collapse through the eighteenth century. However, it was not simply the existence of a low land to labour ratio resulting from unoccupied land that allowed northern farmers to avoid the Malthusian 'B phase', as the demographic-frontier historians claimed. Rather, it was the ability of rural householders to appropriate this land outside of commodity production – through squatting and/or at non-market determined low prices – that allowed migration to the frontier to short-circuit demographic collapse among independent producers in British North America (Greven 1970, Part III; Lockridge 1968; Lemon 1976, 85–94).

In sum, the inability of imperial and colonial landowners and merchants to forge state institutions that could enforce their legal title to landholdings any distance from the Atlantic seaboard – their inability to establish a social monopoly of landed property – allowed the development of independent household production in the northern colonial countryside. With their landholdings unaffected by the travails of market competition, northern rural households marketed physical surpluses. Under no compulsion to specialize, innovate or accumulate, independent household production in the northern colonies gave rise to *extensive economic growth* – the multiplication of technically unchanging family farms into the frontier:

> The absence of intensive development did not imply agricultural decline, a subsistence crisis, or an increase in wealth inequality. Rather the Malthusian rates of population increase and the availability of an agricultural frontier resulted in an *extensive* pattern of growth. Farms were hacked continually out of the wilderness for an ever-growing population; the result was a static multiplication of productive units rather than a process of economic development and transformation. (Henretta 1991, 170)

Put simply, the growth of output without increases in per capita income that characterized the northern colonial countryside flowed from the logic of the *non-capitalist social property relations* of independent household production.

CONCLUSION: COLONIAL ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT, THE AMERICAN REVOLUTION AND THE DEVELOPMENT OF CAPITALISM IN THE US, 1776–1861

The limits of imperial British power allowed the autonomous development of an independent economy dominated by colonial merchants and planters and short-circuited the development of specifically capitalist forms of agriculture in British North America. The American Revolution, the product of sharpening tensions between imperial and colonial ruling classes flowing from the colonies' independent economic development, established new state institutions that could effectively enforce the landowners' legal claims on lands in the interior. The result was sharpening, uneven regional development. In the north, the progressive subordination of rural household producers to market compulsion unleashed capitalist industrialization; in the south, plantation slavery remained in place, precluding capitalist development in the region.

Over the course of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the British colonies on the North American mainland developed a distinctive, non-capitalist and relatively independent economy. The close political and economic ties between the original colonial merchants and landowners and the British state and ruling class of merchants and capitalist landlords 'did not prevent the colonial economy from developing less on the strength of the British domestic market than on the growing interdependence of colonial settlements' (Wood 2003, 107). Northern farmers, while maintaining their independence from market compulsion, produced and sold large surpluses of grains and meat to the northern ports of Boston, New York and Philadelphia and to the growing sugar plantations of the Caribbean. Southern plantations, while generally self-sufficient in food, sold tobacco in the Caribbean, the northern colonies and Britain (Mayer and Fay 1977, 41–84).[5]

At the centre of the independent colonial North American economy, binding together rural independent household production and plantation slavery, was a class of colonial merchants. These merchants first emerged as junior partners of British merchants, who held a monopoly on trade and credit with Britain's colonial empire under the Navigation Acts. Colonial American merchants acted as agents of British merchants in the 'triangular trade' (Williams 1944), organizing the import of British manufactures to North America and the Caribbean, and the export of tobacco to Britain (Brenner 1993, Chapter XII; Kulikoff 1986, 122–31; Gray 1933 I, Chapter XVII). As northern independent household producers began to produce surpluses of food for sale to the growing port cities of North America and the expanding plantation economies of the Caribbean, colonial merchants organized this inter-colonial, coastal trade. Urban merchants in New York, Philadelphia and Boston gathered rural surpluses from hundreds of small traders and shopkeepers scattered across the northern countryside, consolidated them, and shipped them to other parts of colonial North America and the Caribbean (Matson 1998; Nobles 1989, 655–66; Szatmary 1980, 12–18).

The development of an independent, non-capitalist colonial economy laid the foundation for the settler colonists' bid for independence, under the leadership of the merchants:

> inevitably, the economic and political connections between colonial America and the imperial power would eventually grow weaker . . . At such a great distance, with more or less self-sufficient agriculture and with colonial markets nearer to hand, the colonies were not so easily kept within the economic orbit of the imperial power, and direct political control by the state was even harder to maintain . . . A colonial economy with a strong foundation of its own, dominated by local elites with their own distinct interests and enjoying substantial degrees of self-government, was bound sooner or later to break the imperial connection. (Wood 2003, 108)

Even before independence, colonial merchants in the north and planters in the south were able to exercise political power through elected Assemblies in all of the colonies (Mayer and Fay 1977, 53–5). British imperial attempts to impose new taxes and restrict trade, and the geographic expansion of agricultural commodity production, allowed the merchants to forge an alliance of all free people. Under the leadership of the merchant class, a coalition of slaveholding planters, independent

[5] Mayer and Fay's (1977) path-breaking essay was based on a partial translation of Mayer's 1976 dissertation, *Zu Genese des Nationalstaats in America* [The Genesis of the Nation-State in America] (Johann Wolfgang Goethe-Universitat, Frankfurt am Main, 1976); later published in 1979 as *Die Entstehung des Nationalstaats in Nordamerika* [The Emergence of the Nation State in North America] (Frankfurt: Campus). Unfortunately, neither the complete dissertation nor book has been translated into English. While Mayer's analysis shapes much of what I argue about the American Revolution and Constitutional Settlement, we differ in our characterization of northern family farming. Mayer, incorrectly in our opinion, characterizes northern colonial agriculture as capitalist.

farmers, urban artisans and wage workers, land speculators and back country traders successfully ended British colonial rule in the American Revolution.

The seven years of revolutionary war profoundly disrupted agricultural production in what became the United States in 1776. In particular, the war disrupted the relationships between northern independent farmers and merchants and speculators. State governments began to purchase food, cloth and other supplies from northern farm households at inflated prices to support the war effort. As a result, farmers began to devote more and more family labour to the production of commodities. Unable to produce the variety of goods previously manufactured in their self-sufficient communities, rural households borrowed from local storekeepers to purchase US manufactures during the war, and British manufactures after the war. These debts became particularly burdensome after the war, as newly independent northern state government raised taxes – mostly land taxes – to fund the enormous public debt accrued to finance the Revolutionary War. The combined growth of debts and taxes forced northern households to market larger and larger portions of both their subsistence and surplus output in order to maintain their landed property in the 1780s (Henretta 1991, 231–41; Kulikoff 1992, 100–51; Nobles 1989; Szatmary 1980, 19–23).

The wartime disruption of the balance between production for use and exchange, and the growing burden of debts and taxes was not sufficient to undermine independent household production. Brenner points out that similar developments during wars in France in the seventeenth century were insufficient to end peasant proprietorship:

> the growth of taxation, especially consequent upon war, meant that greater production was necessary merely to survive (thus, ironically the state which in the first instance provided the primary support for peasant proprietorship was indirectly perhaps also the major source of its disintegration) . . . It was no accident, moreover, that the greatest number of casualties [loss of land] appears to have occurred in times of war (especially the wars of religions and the Fronde) and of dearth (particularly the subsistence crises of the later seventeenth century) and to have been concentrated in the zones immediately affected by military action (for example, the Paris region and Burgundy). Yet even such long-term pressures and short-term catastrophes seem to have worked their undermining effects on peasant proprietorship relatively sporadically and slowly over the whole of France. (1985a, 60–1)

The French absolutist state's commitment to maintaining the peasantry on the land – in order to protect its independent tax base – short-circuited the impact of wartime disruption, taxation and debt on French agriculture. In the US, however, class conflicts during the post-Revolutionary period created a very different type of state – one committed to and capable of enforcing legal claims on landed property in the countryside.

The Continental Army, the standing army with professional officers that displaced the state militias, secured US independence in the early 1780s (Kohn 1975, Chapter 1). The end of the war opened a period of intense social conflict among the classes that made the American Revolution.[6] The colonial merchants and land speculators sought to create state institutions that could secure the public debt and re-establish US commercial credit in the Atlantic economy, enforce legal claims to land on the frontier and allow landowners to profit from the sale of these lands. Arrayed against the merchants and speculators were the vast majority of northern and southern independent household producers who feared a strong central state capable of imposing taxes and collecting debts, and slave-owning planters who wanted to exclude all other social classes from interfering with the master–slave relation of production.

During the first decade of independence, US state institutions embodied the inability of the merchants and land speculators to establish their political dominance. Under the Articles of Confederation, the US state was decentralized and the national Congress lacked the independent capacity to levy taxes. Not only was the Confederation incapable of securing the public debt through taxation, it was unable to maintain a peacetime standing army (Cress 1982, Chapter 2; Weigly 1984, 75–84). Their experience with regular British troops during the American Revolution deepened longstanding hostility to a standing among farmers and artisans:

> After 1763, for the first time the British government stationed several thousand soldiers in the mainland colonies, and as the agitation increased colonials focused much of their discontent on the army as the most visible, crude symbol of British authority. When redcoats suppressed tenant revolts on some of the Hudson River manors in 1766, looting and destroying property, many Americans began to see the analogy between the British army and the standing army of classical theory. (Kohn 1975, 5)

The planters successfully relied on militias made up of non-slave holding white farmers to control the slave populations, and had no interest in strengthening the central state with a standing army.

Despite attempts by the political representatives of the merchants to force Congress to maintain and expand the standing army – including an abortive military conspiracy in 1783 – the standing army was effectively disbanded after the revolutionary war (Kohn 1975, Chapters 2–4). By 1789, the US army consisted of a total of 718 men – mostly stationed on the frontier (United States Department of Commerce 1976, 1143). The tiny army was incapable of either effectively expropriating Native Americans or preventing thousands of squatters from 'pouring into the Ohio Valley, threatening to deter purchase of federal land by speculators and settlers' (Kohn 1975, 55).

Shay's Rebellion of 1786, the first revolt of northern farmers against the burdens of debts and taxes that threatened to make their possession of landed property dependent upon successful market competition, initiated a political realignment among the dominant classes in the US. As armed farmers and artisans closed down

[6] The following analysis of the class conflicts that produced the Constitutional Settlement of 1787 is drawn from Post (1983, 154–95).

courts attempting to collect debts in the fall of 1786, 'the local militia sided with Shay's Rebellion'.

> From September through January reports of the militia's unreliability flowed into the governor's office. Even the militia's successful defence of the Continental arsenal at Springfield was marred when supposedly loyal militiamen joined the ranks of the insurgents during the skirmish. Resistance to constitutional authority was by no means limited to the militia's rank and file. Militia officers discouraged their companies from taking the field, prevented the distribution of powder and supplies, and actively recruited their subordinates for service with the insurgents. (Cress 1982, 95–6)

Planters, frightened by the difficulties the Massachusetts militia had in suppressing Shay's Rebellion, joined the merchants in demanding a more centralized state. The Constitutional settlement of 1787 contained a series of concessions to planters – most importantly preventing any other social classes represented in the federal government from interfering with the master–slave relationship in the south. However, the new federal state created in 1787–1789 generated a national judiciary, a corps of tax collectors, centralized control of the state militias, and a standing army capable of enforcing the legal claims of landowners and creditors (Coakley 1988, Chapter 1; Cress 1982, Chapter 6; Weigly 1984, Chapter 5). By 1794, the regular US army had grown from 718 to 3,818 troops (United States Department of Commerce 1976, 1143) and the President had the power to mobilize rebuilt state militias.

The new state institutions allowed merchants and land speculators to defeat independent household producers in the cycle of class struggles of the 1780s and 1790s.[7] Independent farmers fought tax collectors, merchant-creditors and land speculators over the conditions of their economic survival in a series of armed confrontations across the northern countryside. Faced with a merchant class backed by a standing army, the independent farmers were defeated.

The new US ruling class demonstrated its military capacity for the first time during the Whiskey Rebellion of 1794. Western Pennsylvania farmers, who marketed their grain surpluses in the form of whiskey, organized armed resistance to the collection of the Federal Whiskey Excise of 1791. In the fall of 1794, the Washington administration declared the region to be in revolt and mobilized between 10,000 and 11,000 troops. The Pennsylvania, New Jersey, Maryland and Virginia militias supplied the troops, mostly recruited from the urban poor, who were placed under federal commanders. The revolt had all but collapsed before the arrival of the federalized militia in November 1794 (Coakley 1988, Chapters 2–3; Cress 1982, 123–9; Weigly 1984, 101–3). However, federal forces unleashed a wave of repression in Western Pennsylvania. According to an official US military history of the revolt:

[7] The following analysis of the destruction of independent household production and the emergence of petty-commodity production in the northern countryside is drawn from Post (1995, 418–34).

> Cavalry detachments conducted the rounding up of suspects, which began as scheduled in the wee hours of 13 November and continued for a day or so afterward . . . The militia contingents rounded up some 200 people, often mixing suspects and witnesses and including men who were entitled to amnesty . . . Men were routed from their beds in the middle of the night amidst threats of hanging made within hearing distance of their wives and children. Some were forced to trot in front of horses along muddy roads to the military encampments, there to be incarcerated under miserable conditions. (Coakley 1988, 61–2)

The Whiskey Rebellion demonstrated that the new federal regime was able 'to marshal the states' militias to enforce national law' (Cress 1982, 126) and 'that federal laws would be enforced and that no turbulent faction would set them aside at its whim' (Coakley 1988, 67). The federal government's use of military force 'inspired respect, even fear, and . . . established a deterrent atmosphere which could last for years, making another such costly exercise unneeded' (Kohn 1975, 139). The new regime reinforced these lessons in 1799 when a much smaller army of 500 regular troops and the Pennsylvania militia crushed Fries Rebellion against federal taxation (Coakley 1988, 69–77; Weigly 1984, 103–4).

The unintended consequence of closing off access to free or inexpensive land on the frontier, levying burdensome taxes and enforcing the payment of debt in gold or silver, was the transformation of the conditions under which farmers in the north obtained, expanded and maintained landed property. The burdens of mortgages, taxes and debts ensured that northern farmers marketed both their surplus and portions of their subsistence output. Put simply, northern US farmers became dependent upon successful market production for their economic survival – they became agrarian petty-commodity producers who had to specialize output, accumulate land and capital, and introduce new tools and methods in order to obtain, maintain and expand landed property.[8]

The subordination of northern rural household producers to market compulsion proceeded unevenly over the first four decades of the nineteenth century. Farmers in the northeast increased the time and labour they devoted to commodity production in the early 1800s. Better-off households were able to maintain and expand their landed property exclusively through farming, while poorer households combined farming and domestic manufacturing organized by merchant-capitalists in increasingly vain attempts to preserve land ownership. Elements of independent household production survived in the trans-Allegheny west through the 1830s. However, the extension of federal land auctions to the northwest raised land prices at the same time northern state governments increased property taxes, forcing northwestern farmers to specialize their output, accumulate land and capital and innovate technically in order to obtain, preserve and expand their landholdings in

[8] Additional comparative research is necessary to determine why US merchants, through the new federal state apparatus constructed after 1787, were able to impose a social monopoly on land. Similar attempts in nineteenth- and twentieth-century Africa, Asia and Latin America clearly did not produce the same results – the dominance of agrarian petty-commodity production – as in the US.

the 1840s. As rural households became dependent on the market for their economic survival, northern agriculture became a massive home market for industrially produced capital and consumer goods, sparking the US industrial revolution of the nineteenth century. In sum, the transformation of social property relations in northern agriculture led to the shift from *extensive growth to intensive development – the development of capitalism – in the US north*.

The American Revolution and Constitutional Settlement did not, however, lead to a capitalist transformation of southern agriculture.[9] The shift of many Virginia and Maryland planters from tobacco plantations to small grain farms in the face of falling tobacco prices did not bring about a 'gradual extinction' of slavery. By the early nineteenth century, slave-owning planters had successfully shifted from tobacco to cotton – the most important industrial raw material for capitalist industry in Britain. Slavery's non-capitalist social property relations remained in place, leading to technical stagnation, self-sufficiency in food stuffs and the geographic expansion of plantation slavery from the Atlantic coast to the plains of east Texas to meet the growing industrial demand for raw cotton. While the expansion of plantation slavery in the south fuelled capitalist industry in Britain and commodity production in the northern US, slavery's non-capitalist social property relations undermined the development of industry in the US south. The continuity of slave social property relations led to the *continuity of extensive growth in the US south*.

By the 1840s, the continued expansion of plantation slavery threatened the further development of capitalism in the US, which rested on the expansion of agrarian petty-commodity production (Post 1995, 434–6; 2003, 326–7). The growing contradictions between the social conditions of the development of capitalism and slavery set the stage for the sharp class conflicts that culminated in the Civil War. Sharpening conflicts between manufacturers, merchants, farmers, planters and slaves in the 1840s and 1850s over a variety of issues – but especially the class structure of western expansion – produced a political crisis: the collapse of the bi-sectional Whig and Democratic parties, the increasing sectionalization of politics, and the secession crisis that culminated in four bloody years of Civil War. The outcome of the war and nearly a dozen years of tumultuous struggles during Reconstruction ultimately secured the social and political conditions for industrial capitalist dominance in the Gilded Age (Post 1983, Part III).

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