Chapter 3

Capitalism, Colonialism, and Consumerism

The ever-increasing circulation of new commodities and the inclusion in market-exchange circuits of every sort of goods have been important components of the reflections on what it is to be modern.

(Sassatelli, 1997: 339)

3.1. INTRODUCTION

In the inaugural volume of the Contributions to Global Historical Archaeology series, Charles Orser explored the existing definitions of historical archaeology and proposed that there are four “haunts” or “historical processes that underlie all historical archaeological research”—colonialism, Eurocentrism, capitalism and modernity (Orser, 1996: 22 and 57–88). With regard to the establishment of the early Australian colonies, I agree with much of what Orser proposes, in particular the importance of colonialism and capitalism. Nevertheless, I feel that the period in question was, at least, partially “pre-modern” or at least “pre-industrial” and that Eurocentrism was, in fact, a paradigm that underpinned all of the other processes. As a result, my own concept of these historical processes, at least as they apply to my own research, is framed in terms of just three processes—capitalism, colonialism and consumerism. I see these three processes as most important and I believe that they represent the underlying framework that enabled the invasion of places such as Australia, and the establishment of settlements like the Australian colonies during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. In order to better understand these processes I believe it is necessary to focus on the food, drink and material culture that allowed these people to establish, maintain and transform their colonial communities and societies. It was the supply of a sufficient quantity, quality and variety of suitable food, drink and other consumer goods that underpinned the day-to-day lives, practices and attitudes of the capitalists, colonizers and consumers who made up the early Australian colonial populations.
The separation of the production of goods from the consumption of those goods that underlay the rise of capitalism, prompted an increased need for long-distance sea transportation and more sophisticated international trade networks (see Wolf, 1982; Said, 1993). In recent centuries European mercantile capitalism has been fundamental to the growth of systems of colonial exploitation and was fuelled by the emergence of the consumer society. In this respect, the intersection between the supply of goods through the mercantile capitalist system and the demand for goods from the consumers in the early Australian colonies can be seen as the fundamental underlying processes that enabled the successful colonization of Australia. Although this chapter considers capitalism, colonialism and consumerism as separate and distinct historical processes, this obviously represents an artificial divide for purely analytical purposes. In reality these processes were closely inter-linked within the time periods and contexts being addressed.

3.2. CAPITALISM

Capitalism as an economic, social and ideological system has come to dominate the post-modern world of the late twentieth century and the fall of communism has only accentuated this. Establishing a simple definition of capitalism is not easy nor is it possible to determine exactly when and how the so-called rise of modern European capitalism took place (Johnson, 1996: 7–10; Orser, 1996: 72–73). Nevertheless, it is clear that the modern capitalist system has dramatically changed cultural attitudes, world views, work practices and life styles, albeit at differing rates in different places.

A significant part of the ideology, and reality, of the modern capitalist system was, and still is, based on the production and consumption of material objects (see Schama, 1986; Muensterberger, 1994: 204–224). It has been argued that historical archaeology has considerable potential to contribute to our understandings of the modern, and post-modern, way of life (e.g., Leone, 1988: 235–261; McGuire, 1992: 14–17; Little, 1994: 16–23; Gibb, 1996: 1–5). Anthony Firth has asserted that one of the “critical directions” that maritime archaeology can pursue is towards “a critique of modernity, addressing the origins, dynamics and global spread of Western industrial capitalism and its associated institutions” (Firth, 1995: 4). Maritime archaeology is particularly suited to pursuing such an analysis as it was the development and expansion of long-distance shipping that allowed the movement of people and goods across the world’s oceans. Some of these ships sank and the archaeological remains in the form of shipwrecks, their cargoes and the personal belongings of the passengers and crew provide a variety of opportunities to critically examine the development of the modern world. The archaeology of immigrant and convict voyages, for example, is believed to have great potential in this respect (see Staniforth, 1991, 1993b, 1999).
3.2. Capitalism

To date, the most influential considerations of capitalism from an archaeological perspective have come from the work of historical archaeologists in the USA. Some of this work has followed the approach taken by James Deetz and classified as historical structuralism (see Deetz and Dethlefsen, 1966; Deetz, 1977, 1988, 1991). Deetz’s now classic In Small Things Forgotten (1977) and his subsequent work sought to link changes in material culture with a shift to a Georgian mind set (or the mentalité of the Annales School) that emphasized order, symmetry, segmentation and standardization (Deetz, 1977, 1988). This represents a search “to uncover the grammars for constructing senses of individuals, families and society, coded in the things of everyday life” (Paynter, 1988: 407). Others, such as Mark Leone, have developed an approach that directly links materialism, or the physicality of objects, with critical theory. This approach derives from the Frankfurt School that argues that research is never neutral and is always affected by individual and cultural biases (e.g., Leone, 1988: 235–262; Orser and Fagan, 1995: 194).

The new British colonies in North America and Australia were the terminal points for a number of supply lines representing “a complex, carefully structured, world-wide distribution network” (Jones, 1993: 25). The processes of capitalism, and the expanding British mercantile-capitalist trading system can, at one level, usefully be seen in terms of what Immanuel Wallerstein has called the Modern World System or the capitalist world-economy (e.g., Wallerstein, 1974, 1980, 1989; Champion, 1989a; Sanderson, 1995). Wallerstein’s work, or World Systems Theory, draws extensively on the work of Fernand Braudel and the Annales School (see Chapter 2), Karl Marx’s ideas on historical materialism and André Gunder Frank’s dependency theory. Wallerstein has argued that the modern capitalist world-economy had to be based on the production and exchange of bulk, or “necessary”, goods and that the trade in prestige, or luxury, goods was insufficient to establish true systemic ties. He also proposed that the capitalist world-economy consisted of three components. Firstly, core societies that were economically dominant and technologically advanced. Secondly, peripheral societies which produced raw materials and were frequently based on forced labor systems (slaves or convicts). Thirdly, semi-peripheral societies that exhibited features of both the core and the periphery and provided a link or buffer between them (see Champion, 1995b: 5–9; Sanderson and Hall, 1995: 95). World Systems Theory has been taken up by archaeologists not just in their investigations of the capitalist world-economy (post AD 1500) but also in interpreting pre-capitalist societies.

According to Wallerstein’s World Systems model, the core in this case would be Great Britain, while the peripheral and, somewhat later in the process, the semi-peripheral settlements were the colonies like British North America (Canada), South Africa and Australia (see Jeans, 1988: 57–63; Sanderson and Hall, 1995: 96–97). At one level this provides a useful way of looking at the relationship that existed between these geographically widely separate and technologically very different societies in the late eighteenth and the first half of the nineteenth
centuries. However, this also represents an oversimplification of the history and archaeology of colonization and colonial settlement, as geographically isolated settlements were the recipients of material culture not just from the core (Great Britain) but from a number of sources (Ucko, 1995: xv). This book will argue (see Chapter 5) that rather than obtaining all of its material culture from Great Britain (the core) as World Systems Theory might suggest, the early Australian colonists at Port Jackson obtained a significant portion of their necessities and luxuries from, or at least through, British merchants resident in India (principally Calcutta). It is clear that the early Australian colonies were involved very quickly in extensive trade networks with other peripheral and semi-peripheral societies which included India, South Africa, Asia, the Pacific islands and North America. In this respect, I suggest that the mercantile capitalists resident in other British colonies probably had more knowledge about and a better understanding of the needs of colonists in other colonies than the merchants resident in the metropolis.

3.3. COLONIALISM

Colonialism, colonization and the expansion of European powers into the New World, Africa and the Indo-Pacific after AD 1500 has been identified as one of the central areas of interest in historical archaeology (e.g., Dyson, 1985a: 2; Connah, 1993: 4–5; Orser, 1996: 58–66). After all, as Alison Wylie has enthusiastically proposed, “what could be more exciting than to figure out how to use archaeological data—surviving material culture—to build and test theories of core expansion/colonization into ‘new’ peripheries?” (Wylie, 1993: 7).

This book takes as one of its starting points a comment made by Stephen Dyson in 1985 that “The time seems ripe to break out of this parochialism and develop a discipline of comparative colonial archaeology” (Dyson, 1985b: 2). Charles Orser has also suggested working towards a more global historical archaeology that can, at one level, be seen as a development of the concept of a comparative historical (and colonial) archaeology (Orser, 1994b: 5–22). Orser has made the very valid point that “historical archaeology has never been without colonialism” and “historical archaeology and colonialism are inexorably linked” (Orser 1996: 58). He has also asserted that the principal area of interest of what he refers to as “colonial” archaeology could be, or indeed should be, the study of interactions between Indigenous people and colonizers (Orser 1996: 58–66) or what in Australia has been called “contact” archaeology. Orser has dismissed J.C. Harrington’s earlier definition of colonialism (Harrington, 1955) as the transplantation of “a group, or community, having a common European culture,” to “a new and unfamiliar environment” as “benign and non-controversial” (Orser, 1996: 58).

Colonialism has many victims and it is important to appreciate that colonialism also affected, changed and determined many aspects of the lives of individual
colonizers in ways that also made them victims of the processes of colonization. Certainly the utility of defining historical archaeology solely from a post-fifteenth century, Eurocentric perspective may validly be questioned (DeCorse, 1996: 40). Orser’s contact archaeology focus, however, is seen as both limited and limiting as I believe that there is considerably more to “colonial” archaeology than simply the interactions between Indigenous people and colonizers. Instead this research involves a specific focus on the processes that underpinned British colonization that allowed the transportation and supply of large numbers of people huge distances around the world.

British colonization of Australia, South Africa and the former French colonies of North America (Canada) all occurred within a period of four decades at the end of the eighteenth century (see Elphick and Giliomee, 1989; Brown, 1991; Ross, 1994). The British took over from the French in a substantial part of what is now Canada in 1763, they invaded Australia in 1788, they temporarily supplanted the Dutch in South Africa in 1795 and took permanent control in 1814 (see Fruend, 1989: 324–357; Wynn, 1991: 190–278; Burnsted, 1992: 132–164). As the *Sydney Gazette* newspaper wrote each of these new colonies was “a valuable addition to His Majesty’s dominions” (*Sydney Gazette*, 21 April 1805: 3).

The British colonization of South Africa, Australia and what became British North America (Canada) during these years saw the establishment of settlements dependent on external sources for their supply of material culture. Indeed I have already argued that the capacity of countries like Great Britain (or any other colonial power) to invade and colonize successfully the Antipodes, South Africa, or earlier the New World, was largely dependent on international trade links maintained by shipping transport. In the South African context this has been clearly recognized by Martin Hall and Ann Markell, who wrote that:

Colonies are, by definition, outliers, connected to metropolitan centers. Europe’s discovery of southern Africa was by sea, and throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries all contact was via ships ... In this situation, maritime archaeology is an important part of establishing a comprehensive archaeology of colonial settlement (Hall and Markell, 1993b: 4).

With regard to the earlier settlement of Virginia, for example, Rhys Isaac has observed “material reliance entailed also cultural and psychological dependence. With goods came tastes, standards and a whole set of assumptions about the proper ways of ordering life” (Isaac, 1982: 16). Furthermore, as James Deetz, and before him Freidrich Ratzel, have pointed out, the emigrants arriving in the New World arrived with a blueprint for re-creating the culture they had left behind (Deetz, 1977: 36). I would extend this argument by suggesting that emigrants not only brought with them in their cultural baggage a blueprint for establishing a culture. They also needed to carry with them many material goods and that in
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