

The Question of Capitalism in Pre-Confederation Quebec

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Introduction

Historians have been hard pressed to view New France (or Lower Canada) as "anything but a budding capitalist society."²⁰⁷ They have either preferred to see the colony's socio-economic structure as primarily commercial, tending to dismiss the impact of the seigneurial system, or they have characterized that structure as having been comprised of largely disconnected spheres of commerce and seigneurial agriculture, with the heart of the economy developing in the former. Moreover, those scholars who have emphasized the continuing importance of seigneurialism up to the late nineteenth century have been inclined to identify a largely "de-politicized" economy taking shape, albeit one impeded by "feudal" residues.

This article argues that the tendency to analyze colonial society in terms of capitalist development has suffered from two interrelated flaws. First, insufficient attention has been paid to the fusion of political and economic power in the colony. Whereas late eighteenth, nineteenth and early twentieth century histories focused on politics at the expense of socio-economics, subsequent historiography ? aimed at correcting the "history from above" approach ? has typically treated colonial politics and government in isolation from socio-economic relationships. As a result, both traditions have neglected the domination of colonial life by forms of "politically constituted property", which Robert Brenner defines as the power to accumulate through non-market factors, such as military coercion, state privilege and juridical authority.²⁰⁸

Second, colonial historiography has overwhelmingly equated commerce with capitalism. Commodity exchange, commercialized agriculture, the commodification of land, production for markets, the development of rational business practices and the political representation of mercantile interests have all been viewed as aspects of a larger process of capitalist development. Following Wood, I argue that capitalism is neither an outcome of increasing commercialization nor a social form realized through the opportunity to shed the strictures of feudalism in favour of market relations.²⁰⁹ The essentially economic accumulation characteristic of capitalism must, in my view, be seen as incompatible with a society like pre-Confederation (i.e., colonial) Quebec, which was organized around the transmission and maintenance of politically constituted property.

This article is not intended to be a comprehensive survey of historical writing on the colony. To properly situate historiographical currents within the changing political, economic and cultural dimensions of Quebec society over the past few centuries would

²⁰⁷ Bernier, G. and Salée, D., *The Shaping of Quebec Politics and Society* (London: Crane Russak, 1992), 9.

²⁰⁸ See "postscript" in Robert Brenner, *Merchants and Revolution* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993).

²⁰⁹ See Ellen Meiksins Wood, *The Origin of Capitalism: A Longer View* (London and New York: Verso, 2002).

certainly require a book-length treatment. What follows is a brief and unavoidably partial, though hopefully critical, sketch of some of the more salient historical depictions of an emergent colonial capitalism.

The Early Historiography of New France

Allan Greer notes that over the last 40 years scholars have been averse to the "Myth of the Fall of New France" that informed previous historiography of the colony. The "Myth" held that the colony was "fundamentally defective." It appeared as early as the 1770s, when liberal historians approached the 1763 Conquest as a clash of civilizations ? the more advanced British naturally prevailing over the backward French colony.²¹⁰ The classic expression of this view is found in the work of Francis Parkman, who depicted New France as a diseased outgrowth of France under the Ancien Régime.²¹¹ For sometime afterwards, this account remained dominant among Anglophone historians, who viewed the royal will giving free rein to an oppressive clergy and a bellicose military elite who together kept the peasantry in a state of complacency and ignorance. The chauvinism and religious bigotry that informed Parkman's explanation of the colony's shortcomings was typical of early Anglophone liberal historians. However, no less typical was the critique of the colonial economy that was inextricably wrapped up in his disdain for French Catholics and absolutism. He deplored the decrepit state of colonial agriculture and the general lack of entrepreneurialism. For Parkman, the Conquest was New France's salvation: The uprooting of the Ancien Régime would allow for the free development of commerce and liberty.

Late nineteenth and early twentieth century Francophone scholarship, inasmuch as it challenged cultural stereotypes, did not reject the underlying "clash of civilizations" approach. Francophone historians like Ferland, Rameau de Saint-Père, and most famously Lionel Groulx, praised the humble piety of the peasant, the priest's tenacious concern for his flock and the gallantry of the military officer.²¹² Whereas Anglophone historians had tended to view absolutist control of the colony as stifling and corrupt, their Francophone counterparts saw the colonial administration in terms of a favourable paternalism. They often recast the seigneurial system in sympathetic terms, arguing that the hardships and dangers of colonial life had revitalized the affective and reciprocal bond between lord and peasant that had degenerated into a relation of brutal oppression in France. For them, the fall of New France was equivalent to the victory of men who cared little for the simplicity and virtues of the colony.

Allan Greer, *The People of New France* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1997), 8-10.

See Francis Parkman, *The Old Regime in Canada* (Boston: Little Brown, 1918).

For perhaps the most representative work in this tradition, see Groulx's *Notre Maître Le Passé* (Montreal: Grauger, 1936).

The Innisian Legacy

Harold Innis' *The Fur Trade in Canada*, first published in 1930, offered an explanation of New France's decline and fall devised along the lines of political economy.²¹³ Innis essentially argued that the initial profitability of the fur trade resulted in the failure to diversify the colonial economy. Moreover, he claimed that the "monopolistic market structure" of the fur trade "had favoured centralized control within all of New France's major institutions." In his view, "government regulation, the Church, and the seigneurial system exhibited authoritarian behaviour in contrast to the competitive, decentralized political and economic activities of New England."²¹⁴ Such institutions proved too inflexible to allow for either the reinvigoration of the economy or a successful bid to lay claim to the retreating frontier once the immediate supply of furs had been exhausted. According to this interpretation, the British victory was essentially only the politico-military expression of New France's economic defeat.

Innis' "staples" approach to the history of Canadian economic development remained dominant among Anglophone economic historians for more than a generation and, of course, still has its proponents. Although Innis' work had strong parallels with earlier colonial historiography ? particularly in terms of offering a more scientific version of the "Myth of the Fall" ?, it also marked a real turning point insofar as it posited a troubled nascent capitalism instead of a corrupt Catholic absolutism as the chief explanatory model for colonial history. According to Bernier and Salée, "Innisian political economy"

[e]choes in many ways the dependency theory and unequal development literature expounded by Samir Amin, Andre Gunder Frank, and Latin scholars in the 1970s as well as Immanuel Wallerstein's world systems theory. Their general views are well known. Capitalism emerged from European conquests abroad about 400 years ago and later developed into a world economy, strongly polarized between cores and peripheries. In this context, peripheral economies such as colonies are understood to partake of the general process of capitalism on a world scale. Colonies are thus capitalist by definition, even if their dominant relations of production are of a pre- or non-capitalist nature.²¹⁵

This understanding of colonial traditionalism is most notably expounded in Donald Creighton's *Empire of the St. Lawrence*.²¹⁶ Creighton viewed New France's laggard development as the result of the displacement of French mercantile interests, which he believed to be evidenced in their failure to stage a successful bourgeois revolution.

²¹³ Harold A. Innis, *The Fur Trade in Canada* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1956).

²¹⁴ Robert Armstrong, *Structure and Change: An Economic History of Quebec* (Toronto: Gage 1984), 9.

²¹⁵ Bernier and Salée, *The Shaping of Quebec*, 9.

²¹⁶ See Donald Creighton, *The Empire of the St. Lawrence* (Toronto: Macmillan, 1956).

The Colonial Bourgeoisie

Beginning in the fifties, Quebec historians sought to critique the Innisian depiction of colonial commerce as myopic and inflexible. They also took issue with the older Francophone historians' conception of a thoroughly traditional society, demonstrating the complexity and vitality of colonial commerce and the role played by merchants in shaping governmental policy towards "modernization". It was through the work of Fregault that the notion of a colonial merchant elite gained popularity amongst historians of Francophone universities in Quebec. His influence prompted a range of studies by scholars ? such as those by Bilodeau, Gérin, Séguin, and Nish ? that explored mercantile activities. Nish, in particular, most fully expanded upon Fregault's analysis by arguing that the colony was essentially controlled by merchants, who took on the mannerisms and titles of noblemen ? *les bourgeois-gentilshommes* ? in order to blur the commercial roots of their wealth in light of the persistent snobbery of French aristocratic culture.²¹⁷ This stood in sharp contrast to earlier literature, which had typically viewed the colony's ruling elite as composed of high churchmen and lay nobles, and regarded colonial trade merely as a means of enriching the French crown and aiding in the construction of its empire. Nish's work called all of this into question by arguing that the colonial bourgeoisie had forged the economic foundation for a society in its own right and, moreover, had steered administrative policy to accommodate that foundation.

R.C. Harris' *The Seigneurial System in Early Canada: A Geographical Study*, which appeared two years prior to the publication of Nish's *Bourgeois-Gentilshommes*, proceeded on entirely different ? indeed, markedly more Innisian ? methodological lines, yet still managed to arrive at similar conclusions.²¹⁸ Whereas Nish had focused on merchants, Harris examined colonial seigneurialism. What he saw was no revived feudalism, but an ineffective facsimile of the agrarian system of the Ancien Régime. Noting the tiny population living on seventeenth-century seigneuries, the poor profits of seigneurial exaction and the perennial lure of the fur trade, Harris concluded that the agrarian element had not played a determining role in early colonial development. He perceived the acquisition of both seigneurial lands, and peasant plots within them, in most instances, as a mere front for fur-trading. Seigneurs often let dues lapse and peasants, in turn, neglected their duty to fully cultivate the soil, while both simultaneously enjoyed the advantages of land bases with the river-access that was so important for trade. Harris, like Creighton, held that it was only when French merchants began to lose their hegemonic position in the North American fur trade that colonial society resorted to the seigneurial system.

Fernand Ouellet's *Economic and Social History of Quebec 1760-1850* followed quite closely along the methodological and interpretative lines laid down by Creighton. However, unlike Creighton, he did not view the British usurpation of New France as "an

²¹⁷ See Cameron Nish, *Les Bourgeois-Gentilshommes de la Nouvelle France, 1729-1748* (Montreal: Les Éditions, 1968).

²¹⁸ See R.C. Harris, *The Seigneurial System in Early Canada: A Geographical Study* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1966).

experience arresting a nation already firmly established, although in a state of adolescence, in its growth towards maturity."²¹⁹ Ouellet explained the colony's political turbulence and laggard economic development as the result of conflict between the combined French professional and petty bourgeoisies and the predominantly British capitalist bourgeoisie. Ouellet saw the rebellions that occurred during the period from 1837 to 1838 as constituting a failed bourgeois revolution, wherein nationalist divisions placed professionals in a position in which they had to oppose capitalism in order gain popular support, while the urban petty bourgeoisie opposed their own marginalization implicit in a capitalist victory.

The issue of bourgeois revolution has been a touchstone of debate amongst historians. Colin Coates observes that it has been imperative for some scholars to demonstrate that Lower Canada experienced a bourgeois revolution in order to be able to argue that the colony was progressing along normal lines.²²⁰ Others have rejected the view that the indigenous bourgeoisie failed to mature as a result of British imperialism. Others still, echoing Parkman, have insisted that the British conquest made a bourgeois revolution unnecessary. For example, Roberta Hamilton claims that "the English Conquest of Quebec was just the second capitalist takeover in history."²²¹ However, as Coates points out, this interpretation cannot withstand scrutiny. The British governors preferred "the political stability offered by collaborating French-Canadian churchmen and nobles over the quick profits of the British traders...the wrong bourgeoisie in any case."²²²

Similarly, the hypothesis that the French merchants would have become full-blown capitalists if left to their own devices flatly ignores the fact that the incoming British merchants continued to function as businessmen in the manner of their predecessors until the late nineteenth century.²²³ In the 1970s, Tom Naylor contended that "Canada's economic history in the nineteenth century was simply the history of the consolidation and continuous redeployment of circulation and exchange in a manner detrimental and antithetical to the creation of industrial or productive activity."²²⁴ Naylor's thesis was sharply criticized for being simplistic and for casting too wide a net. Yet, the case of Quebec does not stray very far from Naylor's portrait. Granted, citing the end of the First World War as the demise of the preponderance of merchant capital is at least a generation off the mark. However, it remains the case that the British colonial merchants (i.e., pre-Confederation merchants), like their earlier French counterparts, remained focused

²¹⁹ See Fernand Ouellet, *Economic and Social History of Quebec 1760-1850* (Toronto: Gage, 1980), 1.

²²⁰ Colin M. Coates, "The Rebellions of 1837-38, and Other Bourgeois Revolutions in Quebec Historiography," *International Journal of Canadian Studies*, 29 (Fall, 1999): 19-34.

²²¹ Roberta Hamilton, "Feudal Society and Colonization: A Critique of the Historiography of New France," in *Canadian Papers in Rural History*, Vol. IV, ed. D.H. Atkinson (Gananoque: Langdale Press, 1988), 115, quoted *ibid.*, 23.

²²² Coates, "The Rebellions of 1837-8," 23.

²²³ Ouellet, *Economic and Social History of Quebec*, 14-22.

²²⁴ Bernier and Salée, *The Shaping of Quebec*, 31. See Naylor's "The Rise and Fall of the Third Commercial Empire of the Saint Lawrence," in *Capitalism and the National Question in Canada*, ed. G. Teeple (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1972), 3-40.

whether this was an exclusive focus is a matter to be taken up shortly? on circulation and exchange.

Another angle in the debate has been to interpret the 1837-8 Rebellions as comprising an attempted bourgeois revolution. I have already noted Ouellet's analysis? itself similar to Stanley Ryerson's well-known formula, which characterized 1837-38 as "une révolution bourgeoise sans bourgeoisie."²²⁵ Ryerson's account rested on the observation that the men involved in the Rebellions were could not be construed as big capitalists. Bernier and Salée have shown that the only evidence that even comes close to suggesting that the rebels were pursuing capitalistic objectives comes from propaganda issued by certain rebel leaders who called for the end of the seigneurial system. However, only a minor proportion of the insurgents were interested in dismantling seigneurialism. The majority preferred a reformist approach intent on curbing oppressive treatment of the peasantry.²²⁶ For the majority, the seigneurial system was perceived as an integral part of national culture that ought to be preserved against the colonial government. Moreover, many conservative rebel leaders, such as Papineau, were seigneurs themselves.

While Coates is sceptical of claims that capitalistic interests were congealing in the colony in the above-mentioned eras, he is willing to concede that there may be something in the idea that the relative calm in the decades following the suppression of the rebellions, when the most radical elements amongst both aristocratic and rebel factions had been quieted, "served to hasten the spread of capitalistic practices in Quebec."²²⁷ While Coates does not view the mid-century as the point at which capitalism embraced the majority of the population,²²⁸ he is convinced that some form of capitalism was in place by this time. However, Coates does neither specify what these practices entailed for the people they concerned. Indeed, there are indications that the activities of colonial businessmen, artisans and landowners had not shifted towards capitalistic practices by the mid-nineteenth century.

Extra-Economic Accumulation in the French Era

Weighing analyses which emphasize the emergence of some form of capitalism in the wake of the Conquest is complicated by the tendency of many colonial historians to assume that capitalism was well under way during the French regime. As I have pointed out, the colony's very existence is sometimes taken as sufficient evidence of this. Others have concentrated on the commercial dimensions of colonial life neglected by early historiography and perceived a "budding capitalism" in the mercantile sector. While there are many grounds for disputing such claims, the most effective point of departure is to argue that there is not a shred of historical evidence prior to the late nineteenth century that indicates that a purely economic form of exploitation was taking hold in the colony.

Stanley Ryerson, "Luttes de classes et conflits nationaux", in *Les rebellions de 1837-1838: Les épiques du Bas-Canada dans la mémoire collective et chez les historiens*, ed. Jean-Paul Bernard (Montreal, Boreal Express, 1983), 257. Quoted in Coates, "The Rebellions of 1837-8," 24.

Bernier and Salée, *The Shaping of Quebec*, 129-152.

Coates, "The Rebellions of 1837-8," 25.

Ibid.

Instead, the persistence of extra-economic power dominated town and country, trade and agriculture.

With regards to the pre-Conquest, this is difficult to prove, mainly because the tax/office structure of the Ancien Régime did not make the trans-Atlantic voyage. Colonial office was not venal²²⁹ and the peasants paid no taxes (though *corvée* labour was imposed upon them) to the state. These facts have provided ammunition to those historians who have argued that New France had broken away from the "corrupt" ways of the homeland. However, the reasons for the absence of the absolutist tax/office structure are quite mundane. Taxation, which made office lucrative in France, did not exist in the colony. There was not a sizeable enough surplus to support it, as colonial administrators explained time and time again in their correspondences. Tithes and seigneurial dues were all that could be reasonably pumped out of colonial peasants, and the absence of taxes was used as a rather ineffective incentive to attract settlement. Moreover, officers in the colony were often either career politicians seeking to prove themselves to the Crown or noblemen running from creditors and humiliation in France.²³⁰ Thus, there was no compelling reason to venalize the offices that these men filled.

That said, the absence of large incomes associated with good venal offices in France did not mean that colonial administrators did not use their authority for legitimate gain. Such, as J.F. Boshier points out, has been the extremely short-sighted conclusion of many historians who, though "aware that the royal administration was not like our own of the twentieth century," have nevertheless

contented themselves with elementary studies of its structure and with dark hints about the decadence of the Ancien Régime (as in Fregault's writings) or brave declarations about the virtues and benefits of the regime (as in Eccles's works). Most writers have only assumed, without investigating, that there was a public domain clearly separable from the ordinary realms of private life, a set of public officials clearly separable from private citizens, state function as distinct from private activities, and public finances clearly marked off from private wealth. There is, nevertheless, considerable evidence for a broad no-man's land between the two spheres, that of the royal state and that of the rest of society. In other words, there is evidence that state officials, finances, property, and functions were confused with private ones.²³¹

This analysis of colonial trade and governance comes close to identifying the colony's extra-economic foundation. However, Boshier does not go quite far enough, insofar as the "no man's land" to which he refers presupposes an incomplete phase of the characteristically capitalist disintegration of political and economic power. To regard the intertwining of public and private spheres in the colony as a form of confusion is to

²²⁹ Louise Dechêne, *Habitants and Merchants in Seventeenth-Century Montreal* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1992), 209.

²³⁰ For details on the early officials, see W.J. Eccles, *Canada Under Louis XIV 1663-1701* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1963).

²³¹ J.F. Boshier, "Government and Private Interests in New France," *Canadian Public Administration/Administration Publique du Canada*, X, No. 2 (1967): 246.

regard the dominant forms of accumulation, which remained rooted in extra-economic coercion.

Colonial expressions of extra-economic coercion are abundant. That the colony's top administrators controlled the fur, fish and lumber trades for their own profit may have bred envious contemporaries, but it never elicited charges of fraudulent activity, save in the most egregious abuses of the crown's finances. In the absence of a tax system based on appropriation of the agrarian surplus, it was expected that the colony's officials would profit from their administrative functions. The colony's governing cadre determined the numbers and recipients of fur-trading licenses, attached levies on furs delivered to trading entrepôts and those leaving ports, and retained fines collected from illegal participation. As nobles they were also given free shipping on all royal naval vessels. Moreover, their authority not only led to direct revenues, but also to myriad reciprocations deriving from patronage? it was not without reason that so much jockeying accompanied changes in administrative personnel. Dale Miquelon has astutely made the somewhat exaggerated claim that "whatever the fur trade had been, it certainly had not been a business." The same must be said for the fish and timber trades.²³² Officials reaped exceptional profits in this area not only by using the same tactics employed in administering the fur trade, but also as a result of their positions as seigneurs: Since all officials were seigneurs under the French regime, they all held rights of *banalité* over lumber and fish harvested from their lands, giving them a monopoly over production. They also controlled the trade in supplies to the civilian populace, which proved extremely lucrative in light of the colony's inability to produce all that it needed. The provision of military supplies proved valuable as well, as officers could easily profit by skimming on rations and selling what remained.

Not all of the colony's businessmen held administrative functions. However, those who were not dabbling in commerce as a sideline did not constitute a very significant or powerful group. Minutely charting the fortunes of mercantile interests in seventeenth-century Montreal, Louise Dechêne found that during the seventeenth century, prosperity in the absence of office invariably required that merchants align themselves to the capricious power of officialdom or else wind up left out in the cold.²³³ The merchants' continuing dependence on patronage is confirmed by Boshier's examination of the linkages between commerce, family ties and the structures of state power for the period from 1713 to 1763.²³⁴

An Autonomous Economy

It is not surprising that the majority of scholars who first became aware of the colonial bourgeoisie overlooked or attributed insufficient importance to the extra-economic underpinnings of the greatest accumulations of wealth in New France. After all, they had to get on by assuming that New France was an emerging capitalist society. It was this assumption that led them to either dismiss the seigneurial system as largely ornamental or

Dale Miquelon, *The First Canada: To 1791* (Toronto: McGraw-Hill Ryerson, 1994), 99. Quoted in Coates, "The Rebellions of 1837-8," 26.

Louise Dechêne, *Habitants and Merchants*, 90-125.

J.F. Boshier, *The Canada Merchants, 1713-1763* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987).

to claim that it became important only when the fortunes of the bourgeoisie were in decline.

Dechêne stands out as the most remarkable exception. Her seminal 1973 book, *Habitants et Marchands*, was the first inquiry into the activities of seventeenth-century merchants, lords and peasants that did not rely heavily on anecdotal evidence and did not presume that commerce could be simply equated with capitalism.²³⁵ In Dechêne's estimation, the merchants under the French regime were not full-blown capitalists. Instead, she characterized them as specialized commercial agents engaged in profit-taking by arbitrage. Essentially, they made money because non-economic factors enabled them to exploit price differentials between distant markets.

Dechêne's account revealed that the seigneurs were neither impoverished adventurers itching to abandon lordship at the first chance to trade in furs nor "feudal anachronisms" impeding market relations. She demonstrated how their dominance was not incompatible with the practice of agriculture and commerce, and that they, in fact, dominated both by virtue of their position atop the social hierarchy. That many seigneurs were town-dwellers? a fact often thought to be indicative of their bourgeois character? was neither out of keeping with the lifestyles of the nobility in France nor did it necessarily make them "absentee" landlords: All of the urbanized centres in the colony were seigneuries or comprised several seigneurial estates. According to Dechêne, the meagre gains the colonial nobility realized during the first century or so of the seigneurial system cannot be explained by assuming that lordship was a mere front for fur-trading or by assuming that the seigneurs were inept estate managers. Success of the seigneurial system would have to wait for the initial clearance of the land and the demographic expansion that occurred in the following century.²³⁶

Finally, Dechêne's exploration proved that the peasants were not the freewheeling entrepreneurial "frontiers-people" depicted by Harris. The habitants were "non-marketized" agriculturalists working to meet their subsistence and their feudal obligations, and, whenever possible, trying to obtain some extra acreage for their progeny. From time to time, peasants did engage in fur-trading, often illegally. However, they did so not as a means of breaking out of their subordination to the seigneurs, but in order to supplement the poor returns from the soil during the clearance phase, to purchase necessary implements and to acquire extra parcels of land. Their occasional commercial endeavours were entirely consonant with those of peasants in France, who always required a certain degree of market participation in order to meet their obligations to their lords, to add to their properties and to appropriately celebrate the milestones of birth and marriage.²³⁷

Despite Dechêne's clear-sightedness, her interpretation was, nevertheless, highly problematic. In her view, the colonial "economy" had an autonomous existence. It

²³⁵ This was the original French version, fully titled *Habitants et Marchands de Montréal au XVII^e Siècle* (Paris: Plon, 1973).

²³⁶ This success is well-attested to by Alan Greer's close examination of seigneuries in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. See Allan Greer, *Peasant, Lord, and Merchant: Rural Society in Three Quebec Parishes, 1740-1840* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1985).

²³⁷ See Georges Duby, *France in the Middle Ages 987-1460* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991), 41-117.

involved according to its own rhythms, and the manner in which it interacted with the rest of the system was neither pre-ordained nor pointedly dictated by the authorities."²³⁸ Here, Dechêne was eschewing one of the conventional interpretations of colonial failure? namely, the view that colonial government stifled the growth of commerce. In so doing, she was not neglecting the fact that the authorities dominated all "economic" activities in the colony by virtue of their authority. Instead, she argued that the authorities' indisputable power had no direct bearing on the *underlying conditions* of commercial development. These conditions, in her view, were dependent "on the number of men and on their labour,"²³⁹ and were cemented by the absence of "long-term inducements to entice merchant capital to the land,"²⁴⁰ insulating agricultural production from the market economy. Dechêne rejected the possibility that commerce and agriculture took shape in ways entirely fitting with the self-reproduction of the dominant class who wielded extra-economic power, thereby begging the question of capitalist development itself. Her hypothesis that New France would have become genuinely capitalist if sufficiently linked with a powerful and large market, ultimately perceived the market as an opportunity rather than a compulsion, with would-be capitalists and proletarians frustrated chiefly by their isolation. Even at the point when the countryside was offering up "armies of proletarians"? a result of demographic growth, not dispossession? isolation from the world market meant "colonial capital" was, nevertheless, "hopeless at utilizing them."²⁴¹

Thus, while seemingly informed by the development of capitalism in England, where the peasantry was proletarianized, Dechêne's reasoning only superficially recognized that the process of capitalist development in England must be understood as a transformation of property relations? whereby agriculturalists became subject to market imperatives? and, thus, class relations. Ellen Meiksins Wood argues that this occurred on account of the need for owners and producers to reproduce themselves as such within a context in which accumulation had been more or less divorced from? though by no means at odds with? the wielding of political power.²⁴² It did not occur through integration into a flourishing world market.

Thus, Dechêne's understanding of the "market as opportunity" led her to a conclusion remarkably similar to that of Harris, who, ironically, appeared to be one of her chief opponents. Dechêne rejected Harris' view that over-participation in the fur trade had led to agricultural stagnancy. For Harris, the whole system of seigneurial agriculture amounted to little more than a disguise for fur trading. Dechêne correctly recognized that agriculture was both self-reproducing and the main context of colonial life, whereas fur trading was a highly localized, often temporary and relatively minor undertaking. Nevertheless, Dechêne, like Harris, looked upon seigneurial agriculture as lacking sufficient market integration. Harris believed that the paucity of nucleated villages, which might have bridged the gap between commerce and agriculture, owed everything to the

Dechêne, *Habitants and Merchants*, 280.

Ibid., 125.

Ibid., 281.

Ibid., 282.

See Ellen Meiksins Wood, "From Opportunity to Imperative: The History of the Market," *Monthly Review* 46, no. 3 (1994): 14-40.

draw of the fur trade and the necessity of river access for trade ? hence the straggled settlement pattern along the St. Lawrence. Dechêne regarded the failure to urbanize as a straightforward result of under-population and isolation from the world market. Thus, Dechêne's interpretation only mark a significant departure from Creighton's view of the preponderance of "merchant capital" in terms of emphasis, it was otherwise identical in its assumption that a link between rural production and urban trade would have yielded capitalism.

The Persistence of Extra-Economic Accumulation

The appearance of British mercantile interests upon the demise of the French regime did not result in either a radically new approach to profit-making or the political ascendance of the merchants. Like the French merchants, they too were largely dependent upon political offices and connections. In fact, they were even more institutionalized than the French as a result of the way in which Britain managed its colonies.

In the early French period, it was typical for only two or three ships to visit the colony in a year, delivering small quantities of finished goods and armaments, as well as picking up furs and timber. Even by the close of the French era, these numbers only increased slightly. Neither production nor consumption reached high levels, with the population amounted to no more than 20,000, even by 1700.²⁴³ This highlights the fact that French society did not contain the same dynamics as those found in Britain. The consolidation of capitalist property relations in Britain had caused dispossessed peasants and vast numbers of criminals ? who comprised the bulk of immigrants ? to flow into the British American colonies. In the mid-seventeenth century, France, unlike Britain, was not well into the throes of an industrial revolution, which demanded immense supplies of raw materials. Thus, French colonial policy was not dictated by the imperative of providing either enormous quantities of raw materials for domestic production or a foreign market for the consumption of goods produced in France. "[T]he whole British colonial geared towards the development of manufactures in England and the establishment of new markets for the distribution of manufactured goods. Manufacturing activities in the colonies were discouraged so as not to compete with British manufactures."²⁴⁴ This suited the merchants, who were concerned that "unless the colonies were encouraged to devote themselves exclusively to the production of agricultural produce and other raw materials, they would undoubtedly turn their attention to manufacturing before long, and attempt to pass laws for its protection from outside competition."²⁴⁵ This attitude towards production is very important in terms of the question of capitalist development, since there is a long and broad tradition which holds that capitalist relations of production emerge first among merchant-manufacturers who transform artisanal workshops into the sources of extraction

²⁴³ This stands in contrast to the British American colonies, which had a population of 209,000 by 1692 and grew to over 450,000 within 30 years. See Armstrong, *Structure and Change*, 16.

²⁴⁴ Bernier and Salée, *The Shaping of Quebec*, 32.

²⁴⁵ Adam Shortt, "General Economic History, 1763-1841," in *Canada and its Provinces*, A. Shortt and A.G. Doughty, eds. (Toronto and Glasgow: Brook and Co., 1914), quoted in *ibid.*, 39.

for surplus labour power. Supposing that this is the typical path to capitalist development, it is quite clear that the British colonial merchants were not on this path.

The colonial system "gave rise in Lower Canada to a class of merchants who benefited handsomely from the colonial nexus and privileged relationships with the British business milieu."²⁴⁶ The holding of office, which merchants were often able to achieve, was still the surest route to commercial success in that officials could secure the choicest contracts and consolidate stable ties with purchasers and suppliers in both government and the private sphere in Britain. Officials and those under their patronage obtained preferential shipping rates, easy access to credit, could often buy stock below market prices, and were in a prime position to evade duties and excises. "Their views and interests often held sway in matters of economic policy." Moreover, their political authority, though by no means supreme, gave them "easy access to public funds, which they used for the improvement or construction of roads and canals, the lifeline of their economic enterprises."²⁴⁷

However, the increasing political clout of the most prominent merchants cannot be explained as the exclusive result of their commercial activities. Indeed, Bernier and Salée demonstrate that the wielding of political power in the colony rested largely on landownership and that the merchants were the greatest acquirers of land during the British period. This has often been interpreted as a sign of the introduction of capitalism into the Lower Canadian countryside. Yet, what is significant here is that the political institutions and culture nourished by the British did not differ greatly from the aristocratic late structure of the colony under French control. Indeed, the "[t]he participation of a fraction of the commercial class in the exercise of power rested," to a great extent, "on the acquisition of land" and "[l]andownership significantly determined which position one could hold within the various state structures."²⁴⁸ This could be interpreted as a sign that bourgeois power was, at this point, still conditioned by social forces not wholly aligned with its capitalistic interests ? in other words, that the bourgeoisie were having to sink their hard-won commercial profits into sustaining the trappings of aristocratic life in order to gain political representation. Yet, this view overlooks "the extent of the patronage and corruption that influenced land distribution."²⁴⁹ The most important merchants in the colony used political connections and authority to accumulate land, often at little or no cost:

During this period, many members of the Executive and Legislative Councils, judges, and civil servants benefited from the generosity of governors, whose decisions were sanctioned by the imperial government, and were granted thousands of acres of newly surveyed land....Following the unrest of 1837-38...105 individuals or families had acquired 1,405,000 acres of land through dubious means. That is an average of 13,376 acres per individual or family, in addition to seigneurial property.²⁵⁰

Bernier and Salée, *The Shaping of Quebec*, 34.

Ibid.

Ibid., 79

Ibid.

Ibid., 79-80.

It would be a mistake to think that the aristocratic character of the British colonial state was such that polity and economy were altogether fused therein, especially as we trace the controversies, upheavals and attempts at reform that occurred throughout the nineteenth century. The dominance of the landowners was the main focus of political dispute and the networks of corruption and patronage were often admonished as illegal or unfair. Perhaps Boshier's conception of a "no-man's land" between public office and private wealth is a better description. However, it would be imprudent to infer from the increasing awareness that public power should not have been used for private gain that a particularly capitalistic mentality was germinating. The Revolutionaries of 1789 were fuelled by much of the same disdain for corruption. Yet, as the revisionists have shown, liberal or democratic ideologies are never a certified sign of capitalist development.²⁵¹

The non-capitalist nature of the British merchants is further suggested by the way in which their businesses continued to profit through exploiting both price differentials and residual or identical structures of extra-economic power. Essentially, they proceeded in the manner of their predecessors. Indeed, they took over the "economic infrastructure" of the fur trade "left behind by the French."²⁵² Like French merchants, they profited considerably from the timber trade by securing preferential purchasing agreements with the metropolitan navy, which was in constant need of wood for shipbuilding and, moreover, sought to nurture dependent relations amongst the colonists.²⁵³ Their other main endeavours included grain-trading and "the importation of British manufactured goods and staples from other British colonies (tea, coffee, molasses, and spirits)."²⁵⁴ The merchants' political activities demonstrated the extent to which they were orientated toward the exigencies of trade rather than production:

Their main concern was the growth and enhancement of the commercial network they had come to depend on ? the commercial empire of the St. Lawrence. Animated by a true mercantilist spirit, they constantly pressed for advantageous tariff policies...that would guarantee preferential treatment within the Empire and protect them against American competition.²⁵⁵

Alan Greer observes that in so doing the merchants "reinforced the existing exploitation and economic backwardness rather than challenging the dominion of the aristocrats."²⁵⁶ Demand, instead of inflating in a manner consistent with the inability of producers in capitalist societies to directly recreate their material existence, "was rather inelastic," since it was determined largely by the limited needs and means of peasant households.²⁵⁷ The vagaries of agricultural production notwithstanding, productive

²⁵¹ The classic revisionist theory of the Revolution is Alfred Cobban's *The Social Interpretation of the French Revolution* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

²⁵² *Ibid.*, 34.

²⁵³ Ouellet, *Economic and Social History*, 17.

²⁵⁴ Bernier and Salée, *The Shaping of Quebec*, 34.

²⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁵⁶ Greer, *Peasant, Lord, and Merchant*, p.xiii; to appreciate the continuity of practice between French and British regimes, see Dechêne, *Habitants and Merchants*, 100.

²⁵⁷ Greer, *Peasant, Lord, and Merchant*, 156.

outputs were similarly inelastic and, in any case, the quantities of merchant purchases were conditioned by their preferred contracts with British business. Hence, commercial success was ultimately dependent on the predictability of outputs and demand, and tariffs were the key political means of maintaining a stability that was precisely not based on free market competition.

Brodie argues that it was largely as a result of the collapse of preferred status within the Empire ? the watershed being the repeal of the British Corn Laws in 1846 ? and the subsequent disintegration of reciprocity agreements with the US, that the business elites of Upper and Lower Canada sought Confederation. According to Brodie, the political amalgamation of the British North American colonies provided a solution ? in the form of a domestic market protected by high tariff walls ? to the crises that had befallen the colonial business elite in the absence of privileged trading relations.²⁵⁸ Thus, as late as the 1860s, the "mercantilist spirit" was holding fast and having deep repercussions. Moreover, this spirit, at least for Lower Canadian businessmen, was imbued with a marked aversion to investment in manufacture.

The evidence of the extent of manufacturing production confirms the inherently commercial orientation of Lower Canadian businessmen. "In most cases," observe Bernier and Salée, "manufacturing production was not tied to any major financial or commercial network."²⁵⁹ Even by the mid-nineteenth century, manufacturing still tended towards very small-scale workshops, employing traditional production techniques that were not suggestive of a capitalist transformation of production. "The [1851-52] census noted that only 37 manufacturing units out of a total of 2,455 establishments hired more than 25 employees."²⁶⁰ These modest workshops were operated under legal strictures that made it virtually impossible for most workers to dispose at will of their own labour power or to try to obtain the highest price for it" ? a situation wholly inconsistent with capitalist wage labour. Many of these workshops (mills, bakeries, tanneries, etc.) were actually located on seigneurial lands, and the workers viewed by some historians as early proletarians were actually peasant labourers fulfilling corvée obligations and repaying debts on seigneurial dues. Even if some reorganization in some sectors of manufacturing was visible by the 1840s ? a phenomenon which must be connected to capitalist development only if one assumes that non-capitalist societies are quite incapable of technical advancement and planning ?, it must be emphasized is that the traditional and established merchant class played no role in such development. Greer sums up the situation fairly well: "Confined for the most part within the 'sphere of circulation' where goods are not made but only exchanged, traders acted as parasitic intermediaries between productive systems over which they exercised little control."²⁶¹

As noted above, the mercantilist character of the colonial "economy" has itself, in some accounts, been held to blame for laggard capitalist development. But this necessarily requires viewing "merchant capitalism" as a transitory phase on the path to capitalist

²⁵⁸ Janine Brodie, *The Political Economy of Canadian Regionalism* (Toronto: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1990), 85-97.

²⁵⁹ Bernier and Salée, *The Shaping of Quebec*, 37.

²⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

²⁶¹ Greer, *Peasant, Lord, and Merchant*, 175.

development ? a path that a society can apparently become stuck in for centuries. An appreciation of the British merchants' ongoing and, in some sense, heightened reliance on extra-economic power should at least suggest the teleological underpinnings of such views. In other words, there is no reason to suppose that the colonial merchants under the French or the British regime were conducting their affairs in any laggard or stymied fashion when the way in which merchants function in non-capitalist societies is taken into account.

Seigneurialism and the Infeudation of Freehold under the British Regime²⁶²

Nowhere is the notion of an emergent capitalism during the colonial period more sharply called into question than by the approach to landowning and land-management under British rule. The British governing elite had no easy time convincing the King's new French subjects of the advantages of land held in "free and common soccage" ? in other words, as property without seigneurial rights or burdens, but with a more complete ownership, theoretically at least, entailing full rights of alienation. Perhaps more importantly, they had a hard time convincing *themselves* of the benefits of freehold. The significance of this cannot be understated, since the theory that capitalism develops first amidst agricultural social relations rather than within the interstices of urban commerce and industry suggests that non-capitalist property forms would quickly dissolve in a society imbued with a capitalist logic.

The 1791 Constitution Act ordered that all new land grants outside of the seigneurial regions were to carry full property rights. In fact, only a small portion of the overall geographic area was granted on such terms, most of it in the Eastern Townships, near Montreal. Land acquirors, the majority of whom were "bourgeois" merchants, professionals and bureaucrats, did not exhibit a preference for freehold grants. For example, they gobbled up "90.7 percent of the seigneuries available on the real estate market" between 1782 and 1840, when undeveloped land was basically available for a song.²⁶³ Those lands that were granted under "free and common soccage" were not turned or subdivided into capitalist farms. In the overwhelming majority of cases, they remained undeveloped ? a fact that provoked a welter of complaints from the burgeoning peasant population. Grantees preferred to speculate on their land's future worth in light of expected immigration. In so doing, they barred peasant families from renting or purchasing small plots, leading to many peasants fleeing to the US in search of land and employment. Nevertheless, the fact that the landless peasantry were not absorbed into a process of proletarianization within the colony has not discouraged historians from seeing the commodification of both seigneurial and freehold land as a turning point on the road to capitalist development. Yet, the colonial authorities did not see things in this way. In response to these monopolistic practices and the consequent drain on colonial labour, the colonial government began, as early as the 1790s, experimenting with a series of land-granting schemes that offered generous, indeed massive, parcels of land to those who

²⁶² As the bulk of the information in this section is derived from Bernier and Salee, 1992, only direct quotes from them will be cited.

²⁶³ Bernier and Salée, *The Shaping of Quebec*, 42.

could demonstrate their means, provided that they actually encouraged settlement and provided infrastructure to settlers. In some instances, grantees neglected their obligations outright, often hiring workers to throw up makeshift cabins to avoid the suspicion of speculation. In other instances, the powers granted to and cultivated by those who actually attempted to settle and develop the land resulted in the grantees becoming *de facto* seigneurs:

The land management practices of Philemon Wright under the leader and associates system offers a case in point. Wright was the leader of a group established in the township of Hull on the banks of the Ottawa River. As a leader he was responsible for expenses incurred with respect to the infrastructure of the township (e.g., roads, bridges, mills, etc.) Six years after the grant, he had spent \$20,000 to that end. By way of compensation, each of his associates had retroceded to Wright 1000 acres of their original grant of 1200 acres. In this fashion, Wright came to own most of the land along the river shore... Farmers had to buy all of their seeds from him. Lumber and cereals were transformed in his mills. He built various facilities, such as a tannery, a tailor shop, bakeries, a shoe-making shop, and an ironworks. Townsfolk had little choice but to buy from him. He reserved for himself a monopoly of all trade and exploitation of timber in the region. His company, P. Wright and Sons, employed 58 percent of the township's active population, owned 56 percent of cultivated lands, 49 percent of pastures, 66 percent of livestock, and fed 36 percent of the township's population.... His economic hegemony was also upheld by his socio-political pre-eminence in local juridical and administrative structures: In turn or simultaneously, he held various positions such as justice of the peace, land officer, commissioner of internal communications for the county of York, and captain in the militia.²⁶⁴

Other strategies aimed at encouraging freehold were attempted. The 1825 Canada tenure Act made provisions for the conversion of seigneurial estates into freeholds. However, there were very few takers. Those that did opt for conversion did not seek the conversion of whole seigneuries. In any case, the government's commitment to transforming the seigneuries was somewhat doubtful, since it simultaneously allowed five large freeholds to be converted to into seigneuries.

This suggests that neither the colonial authorities nor the populace were opposed to seigneurialism on the grounds that it impeded *capitalism*. The political debates surrounding seigneurial tenure that took place in the early nineteenth century appear to confirm this. Seigneurial tenures were opposed on the grounds that they both prohibited land speculation and impeded *commercial expansion*.

Brian Young's work on the Sulpician seigneuries, which included the Island of Montreal, contends that the city's ecclesiastical seigneurs found themselves in the enviable position of being held responsible for blocking industrial capitalist development by the early nineteenth century.²⁶⁵ Protest was spearheaded by a group of businessmen wishing to set up mills and other manufactories at strategic sites on the seigneurial lands. Opposition grew to the point at which the Sulpicians were forced to convert lands into freeholds for these so-called capitalists.

²⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 53.

²⁶⁵ Brian Young, *In Its Corporate Capacity: The Seminary of Montreal As a Business Institution, 1616-1876* (Kingston and Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1986).

However, Young's account of embryonic industrial capitalism fails to take into consideration the types of enterprises that the Montreal businessmen sought to pursue. In fact, these enterprises were not incompatible with the peasant economy: Breweries, sugar refineries, tanneries and gristmills were all designed to profit by supplementing goods that could not be produced in peasant households. Furthermore, most of them were specifically intended to compete with production facilities that the seignery already operated according to the most advanced techniques available. Thus, what was at issue was not the feudal hindrance to capitalist development, but the prerogative to profit by the disposable income of the seignery's peasants. The Montreal businessmen were not in any way eager to see the seignerial privileges outside of the city dismantled. What troubled them, as Young's research demonstrates, is that seignerial rights monopolized manufacturing production and allowed for the extraction of fees upon alienation and improvement of lands, since the entrepreneurs were all technically the tenants of the seignery. The watershed dispute, according to Young, occurred in 1816, when a seignerial tenant erected an illegal gristmill. The problem, from the Sulpician perspective, was that their peasants were processing grain at this mill and, thereby, avoiding the fees attached to the banal rights. The compromise eventually worked out in the form of the 1840 Ordinance allowed for tenants who could pay the commutation fees to erect manufactures at a limited number of locales, while the seigneurs strengthened their privileges over the vast majority who could not afford commutation. The Ordinance abruptly ended the resistance to the payment of seignerial dues. All *censitaires* ? rural and urban ? were forced to pay their overdue seignerial debts and, unless they commuted their lands into freehold tenure, to pay promptly ongoing seignerial levies. The renewed corporate status of the seminary enabled it to enforce fixed payment dates, to begin the levy of legal interest rates on overdue debts, and to exact its seignerial property rights with the full force of the law.²⁶⁶

Young does not view the enhancement of seignerial exaction in 1840 as problematic in terms of the alleged development of capitalism in Montreal. Young sees the need to compromise as evidence of the futility of standing in the way of industrial capitalism. In addition, Young interprets the fact that seigneurs began collecting interest on unpaid dues, with the backing of the state, as the emergence of capitalistic business practice. Yet, there is no reason to see the payment of interest as particularly capitalistic, particularly since rates were not established according to market fluctuations, but reflected yearly rates of seignerial exaction.²⁶⁷ Moreover, the seignery pursued payment on the basis of a measure of a tenant's "responsibility"; those perceived as hard-working and committed to their dues, received lower rates, could pay on hospitable installment plans or had debts diminished outright.²⁶⁸ Furthermore, the state's role in backing seignerial exactions, once identified as such, is not a very convincing sign of "capitalization".

More broadly, Young's portrait of industrial capitalism neglects the colony's unique settlement pattern. Medieval French towns were likewise usually under seignerial control, but in France seignerialism had developed *after* the revitalization of towns in the

²⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 74.

²⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 75

²⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 26; 72-81.

Carolingian period. Often it was the bishops and counts themselves who directed much of the manufacturing and commerce in the towns ? activity that was central to their wealth and power ? and the consolidation of their seignerial rights over towns did not generally come into conflict with the expansion of commerce and industry that attended that consolidation.²⁶⁹ New France had necessarily been founded as a series of rural seigneuries. Thus the nineteenth-century demographic and commercial expansion of the colony posed considerable problems of accommodation, particularly within urbanizing areas ? a matter that must be taken into account when evaluating the government's attempts to promote freehold. The Sulpicians' case was especially troubling, because the maintenance of their non-labouring religious order depended mainly on seignerial exploitation. The Sulpician seigneurs were torn between attempting to run the city of Montreal along the lines of a rural estate and trying to find ways to permit the growth of commerce and manufacturing on lands under seignerial obligation. Thus, on the one hand, they believed that loosening their grip on the city through limited commutation would lead to a prosperity that they favoured on moral grounds. Yet, on the other hand, they were concerned that allowing excessive commutation would both undermine the revenues that they depended on and weaken their moral and political authority in the city. The compromise ensured that the peasants would be tied more firmly to seignerial control, while allowing for the further enrichment of wealthy tenants (and the supplementary employment of poor tenants): the level of commutation fees were established in inverse proportion to the size of the property in question.

Whereas the predominantly British entrepreneurs of Montreal opposed the competition inherent in seignerial tenure, other British inhabitants of the colony actually came out in favour of seignerialism, as freehold was perceived to be "ill-adapted to the traditions and economic conditions of the colony."²⁷⁰ Some British potentates opposed seignerialism in principal, while continuing to operate their lands as seigneuries ? the principals at stake being both the obstruction of commercial expansion (in the cities) and the moral issues surrounding the abuse of the peasantry. Peasant petitions in this era generally reveal the hope of reforming the seignerial system both by forcing speculating seigneurs to grant unused land and by curbing their capacity to arbitrarily alter peasant-owned obligations. Only some of them sought to abolish the seignerial system outright. This, in any case, cannot be explained by any desire on the part of the peasantry to begin acting like capitalists or proletarians: What they desired was the eradication of burdens that were generally more onerous than those experienced by the peasantry of France.

Some historians have contended that we must look within the rural seigneuries to see capitalist production taking shape, or at least within those seigneuries acquired by merchants. Noël's research on the Christie seigneuries is a good example of this reasoning, which derives from observations of the increasingly commercial orientation of agriculture and the proliferation of centres of petty commodity production on the

²⁶⁹ See Georges Duby's *The Early Growth of the European Economy: Warriors and Peasants from the Seventh to the Twelfth Century* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1974).

²⁷⁰ Bernier and Salée, *The Shaping of Quebec*, 42.

seigneuries.²⁷¹ There can be no doubt that "[s]eigneurs who also doubled as merchants understood their seigneuries as profit-drive enterprises and operated them as such," or that "[v]illages in the seigneurial area experienced considerable expansion as sites of rural manufacture."²⁷² However, several aspects of this growth in commercial agriculture and petty manufacture needs to be illuminated. First, much of the commercial orientation of seigneuries occurred through the strengthening of seigneurial control. The timber trade is a case in point: Seigneurs exploited their *banal* monopolies on woodlands to turn a commercial profit. Many of the other sites of manufacture also fell within the jurisdiction of the *banalités*, including bakeries, gristmills and tanneries. That production at these sites was geared towards the market does nothing to diminish the fact that it was upheld by non-capitalist forms of politico-economic control. Second, the "market" was largely made up of the peasants on the seigneurial lands. For the peasants, the erection of gristmills and bakeries, for example, meant that they not only had to grind their wheat in the seigneur's mill at a cost, but that they could not bake their own bread and instead had to purchase it from the seigneur's ovens. Third, though wages were typically used to remunerate labourers, the vast majority of labourers were seigneurial peasants working to pay off debts owed to the seigneurs ? hardly a sign of characteristically free capitalist wage labour.

Finally, the commercialization of agriculture ought never be confused with the capitalization of agriculture. For example, most agricultural output in medieval Europe was bound for markets. In some instances, as noted above, it was marketed by peasants themselves for entirely "feudal" reasons. In other cases ? most conspicuously in the enserfment of Eastern Europe in the late middle ages ? lords extracted labour services and payments in kind and sold yields at a profit. Lords east of the Elbe amassed massive quantities of grain through such extraction and sold it to Dutch merchants, establishing one of the most important commercial networks in the medieval period. This too was commercialized agriculture, whether it was a function of lords' inability to consume rents in kind or the products of forced labour, or peasants' inability to obtain needed cash. One cannot assume that commercialized agriculture in Lower Canada differed in character or function from that of medieval Europe simply because of a late historical date.

Nevertheless, dates are otherwise telling: The seigneurial system was not technically abolished until 1854, eleven years after a Legislative Assembly report "lifted the veil on the numerous complaints of the censitaires against abuses of seigneurial rights and privileges."²⁷³ Until the system was legally prohibited, seigneurialism "would be a major area of public debate...one that implicitly raised the issue of equality and of the social balance of power."²⁷⁴ However, the way in which power imbalances were adjusted was primarily legal rather than economic. "Ex-seigneurs" were heavily compensated for the loss of their incomes: "The sum total of the amount of the annual value of all seigneurial rights constituted the price the censitaire had to pay to have the absolute ownership of his

²⁷¹ Françoise Noël, *The Christie Seigneuries: Estate Management and Settlement in the Upper Richelieu Valley, 1760-1854* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1992).

²⁷² *Ibid.*, 43, 48.

²⁷³ *Ibid.*, 142.

²⁷⁴ *Ibid.*

land and be freed from all his obligations toward the seigneur."²⁷⁵ Given that seigneurial dues in most areas siphoned approximately half of a peasant's annual income, it typically took years for peasants to pay off their debts, during which time they were still practically subordinate to their seigneurs. Indeed, the situation was so serious that the Canadian government cancelled peasant debt in 1935, at which time there were still 60,000 people in arrears.

Conclusion

An agreed upon "moment" at which capitalism can be said to have truly taken root in Quebec as the dominant form of social and material reproduction may never be forthcoming. Nonetheless, this paper has argued that any reasonable estimate must take into account the fact that both commercial and agricultural forms of extra-economic power dominated life in the former New France, until at least the mid-nineteenth century. The purely economic exploitation characteristic of capitalism was not a determinant force under either the British or the French colonial regime.

In other words, there was nothing compelling any of the "economic" actors present to boost productivity in order to survive in a competitive arena in rents and prices in basic commodities.²⁷⁶ Rents and commodity prices were still not market determined, with the vast majority of the population living on subsistence agriculture within either seigneurial or *de facto* seigneurial systems. Commerce hinged largely upon the political framework of colonialism by supplying both European markets with raw materials and the colonial market with manufactured goods, rather than providing basic commodities to a labouring class detached from the means of production. The fraction of the population engaged in manufacturing worked within the confines of an artisanal system, which was marked by master-servant or seigneurial relations. All of this is completely consonant with non-capitalist social forms in which accumulation is largely dependent upon non-market factors.

With some notable exceptions, which I have relied upon here, the historiography of New France/ Lower Canada has paid insufficient attention to these non-market factors which, following Brenner, I have referred to as "politically constituted property". Historians have tended to both treat commerce as the solvent of all forms of pre-capitalist social and economic organization and to view capitalism, understood as a process of commercialization, as the realization of opportunity. Such uncritical and unhistorical thinking has informed a variety of theories that have sought to explain the colony's laggard development.

Following Wood, I have argued that capitalism must be understood as neither the result of any "critical mass" reached in commercial development nor as a social form manifested through opportunism. On the contrary, commerce and commercialized agriculture must be appreciated as trans-historical phenomena that have always been compatible with systems of extra-economic coercion like seigneurialism. Consequently,

²⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 143.

²⁷⁶ On the systematic nature of productivity gains under capitalism, see Wood, *The Origin of Capitalism*.

the notion that specifically capitalist market compulsion could not have left unscathed the basic conditions of aristocratic dominance, peasant subordination and politically-upheld commerce that underlay colonial society until Confederation must be seriously reconsidered.

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MediaThink

Megan Dombrowski

James Winter. *Mediathink*. (Montreal: Black Rose Books, 2002). 232 pp, index. ISBN 1-55164-055-4 (hardcover), 1-55164-054-6 (paper).

Following in the tradition of George Orwell and Noam Chomsky, James Winter's *MediaThink* exposes the substantive lack of critical analysis inherent in the production of corporate news and media content. This lacuna is more than just a quantitative insufficiency of analysis that many contemporary media critics identify. According to Winter, there is a "discernable and consistent framework of bias" which lies behind the construction of news content and the direction in which it tries to lead the public.²⁷⁷ Implicated in this construction are media owners, managers and reporters, all of whom interpret and represent the world through a process which Winter terms "MediaThink".

Winter's concept of MediaThink, which stems from George Orwell's "orthodoxy" and Antonio Gramsci's "common sense", refers to the way in which reporters uphold an orthodox vision of the world by failing to challenge or provide diverse perspectives to the mainstream, corporate version of issues and events.²⁷⁸ According to Winter, reporters adhere to orthodoxy by approaching issues through a process of self-censorship and a "black and white" simplification of issues.²⁷⁹ They attack those who challenge an orthodox interpretation and use a number of other tactics – such as reliance on favourite spokespersons, distortion of academic research, the neglect of context, and faulty polling – to advance their distinct and deliberate agenda.

To illustrate the ways in which corporate media orthodoxy functions and affects the public's understanding of events, Winter looks at case studies from Canada's major newspapers and television news shows. It is at this point, after an initial introductory chapter, that Winter starts to provide extensive evidence to support his fairly general point. In the following chapters he demonstrates how the media's "framework of bias" operates by looking at the media's coverage of the wars in East Timor and Kosovo. Unlike many mainstream media critics, Winter extends his analysis beyond the coverage of specific political events toward an investigation of systemic issues like racism and anti-feminism, to which he devotes three chapters. The reason behind the order of the chapters is not obvious. The first chapter, which covers the Indonesian war, is followed by one on representations of feminism in the media, and then by a third chapter on the coverage of the Kosovo war. The fourth chapter moves back to an examination of feminism and the fifth discusses immigration and racism issues in media coverage. His concluding thoughts, rather than being presented in a concluding chapter (as there isn't one) are dispersed throughout his various case studies. As such, the book at times comes across as more of a compilation of essays than a tightly constructed work building upon a main thesis.

²⁷⁷ James Winter, *MediaThink* (Montreal: Black Rose Books, 2002), xxviii.

²⁷⁸ *Ibid*, xxviii.

²⁷⁹ *Ibid*, xxv.