

# **Hegemony: Explorations into Consensus, Coercion and Culture**

**A workshop at the University of Wollongong  
14 &15 Feb 2005**

**Commodo-normativity and the construction of hegemonic  
Australian economic historiography**

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## **Commodo-normativity and the construction of hegemonic Australian economic historiography**

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### **Introduction**

Although Australian economic historians frequently talk about commodities, few stop to question what commodities are, where they come from or why they exist. While this might be expected of conservative historiography, the assumption that 'commodity' is an unproblematic category has prevailed with few exceptions across the ideological spectrum of Australian (economic) historiography.<sup>1</sup> Left, right and centre, the commodity exists as though it is a 'common sense', neutral backdrop to the main economic action – growth, expansion, progress and Depression - on centre stage. Because the commodity is of such defining centrality to capitalist society - and recalling Marx's view of the commodity as 'the cell-form of capitalism' - economic historiography has taken this centrality as its own explanation and justification. Yet in spite of this, economic historians have had to work hard to deproblematise and to normalise the commodity-form in Australia. In order to construct the seamless story of the common-sense, unproblematic commodity, they are frequently forced to confront the stubbornly recurrent reality that commodities are products of an active process that 'creates' commodities from non-commodified things and relations. Economic historians use an ensemble of techniques and assumptions to keep the commodification process at analytical arms length and to normalise the commodity-form. These techniques, and the commodification-less historiography that is the result, can be termed commodo-normative(ity). In general the term commodo-normative(ity) refers to analysis/discourse/description/argument organized

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<sup>1</sup> The most significant departure from this general approach is A.D. Wells, *Constructing Capitalism. An Economic History of Eastern Australia, 1788-1901*, Allen and Unwin, Sydney, 1989. Even so, this work maintains a soft commodo-normativity.

around the assumption of the normalcy or desirability of the commodity-form itself. Commodo-normative approaches try to establish an epistemological[?] structure that naturalises the commodity-form and represses its historically-specific, aberrant or 'un-natural' character. In order to do so, commo-normativity assembles the questions, categories, vocabulary, empirical evidence and logic which combine so that 'rational inquiry' (an example is 'Economic History') confirms what 'instinct' and 'common sense' already have been led to 'know': that the commodity-form is unavoidable, uncontroversial and irresistible.<sup>2</sup>

This paper uses the concept of commo-normativity to analyse mainstream Australian economic historiography. By paying close attention to how canonical texts of Australian economic historiography deal with the commodity-form and its surrogate - the market - it shows how commo-normativity has shaped the dominant narrative of Australian economic history. It is important at the outset to emphasise that to critique Australian economic historiography as commo-normative is not based in a desire to romanticize or to valorize the non-commodity form as pre-Lapsarian state of grace. And although one of the effects of commo-normativity has been to discourage research into the extent and significance and extent of the non-commodity form in Australia, to use the concept itself as a basis of critique does not imply any specific value-judgement about the extent and significance of the commodity-form itself. Thus, I am not trying to suggest in the concept of commo-normativity the existence of a hitherto undiscovered Australian peasantry (to mobilise an archetypical non-commodity category). Rather, the intention is to identify the inadequacies of an approach that assumes the very thing that needs to be explained (the existence and purpose of the commodity-form), and how an alternative story (commodification) is necessarily repressed in the process. The concluding section of the paper argues that the erasure of

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<sup>2</sup> The terms 'commodo-normative/ity' have been developed by the author, as adaptations of the terms 'hetero-normative/ity' developed in queer theory to describe the organization of gender relations around the assumption that heterosexuality is the 'normal' sexual orientation. For a detailed discussion see R. Hennessy, *Materialist Feminism and the Politics of Discourse*, Routledge, New York, 1993.

commodification that is effected by commo-normativity has facilitated the construction of a benign history about capitalism and class relations in Australia. This has been – as it continues to be – the main hegemonic function of commo-normativity.

### **Identifying commo-normativity**

[As naturalization does its best to erase the non-natural character of what it naturalizes,] it is no easy task to identify phenomenon that have been as deeply naturalized as the commodity-form is in Australian (economic) historiography. In general one needs to work with the aim of showing that key aspects within the field or argument rely on unexamined assumptions that are often deeply-buried rather than immediately available. Fortunately, even epistemological repression usually leaves traces - if only faintly - of the struggle that has been waged to establish domination, and these allow its presence to be tracked and identified.

Within mainstream Australian economic historiography, the repressions involved in commo-normativity can be tracked in a variety of ways. One of its manifestations is the almost unconscious way historians have de-problematized the existence of the non-commodity form. For example, Jackson's 1977 portrait of *Australian economic development in the nineteenth century*, automatically selected the commodity-form as its focus by examining the phenomenon of 'modern economic growth' defined as 'the excess of per capita product over the bare physical necessities of life' (i.e. subsistence), and excluded from its analysis of Australian economic history its most 'backward' rural sector – 'non-pastoral rural activity' – the precise sector in which the commodity-form was weakest in the nineteenth century.<sup>3</sup> Similar self-selection

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<sup>3</sup> R.V.Jackson, *Australian economic development in the nineteenth century*, ANU Press, Canberra, 1977, 'Preface', pp. 107-8.

shapes the emphasis Shaw gave to the pastoral and industrial sectors.<sup>4</sup> Whitwell also described the process of 'making the market' as one of replacing simple commodities with more technologically complex, mass produced ones, a feature of late 20th century mainstream economic historiography that is also found in contemporaneous works such as Snooks.<sup>5</sup> Butlin gives perhaps the best summary of this stance when he suggests that European colonization of Australia could not have been sustained 'without the ability to develop rapidly towards a free market –oriented system'.<sup>6</sup> In these teleological readings of Australian economic history, the least commodity-oriented sectors and activities are written out of the story from the start. The dominance of the commodity-form is thus invested with an aura of inexorable historical inevitability.

A further symptom of the pervasiveness of commo-normativity is the pejorative terms and associations that are used throughout mainstream Australian economic historiography for economic practices not organized around the market and commodity production and exchange. Few have been quite as blunt as Shann, who described the sharing of equal rations amongst convicts and marines as a period of 'economic childishness' and 'the economic last ditch, communism'.<sup>7</sup> Even a more measured historian such as R.V. Jackson similarly consigned the early colonial period, describing its economic activity as 'not very relevant', because it lacked significant 'export commodities', had only a small local market, and the flow of population and capital was 'the outcome of administrative decisions' attached to a penal colony rather than 'a market response to economic conditions'. The commo-normative criteria in operation here are obvious in Jackson's observations that

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<sup>4</sup> AGL Shaw, *The Economic Development of Australia*, Longmans of Australia, Croydon, Victoria, 1967.

<sup>5</sup> G. Whitwell, *Making the Market: The Rise of Consumer Society*, McPhee/Gribble, Melbourne, 1989, pp. 11-15.

<sup>6</sup> N.G. Butlin, *Forming a Colonial Economy, Australia 1810-1850*, Cambridge University Press, Melbourne, 1994, p.108

<sup>7</sup> E. Shann, *An Economic History of Australia*, Australian Edition, Cambridge University Press, 1948, pp. 4-12

before 1850 'many households made simple manufactures for their own use instead of resorting to the market in the fashion more typical of mature economies.'<sup>8</sup> AGL Shaw similarly implied the 'immaturity' of economic activity in the early colonial period, when 'officers paid their servants in kind .. [and] its economy was largely carried on by barter'. He went on to implicitly critique the degree of government regulation of economic activity during World War 1, citing with approval that in the 1920s there was 'a reaction against government interference in economic life.'<sup>9</sup> Already in this analysis he has constructed a healthy economy as a zone that has enough independent integrity as to make it possible to identify 'interference'. Similar views about the market as an independent zone are implied wherever terms such as 'retarded', 'distorted', 'imperfect' is attached to market, denoting a potential purity denied. Butlin's work echoed many of these discriminations, for example commenting that in 1808-1810 economic activity was 'driven further back into barter', a 'retrogression'. Butlin similarly described the early colonial economy's reliance on imports of 'consumer (*sic.*) goods' as indicative of 'a primitive, inchoate economy', and shared with Shaw the contention that 'Australian conditions (natural or physical) discouraged reversion to self-sufficient behaviour' on the part of the early colonial immigrants and convicts.<sup>10</sup> Here the market meshes with nature to make economic self-sufficiency equate to the going-backwards to a less developed and less desirable state that is implied by 'reversion'. Even had nature and market not so fortuitously combined, non-commodity self-sufficiency would have been critiqued, as it was in Butlin's comments that the increasingly successful community of small farmers in Van Diemens land who were 'self-supporting ... was a limited merit'. Graeme Snooks, whose 1994 reactionary economic history for advocates of the unrestrained market provided a pithy synthesis of this commo-normativity when he noted that

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<sup>8</sup> Jackson, p. 2, p. 113.

<sup>9</sup> Shaw, *Economic Development*, p. 13, p.137

<sup>10</sup> Butlin, *Forming A Colonial Economy*, pp.132-3, p. 165, p.107; Shaw, *Economic Development*, pp. 4-7

economies with a weak or non-existent market system were 'closed', in contrast with those market systems that were 'open'.<sup>11</sup>

### Counting sheep ...

A privileged window into the interior logic of commo-normativity is provided by examining how economic historians deal with the issue of the increase in sheep numbers in Australia's 19<sup>th</sup> century pastoral economy. Many historians see the issue of sheep numbers as an important part of the empirical evidence for calculating the growth of the Australian economy and its value in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Despite the efforts of writers such as Wells and Denoon, most economic historians operate with the view summed up by Shaw that the building of the pastoral basis for Australia's 19<sup>th</sup> century economy was 'to a large extent determined by ... facts of climate and topography'.<sup>12</sup> The commo-normative implications of this 'common sense' assertion can be observed when it is set in motion around the issue of explaining increases in the size of sheep flocks in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. It formed the core assumption in Butlin's comment that 'livestock changes occur on a large scale, as a natural genetic process or due to exogenous climatic changes' and that natural increase was 'a major source of output'.<sup>13</sup> Jackson echoed this view, claiming that 'The tendency for flocks to increase rapidly was inherent in the [natural] conditions' and lead to 'an increase in the capital stock in the form of a natural increase in its flocks'.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> G.D. Snooks, *Portrait of the Family Within the Total Economy. A study in long-run dynamics, Australia 1788-1990*, Cambridge University Press, Oakleigh, Victoria, Melbourne, 1994

<sup>12</sup> Shaw, pp. 4-7.

<sup>13</sup> N.G. Butlin, *Australian Domestic Product. Investment and foreign Borrowing 1861-1938/9*, Cambridge University Press, London, 1962, p. 21; Butlin, *Forming A Colonial Economy*, p.193

<sup>14</sup> Jackson, *Australian economic development*, p.57

Yet as sound as this ‘common sense’ conjuncture of Australian environment and merino libido appears to be, it displays a remarkable symmetry with capital’s idea of itself as being the generator of its own value, and commodities almost spontaneously generating and reproducing themselves. This illustrates one of the essential foundations of commodonormativity, its systematic erasure of the role played by human labour in the process of producing commodities. At least in the early stages of pastoral history, the expansion of flocks was dependent on the animal birthing skills of a subterranean sector of the (often convict) pastoral workforce. Far from being satisfied with naturalistic explanations of the increase in sheep numbers, contemporary observers described it as ‘entailing an immense amount of labour’.<sup>15</sup> And to extend this story, it appears that it was not until late in the 19th century, when lambs themselves had become more intensively commodified, that pastoralists could systematically expand their flocks by purchasing lambs *en masse* as a commodity.<sup>16</sup> As a consequence, they no longer relied on the specific labour and skills that had previously contributed to the expansion of sheep numbers.

Ingrained in these details of Australian pastoral history are the double movement of commodification that is erased by commodonormative approaches. On one hand, the crucial role of labour and on the other the later transformation of the mechanism of sheep flock expansion *via* the commodity-form. The fetishistic ‘forgetting’ of labour in this instance is a specific manifestation of a general erasure of issues to do with labour in commodonormative approaches. While Australian history is replete with examples that indicate a far more complex story, and despite the fact that many of these examples are included almost in passing in some standard economic histories, the presence of labour and how, whether, where and when it was commodified, is totally absent. The problem here is more than just the played-out labourist concern with ensuring that that ‘labour is given its due

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<sup>15</sup> A. Joyce, *A Homestead History*, (Ed. G.F. James), Melbourne University Press, Melbourne, 1942, p.50. For the alternatives see Wells, *Constructing Capitalism*, and D. Denoon, *Settler Capitalism*

<sup>16</sup> as suggested in *A New England History*

recognition' in the economic story. Rather, what needs to be observed is that without labour, commodities appear historiographically as though they are produced - like lambs - by auto-genesis - or out of the actual demand for them. Without labour, the historiographical and conceptual reason for the existence of commodities is simply to satisfy consumer demand and human need. Commodo-normativity systematically excludes the possibility for developing alternatives, especially those that see commodities as vehicles for the extraction of surplus value in production.

### **Disappearing non-commodities**

Despite their efforts in these ways to normalise and naturalise the commodity-form, most serious economic historians have been forced to grapple with the fact that even in European Australia the commodity-form and market relations have not perpetually, automatically and universally dominated. Indeed, much of the evidence for the existence and significance of non-commodity forms in Australia is derived from historians' attempts to deal with how the latter can be resolved into terms in which they can be incorporated into the economic growth analyses that dominate mainstream economic historiography.<sup>17</sup> Snooks summarizes the standard approach as defining economic activities as 'those undertaken primarily to generate income or at least goods and services *which could be marketed* rather than activities in which the act of production cannot be separated from the act of consumption, such as social and leisure time pursuits.'<sup>18</sup>

Noel Butlin was particularly prominent in translating non-commodity aspects of economic life into forms that made them commensurate with the commodity-form and principles of market alienation. One of the most important techniques is 'imputation', which as Butlin explains, allows the attribution of

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<sup>17</sup> As Shaw put it in 1966, 'We (economic historians) are more concerned with the problems of economic growth'; Shaw, *Economic Development of Australia*, Preface

<sup>18</sup> Snooks, *Portrait of the Family*, p.157

market value to 'goods and services ... where this output is not sold or exchanged but consumed ... by the producers themselves'. Butlin used imputation extensively in constructing his picture of the course of late nineteenth and early twentieth century Australian economic development, especially in calculating 'the value of construction activity ... in primary industries, ... in the work of households (*sic.* read women's and children's unpaid domestic labour) for household use, ... the value of house construction by owner-builders'. Similarly he treated ... the value of 'domestic and personal services ... as contributing to gross domestic product the sum of wages and salaries of those engaged'. Noting that especially before 1880, 'many important durable assets were produced without recourse to the market' in mining, pastoral industrial and commercial structures and equipment,' he 'adopted the practice of valuing the resources and the resulting fixed assets as *though* they were produced by ordinary commercial processes or were constructed for the purposes of exchange'.<sup>19</sup>

In his later work Butlin extended the technique of imputation to extreme lengths. Here the commo-normative basis of imputation becomes most graphic as Butlin attempts to resolve the activities of Aboriginal societies into market terms. Comparing the economic activities of European and Aboriginal societies, is difficult, writes Butlin, because 'Tastes and preferences of the two societies appear radically different, with little means of equating them through any pricing or shadow pricing of the commodities (*sic.*) produced'. Despite these difficulties, Butlin maintains that 'Aborigines prized (placed a price on) (*sic.*) some activities that would leave little room for exchange relations with colonists ... One can accept these reasons and still interpret behaviour as *if* (*sic.*) it were divorced from the explicit system of beliefs and traditions.' Butlin's reasoning here clearly revolves on the hub of the commodity and the market. Despite recognising the incommensurability of Aboriginal and European 'tastes and preferences', he persists in trying to force non-commodity activity into the commodity form and the market. To do this he needs to describe Aboriginal activities – even cultural and religious practice – as producing

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<sup>19</sup> Butlin, *Australian Domestic Product*, pp. 7-14.

'things', which are in turn described as 'commodities', which itself constructs them as potentially market-alienable. An even more revealing linguistic slippage can be observed in Butlin's contention that because some activities such as religion and leisure are 'prized' in Aboriginal societies, this means that essentially they are 'priced'. After battling in these ways through a number of the obstacles that make difficult the resolution of non-commodities into the commodity form, Butlin finally produces a table that purports to show in 1830 prices 'the rough approximations of Aboriginal GDP' for Australia as a whole!<sup>20</sup>

The commo-normative reflex to translate all economic activity into market terms is not by any means confined to Butlin. Snooks also resorted to transposing market terminology to non-market phenomenon. At one point he describes Australian households as being '*staffed* with a full-time female worker' (emphasis added), an orthographic observation that becomes a little less pedantic when placed in the context of Snook's view that households combine market and non-market resources 'to produce higher "commodities" of children, "happiness"(sic.) and recreation'.<sup>21</sup>

### **Explaining the market**

Early generations of Australian economic historians saw no need to explain the market, so enmeshed were they in the commo-normative story of progress, development and growth that assumed its unproblematic existence. In the 1980s and 1990s, this view of the market and commodities in Australia was destabilised when the surge in contemporary commodification extended the reach of the market into areas of life from which it had hitherto been excluded. At the same time feminist economics contested mainstream claims to be engaged in neutral empiricism by showing that the categories it relied on

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<sup>20</sup> Butlin, *Forming a Colonial Economy*, pp. 213-4; Figure 14.5. p. 219

<sup>21</sup> Snooks, *Portrait of the Family*, p.84, p. 186

reflected a range of unexamined patriarchal assumptions.<sup>22</sup> Both these factors meant that by the late 20<sup>th</sup> century the market had been problematised to a degree that had not been seen since the late 19th century – since, that is, the progenitors of Australian economic historiography such as T.A. Coghlan, had last waged and won the conceptual war against the non-commodity form.<sup>23</sup> Now, as they had done a century earlier, mainstream economic historians responded to these challenges by developing explanations of the origins, impact and extent of the market that were enmeshed in the assumptions and logic of commo-normativity.

One of the most ambitious of these was Graeme Snooks' elaborately simplistic 1994 attempt to paint 'A new portrait of the Australian economy'.<sup>24</sup> While Snooks claimed to be innovatively reinterpreting the basis of economic history, in fact his fundamental premises are as old as bourgeois political economy and as original as the neo-conservative valorization of 'the individual' whose collective enmeshments extend no further than the 'household' (which according to Snooks, has been 'limited to about five people' for 'the last millennium'<sup>25</sup>). The foundation of Snook's argument is his assertion that 'the ever-present goal [of humanity in all its diversity] is to maximize individual material advantage'. Thus, he claims that despite the absence of the market in Aboriginal society, the 'economic motivation' of the system was the same as

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<sup>22</sup> See, for example, the critique of mainstream economic discourse in M. Waring, *Counting For Nothing: What Men Value and What Women are Worth*; Desley Deacon, 'Political Arithmetic: the Nineteenth Century Australian Census and the Construction of the Dependent Woman', *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, Autumn 1985, Vol 11, No. 1; and the debate between Katrina Alford, Tony Endres and Graeme Snooks in *Labour History*, Nos 51-52, 1986-1987.

<sup>23</sup> Coghlan began to construct the commo-normative empirical and conceptual basis of his major work, *Labour and Industry in Australia*, Macmillan, Melbourne, 1968 [first edition 1918] during his employment as New South Wales Government Statistician from 1888. As statistician he published yearly socio-economic analyses of *The Wealth and Progress of New South Wales*, as the volumes were titled, and in the process developed and applied the statistical histories that would form the basis for *Labour and Industry*.

<sup>24</sup> Snooks, 'A new portrait of the Australian economy', Ch 6, a *Portrait of the Family*

<sup>25</sup> *ibid.*, pp. 125-6

for all of humanity - 'the maximization of family/tribal, and hence (*sic.*) individual, material returns.'<sup>26</sup> While humans have thus invented various ways of trying to satisfy this trans-historical aspect of human nature, none achieves it so effectively as does the market system. As Snooks puts it, while 'all economic activity had its beginning in the household', at certain times and places 'it became clear that some economic activities could be undertaken more efficiently in a separate and specialized way. ... the household contracted out a number of its former functions to the fledgling market sector' in order to 'achieve increasing returns through specialization'. As a consequence individuals, through the mediation of households, could now 'enjoy the fruits of growth through an interaction with the market sector – which is why the market sector was initially established.'<sup>27</sup>

While the massive historical inaccuracies and other absurdities in this account are evident, it is more difficult to identify its commo-normativity. This is partly because Snooks hardly works with the category 'commodity' at all, (far less a notion of commodification) substituting instead 'goods and services' produced in household and market settings. Indeed, he arrives at the counter-intuitive view that 'there is no evidence ... over the past 150 years' that the activities of the household are increasingly being 'contracted out' to the market.<sup>28</sup> As an explanation of the origins of the market it relies on some critical assumptions. The first is the profoundly teleological one that the when 'people' began to look outside the household (c.6000 years ago, 'at the dawn of civilization'<sup>29</sup>, according to Snooks), the only alternative they 'found' was the market. The market was thus the universal default position when existing economic systems proved inadequate. While this may well summarize the ideological assertions of capital in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, it can't be taken seriously as a comment on the origin of the market. Similarly, Snook's argument relies on a range of assertions about the 'acquisitive aspects of

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<sup>26</sup> *ibid.*, pp. 48-9, p. 97

<sup>27</sup> *ibid.*, p. 124

<sup>28</sup> *ibid.*, p. 28

<sup>29</sup> *ibid.*, pp. 124, 127

human nature', of which the market is both a response and reflection. While Snooks cautions that not all human needs can be satisfied through the market (the household 'provides ... recreation in the sense of renewal of the spirit. And there is no perfect market substitute for this'<sup>30</sup>) - Snooks sees the market as the servant, rather than the exploiter, of human needs; an expression of 'the ultimate meaning of economic life.'<sup>31</sup>

Butlin's explanations for the growth of the market in Australia is mercifully free of this reliance on essentialist and ethnocentric views of 'human nature' and 'civilization' and the neo-conservative resurgence of the individual. Operating far more as an historian, and far less as an ideologist, Butlin's 1991 attempt to explain the origins of the market in Australia had the virtue absent in Snooks of at least posing the problem of market relations in real historical terms. Instead of automatically assuming the existence of the market or an instinctive market rationality Butlin sets out to explain how a market system was established in Australia by about 1840. He does not rely on the inexorable march of the pastoral commodity in international trade, as had classically been the case. Rather, he begins with the assumption that the establishment of market relations was problematic and practical, and it had to be organized and nurtured, rather than grow automatically. The most important part of the problematic Butlin sketches, is 'how the intellectual baggage of the immigrants [convict and free] was exploited and adapted to achieve a viable market economy'. The crux of his argument is that convicts and free working class immigrants in the period to 1840 brought with them from Britain 'a degree of understanding of the most advanced market system on earth ... the convicts were the most fully accustomed to the ways human beings might ... exploit market behaviour'. As economic refugees, they had direct experience and understanding of what it meant to operate and to respond to 'market stimuli'. Once in Australia, they quickly applied these understandings to the 'inchoate' system that was being established. That the mass of the new population was so well acculturated into the rules and rationalities of the market system, was,

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<sup>30</sup> *ibid.*, p.28

<sup>31</sup> *ibid.*, p.126

according to Butlin 'a vital part of the rapid evolution of market behaviour in Australia'.<sup>32</sup>

The main problem with this hypothesis is that it relies on a partial understanding of British economic and social historiography, Butlin seemingly having censored out the vast body of accessible work that casts serious doubt on his characterization of British working class market mentalities. Butlin has avoided the literature that demonstrates the longstanding and deep hostility to the market in 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century working class British mentalities, and a propensity to base market transactions on extra-market factors summarized in the term 'moral economy'.<sup>33</sup> Butlin's use of more contemporary perspectives on convicts elsewhere in his work suggests a filtering out of evidence that contradicts the emphasis that he wants to give to the role of consciousness and consent in establishing the market.<sup>34</sup>

### **Consent and the market**

The accounts of the origins of the market given by Snooks and Butlin foreshadow new versions of commodo-normativity. They might be described as 'market populism', in that their accounts of the expansion of the market in Australia and elsewhere assume that the commodity-form was readily and enthusiastically taken up by populations that had market rationality ingrained into their consciousness. Moreover, they project the idea that the commodity-form was an original invention and authentic expression of popular will, a kind

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<sup>32</sup> Butlin, *Forming a Colonial Economy*, pp. 107-122

<sup>33</sup> The conventional references here are E.P. Thompson, 'The Moral economy of the English crowd' and Eric Hobsbawm, 'Custom, wages and workload'. These two essays spawned a mass of more detailed studies on the themes of working class responses to the market. Butlin can hardly have been unaware of them, and even uses Hobsbawm's key phrase (who had himself taken it from K. Polanyi's *The Great Transformation*), 'learning the rules of the game'. See Butlin, *Forming a Colonial Economy*, pp. 119-22, p. 150

<sup>34</sup> Butlin cites the 1980s work of Nicholas, Shergold and Oxley on convicts, collected in *Convict Workers*,

of economic democracy of exchange, despite the mass of historical and anthropological evidence that shows that the market has been resisted and rejected as much as it has been embraced and accepted. 'Market populism' allows the portrayal of those factors inhibiting the development of the market as fundamentally opposed to the freedom and choice that the market is assumed to facilitate. It is this feature that allows market populism to be readily grafted onto older versions of commo-normativity, which portray the market as latent potential, the development of which only required the removal of a number of 'obstacles' to its 'maturation'.<sup>35</sup> Reflecting this conceptualization, Australian economic historiography is replete with metaphors of constraints being broken, typically the 'constraints' of a small domestic market thus population and environment and potentials being fulfilled.<sup>36</sup> Butlin offers the most sophisticated version of this conceptualization, where a range of bureaucratic-legal 'obstructive conditions' to the operation of the market in the colonial economy – the low degree of social division of labour, the lack of commodified land, and restraints on 'freedom of (trading) behaviour' - are slowly reformed when it becomes clear that popular economic practice has established the market. This in itself is in a longer line of removing the 'many limitations' and 'restrictive conditions' of medievalism and mercantilism that started in Britain and Europe in the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries.<sup>37</sup>

Closely associated with this portrayal of the market as latent energy and potential, is the almost unanimous sense within mainstream Australian economic historiography that the market and its expansion is provides opportunities to be embraced, and expands the arena of human freedom and choices. From the finest details through to the largest overviews, commo-normative historiography is marbled through with this deeply ideological stance in relation to the market. It is evident, for example, in Butlin's contention

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<sup>35</sup> A more detailed examination of this approach to the market can be found in E. Meiksins Wood, *The Origin of Capitalism*, Monthly Review Press, New York, 1999, Ch. 1.

<sup>36</sup> see Jackson, *Australian economic development*, p. 4; Shaw, *Economic Development*, pp.4-7

<sup>37</sup> Butlin, *Forming a Colonial Economy*, pp. 109-115

that the strengthening of the market in early Sydney was an 'opportunity' and meant that 'business was able to ... satisfy local tastes.'<sup>38</sup> It can also be seen running from Shann through to more recent commentators such as Whitwell's account of the 'rise of the consumer society' after 1945. In these respects, commo-normative approaches project the commodity-form, and its surrogate, the market, not only as inevitable but as being consensual by virtue of the popular recognition of its positive and constructive functions as the means for expanding human freedom and possibilities.

### **Hegemonic considerations: commo-normativity and the construction of benign capitalism**

Hegemony is at its strongest when cultural and ideological formations work to naturalise the various dominations and acts of power that shape lived experience, presenting them as legitimate, desirable, inescapable, or immovable. To this extent, it is helpful (although not without its own flaws) to discriminate between those aspects of cultural and ideological life that passively reflect and those that actively shape hegemony. This discrimination allows us to avoid the unhelpful tendency to give equal analytical weight to all cultural and ideological features within a society. What one searches for are those 'parts' of the cultural and ideological spheres that have maximum hegemonic affect.

At first sight it may appear fanciful to attribute a hegemonic affect – a constitutive rather than 'passive' hegemonic role – to economic historiography, removed from the hurly burly of everyday life. However, the way that capitalism and the market have been represented historically is closely connected to hegemonic processes, because it has normalized and naturalized the commodity-form and the market in Australia. Crucially, the commo-normative character of Australian economic historiography has operated to suppress an alternative story of Australian economic history.

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<sup>38</sup> *ibid.*, pp. 135-6

Because *commodo-normativity* assumes the natural existence of the commodity form, it automatically neglects the highly volatile and problematic process of how things and relations become transformed into a form where they are market-alienable – how and why commodities exist. *Commodo-normativity* erases the process of commodification and the politics that accompanies it, and fosters conservative analyses of the origins and character of market relations in Australia. Under the guise of common sense reading of ‘the economic facts’, it projects profoundly ideological views of the market and the commodity form. It focuses attention on the market as an arena for the expansion of human freedom, choice and possibility, and excludes more unsettling aspects of the market as a series of compulsions, coercions and imperatives imposed as an inherent part of the deepening of capitalist economic and social relations. It has only been possible to produce commodification-less economic historiography by repressing the alternative story derived from the point of view of commodification.

The most important way that *commodo-normativity* achieves these effects is by presenting Australian commodities and markets without a process of commodification. Commodities are ‘transplanted’, to use Butlin’s term, from Britain in 1788, and thus given in Australian history, rather than made in the process of developing capitalism. *Commodo-normativity* presents the fiction that the deepening of capitalist economic forms and the social relations that accompany them, has taken place since 1788 with few destructive consequences. While more recent versions have modified this in the light of the obvious consequences for indigenous societies, in general it is still the case that Australian economic history is portrayed as an expansion into an economic *terra nullius*. Yet the Australian economic landscape was not – and is not - an economic empty space on which commodity relations could be established without consequence. Rather, the deepening of commodity relations – the process of commodification - had (as it still has) the effect of eroding the vernacular ‘people’s economy’ that local, regional and detailed social histories make clear thrived from 1788. Although much work remains to be done to identify the precise significance and history of this economy it is already clear from working class and subaltern autobiographies that how the

economy was experienced at the level of personal experience was vastly different from the narrativised progress of the market of commodo-normative historiography. The lived experience of economic life appears to have been a hybrid of commodity and non-commodity relations, in which the latter were often equally or more important than the former. The intensification of market relations – the tendency to increasingly route all economic life through the market – or the tendency to turn the social into the economic - reshaped and destroyed these indigenous and non-indigenous vernacular economies.

The commodo-normativity of Australian economic historiography has had profound consequences for how the story of Australian economic, social and class history has been told. Not only has it buttressed conservative views about Australian society, but more importantly, by naturalizing the commodity-form it has blunted the counter-hegemonic potential of the radical critique of Australian society and history.

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