



JOHN LOCKE, ABOLITIONISM, AND THE REACTIONARY ENLIGHTENMENT

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In the increasingly polemical abolitionist and pro-slavery literature of the eighteenth century, John Locke's thought was often tokenized. Both sides appealed to him in their respective defenses. Abolitionists centralized the anti-slavery elements inherent to his social contract theory – natural liberty, self-ownership, and the necessity of express consent – while pro-slavery apologists foregrounded his entanglements in colonial politics, specifically his role in composing the Carolina constitution. Things changed rather dramatically in the nineteenth century. Right around the time England abolished the slave trade in 1807, a string of successful vindication narratives helped to liberate Locke from his linkages to slavery. As a result, not only did prominent slavocrats begin to ridicule the Carolina constitution, but they also came to see Lockean natural law thinking as much more fundamentally incompatible with their worldview. This is the tradition Louis Hartz called the “reactionary enlightenment.” Leading nineteenth-century defenders of slavery in America, like John Gillies, George Fitzhugh, Henry Hughes, Albert Taylor Bledsoe, and Robert Dabney, dedicated a great deal of energy to refuting Locke's ideas of natural liberty and express consent. They believed Lockean natural right principles had contaminated America at its founding and that Locke's fetishization of individual liberty had become an obstacle to the development of a pro-slavery society. These attacks demonstrate the centrality of Locke's influence in nineteenth-century humanitarian and liberatory movements.

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In the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, it was common for Locke's thought to be co-opted by both abolitionists and pro-slavery advocates.¹ Being the symbolic figure that he was – a man of enormous influence and intellectual stature – activists and apologists alike laid claim to him. In this tug-of-war, however, one will typically not find nuanced textual debates about Locke's theory.² With few exceptions, Locke's thinking was for the most part tokenized.³ Those who believed Locke supported slavery, for instance, did so based exclusively on the assumption that he was the sole or principal author of the *Fundamental Constitutions*, which in section 110 stipulates that 'Every freeman of Carolina shall have absolute power and authority over his negro slaves.'⁴ This was proof enough for many that Locke was pro-slavery. In a public letter to William Wilberforce, Sir Robert Heron reminded him that despite the appeals to Locke by 'our ravers for liberty and emancipation', one must remember that when 'compiling the laws of South Carolina, he was so far from proscribing Slavery, that he introduced a law expressly recognizing and establishing the property in Slaves.'⁵

For this same reason, some prominent critics of African slavery believed that Locke represented a moral liability and should be abandoned as an intellectual champion of anti-slavery. In a damning late-eighteenth century attack, Josiah Tucker derided Locke as perniciously pro-slavery. He writes, 'A complete System of Baronage and Vassalage never yet appeared in the World, than is com-

1. Locke's relationship to the abolitionist movement is underdeveloped. A few articles proceed thematically along these lines; see Loewenberg, Robert. 1985. "John Locke and the Antebellum Defense of Slavery." *Political Theory* 13 (2): 266–91; Lewis, Douglas. 2003. "Locke and the Problem of Slavery." *Teaching Philosophy* 26 (3): 261–82; Farr, James. 2008. "Locke, Natural Law, and New World Slavery." 36 (4): 495–522; and Monoson, Sara S. 2011. "Recollecting Aristotle: Pro-Slavery Thought in Antebellum America and the Argument of *Politics* Book 1." In *Ancient Slavery and Abolition: From Hobbes to Hollywood*, edited by Edith Hall, Richard Alston, and Justine McConnell, 247–77. New York: Oxford University Press. Sometimes Locke is tangentially mentioned in related discourses; see Tise, Larry. 1987. *Proslavery: A History of the Defense of Slavery in America, 1701–1840*. Athens, GA: The University of Georgia Press; Ericson, David. 2000. *The Debate over Slavery: Anti-slavery and Proslavery Liberalism in Antebellum America*. New York: NYU Press; 2006. *Proslavery and Sectional Thought in the Early South, 1740–1829*. Edited by Jeffrey Young. Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press; and Brophy, Alfred. 2016. *University, Court, and Slave: Pro-slavery Thought in Southern Colleges and Courts and the Coming of Civil War*. New York: Oxford University Press.

2. Bernard Bailyn explains that in the late eighteenth century Locke was often 'referred to in the most offhand way, as if he could be relied on to support anything the writers happened to be arguing.' This also seems to be true of both pro- or anti-slavery positions. Bailyn, Bernard. 1967. *The Ideological Origins of the American Revolution*, 28. Cambridge: Belknap Press.

3. Thomas Paine, for instance, lists Locke among the 'eminent men' who opposed the institution, though without elaboration on the point. Paine, Thomas. 1894. "African Slavery in America." In *The Writings of Thomas Paine, Volume 1*, 4–9. New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons.

4. 1669. *Fundamental Constitutions of Carolina. The Avalon Project. Documents in Law, History and Diplomacy*. https://avalon.law.yale.edu/17th_century/nco5.asp.

5. Heron, Robert. 1806. *A Letter to William Wilberforce*, 86. London: Printed for Jordan and Maxwell.

prised in this little Code of *fundamental* laws.⁶ He continues, ‘Mr. Locke carries the Matter of Slavery so far, and grants such Powers to Masters to put their Slaves to Death, whenever they please.’⁷ Jeremy Bentham likewise believed, without getting into the specifics, that Locke’s theory could be ‘employed for the defence of slavery, – for the defence of boundless mischief, – for the defence of boundless misery.’ Again, the principal evidence he adduces for this claim was Locke’s involvement in composing the ‘constitution for one of the Carolinas’.⁸

As seen in Heron’s letter to Wilberforce above, the arguments about Locke’s involvement with the Carolina constitution arose more specifically in connection with the public debates around Britain’s proposed abolition of the slave trade in 1807. When John Scott, First Lord of Eldon, appealed to Locke’s relationship to the Carolina constitution to oppose ending the slave trade, he was widely rebuffed by a series of authors seeking to ‘vindicate’ Locke’s reputation on slavery. One author explained that if Eldon had truly been interested in using Locke for ‘a more liberal purpose’, he ‘might, otherwise, have observed the first sentence of the “Treatises of Government”, where in the maturity of judgment, the author declares that “slavery is vile and miserable an estate of man.”’⁹ Another anonymous author claimed, ‘His Lordship [Eldon] seemed to admit that Mr. Locke had given an opinion in favour of the Slave Trade, though he took away the whole weight of his authority, as applying to our times, by shewing the utter ignorance on the subject.’¹⁰ He continues, ‘After attentive examination of Mr. Locke’s works, such as he presented them, by his will, to the University of Oxford, and his posthumous works, first added to the folio editions, I cannot find a syllable respecting negro slavery, nor any doctrine maintaining which can be even tortured into an approbation of it.’¹¹ The author goes on to argue that the *Fundamental Constitutions* was devised by the Earl of Shaftesbury and added to Locke’s collected works much later. Another anonymous author sought to defend Locke against the slanderous implication that he had given ‘countenance to the injuries inflicted upon the calumniated children of Ham.’¹² The author

6. Josiah Tucker, Josiah. 1781. *A Treatise Concerning Civil Government in Three Parts*, 55. London: Printed for T. Cadrell.

7. *ibid.*

8. Bentham, Jeremy. 1834. *Deontology; or The Science of Morality*, Vol. 1. Edited by John Bowring, 309–10. London: Longman.

9. N.L.T. 1825. “Correction of Two Remarkable Errors – On the Subject of Oaths and of Religious Toleration.” In *The Oriental Herald and Colonial Review*, Volume 5: 419–22. London: Standford Arnot....

10. 1808. “Defence of Locke against Lord Eldon.” In *The Monthly Repository of Theology and General Literature*, Volume II, 83. London: Printed by C. Stower.

11. *ibid.*

12. 1825. “Locke Vindicated, as a Friend to Freedom; Addressed to Common-Sense.” In *The Hummingbird; Or Morsels of Information, on the Subject of Slavery*, 96. Leicester: Printed and Published by A. Cockshaw.

concludes that Locke was ‘among the most strenuous enemies of slavery, in every shape.’¹³ In their responses, abolitionists attempted to demonstrate not only that Locke did not compose the Carolina constitution, but that even if he did, this should be treated as immature and not representative of his later, more well-developed theory, which was decidedly anti-slavery.¹⁴

These efforts at vindicating Locke’s reputation were largely successful.¹⁵ By the early nineteenth century, the anti-slavery elements in Locke’s thinking – and Locke himself – were widely co-opted by the abolitionist movement. While one can still find the odd reference to Locke and the Carolina constitution in this period, all the most prominent defenders of slavery saw Locke as a significant liability and attacked him as such. The commanding influence Locke held over nineteenth-century humanitarian movements was first noted by the early twentieth-century intellectual historian Merle Curti, who was hagiographically seeking to solidify Locke’s status as ‘America’s philosopher’. Curti claimed that ‘Locke’s conception of human nature [...] was good ammunition for the humanitarian and reform groups which began, in the second decade of the last century, to form associations to uproot war, outlaw intemperance, and abolish slavery, poverty, and every social ill.’¹⁶ He would conclude that even though ‘reformers did not find Locke’s philosophy adequate for all their purposes, its importance to crusading humanitarianism can scarcely be overemphasized.’¹⁷ As Curti had suggested, even though Locke’s natural rights thinking was deficient in certain key (yet unspecified) respects, it had become a foundational basis for all kinds of social activism, especially abolitionism.¹⁸

One does not need simply to take Curti’s word for it. A cursory review of the literature on Locke in late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries shows that his prominent role in liberatory social movements was reflexively assumed by

13. *ibid.*

14. James Buckingham, for instance, notes that Locke ‘lived to have clearer ideas of the injustice of slavery before he died.’ Buckingham, James. 1842. *The Slave States of America, Vol. 1*, 19. London: Fisher, Son & Co.

15. Even pro-slavery advocates were willing to grant this point. William Simms, a southern historian and defender of slavery, writes, ‘Locke, though subsequently one of the proprietors, was, at the beginning, simply the secretary of the earl of Shaftesbury. The probability is, that, in preparing the constitution for the Carolinas, he rather carried out the notions of that versatile nobleman than his own. It may be doubted if his agency extended much beyond that of one chosen as a ready writer.’ Simms, William. 1860. *The History of South Carolina*, 48. New York: Redfield.

16. Curti, Merle. 1937. “The Great Mr. Locke: America’s Philosopher, 1783–1861.” *The Huntington Library Bulletin* 11: 107–51.

17. *ibid.*

18. Claims about Locke’s deficiencies as a theorist did not preclude support for his overarching model. For instance, the abolitionist James Freeman Clarke complained about how the ‘wooden philosophy of John Locke’ had been hammered into him and his fellow classmates as undergraduates. Clarke, James Freeman. 1891. *Autobiography, Diary and Correspondence*. Edited by Edward Everett Hale, 90. Boston: Houghton, Mifflin, and Co.

those seeking to chronicle his influence.¹⁹ For instance, Paul Janet argued that ‘Locke energetically combats slavery’.²⁰ Sterling Lamprecht likewise claimed that ‘Locke was anxious to restrict the institution of slavery’.²¹ Charles Hardy also noted in passing that ‘Locke condemned slavery as contrary to the natural law’.²² William Jenkins critically remarked that ‘[t]he natural rights school of philosophers, of which Locke and Paine were members, had great influence upon the development of American anti-slavery theory.’²³ Despite his nominal linkages with colonial slave institutions, the early twentieth-century consensus was that Locke was anti-slavery in disposition and that his political theory had become a foundational basis of the abolitionist movement.²⁴

Whatever comfort pro-slavery advocates could take concerning Locke’s relationship to the *Fundamental Constitutions*, they came to see his wider theory as the greater threat.²⁵ They not only believed his ideas were anti-slavery, but that they were also harbingers of other pernicious social transformations, like equal rights and universal suffrage. Locke’s personal links to slavery were less important than his ideas about self-ownership, consent, and the right to resist tyranny. The extent to which Locke had become central to the humanitarian thinking of the nineteenth century can perhaps be best demonstrated by the degree to which he was attacked and maligned by the most prominent southern slavocrat apologists, what Louis Hartz has termed the ‘reactionary enlightenment’.²⁶ As George Fitzhugh, one of the most prominent defenders of ‘slavery aggression’, summa-

19. Mary S. Locke tracks Locke’s general theoretical influence. Locke, Mary Stoughton. 1901. *Anti-Slavery in America from the Introduction of African Slaves to the Prohibition of the Slave Trade (1610–1808)*. Rutgers University Press.

20. Janet, Paul. 1890. “Political Science.” In *Political Science and Political Economy and the Political History of the United States, Volume III*, edited by John Lalor, 257–68. New York: Charles E. Merrill & Co.

21. Lamprecht, Sterling Power. 1918. *The Moral and Political Philosophy of John Locke*, 128. New York: Columbia University Press.

22. Hardy, Charles. 1919. *The Negro Question in the French Revolution*, 5. George Banta Publishing.

23. Jenkins, William. 1935. *Pro-Slavery Thought in the Old-South*, 122. Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press.

24. John Mecklin accounts for Locke’s position the following way: ‘That Locke and his contemporaries felt no incongruity between their ideas of liberty and the existence of slavery must be attributed to the fact that the full social implication of their doctrines had not yet been brought home to them by industrial development.’ Mecklin, John. 1917. “The Evolution of the Slave Status in American Democracy.” *The Journal of Negro History* 2 (2): 105–26.

25. James Farr shows that many of the slavocrat opponents of Locke also mocked the *Fundamental Constitutions*. Farr, James. “Locke, Natural Law, and New World Slavery.” 513–16.

26. Hartz, Louis. 1955. *The Liberal Tradition in America: An Interpretation of American Political Thought Since the Revolution*, 8. New York: Harcourt, Brace, and World. Hartz largely agrees with Curti’s timeframe. He claims that American southerners broke with their ‘Jeffersonian past around 1830’. Hartz, Louis. 1952. “The Reactionary Enlightenment: Southern Political Thought Before the Civil War.” *The Western Political Quarterly* 5 (1): 31–50.

rized: '[l]et us show that slavery aggression is but part and parcel of a new reactionary movement, which takes issue with the political philosophy that grew out of the liberation of the serfs, and the excesses of the Reformation, with Locke, Rousseau, Tom Paine, and Jefferson.'²⁷ These nineteenth-century defenders of slavery, just as Curti had explained, recognized Locke's humanitarian influence, and they came to believe that the best way to challenge the foundations of abolitionism was by attacking Locke directly. In doing so, they needed to ground their social theory on a fundamentally different philosophical footing, which they did. Slavocrat apologists like John Gillies, George Fitzhugh, Henry Hughes, Albert Taylor Bledsoe, and Robert Dabney, vociferously rejected Locke, and conspicuously sought to rehabilitate an Aristotelian *telos* of society, a form of neo-feudalism which modeled America's moral, economic, and political life on the slave plantation complex.

Locke among the Slavocrats

Locke's framework, which presumed that each person has a natural right to life, liberty, and property, and that the only legitimate authority was one authorized through express consent, sat uneasily with the worldview of slave owners.²⁸ They were reluctant to see the institution of slavery as a state of perpetual war, where slaves had the persistent right to resist unjust capture and to assert their natural rights. Such a view could not be reconciled with the 'benevolent' and 'God-ordained' institution of slavery that pro-slavery advocates imagined. Their fundamental opposition to this natural law framework transformed Locke into an enemy of the institution of racialized slavery as it was being practiced in the U.S.

27. Fitzhugh, George. 1860. "Slavery Aggression." *De Bow's Review* 28: 132–38.

28. D.P. Ellerman is irked that 'consent-based contractarian defenders of slavery are passed over in silence.' Ellerman, D.P. 2020. "Reclaiming Democratic Classical Liberalism." In *Reclaiming Liberalism*, edited by David Hardwick and Leslie Marsh, 1–40. Cham: Palgrave. To this point, some pro-slavery theorists, like Rev. Samuel Seabury, did make consent-based arguments for slavery. He claimed that American slavery is built on 'tacit consent', but to make this argument he appealed to Pufendorf and Grotius, not Locke. In general, Seabury's arguments are so inconsistent as to seem disingenuous. Samuel Seabury, Samuel. 1861. *American Slavery Distinguished from the Slavery of English Theorists and Justified by the Law of Nature*, 144, 166. New York: Mason Brothers. For a nineteenth-century case for why slavery violates Lockean contracts, see Hildreth, Richard. 1854. *Despotism in America: An Inquiry into the Nature, Results, and Legal Basis of the Slave-Holding System in the United States*. Cleveland, OH: Jewett, Proctor, and Worthington. Allen and Pope argue that nineteenth-century jurists used social contractarian formulations to defend slavery, though none of these court rulings appeal to Locke. Allen, Anita and Thaddeus Pope. 2008. "Social Contract Theory, Slavery, and the Antebellum Courts." In *A Companion to African American Philosophy*, edited by Tommy Lott and John Pittman, 125–33. London: Blackwell.

It is nevertheless often mistakenly argued that Locke was used by nineteenth-century slavocrats to defend southern institutions of slavery. For instance, Maurice Jackson claims that Locke's 'ideas were ingrained in proslavery propaganda' up to 1848, a superficial argument based exclusively on Locke's relationship to the Carolina constitution.²⁹ Likewise, Robert Smith paradoxically argues that the U.S. South had demonstrated 'an almost militant espousal of Lockean principles and institutions', while at the same time noting that 'many of the South's leading thinkers rejected Locke because slavery could not be squared with his idea of inalienable natural rights'.³⁰ Smith cites Hartz's claim that the South had become a 'madhouse', in part 'because it embraced Locke for whites, while [...] denying Locke to blacks'.³¹ Hartz's argument here is a bit more complicated than Smith suggests. These 'conservative revolutionaries [sic.]' in the South were quite oddly appealing to the tradition of Burke, which meant, as Hartz explains, they should have been reacting to themselves rather than against Locke and Jefferson!³² Hartz shows that, despite themselves, they occasionally and quite contradictorily fell back on Lockean arguments at different points. This is a far cry from the 'militant espousal' of Locke that Smith contends.³³ And, finally, Philip Gould writes that nineteenth-century pro-slavery thought was '[a]nchored safely in the core thinking of contract theory', and specifically a Lockean theory of property.³⁴ To support this argument, he points to the Dred Scott Case (1857), a Supreme Court ruling which, among other things, claimed the U.S. Constitution did not extend the right of citizenship to people of African descent. What Gould fails to note, however, is that opponents of this decision regularly cited Locke in their rebuttals.³⁵

None of these claims linking Locke to the prominent nineteenth-century pro-slavery apologists in the South withstand scrutiny. As the historiographical record clearly shows, all the leading slavocrats directed the force of their argu-

29. Jackson, Maurice. 2008. "The Rise of Abolition." In *The Atlantic World, 1450–2000*, edited by Toyin Falola and Kevin Roberts, 218. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

30. Smith, Robert. 2010. *Conservatism and Racism: And why in America They are the Same*, 33. Albany: State University of New York.

31. *ibid.*

32. The idea here is that if they were consistent in their Burkean commitment to tradition, it would have been incoherent to rebel against the founding documents of America. Quite in contrast to Burke, they were not 'conservatives' but reactionaries.

33. Hartz, Louis. 1952. "The Reactionary Enlightenment: Southern Political Thought Before the Civil War." *The Western Political Quarterly* 5 (1): 32.

34. Gould, Philip. 2007. "The Economies of the Slave Narrative." In *A Companion to African American Literature*, edited by Gene Andrew Jarrett, 90–118. Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell.

35. Washburn, Israel. 1860, 1973. *Speech of Hon. Israel Washburn*, 11. New York: Plainview; Sumner, Charles. 1874. "No Bust for Author of Dred Scott Decision." In *Charles Sumner: His Complete Words*, 159. Boston: Lee and Shepard; and Sumner, Charles. 1854. *Speeches of Hon. Charles Sumner on the Boston Memorial for the Repeal of the Fugitive Slave Bill*, 13. Washington, D.C.: Buell & Blanchard.

ments *against* Locke. Louis Hartz, recapitulating Curti's early twentieth-century view about Locke's humanitarian influence, tracked this opposition quite meticulously. He claims that the anti-Locke 'reactionary enlightenment' in the pre-war South demonstrated 'the power of Locke in America' and it 'portray[ed] more poignantly than anything else the tyranny he has had'.³⁶ Quite simply, Locke's natural right theory had become one of the most formative and persistent bases of abolitionist argumentation of that period. For these reasons, pro-slavery apologists like John Gillies, George Fitzhugh, Henry Hughes, Albert Taylor Bledsoe, and Robert Dabney lambasted and even ridiculed Lockean social contract theory. They derided Locke, often weaving insults and *ad hominem* attacks into their arguments as they worked to ground their pro-slavery views in an alternative, largely Aristotelian, tradition.³⁷

The Reactionary Enlightenment

In the foreword to John Gillies's³⁸ translation of Aristotle's *Ethics and Politics* (1797), which went through at least three editions in the early nineteenth century, he provides sustained commentary on 'the most extraordinary and most pestilent effects' produced by Locke's 'fundamental maxim', namely that 'government is merely a matter of consent'.³⁹ Rather than contract, he argues, it is better to see government as Aristotle did, as 'coeval with society, and society with men', which leaves no room for the 'fanciful supposition of engagements and contracts'.⁴⁰ From Locke's questionable premise, Gillies laments, 'is fairly deducible the unalienable right of mankind to be self-governed; that is, to be their own legislators, and their own directors; or, if they find it inconvenient to assume the administration of affairs in their own persons, to appoint representatives

36. Hartz, Louis. 1955. *The Liberal Tradition in America: An Interpretation of American Political Thought Since the Revolution*, 8.

37. For more general commentary on this literature, see Genovese, Eugene. 1969. *The World the Slaveholders Made: Two Essays in Interpretation*. Hanover, NH: Wesleyan University Press; and Faust, Drew G. 1977. *A Sacred Circle: The Dilemma of the Intellectual in the Old South, 1840–1860*. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Press.

38. Though a Scottish historian, his work on Aristotle was influential in the American South.

39. Gillies, John. 1813. "Introduction." In *Aristotle's Ethics and Politics, Volume II*, edited by John Gillies, 4. London: Printed for T. Cadrell and W. Davies. Many pro-slavery advocates appealed to Aristotelian ethics to justify slavery. See Roberts, Jennifer. 1994. *Athens on Trial: The Antidemocratic Tradition in Western Thought*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

40. Gillies, John. "Introduction." In *Aristotle's Ethics and Politics, Volume II*, edited by John Gillies, 2.

who may exercise a delegated sovereignty.’⁴¹ The logical consequence of Locke’s theory is the chaotic and socially subversive notion of ‘universal suffrage’.⁴²

Rather than the pernicious theory of natural rights, Gillies prefers to see political society through an Aristotelian lens, as the natural construction of a body whose members have designated roles and stations according to their unique capacities and, more poignantly, their *unequal* values.⁴³ It is absurd, he writes, to assume that a commonwealth could be formed ‘from elements of equal value, or of equal dignity’; such an experiment is like ‘composing a piece of music from one and the same note’.⁴⁴ Gillies’s argument had nontrivial implications for institutions of domination and social subordination. He continues, ‘[a] difficult question follows, how far social inequality, whether civil of domestic, may be allowed to extend? It is with a trembling hand that I touch the delicate subject of slavery; an undertaking to which nothing could encourage me, but the utmost confidence in the humanity as well as in the judgment of my author [Aristotle].’⁴⁵ If society is a natural organ, melded together out of unequal elements, it is quite possible that extreme differentials of status and station would not only be possible, but in some sense necessary and desirable. He goes on to affirm Aristotle’s theory of natural slavery, which holds that slavery is morally permissible when the master is benevolent and there is a symbiotic relationship between the slave and him. He explains that

the good of the master may indeed be the primary object; but the benefit of the servant or slave is also a necessary result; since he only is naturally and justly a slave whose powers are competent to mere bodily labour; who is capable of listening to reason, but incapable of exercising that sovereign faculty; and whose weakness and short-sightedness are so great, that it is safer for him to be guided or governed through life by the prudence and judgment of another.⁴⁶

41. *ibid.*, 3.

42. *ibid.*

43. As will be seen, these arguments were quite common. Prominent pro-slave advocate James Henry Hammond, critiquing the natural rights framework, notes that ‘[n]othing could be more vague, uncertain, metaphysical, and shadowy, than such a proposition as this.’ He rejected the view that rights could exist prior to the state, and that what are often called ‘individual rights’ are really nothing more than ‘individual pretensions, passions, and desires, mistaken for rights.’ Hammond, James H. 1866. “On the Relations of the States, Delivered in the Senate of the United States, May 21, 1860.” In *Selections from the Letters and Speeches of the Hon. James H. Hammond*, 358–68. New York: John F. Trow & Co.

44. Gillies, John. “Introduction.” In *Aristotle’s Ethics and Politics, Volume II*, edited by John Gillies, 7.

45. *ibid.*, 7–8.

46. *Ibid.*, 9.

For Gillies, since individuals are not ‘independent but constituent elements’ of society, it is no injustice if that society requires certain members to work in ‘the lowest of all occupations, domestic servitude.’⁴⁷ There is no pre- or extra-political criteria of evaluation, as Locke had argued, but rather the needs and health, the *telos*, of society itself. Under a properly conceived Aristotelian polity, Gillies concludes, the ‘sacred trust’ of government, both civil and domestic, ‘is totally incompatible with the supposed unalienable rights of all men to be self-governed.’⁴⁸

George Fitzhugh — a Virginia lawyer whose pro-slavery writing had ‘aroused the ire of Lincoln more than most pro-slavery books’⁴⁹ — also had very few kind words for Locke. He derides Locke as ‘the father of all modern infidelity’, as a thinker who should be treated ‘as a political pedagogue, as a presumptuous charlatan, who [is] as ignorant of the science or practice of government as any shoemaker or horse jockey’.⁵⁰ Locke’s arguments, he continues, are ‘a tissue of the grossest and most palpable absurdities and puerilities, from beginning to end.’⁵¹ Fitzhugh specifically targets Locke’s theory of human equality which, he points out, ‘was plagiarized *literatim et verbatim* by Mr. Jefferson, and incorporated in the Declaration of Independence and put into active force in the Chicago Platform, on which Mr. Lincoln was nominated’.⁵² According to Fitzhugh, Lockean principles had fundamentally tainted the American experiment, and they stood in opposition to the Constitution. Fitzhugh saw the ‘Southern Revolution of 1861’, i.e., the U.S. Civil War, as ‘reactionary and conservative’, namely a political movement *against* the ideological foundations of Locke and Jefferson; the war was an attempt to ‘[roll] back the excesses of Reformation — of reformation renounced, a solemn protest against the doctrines of natural liberty, human equality and the social contracts as taught by Locke and the American sages of 1776.’⁵³

Central to Fitzhugh’s argument was that ‘no heresy in moral science has been more pregnant of mischief than’ Locke’s theory of the social contract.⁵⁴ Locke’s formulation is a problem, Fitzhugh assumes, because, as Gillies had warned, it supposes that there was a condition prior to society and that men joined together

47. *ibid.*

48. *ibid.*, 9–10.

49. Herndon, William. 2016. “126. To Jesse W. Weik.” In *Herndon on Lincoln: Letters*, edited by Douglas Wilson and Rodney Davis, 159. Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press.

50. Fitzhugh, George. 1867. “Revolutions of ‘76 and ‘61 Contrasted.” *De Bow’s Review* 4: 36–47.

51. *ibid.*, 39.

52. *ibid.*, 40.

53. *ibid.*, 42.

54. Fitzhugh, George. 1854. *Sociology for the South, or the Failure of Free Society*, 25. Richmond, VA: A. Morris.

to form political communities to maintain natural liberties independent of that society. Fitzhugh rejects this view, arguing instead that no one 'has rights whatever, as opposed to the interests of society and that society may very properly make any use of him that will redound to the public good. Whatever rights he has are subordinate to the good of the whole; and he has never ceded rights to it, for he was born its slave, and had no rights to cede.'⁵⁵

As Gillies had argued above, since man's original condition is always already a social one – there are no rights antecedent to society because there is no transition into a social contract – every person is born already subjected to the will of society.⁵⁶ According to this view, we are all born slaves of a kind, dominated and coerced by the many demands that society places on us. However, within this framework it would be necessary for certain 'superior' members to be elevated to positions of authority and benevolent service. Fitzhugh, attempting to downplay the obvious extremity of this hierarchy, denies this is the privilege that it may seem. It is, after all, the wealthy and virtuous property owners who were saddled with the duty, indeed burden, to manage and care for the slaves in their charge. With an evasive irony, Fitzhugh claims these managers of estates were the true slaves in society, as they carry the responsibility of providing for their underlings.⁵⁷

Fitzhugh is here reproducing a widely held line of thinking, previously formulated by Thomas Dew, the pro-slavery president of William and Mary College, and John Calhoun, former Vice President under John Quincy Adams and then Andrew Jackson, namely that laboring slaves were actually 'free' because they were liberated from the day-to-day worries of economic and self-management. Dew had argued that 'the laborer in this hard condition is already a slave, or rather in a situation infinitely worse than slavery – he is subjected to all the hardships and degradation of the slave, and derives none of the advantages.'⁵⁸ Along these same lines, in a speech to the U.S. Senate, Calhoun contrasted the poorhouses of Europe with the wellbeing of southern slaves. He writes:

There is and always has been in an advanced stage of wealth and civilization, a conflict between labour and capital. The condition of society in the South exempts us from the disorders and dangers resulting from this

55. *ibid.*, 25–6.

56. For a similarly framed attack against Locke, see Smith, William Andrew. 1856. *Lectures on the Philosophy and Practice of Slavery*, 66–9. Nashville, TN: Stevenson and Evans.

57. Pro-slavery apologists often made semantic arguments like this to suggest either that there was technically no slavery in the South or that masters were the true slaves. See Seabury, Samuel. 1861. *American Slavery Distinguished from the Slavery of English Theorists and Justified by the Law of Nature*. New York: Mason Brothers.

58. Dew, Thomas. 1849. *An Essay on Slavery*, 22. Richmond: J.W. Randolph. See also, Grayson, William. 1856. *Hireling and the Slave*. Charleston, SC: McCarter & Co.

conflict; and which explains why it is that the political condition of the slave-holding States has been so much more stable and quiet than that of the North.⁵⁹

Like Dew and Calhoun, Fitzhugh contentiously argued that the free competition of labor, imposed on the South by northern capitalists, would ultimately unsettle these social relations and eventually transform African slaves into little more than wage slaves.⁶⁰ Southern slavery, he claimed, was not only much less cruel than northern factories, but it served to liberate man from the burden of self-rule.⁶¹ He writes, '[s]lavery relieves our slaves of these cares altogether, and slavery is a form, and the very best form, of socialism.'⁶² These were the sardonic, tongue-in-cheek type of arguments he was fond of making given the many so-called 'socialist' commitments of northern abolitionists. Continuing in this antagonism, he claimed that African slavery 'is a beautiful example of communism, where each one receives not according to his labor, but according to his wants.'⁶³

Locke's theory does so much mischief, Fitzhugh claims, because it fosters 'the love of personal liberty and freedom.'⁶⁴ This is a theme that runs throughout Fitzhugh's work, but one he takes up most directly in *Cannibals All!* (1857), which was perhaps *the* most provocative pro-slavery text of this period. He writes, 'the true vindication of slavery must be founded on his theory of man's social nature, as opposed to Locke's theory of the Social Contract, on which latter Free Society rests for support.'⁶⁵ Fitzhugh argues that Locke's claim of natural liberty simply gives rise to a new form of slavery. The wealthy elite in free society will still own the best lands and have control of most of civilization's resources. Instead of being nurtured and cared for by masters, 'free' workers will need to struggle and grovel at the feet of their capitalist overlords. He writes, 'What is falsely called Free Society, is a very recent invention. It proposes to make the weak, ignorant

59. Calhoun, John. 1856. "On the Reception of Abolition Petitions, Delivered in the Senate, February 6th, 1837." In *Reports and Public Letters of John C. Calhoun*, edited by Richard K. Crallé, 625–33. New York: D. Appleton and Company.

60. For a popular, pro-Lockean economic argument for abolishing slavery reacting to these types of arguments, see Helper, Hinton Rowan. 1857. *The Impending Crisis of the South: How to Meet It*. New York: Brudick Brothers.

61. For contemporaneous commentary on economic 'white slavery', see Cobden, John. 1853. *The White Slaves of England*. Buffalo: Derby, Orton and Mulligan.

62. Fitzhugh, George. 1854. *Sociology for the South, or the Failure of Free Society*, 27–8.

63. *ibid.*, 29. For an extended discussion of the 'socialist' or 'communist' linkages with abolitionism, see Fitzhugh, George. 1857. *A Controversy on Slavery between George Fitzhugh, Esq., of Virginia, and A. Hogeboom, Esq., of New York*. Oneida: Printed at the Oneida Sacrem Office.

64. Fitzhugh, George. 1854. *Sociology for the South, or the Failure of Free Society*, 29.

65. Fitzhugh, George. 1857. *Cannibals All! Or, Slaves without Masters*, xxi–xxii. Richmond, VA: A. Moris.

and poor, free, by turning them loose in a world owned exclusively by the few (whom nature and education have made strong, and whom property has made stronger,) to get a living.’⁶⁶

Fitzhugh concludes that the allure of a free society could only ever be a cruel deception, one played against slaves and the working poor. He explains, ‘As modern civilization advances, slavery becomes daily more necessary, because its tendency is to accumulate all capital in a few hands, cuts off the masses from the soil, lessens their wages and their chances of employment, and increases the necessity for a means of certain subsistence, which slavery alone can furnish, when a few own all the lands and other capital.’⁶⁷ Industrialized, capitalist society, he contends, proves that southern slavery is more humane than northern wage slavery. According to Fitzhugh, Lockean liberty generates unrealistic expectations and obscures the fact that we are all born slaves to civilization. The greater cruelty, however, is that ideas like natural liberty and the social contract give us false assurances; it transforms us into, as the subtitle to his book suggests, ‘slaves without masters’. Without the benevolent protection of plantation masters, both White and Black laborers would be forced to fend for themselves against rapacious and vicious factory bosses. To this end, he argues it would be better if the institution of slavery were *expanded* to include not only Blacks but poor Whites as well, establishing a kind of feudal socialism modeled on the slave plantation. Elsewhere he contends that the masses of mankind ‘need masters, or censors, or Spanish inquisitions, or King Alfreds, tithing-men, or the early witch-hanging and Quaker-hanging clergy of New England. The mass must have masters of some sort—must have men about them whose “will stands for law.”’⁶⁸

Many slave apologists of this period believed wage labor was a far worse kind of slavery. Henry Hughes, a lawyer, early American sociologist, slavocrat, and Mississippi state senator, made a similar case. Though he does not specifically target Locke, he simply dismisses him out of hand; ‘I examined Locke [...] I confess disappointment.’⁶⁹ In his critical formulations, he rebuffs a Lockean system of free labor which, he argues, is an enemy to political liberty and should be eliminated. Instead, he suggests, ‘[f]ree-labor must therefore process into a system of liberty-labor.’⁷⁰ For Hughes, ‘liberty-labor’ was best characterized by what he calls ‘warranteeism’, a relationship not unlike Aristotelian natural slav-

66. *ibid.*, 108.

67. *ibid.*, 46.

68. Fitzhugh, George. 1857. *A Controversy on Slavery between George Fitzhugh, Esq., of Virginia, and A. Hogeboom, Esq., of New York*, 6–7.

69. Quoted in Lyman, Stanford. 1985. “Henry Hughes and the Southern Foundations of American Sociology.” In *The Selected Writing of Henry Hughes: Antebellum Southerner, Slavocrat, Sociologist*, edited by Stanford Lyman, 1–72. Jackson MS: University Press of Mississippi.

70. Hughes, Henry. 1854. *Treatise on Sociology; Theoretical and Practical*, 187. Philadelphia: Lip-pincott, Grambo & Co.

ery, which sees the warrantor and warrantee working reciprocally for the moral and economic benefit of the state. Like Fitzhugh, Hughes sought to exploit the tensions in Locke's thinking that arise between political liberty, scarcity of property, and the conditions of economic security to show that these conflicts are best managed through an institution of benevolent administration, again a kind of feudal socialism, where caretakers or magistrates govern and protect those in their charge. These managers, unsurprisingly, broadly aligned with the structure of southern plantations. Hughes only nominally differentiates the system he was advocating for from the coercive slavery that existed in the South. Even if it had not yet attained perfect warranteeism, the South, unlike the North, he supposed, was progressing to such an economic arrangement that, as Fitzhugh had argued, would eventually assimilate both poor Whites and Blacks into the same laboring class under the auspice of a competent warrantor. Of course, this development was only guaranteed if society was not deluded by false hopes of Lockean individualism and baseless promises of economic liberty.

Albert Taylor Bledsoe, a southern academic and one of the chief architects of the Lost Cause of the Confederacy,⁷¹ directly assaulted the Lockean natural rights scheme. He noted that '[i]t seems to have become a political maxim that civil liberty is no other than a certain portion of our natural liberty, which has been carved therefrom, and secured to us by the protection of the laws.'⁷² The trouble with this definition, for Bledsoe, was that there seemed to be a rather stark and contradictory shift from Locke's natural to civil liberty. He writes, '[s]hall we sacrifice this divine gift, then, in order to secure the blessings of civil society? Shall we abridge or mutilate the image of God, stamped upon the soul at its creation, by which we are capable of knowing and obeying his law, in order to secure the aid and protection of man?'⁷³ The fallacy at the heart of Locke's thinking, Bledsoe suggests, is that the law of nature is not a real, much less a realistic, limitation to human behavior. Much as Hobbes had noted, what precipitates the shift to civil society is not the beauty and wisdom of natural liberty, but the unstable natural tyranny of man. He writes, '[t]hus, having loosed the bonds and marred the beauty of natural liberty, he was prepared to see it, now become so "wild and savage," offered up as a sacrifice on the altar of civil liberty.'⁷⁴ The need for restraint, judgment, and security stemmed from the evil passions of

71. For more on the relationship between Fitzhugh and Bledsoe, see Barnhart, Terry. 2011. *Albert Taylor Bledsoe: Defender of the Old South and Architect of the Lost Cause*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press.

72. Bledsoe, Albert Taylor. 1857. *An Essay on Liberty and Slavery*, 13. Philadelphia: J.B. Lippincott & Co. For a defense of Locke against Bledsoe, see Shaw, Charles. 1857. *Is Slavery a Blessing? A Reply to Prof. Bledsoe's Essay on Liberty and Slavery*. Boston: John P. Jewett & Co.

73. Bledsoe, Albert Taylor. 1857. *An Essay on Liberty and Slavery*, 15.

74. *ibid.*, 16.

men that infect humans on a fundamental level. This is the terrible product of 'natural liberty', which can only be properly managed in civil society.

Bledsoe argues, '[i]t is evident, we think, that Locke has been betrayed into no little inaccuracy and confusion of thought from not having distinguished between rights and liberty.'⁷⁵ If we possess natural rights in a state of nature, it would be odd to suggest that the performance of our natural liberties would so quickly inhibit the actualization of those rights. Why should acting on our God-ordained natural liberty inevitably lead to disorder and the need for civil laws and a neutral judge? Instead, Bledsoe claims that it would be simpler and less contradictory to argue that society is simply the antidote to man's natural tyrannies, conceptualized as our sinful nature: '[s]ociety interposes the strong arm of the law to protect our rights, to secure us in the enjoyment of them.'⁷⁶ Bledsoe's argument is that since the shift from the state of nature to civil society did not represent a transfer of rights and liberties but the true attainment of security from natural tyranny, there is no question of infringing inalienable rights within the political community, an ironic and apparently unconscious concession to the Hobbesian framework he is criticizing.⁷⁷ Locke was apparently a bad Hobbesian. Civil society does not abridge rights; it offers clear limits to our sinful nature and gives proper expression to the only liberty worth the name. For Bledsoe, rights come from God, and therefore cannot be reduced to mere social constructs. They are, however, given relative expression through and with reference to the needs of civil society. Society itself must principally be seen as a constrictive tool, designed by God, to restrain man's evil nature. This means that rights and liberties must reflect the needs of society, rather than some indubitable notion of human equality or dignity rooted in a nebulous and uncertain pre-political framework of natural rights.

For Bledsoe, society is for collective security and prosperity, not a Lockean fetishization of individual liberty. He points out that it was widely accepted that 'society has the right to deprive any subject of either life or liberty' for reasons of the common good.⁷⁸ This shows that despite what Locke and Jefferson might say, 'life and liberty' were *not* inalienable rights and therefore cannot be the founding logic of society. They are routinely sacrificed for the public good according to the needs of civilization. If one grants, therefore, that natural liberty is a tyranny and that the law and the regulating effects of the social order are the only bulwarks against chaos and disorder, this suggests, much as Fitzhugh had argued above, that individuals can be organized in whatever way is most

75. *ibid.*, 32.

76. *ibid.*

77. For a similar argument, though principally directed at Thomas Jefferson, see Harper, Chancellor William. 1838. *Memoir on Slavery*, 8–14. Charlestown: Published by James Burges.

78. Bledsoe, Albert Taylor. 1857. *An Essay on Liberty and Slavery*, 36.

compatible with human security in the broadest sense. From this position, Bledsoe sets up the argument he will defend in the rest of the book: '[h]ence, if it be shown that the public good, and especially the good of the slave, demands such a law, then the question of slavery will be settled.'⁷⁹

Finally, in Robert Dabney's *A Defence of Virginia* (1867), he follows a very similar line of anti-Lockean reasoning set out by those above. He also argues that the 'opposition to slavery rests upon a radical and disorganizing scheme of human rights, is but Jacobinism in disguise, and involves a denial of all authority whatsoever.'⁸⁰ He concludes that the pernicious theory of the social contract, first established by Hobbes and then developed by Locke, is essentially atheistic and therefore an affront to God and the true basis of society. He explicitly laments Locke's influence given the 'mischievous and atheistical doctrines' he produced.⁸¹ The essential flaw to Locke's theory, Dabney claims, is that it assumes 'each person is by nature an independent *integer*, wholly *sui juris*, absolutely equal to every other man, and naturally entitled, as a "Lord of Creation," to exercise his whole will.'⁸² Even though Locke seeks to mute this 'monstrous postulate' by claiming that we have a duty to the law of reason, the practical effect of this formulation was that the individual could technically do 'whatever he wished' in the state of nature, a perfectly heretical basis for the transition into political society.⁸³ Dabney concludes that it is from 'this vicious theory of human rights, that abolitionism sucks its whole life.'⁸⁴

Contrary to Locke's 'impotent and infidel theory of government', Dabney claims we should trace 'civil government, then, not to any social contract, or other human expediency, but to the will and providence of God, and to original moral obligation.'⁸⁵ He continues, '[a] perfectly just government would be one which

79. *ibid.*, 39. Edward Coit Rogers attacks this position by appealing to Locke: '[b]ut you reply that "slavery is not iniquitous," that it is "a divine institution," and therefore may be legalized. So said the English Tories. But Locke answered, "He who attempts to get another man into his absolute power, does thereby put himself into a state of war with him, and thus "being the aggressor, forfeits his own freedom."' Rogers, Edward Coit. 1855. *Letters on Slavery Addressed to the Pro-Slavery Men of America*, 66–7. Boston: Bela Marsh.

80. Dabney, Robert. 1867. *A Defence of Virginia*, 241–42. New York: E.J. Hale & Son.

81. *ibid.*, 242.

82. *ibid.* It was common for pro-slavery advocates to link God's formal sanctioning of slavery in scripture with American slavery. Accordingly, a denial of slavery was seen as a denial of scripture. James Henry Hammond, in his many exchanges with anti-slavery groups, based his argument most centrally on scripture. He writes, 'I think, then, I may safely conclude, and I firmly believe, that American slavery is not only not a sin, but especially commanded by God through Moses, and approved by Christ through His Apostles.' Hammond, James H. 1866. "Two Letters on the Subject of Slavery in the United States, Addressed to Thomas Clarkson." In *Selections from the Letters and Speeches of the Hon. James H. Hammond*, 114–98. New York: John F. Trow & Co.

83. Dabney, Robert. 1867. *A Defence of Virginia*, 242.

84. *ibid.*, 249.

85. *ibid.*, 250–51.

would allot to each citizen freedom to do all the things which he had a moral right to do, and nothing else.⁸⁶ And since ‘persons differ indefinitely in powers, knowledge, virtue, and natural relations to each other’, their moral rights should reflect these ‘innate’ differences.⁸⁷ In effect, if properly conceived, this would mean that society should be ordered around unequal distributions of rank and social value, that is, since ‘true equality itself, demands a varied distribution of social privilege among the members, according to their different characters and relations.’⁸⁸ Much like the appeals to Aristotle by those above, Dabney concludes that the God-ordained system of moral rights is perfectly compatible with the so-called benevolent administration of slaves and domestic servants. By ‘unmasking’ the ‘hideous affinities’ of anti-slavery theory, the premises of which logically lead to universal suffrage and the conferral of absolute equality to ‘all sexes and conditions’, Dabney exposes Locke as a ‘lawless atheist’.⁸⁹ And what is more, since Thomas Jefferson had ‘drank too deeply into the spirit of Locke’s political writings’, he too ‘contracted a fondness for atheistical philosophy’ which was responsible for the corrosive and utopian Lockean fantasies at the heart of American politics.⁹⁰

Conclusion

Since the mid-twentieth century, it has become common to see Locke as a contaminating influence on western political thought. He has been conspicuously recast as one who offers intellectual cover to a rapacious master class set on colonial dispossession and the brutally exploitative extraction of labor from slaves and servants, what C.B. Macpherson famously described as Locke’s ‘possessive individualism’.⁹¹ These reformulated genealogies have led to the widespread belief, succinctly expressed by Jennifer Greeson, that ‘modern slave capitalism’ traces back to Locke.⁹² Contemporary lineages of domination like these often con-

86. *ibid.*, 252.

87. *ibid.*, 255.

88. *ibid.*, 256.

89. *ibid.*, 261–62.

90. *ibid.*, 271.

91. Macpherson, C.B. 1962. *The Political Theory of Possessive Individualism*, 271. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

92. Greeson, Jennifer. 2012. “The Prehistory of Possessive Individualism.” *Modern Language Association* 127 (4): 918–24. Along these same lines, Kapoor argues, “[t]his Atlantic economy, as incubator of global capitalist relations, conceived, justified and defended by Locke, hinged upon the “slave plantation complex” that was developed on land taken from Native Americans, was run by slave labor imported from Africa and existed for the sole purpose of producing a cash crop for export.’ Kapoor, Dip. 2022. “Critical Adult Education in the (Neo)colonies: Racial/Colonial Capitalist and Social Movement Ontologies of Land.” In *The Palgrave Handbook on Critical Theories of Education*, edited by Ali Abdi and Greg Misiasek, 571–88. Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave.

strue Locke as a uniquely corrosive thinker with a perniciously enduring influence, one that traces in unbroken sequence from America's colonial founding to today. Such narratives, however, often have a limited historical appreciation for just how dynamic and variable intervening discourses were. The suspicion that we have in some fundamental sense received an unjust world from Locke or Lockean ideas overlooks the ways in which his legacy has been constantly reinterpreted and repurposed for context-specific reasons. This is particularly true in reference to Locke's relationship with the abolitionist movement.

This essay shows that both symbolically and in terms of the anti-slavery elements embedded in his theory, Locke played a much more prominent role in the abolitionist discourse than commonly appreciated. As Curti had established at the outset of the twentieth century, Locke was widely viewed as the basis for humanitarian thinking throughout the nineteenth century. This was partially corroborated by the numerous, and largely successful, attempts to 'vindicate' Locke's reputation on the matter of slavery in the first few decades of the century. But much more definitively, Locke's influence can be seen in the rabid opposition he faced by southern defenders of slavery. Their hostility to abolition and emancipation was predicated on a calculated and brutal resistance to Locke's universalist claims of equality and individual rights. Quite critically, Gillies, Fitzhugh, Hughes, Bledsoe and Dabney—some of the most vocal and influential slave apologists in the nineteenth century—developed their slavocrat visions explicitly in opposition to Locke's ideas of natural liberty and express consent. They argued that seeing society as designed to protect and secure individual liberties was a novel and unsustainable development in the history of political thought, what Fitzhugh mockingly derided as an 'ephemeral Utopia'.⁹³ For this reason, members of what Hartz identified as the 'reactionary enlightenment' were enemies of Locke, and they attacked him as such.

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

93. Fitzhugh, George. 1867. "Revolutions of '76 and '61 Contrasted," *De Bow's Review* 4: 43.

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