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Was Locke a Liberal?

————— ◆ —————
JEROME HUYLER

For more than thirty years social scientists have been debating the relative influence of two ideological “languages,” liberalism and republicanism, on past periods and important literary productions. Modern communitarians vie with contemporary liberals, hoping to retrieve vital elements of the republican tradition in order to ameliorate what they perceive to be the coarser aspects of liberal, capitalist life. The contributors to this conversation, however, sometimes seem trapped in a quagmire of confusion and dissension. These difficulties are hardly surprising in light of the frequent and simultaneous appearance of the ostensibly competing idioms—firm liberal commitments alongside clear republican concerns—in so many of the same political texts and revolutionary proclamations.¹

Much of the problem lies in the very conceptual tools we take to our intellectual trades. In exploring the historical influence, exposing the contemporary crises, and debating the moral merits of liberalism as a monolithic social structure, we too often overlook the many important tensions that divide various and unnecessarily elusive liberal visions. And we miss the opportunity to weigh carefully enough the fuller meaning (and potential promise) of the speculative systems many thoughtful theorists labored to leave behind.

In reviewing the extensive literature surrounding the contemporary liberal-communitarian debate, it became clear to me that this much-attended scholarly dialogue is predicated on a peculiar estimate of what lib-

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1. The defining document of America’s Revolutionary Age, Jefferson’s immortal Declaration, is but a compendium of republican concerns and complaints affixed to a Lockean doctrine of natural right. For Jefferson, it was all the common sense of the day.

The Independent Review, Vol.I, No.4, Spring 1997, ISSN 1086-1653, Copyright © 1997, pp. 523-542

eralism represents and recommends. Having spent a good deal of time reconstructing John Locke's liberal philosophy, I realized that something is definitely amiss. It dawned on me that Locke, so often pronounced the founding father of modern liberalism, would not choose to champion a liberalism that is what liberalism's communitarian critics suggest or say it is. Yet even liberalism's defenders have failed to remove the burdensome baggage loaded onto liberalism's beleaguered back. I propose to reassess the liberalism that has received so much recent scholarly attention by posing the question: If this is liberalism, was Locke a liberal?

In reconstructing the assumptions made about liberalism I shall revisit a number of fairly worn sources, including Sabine, Strauss, and Polanyi. Although many of their conclusions have been challenged and rejected, their formulations have been highly influential in shaping current attitudes and presuppositions about liberalism, capitalism, and Locke.

In this paper, then, I shall focus on Lockean liberalism precisely because a more careful reading of Locke's life and thought will reveal a socially active, intellectually commanding liberal theorist thoughtfully rejecting many of the major premises and features now commonly associated with liberalism (and, all too often, with Locke). In Locke's words and deeds, we encounter a leading liberal openly embracing and sometimes demanding human activities and relationships now commonly considered illiberal.

The practical usefulness of this kind of inquiry should not be underestimated. By more cautiously considering the complex, intellectually comprehensive vision of so thoughtful a liberal theorist, we may not only equip ourselves to resolve perplexing public disputes but also find a powerful tool for reforming some problematic aspects of contemporary political practice.

Locke, Liberalism, and Atomism

Essential to much contemporary discussion is the settled view that liberalism embraces a commitment to a vulgar individualism. Liberal man or woman is often presented as a social "atom," a being bereft of deep or enduring communal ties and obligations. Egoists, wholly preoccupied with their own self-interest and supremely acquisitive, liberals expect government to serve them, not the other way around. The state should be an impartial umpire, tolerating and supporting individuals in the pursuit of their personal purposes or life plans. What would Locke say of such a state of affairs? Traditionally, it has been supposed that he would heartily endorse it. Yes, it is Thomas Hobbes who most vocally depicts the barbarous egoist in the social environment—a war-weary state of "all against all...that ceaseth only in death." But scholars have often failed to find any less bellicose a being or

hostile a social environment in Locke's imagined state of nature.

If in nothing else, Hobbes and Locke agreed in their common design to ground civil society in a social contract signed by free and equal men rather than in a patriarchal theory that conferred divine-right grace on any sitting monarch.² Locke, far more than Hobbes, emphasized human rationality and the capacity to be guided by reason. The life of reason might even produce perpetual peace and tranquility, were it not for the few degenerate men who turn themselves into wild jungle beasts. But scholars became skeptical of a Lockean dualism that identified human nature as both rational and peaceful and "quarrelsome and contentious." Drawing out the full implications of Locke's discussion "Of Property," two of the twentieth century's most influential Lockean scholars, Leo Strauss (1953) and C. B. Macpherson (1962), projected a resolutely self-serving being inhabiting Locke's natural state. In his highly influential history of political thought, George H. Sabine (1937), schooled generations of budding scholars in the same approach.

[Locke's] theory, in all its social and political implications, was as egoistic as that of Hobbes....[t]he two men fastened on social theory the presumption that individual self-interest is clear and compelling, while a public or a social interest is thin and unsubstantial. Perhaps the influence of Locke, precisely because it was less aware of its principles, was the more insidious.... Instead of a law enjoining the common good of a society, Locke set up a body of innate indefeasible, individual rights which limit the competence of the community and stand as bars to prevent interference with the liberty and property of private persons. (528–29)

This ready identification of liberalism (and Locke) with a stark individualism proceeds from more than just the association with Hobbes. The emphasis on egoism would become a staple of post-Lockean liberal thought. At first, though, it would be identified with a common good. The greatest good of the greatest number could be had, Adam Smith and Jeremy Bentham believed, if only individuals were set free to pursue their own good and allowed to enjoy the fruit of their labors. Permit such liberty, Bernard de Mandeville had urged, and private vices could be transformed into public virtues. The passions could be tamed and put to sound social use if people were allowed to pursue the peaceful commercial trades (Hirshmann 1977; Myers 1983). It was an outlook that later liberalism would progressively

2. The most prominent divine-right theory of the time was that of Sir Robert Filmer, written during the English Civil War and first put into print on behalf of Stuart absolutism in 1679. Locke's explicit purpose was to refute Filmer and rescue the competing consent or contract theory from Filmer's scathing assault (Schochet 1975, 115–58).

overturn (J. S. Mill [1838] 1962, 78–125; Bramsted and Melhuish 1978, 25–29, 271–78). In the era of early industrialization many looked with dark foreboding on the development of the individualist proclivity.³

In the same vein, many contemporary scholars who associate egoism or self-interest with liberalism, and liberalism with Locke, are also critical of its or his influence on human affairs. The division of labor might be economically productive (periodic panics and plunges aside), but the fracturing of society that accompanies liberalism's "progress" makes it a breeding ground for alienation and social conflict. "To separate labor from other activities of life and to subject it to the laws of the market," Karl Polanyi (1944) wrote, "was to annihilate all organic forms of existence and to replace them by a different type of organization, an atomistic and individualistic one" (163).

To allow the market mechanism to be sole director of the fate of human beings and their natural environment, indeed, even of the amount and use of purchasing power, would result in the demolition of society. For the alleged commodity "labor power" cannot be shoved about, used indiscriminately, or even left unused, without affecting also the human individual who happens to be the bearer of this peculiar commodity. In disposing of a man's labor power the system would, incidentally, dispose of the physical, psychological, and moral entity "man" attached to that tag. Robbed of the protective covering of cultural institutions, human beings would perish from the effects of social exposure; they would die as the victims of acute social dislocation through vice, perversion, crime, and starvation.... But no society could stand the effects of such a system of crude fictions even for the shortest stretch of time unless its human and natural substance as well as its business organization was protected against the ravages of this satanic mill.
(73)

In short, Polanyi (1944) concluded, "The Industrial Revolution was causing a social dislocation of stupendous proportions, and the problem of poverty

3. Summing up the view of the individual economic actor in the literature of the period, Myers (1983) writes:

Tucker sees him driven toward monopoly, and eventually poverty, by the insatiable appetite of self-interest. Smith describes his devious and conspiratorial nature and his corrupting influence on the economic policies of a great nation. Godwin finds him to be a rapacious exploiter of the laboring poor. Carlyle, with mordant raillery, ridicules the meanness of his interests, his calculating and utilitarian character. Dickens outlines strongly his primitive and thrusting nature on the one side, while emphasizing his cold and unemotional character on the other. For Ruskin economic man is the inhuman destroyer of those things giving meaning and quality to life.
(26)

was merely the economic aspect of this event" (129).

More recently, Theodore Lowi (1969) predicated his famous prophecy (his "end of liberalism" thesis) on a similar psychological estimate. For Lowi, liberal capitalist society is rent with atomizing impulses. The perpetual process of "differentiation" shatters not only liberal society but the individual personality. Thus "we are led to a confrontation with the two central sources of disequilibrium in industrial societies. They cannot be eliminated, but rather must somehow be controlled. These are alienation and conflict. They seem to be as much a part of capitalist practice as is the market" (19). As society splinters into a Heraclitean flux, a kaleidoscopic maze of roles, statuses, and interests, the toll taken on the human personality mounts:

Specialization [i.e., the steady multiplication of roles and statuses] reduces a person's chances of developing a whole personality; it can twist and depersonalize him or her. People thus become alienated from themselves; they become anomic. They also become alienated from other people—from their own families, from friends, from the community. Work becomes a mere matter of compulsion. People no longer own their own tools. Their labor, therefore they, become a commodity. Work can become separated from life, and life can become so divided and subdivided that one loses the human meaning of living. (19)

This is a very deleterious, if natural, tendency in modern societies. Lowi laments that "no longer do people grow up together, know exactly what to expect of one another, move in easy interactions by unconscious cues. Yet they must somehow interact, indeed more frequently and over a wider range of infinitely more complex expectations" (20). The "automatic or self-regulating mechanisms" break down, one by one, and society is left with the necessity of putting it back together again. Administration, what Lowi calls "the sine qua non of modernity," holds the key.

Polanyi's and Lowi's views are repeatedly echoed in the scholarly literature. For example, Christian Bay (1978) expresses regret that liberals (following Locke) "have placed on their humanistic pedestal a cripple of a man, a man without a moral or political nature; a man with plenty of contractual rights and obligations, perhaps, but a man without moorings in any real community, a drifter rather than a being with roots in species solidarity" (30). Similarly, Michael Walzer (1984) has written that under the liberal order the individual exists "wholly outside institutions and relationships and enters into them only when he or she chooses or as he or she chooses." That individual therefore "does not exist and cannot exist in any conceivable social world" (324). While diplomatically negotiating a union between the liberal and communitarian outlooks, Amy Gutmann (1992) defines liberal

society as one

in which no one does more or less than respect everyone else's liberal rights. People do not form ties of love and friendship.... They do not join neighborhood associations, political parties, trade unions, civic groups, synagogues, or churches. This might be a perfectly liberal, even a just society, but it is certainly not the best society to which we can aspire. (134)

No doubt. But does any of this social and psychological fracturing inescapably inhere in liberalism as such? Is it at all compatible with, say, Locke's views of human nature and social life? Judging by the example of Locke's life and the unmistakable thrust of his writings, we would have to say no, certainly not.

In fact, Locke repudiates the atomist viewpoint at its ontological root. The Lockean individual is anything but metaphysically alone and unencumbered. He is a rational animal (as he was for another apostle of community: Aristotle). But he is also a social animal, a being naturally fitted for society. Opening book 3 of *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, Locke ([1690] 1959) explains: "God, having designed man for a sociable creature, made him not only with an inclination, and under a necessity to have fellowship with those of his own kind, but furnished him also with language which was to be the great instrument and common tie of society"⁴ (bk. III, ch. 1, par. 1).

This remark should not come as a surprise. Locke, after all, did not fling himself into an untrammelled pursuit of private gain. He was not a poor man. He husbanded his resources, collected rents, lent money at interest, and invested modestly in commercial projects throughout his life. But by no stretch of the imagination did he lose himself in acquisitiveness and accumulation. Locke was one of the foremost social participants of his era, lending his considerable energies to a dizzying array of intellectual projects and, in many of them, collaborating eagerly with some of the leading lights of his day. Student of the esteemed physician, Thomas Sydenham, Fellow of the Royal Society, participant in an assortment of study and scientific groups and an avaricious correspondent, Locke was no less socially engaged than Aristotle before him or Karl Marx after him. Along with Francis Bacon, Locke believed that knowledge was a power to improve the conditions of life for generations to come, and that the cooperative search for and sharing of knowledge would facilitate its advance in the world. More than most, Locke availed himself of the steady opportunities for collaborative learning his

4. Thus we immediately see a distinction that can be drawn between Lockean liberalism and the neo-Kantian liberalism of John Rawls, Ronald Dworkin, and other modern antiperfectionists.

civilization offered. His writings respond to an immense array of critical questions that puzzled his contemporaries. Only a few currents of seventeenth-century thought did not sweep Locke along with them.

Consider the discourses to which Locke consciously contributed: (1) the natural law/divine right dialogue begun by Hugo Grotius and pursued by Robert Filmer, John Selden, Richard Cumberland, and Samuel von Pufendorf; (Tully 1980; Horne 1990); (2) the antimonarchical, resistance literature of Protestant Huguenots in France and such notable Scotsmen as George Buchanan (Skinner 1978, vol. 2); (3) the growing agronomic science pioneered by such Baconians as John Evelyn and Samuel Hartlib (Wood 1984); (4) the great debate over commercial and economic issues, such as coinage, interest rates, and the regulation of commerce that so occupied the attention of Locke's friend and Royal Society Fellow, Sir William Petty (Locke [1691] 1825); (5) the important experiments conducted by Locke's close friend and colleague, Robert Boyle, and later by Sir Isaac Newton (Locke edited Boyle's scientific papers); (6) the controversy within latitudinarian Anglicanism over comprehension for dissenters (Rogers 1992; Marshall 1992); (7) the thorny theological questions raised by the latitudinarians, and the project to identify the minimal principles of Christianity one would have to avow to be comprehended within the Anglican worship (Locke 1695a, 1705); and finally, (8) the important contribution Locke made in the field of education (Locke 1695b, 1706). Nothing in any of this reveals an afflicted soul, socially adrift, alienated and alone.

Locke also could be a generous and humane benefactor to those who needed and deserved encouragement. Lady Damaris Cudworth Mashom, perhaps the person who knew Locke best, wrote of her dear friend:

He was naturally compassionate and exceedingly charitable to those in want. But his charity was always directed to encourage working, laborious, industrious people, and not to relieve idle beggars, to whom he never gave anything.... People who had been industrious, but were through age or infirmity passed labour, he was very bountiful to...[believing not] that they should be kept from starving or extreme misery...[but that] they had, he said, a right to live comfortably in the world.⁵ (Amsterdam: Remonstrants' Mss. J. 57a, cited in Cranston 1985, 426)

Turning from the example of Locke's life to the moral recommendations in his writings, we again witness an individual devoted to charity and social affiliation. Locke made a clear and dramatic statement on the subject of charity in a brief essay titled "Venditio." Intended as a justification of

5. The distinction drawn by Locke between the deserving and undeserving poor reflects the attitude of the latitudinarians generally (Jacob 1976, 55).

unregulated market prices, it includes as well a critical caution: If a seller “extorts so much from...[his buyers’] present necessity as not to leave them the means of subsistence afterward he offends against the common rule of charity...and if any of them perish by reason of [his] extortion is no doubt guilty of murder” (Locke 1968, 86).

In his educational writings, Locke dramatically fills out his idea of how human beings should behave toward one another. Throughout his *Some Thoughts Concerning Education*, he seeks to inculcate a liberal and benevolent temperament. Although he perceives that “children, who live together, often strive for mastery,” Locke condemns such behavior and states that children “should be taught to have all the deference, complaisance, and civility one for the other imaginable.” They should be shown that instead of this “insolent domineering,” a benevolent care for others will “procure them respect, and that they lose no superiority by it, but on the contrary, they grow into love and esteem with every body” (1695b, 109). Locke enjoins parents and tutors to instill the virtue of “Liberality” in their charges: “As to the having and possessing of things, teach them to part with what they have easily and freely to their friends; and let them find by experience, that the most liberal has always most plenty, with esteem and accommodation to boot” (par. 110). Thus, “by a constant practice” of generous acts, Locke expects that “good-nature may be settled...into an habit, and [maturing children] may take pleasure, and pique themselves in being kind, liberal, and civil to others,” (par. 110) and he advises parents to instill in their progeny a “natural temper of benignity and compassion” toward others (par. 116).

None of these beliefs preclude the clear Lockean endorsement of industrious, lifelong labor and the free enjoyment of its fruits. Yet even the acquisitive proclivity must be subordinated to moral law and rational discipline: Reason teaches “that being all equal and independent, no one ought to harm another in his life, health, liberty or possessions” ([1690] 1965, par. 6). Men may discard reason, succumbing to their own unruly passions for riches or power and turning themselves into jungle beasts. True Levelers pressed by hard times may act so, as may sitting kings, puffed up by their own patriarchal pretensions. In this context Locke warns that “covetousness and the desire of having in our possession, and under our dominion, more than we have need of” is “the root of all evil” (1695b, par. 110). But despite Tully’s invocation of this language to argue for Locke’s commitment to Christian altruism (1980, 150), Locke does not intend to recommend altruistic sacrifice here. Rather, his advice bespeaks a generous temperament that really costs a person nothing. Locke (1695b) says: “Let [the child] sensibly perceive, that the kindness he shows to others is no ill husbandry for himself, but that it brings a return of kindness, both from those that receive it, and those who look on” (par. 110).

Although Locke certainly allows individuals to ambitiously augment their fortunes, or at least amass what would be called a decent competence, he does not gauge men's worth by their wealth. He castigated the wealthy lords of the Stuart court not just for their design to impose absolutism on England but for giving their lives to debauchery, gaming, and luxuriant idleness, and so squandering their natural and inherited resources. He happily befriended many a man of humble origins and means, such as Thomas Firmin and Isaac Newton, who laid claim to far more fame than fortune.

If we take liberalism to be unavoidably wedded to an "ethic" of narrow, selfish acquisitiveness (à la Marx or Macpherson), then we must conclude that Locke was no liberal. Lockean individuals are suited for society, and it is fitting that they function actively within it. Yes, human ingenuity would find an outlet for its private pursuits in a dizzying assortment of useful callings. But cooperative ventures of every imaginable description are possible and advisable. The honest and industrious application of one's endowments, not abundance of material possessions, matters most for Locke. The project was Baconian through and through. Constant improvement in the conditions of life was the universal desideratum ordained by divine providence, the key to "Preservation" in the fullest sense. Its pursuit would bring forth both the peaceful competition and the productive collaboration of socially active and commercially engaged Englishmen.

Liberalism versus Republicanism

A conception of liberal life as essentially solitary and brutish has a profound implication for political association. Liberalism, it is said, rudely undervalues civic virtue and depreciates the currency of participation. All the liberal wants from government is protection, and perhaps a few "encouragements." Now, Locke's strong political defense of property in the eleventh chapter of his *Second Treatise*, together with his stunning support in the fifth chapter for acquisitiveness and accumulation, should allow us to label Locke a liberal, and therefore to contrast this apostle of liberal capitalism with his more civic-spirited contemporaries, the modern apostles of republicanism. This republican creed, first advanced in the writings of Aristotle, Cicero, and Polybius, advertised in the famous *Lives of Plutarch*, then revived and revised in the modern works of Machiavelli and James Harrington, emphasized civic virtue and the good of the *res publica*. It is only the republican who, like Aristotle, finds his highest fulfillment in political participation or who, like Socrates, at least acknowledges duties to the community that gives one life, language, and social identity.

For decades scholars have debated the relative influence of the Lockean liberal and republican "paradigms" on the events that culminated in the

American founding. The question has been largely in the form of either/or. But as recent scholarship makes abundantly clear, the influence of both ideological outlooks is evident almost everywhere in the fateful period bridging America's exceptional birth and meteoric growth. In fact, this apparent "confusion and profusion of political tongues," as Kramnick (1988, 4) called it, was already an old development in 1776. The highly influential *Cato's Letters* (1720–23) combines liberal commitments and republican preoccupations in 144 tightly crafted essays (Pangle 1988; Hamowy 1992).⁶

But Lockean liberalism was present at the very birth of the modern republican tradition. Long ago, Pocock (1973, 115) pointed to the neo-Harringtonian turn that ideological developments took in Restoration England. He traced the dynamic new "Commonwealthman" ideology, which would exert so much influence on eighteenth-century radicalism, to the estate of Anthony Ashley Cooper, the first earl of Shaftesbury. Weary of the court's campaign against religious dissent and its treacherous treaties with the tyrannous French, and wary of the eventual accession of James Stuart, a practicing Catholic, Shaftesbury mounted a parliamentary campaign to bar James from succeeding his brother Charles II to the English throne. The interesting point is that from 1667, when Locke took up residence in the Cooper household, the champion of liberalism and radical individualism served as Shaftesbury's closest confidant and "assistant" political pen. As Maurice Cranston (1985) and Richard Ashcraft (1986) have clearly shown, Locke's *Two Treatises of Government* (which will be signified by ST henceforth in this article) was intended to serve the cause of exclusion and so serve Shaftesbury's important political purposes (toleration toward religious dissent and resistance to Stuart absolutism). Parliamentary bills were introduced, between 1679 and 1681, when King Charles II suspended Parliament and Shaftesbury saw the need to mount and defend a more radical movement. Supporting this movement was the contemporary aim of Locke's *Two Treatises* (Ashcraft 1986). Historically, then, Lockean liberalism and neo-Harringtonian republicanism are joined at the trunk. It is hardly surprising that Alan Craig Houston (1991, 224–25) discerned a Lockean stamp on Algernon Sidney, the great republican theorist and martyr. Similarly we should not overlook the supremely civic sacrifice Locke, the scion of "radical individualism," accepted for the sake of civil liberty and the good of his

6. Elsewhere, I argue (1995) that the two allegedly opposed ideological "idioms"—Lockean liberalism and republicanism—are not idioms and are not opposed. They are, rather, two sets of answers to two distinct sets of political questions. Republicanism contributes to the science of politics; Lockean liberalism belongs to the fundamentals of politics (or moral philosophy). They stand in relation as necessary means to the achievement of legitimate ends. Locke explicitly discusses this division of the branches of human understanding (esp. chap. 8).

commonwealth. What Shaftesbury, Locke, and thousands of other Englishmen feared and hoped to thwart was the prospect of a monarch religiously responsive to the authority of a foreign Pope and puffed up by a pretentious divine-right doctrine. It was a danger to be resisted at all costs, for it threatened liberty in the political and the private sense. A political tyranny of the Catholic kind augured religious intolerance, persecution, and conflict, as well as a dire disturbance to property and commercial freedom.

But Locke's public life neither began nor ended with his radical activities. In 1665 he accepted a diplomatic mission to the elector of Brandenburg. He held several public offices during his patron's tenure, first as chancellor of the exchequer and then as lord chancellor of England. Following the Glorious Revolution and though already in his sixties, Locke returned again to public service, as an active and esteemed member of England's Board of Trade. Indeed, it is not stretching things to say Locke devoted his entire life to patriotic service and the welfare of his country. Why else does one delve into the deepest and thorniest questions of metaphysics, morals, epistemology, and theology and, at considerable risk, put one's "dangerous" thoughts into print? Had Locke devoted even a large fraction of his considerable energies to narrow economic gain, he would no doubt have died, in 1704, one of England's wealthiest landed lords or commercial barons.

If Locke's life and writings exemplify liberalism, then at least one liberal project conforms to the republican blueprint in virtually every detail. What does that conformance say about liberalism, and about Locke? Can one cogently argue that Sidney and Shaftesbury were good "commonwealthmen" but Locke, who stood shoulder to shoulder with them, was an unbridled egoist? Locke perceived, as did liberal writers such as Smith and J. S. Mill, that individuals' fortunes are intimately tied to the fortunes of the polity in which they reside. Only under a limited constitutional government can rational people conduct the industrious lives that human preservation demands (and Locke's Maker ordains).⁷ Only under such conditions can

7. This argument raises an interesting distinction between Locke and neo-Kantian liberalism, which demands that only by eschewing a conception of the good life and fundamentally asserting each individual's right to determine his or her own life plan can a tolerant society sustain itself and not sink into intolerance and conflict. Once a liberal theory is rooted in some particular conception of the good, then that conception will ultimately prevail and those who evade its constraints will suffer for their recalcitrance. Yet Locke consciously established a fundamental conception of the good (comprising the will of a Christian Creator and the nature of His creation), while fashioning himself one of Western civilization's foremost champions of liberty and toleration. The character of reason, and the pivotal role Locke assigns to it, commands a liberal tolerance for unrestricted choice—and stiff civil sanctions for its violation. He asserts that

The Freedom then of Man and Liberty of acting according to his own Will, is grounded on his having Reason, which is able to instruct him in that Law he is to govern himself by, and make him know how far he is left to the freedom of his own will." (ST, par. 63)

individuals both worship according to their wills and happily pursue their callings. In sum, if liberalism is home to selfish citizens, apathetically ignorant of the civic duties that liberty and security demand, then Locke surely would not like to live there.

Locke, Capitalism, and Class Privilege

If we turn to the economic implications of Locke's liberal teaching, similar conceptual difficulties unavoidably emerge. Is Lockean liberalism compatible with capitalism? To a large extent, yes—but not entirely. It depends on what cache of practices and prizes one expects to find in such a political economy. Like liberalism, capitalism is conceptually complex, comprising a variety of ideas and social arrangements. Some of the features we commonly associate with liberal capitalism flow from Locke's fundamental premises, whereas others can only deny and defeat them. Insofar as he recommended an active, industrious life given to production, free trade, and industrious appropriation, Locke certainly seems an apostle of capitalism. Insofar as a market economy rests on the principle of private property and the sanctity of contract, Locke again serves as one of capitalism's stalwart defenders. Having a property in their own persons, all individuals are naturally at liberty to choose and pursue any suitable outlet for their industrious energies. In civil society all remain free to go after, get, keep, use, and dispose of the product of their exacting labors, be it the fruit of the vine they planted, the profits returned on their investments, or the wages for which their labor was contracted. All of this is property and all of this—however large, however little—is private. The right of disposal implies a commitment to the principle of contract and a due respect for its sanctity. And, because Lockean speculation starts from a premise of natural equality, which equal laws are to respect, the fundamental rights of one are the rights of all.

Here Locke's association with capitalism, at least as we conceive it, becomes tenuous. We stand before a peculiar conceptual fork in the historical road and, unlike Yogi Berra, we cannot simply take it. We must decide which path leads to Locke and which to capitalism. Do the two paths eventually connect or, at this peculiar juncture, do Locke and capitalism forever part company? The principle of property is legitimized insofar as it is universalized. And it is universal only insofar as it is handled as a resolute principle of equity applied to every species of property and to all property holders. As all persons are born with a natural property in themselves, upon reaching the age of discretion, all are entitled to an equal share of liberty.⁸ "Being all equal and independent," Locke says, "no one ought to harm another in his

8. For a compelling treatment of gender bias in Locke's thought and seventeenth-century life, see Carol Pateman (1988).

life, health, liberty or possessions” (ST, par. 6). Brought into civil society, this universal principle of property finds expression in an economic corollary: a free allowance for market relations in which labor and property are voluntarily exchanged. Like many economists of his day and the great classical economists to come, Locke perceived the sheer practical utility of free trade. We might call this system capitalism, except that virtually all capitalist societies have acted in some respects in defiance of the principles of equity, property, and free trade. The contentious questions of slavery, Native American populations, and gender inequity aside, many public “encouragements” have been awarded by governments to privileged segments of the economic community. Historically, both the ruling landed and the rising commercial classes have clamored and campaigned for such public emoluments. To the political victors invariably went the economic spoils.⁹ Although usually defended in the name of progress, prosperity, and the greatest good, all such legislation invariably benefits some individuals and classes at the expense of others.

But what does the political economy of capitalism, so understood, signify for the precept of liberal equality? And what would Locke say of such “class” legislation? Exactly which class or classes did Locke ever seek to politically accommodate? Examining the requirements of ideological debate in Restoration England, Ashcraft found Locke defending the emerging commercial classes, an interest group Shaftesbury needed to attract for his exclusion campaign. Locke roundly criticized the idle lifestyles of the landed, pro-court aristocrats, who conspired to foist divine-right absolutism on free Englishmen. However, in his *John Locke and Agrarian Capitalism*, Neal Wood (1984) pointed to Locke’s deep affinity for agriculture in general and for the landed interest in particular. Wood noticed Locke’s vocal antipathy to the leading commercial institutions of his day—the bank of England, stock jobbers, bankers, and the legal monopolies awarded to great and well-connected trading companies. When in the 1660s and again in the 1690s Sir Josiah Childs, speaking for England’s merchant classes, pressed for a plan to legally lower the rate of interest from 6 percent to 4 percent (ostensibly to promote investment and trade), Locke voiced strong opposition. He strongly objected to other economic interventions, such as Sir William Lounde’s proposal to alter (and debase) the coinage.

9. Such political inequality is reflected in a wide variety of historical patterns, including the distribution of public offices and public contracts in the age of Walpole, factional competition for public benefits in colonial America, the benefits that would accrue to nascent financiers and industrialists from Alexander Hamilton’s Reports or Henry Clay’s American System, and the triumph of “political capitalism” in the Republican-dominated post-Civil War era, which featured cash and land subsidies for the transcontinental railroads and strong tariff protection for privileged producers.

On what grounds did Locke condemn such public policies? Clearly a utilitarian quest to accomplish the greatest good for the greatest number is evident, as Locke exposed the self-defeating consequences of such interventions. But Locke's principal concern was more philosophical. The rejection of political privilege was ultimately grounded in Locke's deepest moral commitment to liberty and equality. The market rate of interest, he declared, should float as freely as the rate fetched by any other market commodity, such as land. The taking of interest and the taking of rent, he maintained, are morally equivalent and just. Therefore, public interference in the market's allowance for interest taking or rent taking is a denial of justice. Nor was Locke solely concerned with the rights of the well-to-do. For

it will be a loss to widows, orphans, and all those who have their estates in money...[and who] have as much right to make as much of the money as it is worth (for more they cannot), as the landlord has [to] let his land for as much as it will yield. To fine men one-third of their estates [by imposing a four rather than a six percent rate], without any crime or offense committed...[and] transfer a third part of the moneyed man's estate, who had nothing else to live on, into the merchant's pocket; and that without any merit in the one, or transgression in the other, seems very hard. (1825, 243–44, 225–26)

Because for Locke all political reasoning proceeds from the premise of human equality—that is, every individual being born with inherent, indefeasible rights—the principles of liberty and property apply for all. It is not that all men are equal in their native capacities. Nor is good fortune distributed equally by nature:

Though I have said...that all Men by Nature are equal, I cannot be supposed to understand all sorts of Equality: Age or Virtue may give Men a just Precedency: Excellency of Parts and Merit may place others above the Common Level;...and yet all this consists with the Equality, which all Men are in, in respect of Jurisdiction or Dominion one over another...being that equal Right that every Man hath, to his Natural Freedom, without being subjected to the Will or Authority of any other Man. (ST, par. 54)

Although the thrust of Locke's equalitarian doctrine is political, its roots are metaphysical. The fundamental precept of equal creation finds expression in a juridical concept of equal protection. Signifying far more than the customary rights of the criminally accused (e.g., the presumption of innocence or the right to a speedy and public trial), that pregnant concept brooks no species of special privilege, no class legislation. It counsels a

steady regard for the rights, the liberties, and the property of all. “The great and chief end of Men’s uniting into Commonwealths and putting themselves under Government” is not the collecting of tax revenue or compliance with majority opinion; it is “the Preservation of their Property” (ST, par. 124; cf. 94, 95, 116, 127, and 131). The prohibition against special advantages or privileges going to some, ultimately at the expense of others, is all but absolute. It is not a question merely of prudence, but of natural and absolute right.

For nobody can transfer to another more power than he has in himself; and no Body has an absolute Arbitrary Power...over any other, to...take away the Life or Property of another.... And having in the State of Nature no Arbitrary Power over the Life, Liberty or Possessions of another, but only so much as the Law of Nature gives him to the preservation of himself;...this is all he doth, or can give up to the Commonwealth...so that the Legislative can have no more than this. (ST, par. 135)

If capitalist government becomes the financial tool of the ruling economic classes, as historically it has been to a great extent, then it is a social formation that Locke must disavow. In creating winner and loser classes, public privileges defeat the precept of equality. Moreover, by dint of the power of precedent, a single instance of the practice places all property in the hands of society to distribute according to any plan whatsoever. A government that can legitimately redistribute a single dollar, ducat, pence, pound, or parcel of land can, in principle, redistribute all the wealth in the world. This tendency is precisely what Locke’s philosophy of government and Shaftesbury’s resistance movement had to resist.¹⁰ In truth, Locke

10. As Ashcraft (1986) has persuasively reasoned, Shaftesbury needed to persuade the propertied classes that in rejecting divine right and grounding government in the consent of the governed, their own property would not be swiftly confiscated by a clamorous and contentious democratic “mob.” And yet Ashcraft, following Tully, believes that Lockean liberalism sanctions the distribution of property on behalf of the most vulnerable in society (1992, 14–49).

favored no particular economic class. He stood up for the principles of industry and equity, barring government from subsidizing any one interest by impoverishing or impeding the liberties of another.

Against such a reading, notable scholars argue that Locke intended property to be purely conventional within civil society and subject to social redistribution for the sake of preservation for all mankind (Tully 1980; Ashcraft 1992, 14–49). Some have viewed Locke as a warm proponent of majoritarian democracy (Kendall 1965). Locke certainly does invoke the principle of majority rule. For, if majority rule “in reason, not be received, as the act of the whole,...nothing but the consent of every individual” would suffice, something “next impossible ever to be had.” Therefore, “every one is bound by that consent to be concluded by the majority” (ST, par. 95–98, emphasis added). Many laws have to be written and penalties for their transgression affixed. A thousand legal questions have to be decided, and majority will is the only practical means of deciding them. But Locke denies that “by being born under any Government, we are naturally Subjects to it, and have no more any title or pretence to the freedom of the State of Nature” (ST, par. 116). On the contrary, he declares,

The Obligations of the Law of Nature, cease not in Society, but only in many Cases are drawn closer, and have by Humane Laws known Penalties annexed to them, to inforce their observation. Thus the Law of Nature stands as an Eternal Rule to all Men, Legislators as well as others. (ST, par 135)

This law informs us that only to preserve their property—life, liberty, and possessions—do individuals give up the executive power they had in nature, to be governed by settled and known laws.

The crux is that “promulgated established laws” are “not to be varied in particular Cases, but to have one Rule for Rich and Poor, for the Favorite at Court, and the Country Man at Plough” (ST, par. 142). In modern terms, we can say that the indefeasible principle of property trumps the majoritarian and pluralist political panaceas. If liberal capitalist societies are governed by and for the capitalist classes, or any special interests, then Lockeanism trumps liberal capitalism as well. Insofar as the principle of property is concerned, the gap separating Lockean liberalism from nineteenth- and twentieth-century liberal political practice is certainly substantial.

Assessing Liberalism: A Final Word and Prolegomena

So what are we to make of a liberal theory that (1) portrays man as both an acquisitive individual and a social animal, (2) rejects egoism for benevolence

and social cooperation, (3) heartily endorses civic participation, even patriotic sacrifice, and (4) defends property and capitalist growth while categorically denying capitalists access to the public treasury or any other species of “class” legislation? Judging from the longstanding liberal-communitarian debate, no such ideology exists. Where is the sharp ideological space separating liberalism and republicanism? Where is the metaphysical gap between ontological atomism and innate human sociability? And just how many species of political privilege implicit in the currently reigning conception of liberal capitalism or interest-group liberalism are securely barred by Locke’s peculiar liberal theory? Is Locke’s political personality split, or do we ourselves suffer from a form of cognitive dissonance? Are Locke’s ideological “abnormalities” simply the product of our own (post-modern) making? Have we failed to identify clearly enough the lines of ideological conflict in Restoration England or Revolutionary America? These questions should pose a serious challenge for historians, social scientists, and philosophers. They certainly call into question the utility of the analytical tools we all take to our intellectual trades.

But they do not blunt the larger liberal critique of Lockeanism. Even acknowledging Locke’s sociability, benignity, and civic-mindedness, much remains for post-Lockean liberal theory to assail, much that strikes the modern eye as profoundly illiberal. Where is the democratic provision for majority rule or for the fair play of pluralist social forces? Where is the power to legislate not in the name of divine natural right but for the greatest good of the greatest number? How is lawful authority to experiment with whatever expedient might help alleviate the immediate crises at hand? Where is the power to foster economic equality, in keeping with communitarian or Rawlsian right? And what remains of modern liberalism once it has been stripped of these democratic and egalitarian ideals?

Actually, liberalism’s critique of Locke cuts much deeper and appeared much earlier. Nowhere is that critique more swollen with piercing invective than in Bentham’s ([1824] 1962) vehement repudiation of all natural-rights claims. Having in mind the French Revolution but implicating Lockean natural right as well, Bentham stormed against the idea that “Men are born and remain free, and equal in respect of rights” (498). “Absurd and miserable nonsense” (498) he called it. Of the view that the end of political association is the “preservation of the natural and imprescriptible rights of man,” he replied, “More confusion—more nonsense,—and...as usual, dangerous nonsense” (500) To what must natural-rights doctrines ultimately and inevitably lead? Bentham answers, “the terrors of anarchical despotism” (499). He insists that

there are no such things as natural rights—no such things as rights

anterior to the establishment of government—no such things as natural rights opposed to, in contradistinction to, legal: that the expression is merely figurative; that when used, in the moment you attempt to give it a literal meaning it leads to error, and to that sort of error that leads to mischief—to the extremity of mischief. (500)

With exasperation Bentham exclaims: “Natural Rights is simple nonsense: natural and imprescriptible rights, rhetorical nonsense—nonsense upon stilts” (501).

Perhaps, but what sturdy obstacles to expansive state capacity are eliminated with the demolition of these “mythical” natural rights? What might liberal governments not endeavor to accomplish, in the crucible of time, in the name of a greatest good or the greater number? Well might we conclude that with the passing of the liberal torch from Locke to Bentham, the very foundations of political authority were uprooted and reconstructed.

Does it make sense, then, to talk about “liberalism” as such? Is it useful to weigh the moral merit, historical tendencies, or “iron laws” of something with no discernible shape or conceptual boundary? Whereas some (Spragens 1995) can conceive of a “communitarian liberalism,” others (Walzer 1984) can glimpse a consistent liberalism that “passes over into democratic socialism” (323). But communitarian views aside, in joining the ideas of utilitarianism, interest-group pluralism, majoritarianism, procedural liberalism, and capitalism, and appending to all of this the original conception of liberalism bequeathed by Locke, do we not load ourselves with too much baggage to carry or intellectually inspect? Is it reasonable to discuss in the same intellectual breath the conception of government outlined by Locke or Mill or Smith, say, and the politics actually practiced in America during the last century or the past year? Can liberalism be defined simply as whatever occurs in a nation-state designated liberal by those who decide to so designate it? By slicing the liberal cake, separating the several layers of liberal speculation, we can sample not only Locke’s critique of later liberalism but liberalism’s abiding critique of Locke. Even more important, we can position ourselves to more conscientiously inspect each of the theoretical models of liberalism in its own right and on its own merits.

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