

Locke and Arendt's Perspectives on Labour: Uncovering the Roles of Native Americans and
Slaves in American Colonial Discourse

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Introduction

The examination of labour, property rights, and prosperity within the context of American colonial history is a complex narrative, marked by the contributions of John Locke in his *Second Treatise of Government* and Hannah Arendt in *On Revolution*. Locke wrote his *Second Treatise of Government* in 1689 and aimed to challenge the existing monarchical and authoritarian norms plaguing England at the time. Arendt's *On Revolution* was published in 1964 during the aftermath of World War II and the onset of the Cold War. In her book, Arendt analyzes the meanings and outcomes of political revolutions, particularly the American and French Revolutions. These works, while written in completely different contexts, both present accounts of labour in the American colonies and both include significant oversights in addressing the experiences of Native Americans and American slaves. This essay aims to critically analyze Locke's and Arendt's perspectives on labour, focusing initially on Locke's theory of property rights and Arendt's account of colonial prosperity. It further explores their treatment of these marginalized groups — examining Locke's omission of slave labour and his misrepresentation of Native Americans, alongside Arendt's oversight of Native Americans. Lastly, this essay proposes philosophical, political, and economical changes to their accounts to adjust for these errors.

Locke's Account of Labour

In his *Second Treatise of Government*, Locke holds that property rights are justified through labour within a state of nature. Using this perspective, and a European market-oriented perspective on economic land valuation, Locke underrepresents the labour of Native Americans and justifies the seizure of their land. Furthermore, by withholding comments on the relationship

between slavery, labour, and property, Locke ignores the prominent use of enslaved African Americans as labour in the American colonies.

Locke justifies his perspective on property rights by taking on a human-centric view of nature: “It cannot be supposed [God] meant [Earth] should always remain common and uncultivated. He gave it to the use of the industrious and rational”¹. Locke views the Earth and its resources as meant for the benefit of humans — to support and enhance their lives. Based on this premise, he argues that in the initial state of nature, land and its resources are not privately owned by any individual. However, because the land and resources are meant to be used by humans for the benefit of humans, property rights must be allocated in some manner to these “industrious and rational” individuals². This allocation of property and thus the formation of property rights, Locke concludes, must be through labor: “The labour of [an individual’s] body and the work of his hands we may say are properly his. Whatsoever, then, he removes out of the state that nature hath provided and left it in, he hath mixed his labour with, and joined to it something that is his own, and thereby makes it his property.”³

Locke’s Misrepresentation of Native Americans

Locke, however, does not apply his definition equally — leaving Native Americans without rights to their land by avoiding examples in which they are given these rights, as well as misrepresenting the values they add to the land. To clarify his definition of property rights, Locke expands on a few examples. Notably, Locke uses an example of a Native American and “fruit or venison”, showing how Native Americans still have the right to the resources they

¹ John Locke, *The Second Treatise of Government* (New York: Dover Publications, 2002), 15.

² John Locke, *The Second Treatise of Government* (New York: Dover Publications, 2002), 12.

³ John Locke, *The Second Treatise of Government* (New York: Dover Publications, 2002), 13.

gather despite having “no enclosure”⁴. Similarly, Locke says that this law of property rights “makes the deer that Indian’s who hath killed it”⁵ when discussing the law’s purpose. In all, Locke protects the resources the Native Americans gather but denies them the rights of the land they have inhabited prior to the arrival of the American colonies. Although this denial is not specifically mentioned, it is implied due to a lack of support during a time (the American colonial period) when Native Americans were viewed by some colonists as “savage” and “heathen”⁶.

Furthermore, in Locke’s discussion of the value gained from land that has been labored, he misvalues Native American labour, decreasing their claim on their land. He starts by claiming that American and European land have the same “natural intrinsic value” if they can produce the same amount of wheat with similar effort (“the same husbandry”). This intrinsic value refers to the natural capacity of the land. However, he claims that with Native American labour the same land would be “possibly not worth a penny”⁷. Locke’s perspective might be due to European systems being more market-oriented and focused on monetization. Although, this perspective alone doesn’t affect Native American property rights. Prior to this discussion, Locke states: “As much as anyone can make use of to any advantage of life before it spoils, so much he may by his labour fix a property in; whatever is beyond this is more than his share and belongs to others”⁸. What “beyond” someone’s share and “before it spoils” is, Locke does not specify. It is this that may allow Locke’s suggested low-value Native American labour to be interpreted as inadequate for property rights. Many colonists used the non-market-oriented use of land, along with an

⁴ John Locke, *The Second Treatise of Government* (New York: Dover Publications, 2002), 12.

⁵ John Locke, *The Second Treatise of Government* (New York: Dover Publications, 2002), 12.

⁶ “Becoming American: The British Atlantic Colonies, 1690-1763,” National Humanities Center, accessed November 24, 2023, <https://nationalhumanitiescenter.org/pds/becomingamer/growth/text7/indianlands.pdf>.

⁷ John Locke, *The Second Treatise of Government* (New York: Dover Publications, 2002), 20.

⁸ John Locke, *The Second Treatise of Government* (New York: Dover Publications, 2002), 14.

already negative sentiment, as justification for Native American land seizure and purchase for little payment⁹. Through this discussion, and the lack of support Locke gives for Native American property rights, Locke misrepresents the value of Native American labour and degrades Native Americans' lawful hold of their land.

Locke's Omission of Enslaved Labour

Like his misrepresentation of Native American labour, Locke omits slavery in his account of labour. Prior to his discussion on property rights and labour in his *Second Treatise of Government*, Locke comments on the nature of slavery. He claims that legitimate slavery only arises as a result of a state of war, where a person who would otherwise be justifiably killed (a captured combatant) can be spared and kept as a slave. This form of slavery, in Locke's view, is a continuation of a state of war between a conqueror and a captive¹⁰. Locke, however, does not comment on the nature of slaves that were born in slavery or enslaved through means other than his narrowly defined war-binding scenario. This form of slavery was extremely prominent in the American colonies and fueled by the Transatlantic Slave Trade — a massive trade of Africans between the mid-sixteenth and late-nineteenth centuries.

Furthermore, Locke's view on slavery does not explicitly connect to his views on property. Although his theory of property rights centers on the idea that individuals acquire ownership through their labor, it does not directly address the condition of slaves whose labour was coerced and exploited without the provision of property rights — specifically the slaves not taken through war. Indeed, it can be assumed through Locke's discussion of labour that those hired by an individual concede the property rights to the laboured land to their employer. This is because

⁹ "Becoming American: The British Atlantic Colonies, 1690-1763," National Humanities Center, accessed November 24, 2023, <https://nationalhumanitiescenter.org/pds/becomingamer/growth/text7/indianlands.pdf>.

¹⁰ John Locke, *The Second Treatise of Government* (New York: Dover Publications, 2002), 11.

the employer pays the hired employee for the labour. In the case of Locke's 'legitimate' slaves, the enslaved individual is paid for their services with a delayed death because they had forfeited their life by some act that had deserved death¹¹. The 'non-legitimate' slaves, on the other hand, have not done any deed to deserve being enslaved, but are still not paid for their services or given property rights for the land they 'mixed' with labour. Thus, Locke does not recognize the labour of these 'non-legitimate' slaves in his account of labour and property rights.

Changes to Locke's Account

Considering Locke's misrepresentation of Native Americans and omission of enslaved labour, he would have to redefine his theory of property rights, change his outlook on the value of Native American labour, and acknowledge the seizure of Native American land as unlawful, to change his account to include these two groups. With regards to modifying his theory of property rights, he would have to include the use of land for reasons other than "husbandry" within his theory of labour. For example, originally Locke's theory does not support claiming land for hunting grounds, which hurt Native American's claim over their land¹². To avoid this, Locke would have to explicitly include the transfer of property rights through hire in his account. This would clarify the boundaries of individual's labour and allocate land rights to 'non-legitimate' slaves that were forced to work their capturer's land.

In addition to allowing property rights for hunting grounds, Locke would have to change his valuation of Native American labour and as a result, acknowledge the wrongful seizure of Native American land. According to Locke's initial commentary: "The leagues that have been ... disowning all claim and right to the land in their other's possession, have, by common consent,

¹¹ John Locke, *The Second Treatise of Government* (New York: Dover Publications, 2002), 11.

¹² "Becoming American: The British Atlantic Colonies, 1690-1763," National Humanities Center, accessed November 24, 2023, <https://nationalhumanitiescenter.org/pds/becomingamer/growth/text7/indianlands.pdf>.

given up their presences to their natural common right”¹³. If Locke were to recognize Native American labour as valuable and as a valuable improvement of the land, he would have to acknowledge the American colonists’ seizure of Native American land as unlawful. This would entail returning that land or providing economic retributions to the Native Americans.

Arendt’s Account of American Colonists

In Hannah Arendt’s *On Revolution*, she describes the prosperity of the American colonies as a factor for the different outcomes of the American Revolution and the French Revolution. In this account, she, unlike Locke, gives some recognition to African Americans and slave labour, but ultimately omits the contributions of land gained from Native Americans during the period. Arendt saw the American Revolution as successful in its primary objective of establishing a new, stable, and democratic political order. She believed that a factor for this was a relative lack of poverty in the American scene, which was present everywhere else in the world¹⁴. More importantly, she also identified that the American colonies had a lack of misery and desire. This lack of misery meant the American founders viewed the ‘social question’ — controversies regarding social inequality, economic justice, and workers’ rights — as eternal and concerning “not the order of society but the form of government”¹⁵. Or in Arendt’s words: “It was the absence of misery which enabled John Adams to discover the political predicament of the poor”¹⁶. This lack of misery, and thus a focus on political matters rather than social, is why Arendt believes the American Revolution proved successful (in establishing a new republic)

¹³ John Locke, *The Second Treatise of Government* (New York: Dover Publications, 2002), 21.

¹⁴ Hannah Arendt, *On Revolution* (New York: Penguin Books, 1977), 58.

¹⁵ Hannah Arendt, *On Revolution* (New York: Penguin Books, 1977), 58.

¹⁶ Hannah Arendt, *On Revolution* (New York: Penguin Books, 1977), 59.

compared to the French Revolution, which she believed was deeply entangled with the economic conditions and social inequalities of the time.

But where was the misery and poverty that was so present throughout the rest of the world? Arendt acknowledges that “if it were not for the presence of Negro slavery on the American scene, one would be tempted to explain this striking aspect by American prosperity”¹⁷. In fact, among the 1,850,00 white men in America in the middle of the eighteenth century, there were 400,00 African Americans¹⁸. Arendt suggests that a considerable amount of American prosperity could be accounted for by African American labour and misery. She also claims that slavery was not part of the ‘social question’ in either Europe or America because it was either absent or “hidden in darkness”¹⁹. As a result, Arendt proposes that the poverty and misery were absorbed by African Americans and slaves, which allowed America to prosper and focus on political problems. This recognition of slaves and African Americans, although presented as a proposition, is still a significant step compared to Locke’s complete omission.

Arendt’s Omission of Native Americans

Arendt’s account, while recognizing slaves, avoids the benefits the Native Americans gave to the expanding American colonies. Arendt’s narrative largely overlooks how the prosperity of the American colonies was intricately linked to the displacement and dispossession of Native American lands and resources — similar to Locke’s misrepresentation. The availability of land for the colonists, which underpinned their economic independence and prosperity, came largely at the expense of indigenous populations. Arendt fails to mention this impact and thus misses a critical dimension of the lack of misery and poverty in the American colonies. Similar

¹⁷ Hannah Arendt, *On Revolution* (New York: Penguin Books, 1977), 61.

¹⁸ Hannah Arendt, *On Revolution* (New York: Penguin Books, 1977), 61.

¹⁹ Hannah Arendt, *On Revolution* (New York: Penguin Books, 1977), 61.

to the slaves and African Americans, it could be suggested that much of the misery that was normally present in other countries, was instead pushed onto the Native Americans through their exploitation and capture of their land. It seems that by taking advantage of marginalized groups, the American colonists alleviated the pressure of the “social question” and were able to steer their revolution towards political change. The French, without Native American land and poverty focused on the average populous, focused their revolution on directly addressing the “social question” and thus failed to make meaningful changes to their political structure.

Changes to Arendt’s Account

To account for the lack of Native American labour in her account, Arendt would have to recognize indigenous sovereignty, critique colonial policies, and acknowledge Native American economic impact. Recognizing Native Americans as the original inhabitants of the land with their own cultures, governance systems and philosophies would allow Native American treatment by colonists to be fully appreciated in her account. By critiquing colonial policies, Arendt would recognize Native American seized land and resources as contributing to the alleviation of colonist’s poverty. Lastly, by evaluating the economic impact of that seized land and resources, Arendt would have to analyze the direct and indirect contributions of Native Americans to the colonial economies, giving a direct measure of their benefit to colonists. Ultimately, because Arendt acknowledges the contribution of slavery to American prosperity, she would only have to change her approach toward Native Americans and their exploitation.

Conclusion

Both Locke’s and Arendt’s accounts exhibit significant limitations in their discussions of labour within the context of the American colonial period. Locke’s theory while pioneering in its assertion of labour based on property rights, falls short in its equitable application to Native

Americans and its failure to address the forced labour of land by ‘non-legitimate’ slaves. Arendt, on the other hand, offers the recognition of African American contribution to American prosperity. Interestingly, Arendt also fails to fully account for Native American land displacement in shaping the economic landscape of the American colonies, even though Arendt is actively aware of the previous American exploitation of African Americans and slaves — unlike Locke. To adjust both Locke and Arendt’s accounts, this ignorance of Native American labour would have to be accounted for by reevaluating Native American labour and culture. In Locke’s account, this would include adjusting his law of property rights to include ‘non-legitimate’ slaves.

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