Yiyun (Leo) Yao

Professor Beau Shaw

GWM

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A Debate on Private Property of John Locke and Karl Marx

One of the most fundamental debates in political philosophy is the issue of private property, its proper position in the political system, its relation to the political order, and its role in society. The debate has lasted for centuries throughout history with philosophers and economists alike taking different stances on the issue. John Locke and Karl Marx are two such influential thinkers who have distinct views on this topic. While Locke believes that a political order is best off when private property is protected, Marx argues that it is best off when private property is abolished. Personally, it is hard to make a preference between the two’s views since they are both famously successful political philosophers whose suppositions both contain convincing self-justification and minimal loopholes. I am quite reluctant to deny either Locke's or Marx’s arguments, but if I have to make a choice, I would slightly favor Locke over Marx. In other words, I will take something from both with slightly more from Locke. In this essay, I will compare and contrast their respective views and explain why I only slightly favor Locke over Marx. I will discuss the ways in which Locke’s view on private property can contribute to a stable society while also recognizing its limitations and criticisms of it. Meanwhile, I will examine Marx's view on private property abolition, acknowledging Marx’s rational critiques of capitalism but also recognizing the risks and challenges of fully implementing socialism.

Locke’s view on private property is founded on his idea of individual liberty. He believes that people have a natural right to own property, which should be protected by the government. According to Locke, such protection of property is essential for a stable and thriving society for it allows individuals to exercise their will and pursue their own interests. Moreover, private property provides stimulus for individuals’ hard work as well as innovation, which accommodates society’s continuous growth and development.

However, Locke's view on private property has its limitations. For one, his view assumes that all individuals have an equal opportunity to acquire property, which is not always the case in reality. In addition, the protection of private property can sometimes lead to the concentration of wealth and power in the hands of a few, which can have negative impacts as it may cause a large social gap and wealth inequality.

Locke believes that private property is essential to a free and well-developed society. In *The Second Treatise of Government*, he claims that private property rights derive from natural law and that individuals have the right to “life, liberty, and property”(Locke, II). Locke argues that the role of government is to protect these natural rights and that the protection of private property is fundamental to this role. “Though the earth, and all inferior creatures, be common to all men, yet every man has a property in his own person: this no body has any right to but himself. The labour of his 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”(Locke, V). Locke defends private property by stating that it promotes individual liberty and personal responsibility. He argues that individuals have a natural right to acquire property through their own labor and that government should not interfere with this right and this act.

On the other hand, however, Karl Marx, in his *Communist Manifesto*, argues that private property is a form of exploitation and oppression. “The worker becomes all the poorer the more wealth he produces, the more his production increases in power and extent. The worker becomes an ever cheaper commodity the more commodities he produces. The devaluation of the human world grows in direct proportion to the increase in value of the world of things. Labor does not only create goods; it also produces itself and the workers as a commodity”(Marx, I). Marx asserts that the capitalist system, which promotes the private property of the means of production, creates a class struggle between the bourgeoisie - the owners of capital, and the proletariat - the working class, where the bourgeoisie sees the working class as commodities.

Marx critiques private property by stating that it is a means of exploiting the working class. He argues that capitalists profit by paying workers less than the value of their labor, through which they create surplus value, extracted as profit. He believes that it leads to the concentration of wealth and power in the hands of the bourgeoisie, while the proletariat is left to suffer in pain and poverty. Marx believes that the abolition of private property is necessary to end this unnecessary class conflict and create a truly equitable society. His solution to this problem is to abolish private property altogether and implement socialism, where the means of production are owned collectively.

While Marx's view on private property abolition has its merits, it also has its limitations. For instance, the implementation of a completely socialist system is nearly impossibly challenging, and history has shown that it can lead to economic inefficiencies and reduced innovation and productivity. Moreover, the abolition of private property can sometimes impact individual freedom, which outweighs the gain.

These quotes above highlight the substantial differences between Locke's and Marx's perspectives on private property. While Locke sees private property as a means of promoting individual liberty and personal responsibility, Marx views it as a tool of exploitation that leads to the devaluation of human labor. Although they have contrasting views on private property, a synthesis of their ideas is necessary for a balanced approach to political order. “Though the earth and all inferior creatures be common to all men, yet every man has a property in his own person. This nobody has any right to but himself. The labour of his body and the work of his hands, we may say, are properly his”(Locke, V). Here, Locke acknowledges that while private property is important, it must be limited by the recognition of individual rights. In other words, private property cannot be used to infringe upon the rights of others. Despite these limitations of private property as advocated by Locke, I believe that Locke’s idea of ensuring economic stability and individual freedom still holds value.

However, I also acknowledge the critique of private property put forth by Marx and the need to address issues of inequality and social welfare. “The first stage of communism, therefore, is characterized by a still incomplete abolition of private property in land; by the maintenance of personal property; by the transformation of the latter into an instrument of production, subject to the will of the communal society”(Marx, II). Here, Marx admits that in the early stages of communism, some forms of private property may still be necessary. This suggests that Marx did not see private property as inherently corrupted, but rather as a product of capitalism that needs to be abolished in order to create a more equitable society.

From these quotes, we can see that both Locke and Marx have taken their respective counterarguments into consideration. They admit those flaws and have therefore claimed the corresponding logical compromises for a persuasive theory on private property on a larger scale. They also recognize the need for limitations or acknowledgments of private property in certain situations even though they had distinct beliefs. Therefore, while favoring Locke's view over Marx's, a synthesis of both views is certainly necessary for a just and equitable society. People should take both Locke’s and Marx’s views into consideration while making policies and enacting laws.

For example, in my opinion, legislators should put ensuring all individuals have equal access to property ownership in the first place, while also implementing policies that address issues of inequality and promote socioeconomic equality. Moreover, it involves some extent of incorporation of collective ownership of key industries and resources as well as some extent of allowance for private ownership of other forms of property. A lot of East Asian countries are all examples of this type of political system such as China and Japan.

In conclusion, the debate over private property protection versus abolition is complex and multifaceted, with both Locke and Marx offering valuable insights. My position on this issue is a synthesis of both views, acknowledging the importance of private property protection for individual freedom and economic stability while also recognizing its limitations and potential harms.

In today's society, we can see the implications of both approaches to private property. Locke’s theory is present in countries with strong property rights protections such as the United States. The drawback is that we also see increasing levels of income inequality and concentration of wealth in the hands of a few. On the other hand, Marx’s theory is present in countries that have experimented with socialist policies and collective ownership such as Cuba and Venezuela. While these policies have succeeded in reducing poverty and inequality as well as promoting social welfare, they have also led to reduced incentives for innovation and economic growth, as well as government corruption and inefficiency.

Therefore, my position on private property lies in the middle ground, recognizing the value of private property protection while also advocating for policies that address inequality and promote collective ownership of key industries and resources. A balanced approach to private property protection and abolition is necessary for a just and equitable society.