



## America's philosopher: John Locke in American intellectual life

by Claire Rydell Arcenas. Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2022, 265 pp., £28.00 (hardcover), ISBN 9780226638607

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## BOOK REVIEW

**America's philosopher: John Locke in American intellectual life**, by Claire Rydell Arcenas. Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2022, 265 pp., £28.00 (hardcover), ISBN 9780226638607

Claire Rydell Arcenas argues in this study that “striking transformation” rather than “continuity or absence” is at the heart of “the story of Locke in America” (3). She adds that “variously idolized, marginalized, embraced, and rejected, Locke has, since the early eighteenth century, impacted every corner of American intellectual life” (3). The question concerning what the future might hold for the philosopher John Locke in America is tantalisingly left open.

Arcenas's thoughtful and well-researched study on the central role that Locke's thought has played and continues to play in American cultural and political life reveals just how flimsy received interpretations and opinions can be. Similar studies about the political theorists Niccolò Machiavelli by Michael Jackson and Damian Grace, *Machiavelliana: The Living Machiavelli in Modern Mythologies* (2018); Edmund Burke by Emily Jones, *Edmund Burke and The Invention Of Modern Conservatism, 1830–1914: An Intellectual History* (2019); and Adam Smith by Glory M. Liu, *Adam Smith's America: How a Scottish Philosopher Became an Icon of American Capitalism* (2023) have also resulted in the establishment of more nuanced historical interpretations.

John Locke (1632–1704), a rather dour person who lived in interesting times, wrote much on many topics, some of which was published in his lifetime, the rest posthumously. He achieved fame with his *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1690), his *Two Treatises on Politics* (1690), and his writings on Christianity. Some of his studies, such as his *Essays on the Law of Nature* (1954), remained unknown until the gifting of the Lovelace Collection of Locke's papers to the Bodleian Library by Lord Peter King in 1942.

Arcenas's key finding is that, in colonial times, Locke's pivotal place in U.S. culture derived from the fame of his *Essay*, his writings on religion, and his commonplace books; works which formed the basis of his “polyvalent authority” (36, 54). His political writings were not the focus of interest, academic or popular. It was only much later in the twentieth century that interest in his political writings, *The Two Treatises on Government*, superseded interest in his *Essay*. As Arcenas comments:

In this book, I explain how and why a seventeenth-century English philosopher has captivated our attention for more than three centuries, exerting an unparalleled influence on the development of American thought and culture. (1)

According to Arcenas, “Americans transformed Locke, his works, and his ideas in five inter-related ways” (3). Initially, known as a “metaphysician” who wrote *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, he achieved fame much later as the author of *The Two Treatises of Government*. Second, he went from being a source of general popular wisdom to being a specialist source of political insight. Third, from being a historical figure to “an ideological abstraction that could be used to invoke, symbolize, or represent a variety of concepts” (3). Fourth, Locke was later seen increasingly as an American rather than as an Englishman. And, “Finally, and largely as a consequence of the other four changes, Americans weaponized

Locke, making him into an avatar of what seemed to them uniquely and quintessentially American political ideals of individual liberty, property rights, and limited government” (3).

Arcenas, additionally, distinguishes five interrelated stages in the evolution of the American appreciation of Locke’s thought. The first stage, the colonial stage until the Revolution; second, the Revolutionary period and the Founding era; third, during the nineteenth century when Locke and this thought were “historicized”; fourth, the Progressive Era, when Locke became the doyen of American liberalism and the American Political Tradition; and fifth, the post-Cold War in Europe period, during which both a republican Locke and a libertarian Locke became dominant. In this time, the popular and academic focus moved from Locke’s empiricist epistemology to his political thought (3).

In the first phase, Locke’s *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* and his writings on education and religion were the focus of popular interest. Benjamin Franklin was an important acolyte. Locke’s writing on quotidian topics such as education and child rearing remained popular, as was his practice of using a commonplace book. Locke’s *Essay* became a mainstay of the Harvard and Yale Universities’ libraries and curricula (8–17). This prominence, however, was not uncontested. The thought of René Descartes was well-established, and later thinkers such as Isaac Watt and George Berkeley were also influential, as were the thinkers of the Scottish Common Sense school such as Francis Hutcheson and Thomas Reid, as well as the theologian Jonathan Edwards (17–30).

After setting the stage for Locke’s deeply embedded place in colonial American life, Arcenas gently leads the reader toward some quite illuminating iconoclasm. The received wisdom that Locke’s political thought contributed significantly to the debates that led to the creation of the constitutional documents, she argues, does not withstand any serious examination. Yet Locke’s “polyvalent authority” remained unchallenged during the age of revolution (36, 54). His *Essay* remained his most famous work. She notes, however, that the role of his political writings changed in the light of the English jurist William Blackstone’s critical commentary on “the practical limitations” of his political thought (52). Locke’s political theory thus began to be seen as largely speculative, distant from the concerns of a “state-building” people (31–52, at 52).

Arcenas notes that Thomas Jefferson was quite familiar with Locke’s writings. Yet many of the ideas that informed Jefferson’s conception of government, such as “original contract”, which differed from Locke’s “social contract”, not only predated Locke’s *Second Treatise* “but also found clearer, more authoritative articulation in English and British constitutional legal sources that the founders and framers knew well” (50). Additionally, she notes that the concept of “happiness” was concerned with the people’s “safety and security” (51). Rather than life, liberty, and happiness, Locke avers to life, liberty, and estates, all of which he considered to be property (50). Arcenas observes that “Locke’s political importance plummeted immediately after 1776” (52). In fact, Blackstone’s criticism of Locke took root and henceforth he was seen as a speculative political thinker, rather than someone with useful practical political ideas. This was reinforced by “the new scientific approach to politics and government” initiated by Benjamin Rush and others (55–7, at 55).

In the first half of the nineteenth century, Locke’s place in U.S. culture continued to be based on his *Essay*, his religious writings, and his commonplace book. Changes were afoot, though, with the publication in 1829 of Lord Peter King’s *Life of Locke*, as well as the spreading influence of Kant’s *Critical Philosophy*. More noteworthy, however, Locke’s *Constitutions of the Carolinas* (1669) became for both the journalistic pundit and the academic historian; an example of the failure of the abstract political theorist to produce efficacious results in comparison to the practical experience of the quotidian man of action deeply concerned with the

labour of nation building. This sceptical sentiment was reinforced by the news arriving regularly from Revolutionary Paris (58–83).

In the second half of the nineteenth century, Locke's place in American cultural life began to change. His thought and persona were increasingly removed from the daily experience of the average American. Instead, it became the focus of a new intellectual elite. Indeed, "by 1900, he teetered, if not on the brink of obscurity, at least on the precipice of irrelevance" (84). His *Carolina Constitutions* became a constant negative example and his *Essay* was being superseded by German Idealism. The influential political scientist Francis Lieber (1798–1892) critiqued Locke's political thought while emphasising his importance in the history of political ideas. Few students read his works; Franklin and de Tocqueville were the new leading theoretical lights (84–102).

During the early decades of the twentieth century, Arcenas argues that "Locke's role in American intellectual life would undergo four transformations that would make Locke ... important to Americans in surprising ways" (103–4). First, in the early decades, Locke's political thought would achieve greater pre-eminence; second, it would be recognised as having "a strange timeliness" (104); third, that "scholars writing about American history, politics, and government placed increasing emphasis on Locke's perceived influence on the founding moment" (104); and fourth, that "Locke's influence came to be understood, by the 1930s, as having a *continual* presence in American political-intellectual life, from the eighteenth century to the present day" (104). Such was the "malleability" of Locke's thought, Arcenas believes, that, when used to interpret problems of the present, he found supporters on the Left for his labour theory of value, and in the centre for his general moderation (104–24, at 104).

In the 1940s and the 1950s, according to Arcenas, the three key interpretations of Locke's political thought, "the democratic Locke, the pro(to)-capitalist Locke, the liberal Locke", were synthesised to form a liberal counter-ideology to fascism and Marxism, as the U.S. sought to raise the political consciousness of both the elites and the general population (122). Louis Hartz's *The Liberal Tradition in America: An Interpretation of American Political Thought since the Revolution* (1955) was a milestone in this tendency. Locke's political thought was deemed to be a solution to the then-current problem of authoritarianism, the backbone of what came to be called "The American Political Tradition". His putative influence on Thomas Jefferson was highlighted. Locke's place in the liberal tradition was further enhanced by the esteem his *Two Treatises* were given in the growing "Great Books" movement at various universities and promoted by enthusiastic publishers. This tendency was deepened by the Earl of Lovelace's donation of Locke's private papers to the Bodleian Library and the substantial light that was thrown on Locke's life and work (121–40). In the 1960s, the prestige of Locke's political thought was invoked by Democrats in terms of natural rights and human rights, and by Republicans in terms of the defence of property, especially during the civil rights debates (126–46).

In the 1970s, Arcenas notes that the liberal Locke of the Louis Hartz school of American liberalism was critiqued by conservative political theorists such as Leo Strauss, Willmoore Kendall, Russell Kirk, and Allan Bloom. Locke's individualism, they believed, only served to undermine, rather than reinforce, key institutions in the social fabric. Additionally, some historians, including Gordon S. Wood and J.G.A. Pocock, amongst others, rejected "Locke's singular importance for the American founding moment and eighteenth-century political thinking" (157). Yet Arcenas believes that this critique only served to reinforce the relationship of Locke to liberalism and "cemented Locke's ideas to the American founding moment more securely" than Hartz's work had (158). She notes that the debate between

the political theorists John Rawls's welfare liberalism and Robert Nozick's Lockean libertarianism centred on divergent emphases of different elements of Locke's thought (147–62).

Professor Arcenas's study of Locke's central, albeit changing, role in American culture and politics is both thorough and engaging. She highlights those key ideas in Locke's works around which change eventually pivoted, that is, initially his epistemological, religious, and practical writings, then later his political writings, with much empathy toward the thinkers who initiated these changes. In so doing, the reader gains many insights into the development of American political and intellectual culture.

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