

JOHN LOCKE AND COLONIAL CAPITALISM

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Abstract

Two decades of scholarship in imperial and intellectual history has squarely established John Locke's professional and personal investment in the English colonial enterprise. It has been argued that Locke's political thought incubated in the context of European expansion in America and that his labor theory of property aimed at delegitimizing Native American property systems, thus wiping the legal landscape clean for English appropriation.

This paper complicates the colonial perspective on Locke's political thought by highlighting the capitalist networks that marked the economy of the early-modern Atlantic. Adopting "colonial capitalism" as the framework of analysis, I weave together the economic and colonial dimensions of Locke's theory of property. Specifically, I identify Locke's notion of money as the linchpin of his justification of colonial dispossession. I trace a crucial shift in Locke's theory from agricultural improvement to monetarization as the principle separating the natural common from the domain of property. The colonial implications of this shift crystallize in Locke's ascription of "mankind's tacit consent" to the origins of money. I argue that the conceptual ambiguity of universal tacit consent enables Locke to fold Native Americans in a set of obligations issuing from monetarization, most importantly, the obligation to accede that their lands lie in the natural common until they join "the rest of Mankind" in the use of money.

The productive indeterminacy of money's status between consent and necessity thereby allows Locke to cast English colonial capitalism in a liberal image despite its structural connection to the extra-legal expropriation of Native Americans. I conclude by drawing out the broader implications of this analysis for thinking about liberalism and neoliberalism, colonialism and development, and the politics of land in the Global South today.