

# Disproportionate and unequal possession of the earth literature review examples

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## **John Locke's Second Treatise of Government**

Disproportionate and Unequal Possession of the Earth:

John Locke's Second Treatise of Government

In John Locke's Second Treatise of Government, Section 50 says that "by a tacit and voluntary consent," men "have agreed to a disproportionate and unequal possession of the earth" (Locke, 1690, p. 19). Whether or not gold or money is a good representative of real wealth in goods or services and that man has made this tacit and consensual agreement for "disproportionate and unequal possession of the earth" is a debate that scholars continue to debate. Locke's writing invites inquiry; his ideas concerning possession, consent, wealth, and the role of government in securing the right to and the protection of wealth are based on his very specific values that, in some cases, appear very different to a twenty-first century mind than to a seventeenth century mind.

A looming issue that Locke writes about is the idea of "tacit and voluntary consent" of humanity "to a disproportionate and unequal possession of the earth," because this consent is debatable (Locke, 1690, p. 19). The time in which Locke lived was a time that his country, Britain, was heavily colonizing the Americas. Locke's feelings about the aboriginal inhabitants of America are made clear in Section 41 of the Second Treatise. He writes, "There cannot be a clearer demonstration of any thing, than several nations of the Americans are . . . who are rich in land, and poor in all the comforts of life," and describes a leader among the aboriginal Americans as "a king of a large

and fruitful territory . . . [who] feeds, lodges, and is clad worse than a day-labourer in England” (Locke, 1690, p. 14). The term “ manifest destiny” was not coined until 1845 by a newspaper editor named John O’Sullivan, but the spirit of the idea was alive in the ideas of Locke (“ Manifest Destiny,” n. d., para. 1). In section 32, Locke writes that the world was given “ in common” to all of humanity, and that God commanded people to work the land, subdue the land to “ improve it for the benefit of life,” and that working this land made it his property (Locke, 1690, p. 14).

The idea that the aboriginal Americans were not working the land appeared to Locke and the people of his time a God ordained justification for simply taking the land themselves to work. Though the many tribes had a multitude of ways to make their livings in America, the colonists did not view it as civilized; the natives were not following God’s command to subdue the earth. The tribes considered themselves sovereign nations, but Britain did not recognize them as such; at least, not as equals to Britain itself. Though the colonists brought labor, agriculture, and money to the Americas, it is not true that as a general rule, the aboriginal tribes tacitly agreed or voluntarily consented to have any of their lands taken from them or that gold or money could replace the land and its original use. Assuming that all humanity should or could be a part of his own Christian faith led Locke to write things such as in Section 38, where he asks, “ Was it a robbery thus to assume to himself what belonged to all in common? If such a consent as that was necessary, man had starved, notwithstanding the plenty God had given him” (Locke, 1690, p. 12). While members of a particular society, tribe, or region

may indeed tacitly agree and consent to the use of gold or some other medium as money, it is faulty logic to believe that acquisition of land or other goods and assigning either a monetary value always requires consent of the people.

Considering the example of the way land was acquired in the Americas, it is not true that all “men have agreed to a disproportionate and unequal possession of the earth” (Locke, 1690, p. 19). In the case of the Americas, hindsight makes it obvious that the immigrant settlers, with their numbers, weapons technology, and other factors made the settling of the continents, the dividing of the land, and the mode of commerce something that was imposed by the strong upon the weak. The position of the weaker party, in this case, the native tribes of America, is not one of tacit agreement to conform to the stronger government’s constitution and methods to regulate property. The lack of agreement and conflict of basic ideas about property and items of value were demonstrated in the numerous skirmishes, raids, and wars that were started by both natives and immigrant settlers.

Today, the idea of money representing wealth as a common idea for people around the world is increasing with the furthering of globalization. Any American citizen alive today has always experienced the existence of the U. S. dollar as a currency exchanged for land, goods, or services. In Section 50 of his Second Treatise, Locke writes that gold and silver are “little useful to the life of man in proportion to food, raiment, and carriage” and have “value only from the consent of men” (Locke, 1690, p. 19). Today, people have further abstracted the idea of money, assigning values to pieces of paper,

metals of less value, or plastic. Gold and silver had and still have their own value as desirable metals for jewelry and other items, but the paper money, paper checks, cheap metal alloys of coins, or plastic of credit cards used today are assigned values far greater than the actual cost of the material they are made of. Indeed, in this circumstance where the money created by people has virtually no value by itself, it takes the widespread consent of humanity in order to maintain its value. People consent to this idea of money being a true measure of wealth and as having value because it is advantageous; as Locke writes, money will not decay or spoil “ in the hands of the possessor” (Locke, 1690, p. 19).

However, people often make the mistake of viewing money, such as the paper dollars they possess, as having a value of their own. Although there is a general consent today about the value of money, when people forget that money is issued by governments and has no actual value by itself, they run the risk of allowing this system to become one that is harmful. As Bell, Henry, and Wray write, “ It is well known that Locke identified labor as the original and just foundation of property” and that Locke treated “ money as a non-exploitative institution” (2004, p. 51). Therefore, Locke saw the real value behind money as a representation of human labor. The current monetary system has allowed a person to “ possess more land” or other things “ than he himself can use” and to abuse the idea of the real value behind money by using the money for self-enrichment while devaluing the labor that it represents. For example, an American business owner may realize that if he manufactures his products in a nation that has fewer regulations than the U. S. A. and where workers will work for a hundredth of

the wages an American worker expects, he can still charge the same amount for his products while keeping more of the accumulated assets for himself. The American workers still tacitly agree to give value to their dollar, but because of particular business practices, are also having the value of their labor lessened. Unfortunately, as money becomes more abstract and distant from its original connection to human labor as its value, the potential for abuse becomes greater.

The role of the government in making and enforcing laws regulating “ the right of property, and the possession of land” must be consciously, not tacitly, approved of and consented to by its citizens (Locke, 1690, p. 19). A government has the responsibility to maintain the value of its currency by ensuring that the true value behind it, the fruits of the labor of individuals, continue to have worth. If a government finds that part of the system supporting the value of its money is being abused, for example if a business is maintaining a monopoly, then it must take action to stop that abuse.

Scholar Kristin Shrader-Frechette points out that “ the value of land is not derived completely from labor” and therefore “ some control over property rights to it rests with the community, not merely with those who labor over it” (1993, p. 202). An example of this could be a piece of land that has abundant natural fuel resources or a burial ground. While money’s value may ultimately come from labor, the value of a piece of land by itself cannot be measured merely by human labor. From a Lockean standpoint, the land does not have a monetary value, but a community value. Although people may assign a monetary value to a piece of land, the money itself is not what makes the land valuable.

Locke's reasoning about consent and what constitutes a just annexation of property for an individual reflect the beliefs of the people of his times and his country; for example, a neighbor's grass lawn cannot be taken by another neighbor, in the name of God, simply because he wants to plant a vegetable garden on it. Locke's Second Treatise did not anticipate the complete abstraction of money as it is today. However, once a monetary system is in place, it is important for the issuing government to regulate how it is used. Locke is correct in assigning human labor as the true value of money, and that if it is not used exploitatively, a person can accumulate more property or items than he can use by himself without injury to anyone. Although some of his ideas are outdated, Section 50 of Locke's Second Treatise provides the key summary to the ideas of money, wealth, and personal accumulation; the idea of humanity providing the true value behind wealth and money is something that today's governments and citizens should not forget.

## References

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