The Lockean Subject: A Critical Reappraisal*

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ABSTRACTS

This article critically revisits John Locke's concept of the liberal subject by examining its entanglement with voluntary action, property, and colonial domination. Situating Locke's political thought within the dual context of 17th-century resistance to absolutist authority and colonial expansion, Jürgen Martschukat argues that the Lockean subject was shaped through and legitimized by systems of unfree labor, land appropriation, and racialized hierarchies. Drawing on Locke's theoretical writings and his active role in the colonization of Carolina, he shows how voluntariness was both a principle of freedom and a mechanism of domination. Rather than viewing exclusion and exploitation as contradictions of liberalism, Martschukat reveals their structural integration into its formation. He calls for a historicized understanding of voluntariness that recognizes its dual potential as a tool of subjugation and a resource for critique and resistance.

Der Artikel unternimmt eine kritische Einordnung des Lockeschen liberalen Subjekts, indem er dieses zu Freiwilligkeit, Eigentum und kolonialer Herrschaft in Beziehung setzt. Jürgen Martschukat betrachtet das politische Denken John Lockes innerhalb von zweierlei historischen Kontexten, nämlich dem Widerstand gegen monarchische Herrschaft und der Kolonisierung Amerikas. Er zeigt so, dass das Lockesche Subjekt nach Selbstbestimmung strebte und zugleich in der Ausbeutung unfreier Arbeit, der Aneignung von Land und der Etablierung rassistischer Hierarchien Form annahm. Gestützt auf Lockes Texte sowie auf Beobachtungen seines Engagements in der Kolonisierung Carolinas argumentiert der Artikel, dass Freiwilligkeit im 17. Jahrhundert sowohl als Freiheitsprinzip als auch als Herrschaftsmechanismus in das Politische eingeführt wurde. Vor diesem Hintergrund sollten Ausschluss und Ausbeutung einerseits und die entstehende liberalen Ordnung andererseits nicht als Widersprüche verstanden werden,

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sondern als historisch auf das engste ineinander verflochten. Eine Genealogie der Freiwilligkeit verdeutlicht daher deren ausschließende Dimensionen ebenso wie deren Potential als Ressource von Kritik und Widerstand.

For more than three centuries, seventeenth-century philosopher John Locke was worshipped as intellectual leader in mankind's struggle against authoritarian rule and for liberty, equality, and limited government instead. In the adoption of Locke's thought, his claim for universal individual rights to "life, liberty, and estate" has taken a central position.[1] That claim consorted with the notion of a Lockean liberal self, understood as capable of striving actively for those rights by living a life of voluntary choice, instead of being coerced by authoritarian power. In the twentieth-century struggle against fascism and communism, Locke's ideas became so foundational to individual liberty and liberal democratic societies as to appear beyond question. They were so powerful that the Lockean liberal subject, seen as able to steer its own life course, represented the idea of the generic human being. It seemed to exist beyond history.[2]

More recently, however, our understandings of the subject in general and the Lockean liberal subject in particular have been reframed due to two major conceptual shifts. First, subjectivation theory has replaced the notion of an ontological, ahistorical human subject with an understanding of a subject that is constantly in the making.[3] Second, postcolonial perspectives on history and society, and the foundational critique of a white, male, ableist hegemony in modern history and society have provided a more nuanced and critical reading of the Lockean subject and the historical context of its formation.[4] From different directions, a range of scholars have pointed to its exclusionary and exploitative dimension and criticized the global and even planetary consequences of its self-understanding and actions.

Several political theorists and philosophers, such as C.B. Macpherson, Carole Pateman, Charles W. Mills, and Stacy Clifford Simplican, have shown that Locke depicted a free human being as a generic liberal subject, and yet he privileged white, propertied, able-bodied men. For example, Carol Pateman argues that Locke's contract theory constitutes "modern patriarchy," and Stacy Simplican encourages us to read Locke's social contract

1 John Locke, *Two Treatises of Government: The Second Treatise of Government: An Essay Concerning the True Origin, Extent, and End of Civil Government*; 1689 (A. Milar, 1764), 2.xix.222, and 2.ii.6, where he refers to "the life, the liberty, health, limb, or goods," accessed January 14, 2025, https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/Two_Treatises_of_Government/Book_II.

2 On the active power of the voluntarily acting Lockean subject as opposed to passive power that succumbs to external influence (such as, for instance, the power of a billiard ball), see Joshua. M. Wood, "Locke, Active Power, and a Puzzle about Ascription," *Locke Studies* 23 (2023), https://doi.org/10.5206/ls.2023.10634; on the growing Locke reception in the twentieth century, see Duncan Bell, "What Is Liberalism?," *Political Theory* 42, no. 6 (2014): 682–715; Angus Burgin, *The Great Persuasion: Reinventing Free Markets Since the Depression* (Harvard University Press, 2012).

3 Michel Foucault, *The Use of Pleasure*, History of Sexuality, vol. 2, 1984 (Vintage Books, 1990), 1–32; Judith Butler, *The Psychic Life of Power: Theories in Subjection* (Standford University Press, 1997).

4 More recent critical perspectives on Locke are summarized by Niklas Angebauer and Tilo Wesche, *Theorien des Eigentums zur Einführung* (Junius, 2024), 47; for the postcolonial discussion of enlightenment thought see Nikita Dhawan, "Die affirmative Sabotage der Aufklärung," *Zeitschrift für Politik* 66, no. 2 (2019): 183–198.

not as a means of equality, but as "a *capacity contract*, which bases political membership on a threshold level of capacity and excludes anyone who falls below."[5] From a different perspective, legal scholar Brenna Bhandar points to the colonizing dynamics of the Lockean subject, not with the power of liberation, but with the "*power of appropriation*" as its "point of origin." In its colonial setting, the self-liberating, active power of the Lockean subject unfolded a settler colonial force with genocidal consequences. As Bhandar maintains, appropriation—or to put it differently: predatory land-grabbing—merged with notions of racial superiority, supported by the persistently powerful narrative of human progress through agrarian cultivation.[6] From yet another angle, historian-philosopher Dipesh Chakrabarty and sociologist Bruno Latour dismiss the "earthmoving agency" of the Lockean subject as a misleading belief with fatal ramifications. They dismantle a subject-centered agency and discuss how the hubris of the Lockean subject has facilitated a ruthless exploitation of the planet's resources and caused an existential crisis of the planet.[7]

The colonialist, exploitative and exclusionary dimensions of the Lockean subject might be interpreted as aberrations from a true liberal ideal. However, recent critical readings reject that as an interpretive fallacy, suggesting instead that the ideal and its "aberrations" should be seen as entwined and intrinsic to the Lockean subject. In this vein, historian Tyler Stovall writes in his book on *White Freedom* that "models of autonomy and self-empowerment have often come with a racial dimension. […] Freedom and race are not just enemies but also allies, *frères ennemis* whose histories cannot be understood separately. Put baldly, at its most extreme freedom can be and historically has been a racist ideology."[8]

This article takes up the two major conceptual shifts in the re-framing of the Lockean subject. First, instead of understanding the Lockean subject as timeless, the article explores its historicity. It examines the genealogy of Lockean liberal subjectivity in its different yet entangled seventeenth-century contexts. Second, I show how those entanglements re-shaped the Lockean subject as both liberating and exploitative at the same time. For parsing the historicity and Janus-faced nature of the Lockean subject, the article

5 Carole Pateman, *The Sexual Contract* (Polity Press, 1988), 2; Stacy Clifford Simplican, *The Capacity Contract: Intellectual Disability and the Question of Citizenship* (University of Minnesota Press, 2015), 27; C. B. Macpherson, *The Political Theory of Possessive Individualism: Hobbes to Locke* (Oxford Academics, 1962); Charles W. Mills, *The Racial Contract* (Cornell University Press, 1997).

6 Brenna Bhandar, *Colonial Lives of Property: Law, Land, and Racial Regimes of Ownership* (Duke University Press, 2018), 157–158, 165, 167 for the quote; on the active power of the voluntarily acting Lockean subject see Wood, "Locke, Active Power, and a Puzzle about Ascription."

7 Dipesh Chakrabarty, "Im Globalen offenbart sich das Planetarische: Ein Gespräch mit Bruno Latour," in *Das Klima der Geschichte im planetarischen Zeitalter* (Suhrkamp, 2022), 345–365, 349 for the quote; Bruno Latour and Peter Weibel, eds., *Critical Zones: The Science and Politics of Landing on Earth* (MIT Press , 2020); on Latour and agency see Bruno Latour, *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory* (Oxford University Press, 2005); Nina Mackert and Jürgen Martschukat, "Introduction: Fat Agency," *Body Politics* 3, no. 5 (2015) 5: 5–11.

8 Tyler Stovall, *White Freedom: The Racial History of an Idea* (Princeton University Press, 2021), 5; Jefferson Cowie, *Freedom's Dominion: A Saga of White Resistance to Federal Power* (Basic Books, 2022), on the interrelation of freedom and exclusion.

proceeds in two major steps. First, it examines the formation of a certain type of subjectivity in John Locke's writings, while reflecting their historical context of antiauthoritarian protest in seventeenth century England. I will add to the existing body of literature by concentrating on a pivotal yet so far understudied dimension of Lockean subjectivity, which is the ability to act voluntarily and steer one's own life course, "barely by willing it," to cite John Locke himself. According to philosopher John Hyman, the ability to enact change is key to the understanding of liberal subjectivity.[9] Second, the article reads Locke and his writings against the backdrop of the settler colonial expansion to the so-called new world in the second half of the seventeenth century. Locke's texts, as well as his political and personal activities in the 1660s to 1690s, are embedded in the English colonial expansion to North America and in the Greater Caribbean, the institutionalization of slavery, and the growth of racial capitalism. As I argue, antiauthoritarian protest in England and racially charged settler colonialism were interlocking and synergetic. The Lockean subject of voluntary choice was formed at the interface of both historical developments, and their trajectories continue until today.[10] The implications for our understanding of voluntariness as political principle remain to be discussed.

1 Voluntary Action and the Lockean Subject

The invention of individual rights, their understanding as natural, and their institutionalization in the concept of the social contract established voluntariness at the heart of the body politic. A human being endowed with natural rights decides their course of life.[11] John Locke's writings played a key role in the growing discourse about natural rights in the second half of the seventeenth century. In his most significant work of political philosophy, *Two Treatises of Government*, Locke depicts the social contract as a "voluntary union […] of men freely acting in the choice of their governors." He identifies the voluntary formation of a union as a foundational act in creating a liberal political order.[12] Thus, in Locke's conception, voluntary choice replaced divine authoritarian power as society's foundational political force.

9 John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*; 1690 (Troutman & Hayes 1853), 2.XXI.4, accessed October 8, 2025, https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/An_Essay_Concerning_Human_Understanding_(Troutman_%26_Hayes_1853)/Book_2/Chapter_21; John Hyman, *Action, Knowledge, and Will* (Oxford University Press, 2015), 25–29; besides the few pages in Hyman's book, academic texts on voluntariness in Locke's work are rare: Patrick Riley, "Locke on 'Voluntary Agreement' and Political Power," *Western Political Quarterly* 29, no. 1 (1976) 136–145; Wood, "Locke, Active Power, and a Puzzle about Ascription."

10 For a historicization of Locke see Barbara Arneil, *John Locke and America: The Defence of English Colonialism* (Oxford University Press, 1996); on racial capitalism, see Cedric J. Robinson, *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition* (University of North Carolina Press, 1983); Jodi Melamed, "Racial Capitalism," *Critical Ethnic Studies* 1, no. 1 (2015): 76–85.

11 John Rawls, *Geschichte der politischen Philosophie* (Suhrkamp, 2008).

12 Locke, *Two Treatises*, 2.vii.102, accessed December 9, 2024, https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/Two_Treatises_of_Government/Book_II; Jürgen Martschukat, "The Lockean Subject: Voluntariness and the Essence of Being Human," *Voluntariness: History – Society – Theory* (August 2024), accessed December 9, 2024, https://www.voluntariness.org/the-lockean-subject/.

Anonymously published in 1689, *Two Treatises of Government* had been written between 1680 and 1682. With his book, Locke sought to intervene in the politics and discourse of the time. His reasoning for an alternative to authoritarian kingship had two major reference points. The first was *Patriarcha*, a book by English political theorist Robert Filmer that was posthumously published in 1680. It argued for a divinely ordained absolute power of kings, leading Locke to call Filmer "an Advocate for Slavery."[13] In the introduction to *Two Treatises of Government*, Locke explicitly evoked slavery to characterize the situation of Englishmen under the absolute and arbitrary power of King Charles II. Here, slavery meant the denial of the right to self-government, not the condition of being treated as somebody else's property. Using the term slavery as a metaphor for political oppression remained commonplace until the late eighteenth century, when American revolutionaries depicted themselves as Englishmen opposing their slavery under King George III.[14] Here as in Locke, slavery—"this vile and miserable […] Estate of man," as he describes it at the very beginning of *The First Treatise*—does not refer to the enslavement of Africans, but to the servitude of Englishmen to an absolutist ruler. This servitude was opposed to Locke's idea of human self-ownership, and of having the right to the fruits of one's labor, which I will get back to later.[15]

Locke's second reference point against authoritarian kingship was the conflict between the English Parliament and King Charles II. No armchair philosopher, Locke sought to intervene in the conflict, which was over the king's Roman Catholic brother James' potential succession to the throne. Locke and his patron, mentor, and friend Lord Anthony Ashley Cooper, who was named the first Earl of Shaftesbury in 1672, were directly involved in this years-long conflict. The Earl of Shaftesbury was a leading member of the parliamentary opposition to the king. In the course of this conflict, both, Locke and Shaftesbury spent several years in exile, and more than once Shaftesbury was detained in the Tower of London on suspicion of high treason.[16] It is important to note that Locke's reasoning for voluntary agency as the origin of political power (and against absolute monarchical authority) had a direct political and personal background. To be as clear

13 Locke, *Two Treatises*, Preface, accessed December 9, 2024, https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/Two_Treatises_of_Government.

14 John Locke, *Two Treatises of Government: The First Treatise of Government: The False Principles and Foundations of Sir Robert Filmer, and His Followers, are Detected and Overthrown;* 1689 (A. Millar 1764), 1.I.1, accessed December 9, 2024, https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/Two_Treatises_of_Government/Book_I; James Farr, "'So Vile and Miserable an Estate': The Problem of Slavery in Locke's Political Thought," *Political Theory* 14, no. 2 (1986) 2: 263–289; Jennifer Welchman, "Locke on Slavery and Inalienable Rights," *Canadian Journal of Philosophy* 25, no. 1 (1995): 70. On slavery as a metaphor of oppression, see Stovall, *White Freedom*, 99–133. On the enslavement of Americans under George III, see Annelien de Dijn, *Freedom: An Unruly History* (Harvard University Press, 2020), 184; Eric Foner, "The Meaning of Freedom in the Age of Emancipation," *Journal of American History* 81, no. 2 (1994): 440.

15 Locke, *Two Treatises*, 2.v.27, accessed December 9, 2024, https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/Two_Treatises_of_Government/Book_II; Macpherson, *The Political Theory of Possessive Individualism*; Johan Olsthoorn, "Self-Ownership and Despotism: Locke on Property in the Person, on Divine Dominium of Human Life, and Rights-Forfeiture," *Social Philosophy and Policy* 36, no. 2 (2019) 2: 242–263.

16 J. R. Milton, "Life and Works," in *The Lockean Mind*, eds. Jessisca Gordon-Roth and Shelley Weinberg (Routledge, 2022), 7–11; Maurice Cranston, *John Locke: A Biography* (Oxford University Press, 1957): 184–213.

as possible, Locke's argument against English slavery under a king did not extend to an argument against the enslavement of Africans in the growing plantation system.

According to Locke, voluntary action must constitute the core of a political order, and, at the same time, the human potential to act voluntarily precedes any political order. Otherwise, human beings would not be able to form a political union voluntarily in the first place. In Locke's political theory, voluntariness is so foundational that it does not seem to require further explanation. Yet he explains the human capacity to act voluntarily in his anthropological *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, and particularly in its central chapter "Of Power." According to Locke, the capacity for voluntary action is in fact what constitutes humans as such (even when he explicitly speaks of humans, he means white able-bodied men), as opposed to animals: "Voluntary motion, with sense and reason," Locke concludes later in the *Essay*, is "the nominal essence of the species."[17]

Locke published his anthropological magnum opus in 1689, the same year he published *Two Treatises of Government*. Notably, both works appeared after the Glorious Revolution of 1688 had disempowered the absolute monarchy and established the primacy of the Parliament over the Crown. The *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* is said to have taken its final form during the 1680s before the revolution, though Locke began developing it years earlier. In the spring of 1667, he had moved from Oxford to London to live in Lord Ashley's Exeter House and serve as his physician, secretary, and tutor for his son. Exeter House would soon become a place of lively intellectual exchange on English politics and philosophy, which inspired Locke to draft a first version of the *Essay* in the winter of 1671.[18] (For the discussion in the second part of this article, it is important to keep in mind that Locke began writing both of his seminal works 15 years or more before he finally published them in 1689.)

Together, *Two Treatises* and the *Essay* devised a new political anthropology, with voluntariness tying both works together. Similar to the *Essay, Two Treatises* portrays the ability to act voluntarily as a prerequisite for becoming a political being, for entering a social contract, and thus for establishing a free society. The Lockean subject is one that acts voluntarily, has inherent property rights over their person and their labor, and is conceived as the wellspring and pivot of a liberal political order. To portray such a political order as historically inevitable, Locke locates voluntariness within the natural internal workings of the human being, at the interface between human will and body. The interaction between will and body, he writes in his *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, is initiated by a purportedly genuine, natural, and universal human desire to achieve happiness and avoid pain. For Locke, desire is a productive force of Deleuzian potency. Desire simply exists, keeps the world in motion, is the engine of being, and the condition for voluntary action. In the *Essay*, Locke does not define the specific object of desire (which he believed

17 John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, 3.VI.3, accessed October 8, 2025, https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/An_Essay_Concerning_Human_Understanding_(Troutman_%26_Hayes_1853)/Book_3/Chapter_6.

18 Milton, *Life and Works*; Cranston, *John Locke*, 117, 140–143; G.A J. Rogers, "The Intellectual Setting and Aims of the Essay," in *The Cambridge Companion to Locke's Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, ed. Lex Newman (Cambridge University Press, 2007), 7–32.

to be property, and specifically land, as we will soon discuss). Instead, the *Essay* focuses on how human beings in general respond to their desires through bodily motions, such as by raising an arm or taking a step. According to Locke, human beings can continue or end bodily motions, initiate or refrain from them. Such motions or their forbearance are what Locke calls "voluntary," and they render human beings as active, self-responsible agents in charge of their lives.[19]

For Locke, the human capacity for acting voluntarily is the wellspring of active power and of the potential to decide which direction one's life takes. Thus, voluntary action—"the nominal essence of the [human] species," according to Locke—constitutes the new and liberal version of divine power: a power in and of itself and steering our life path, yet with its course lying in our own hands. Following Locke, life is in fact nothing but the perpetual process of responding to one's desires. It is "that train of voluntary actions," states Locke in the *Essay*, "which makes up our lives."[20]

However gratifying the fulfilment of desire might be, Locke stresses that immediate satisfaction is not always in one's best interest. To the contrary, he centers "the power to suspend the prosecution of any desire" as making way for consideration, thus empowering the human being to avoid "all that variety of mistakes, errors, and faults which we run into in the conduct of our lives, and our endeavors after happiness. […] This seems to me the source of all liberty." As Locke points out, with the ability to decide about our motions and act voluntarily comes a responsibility for our actions, "as we have opportunity to examine, view, and judge of the good or evil of what we are going to do."[21] Voluntariness creates accountability.[22]

For Locke, living up to this accountability requires effort. Voluntary decision making and self-government must be learned. For Locke, a general ability to act voluntarily is given, but freedom is still an achievement, depending on the choices we make and the actions we take. The Lockean subject is made in practice. In *Some Thoughts Concerning Education,* which Locke published in 1692, he depicts education as crucial for establish-

19 Locke, *An Essay*, 2.XXI.5 on voluntary action, 2.XXI.30ff on desire, accessed October 8, 2025, https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/An_Essay_Concerning_Human_Understanding_(Troutman_%26_Hayes_1853)/Book_2/Chapter_21; Julie Walsh, "Locke Ethics," in *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, accessed February 6, 2025 https://iep.utm.edu/locke-et/.

20 Locke, *An Essay*, 2.XXI.40, accessed October 8, 2025, https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/An_Essay_Concerning_Human_Understanding_(Troutman_%26_Hayes_1853)/Book_2/Chapter_21, and 3.VI.3, https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/An_Essay_Concerning_Human_Understanding_(Troutman_%26_Hayes_1853)/Book_3/Chapter_6; Wood, "Locke, Active Power, and a Puzzle about Ascription," on active power as substitute for divine power; Julie Walsh, "Locke on Power and Freedom," in *The Lockean Mind*, eds. Jessisca Gordon-Roth and Shelley Weinberg (Routledge, 2022), 217–218.

21 Locke, *An Essay*, 2.XXI.48, accessed October 8, 2025, https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/An_Essay_Concerning_Human_Understanding_(Troutman_%26_Hayes_1853)/Book_2/Chapter_21. See also John Locke, *Some Thoughts Concerning Education* (1692), II.38, accessed December 13, 2024, https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/Some_Thoughts_Concerning_Education/Part_II: "It seems plain to me, that the principle of all virtue and excellency lies in a power of denying ourselves the satisfaction of our own desires, where reason does not authorize them."

22 Philosopher John Hyman stresses that "voluntariness is at root an ethical concept," as its basic function is to inform the appraisal of our judgements and of individual conduct; John Hyman, "Voluntariness and Intention," *Jurisprudence* 7, no. 3 (2016): 694; John Hyman, "Voluntariness and Choice," *The Philosophical Quarterly* 63, no. 253 (2013): 685; Riley, "Locke on 'Voluntary Agreement' and Political Power," 142–144.

ing a lifelong habit of self-command in the pursuit of desire and for steering voluntary practices in a proper direction.[23] Philosopher John Baltes points out that such thoughts on education reveal Locke's deeply inegalitarian and class-based thinking. Whereas young members of the propertied landed gentry were to be educated in voluntary decision-making and self-government, Locke presented the poor as lost to brandy, cards, crime, idleness, and "invincible ignorance." The poor are portrayed as in need of strict and severe discipline, instead of education. Thus, despite a depiction of voluntariness as essentially human, Locke obviously sees manifold differences in people's ability to act voluntarily.[24]

2 America, Unfree Labor, Landed Property, and the Lockean Subject

"In the beginning all the world was America," writes John Locke in *The Second Treatise of Government*'s key chapter "Of Property." America, and especially the colony of Carolina, embodied the state of nature in John Locke's mind: It was a vast swath of unclaimed property, and a political blank slate. Locke was fascinated by America, and he was an avid reader of American (and other) travelogues, which were meant to equip him with knowledge about the land and people. His fascination with America showed in his work. In the second half of the seventeenth century, the political situation in England was tense, and the social situation was dominated by nascent industrialization, a substantial growth in population, an increasing proportion of unpropertied wage laborers and rising poverty. Land was in the hands of few Englishmen.[25] America and Carolina held the possibility of an alternative social and political figuration. To Locke, colonizing America meant the promise of a new society with more freedom and opportunity for a greater number of Englishmen. America, and particularly Carolina, was an inspiration and a testing ground for his new political anthropology.

However, the 1663 founding document of the colony of Carolina had established neither a free nor egalitarian society, but rather a "proprietory absolutism," to use philosopher James Farr's words. King Charles II had granted absolute power and authority to

23 James Tully, "Governing Conduct," in *Conscience and Casuistry in Early Modern Europe*, ed. Edmund Leites (Cambridge University Press, 1988), 12–71; Hina Nazar, "Locke and Rousseau on Educating for Freedom," in *The Lockean Mind*, eds. Jessisca Gordon-Roth and Shelley Weinberg (Routledge, 2022), 410; Hina Nazar, "Locke, Education, and 'Disciplinary Liberalism'," *The Review of Politics* 79 (2017): 215–238; Dirk Schuck, "Zur Genese individueller Selbständigkeit bei John Locke," in *Geschichte und Gegenwart der Erziehungsphilosophie*, ed. Matthias Ernst Bähr and Dennis Sölch (J.B. Metzler Berlin, 2023), 31–46.

24 Locke, *An Essay*, 4.XX.2, accessed October 8, 2025; https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/An_Essay_Concerning_Human_Understanding_(Troutman_%26_Hayes_1853)/Book_2/Chapter_20; John Baltes, *The Empire of Habit: John Locke, Discipline, and the Origins of Liberalism*, (University of Rochester Press, 2016), 21, 62–118.

25 Locke, *Two Treatises*, 2.V.49, accessed December 27, 2024, https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/Two_Treatises_of_Government/Book_II; on early industrialization in England see Leigh Shaw-Taylor, *Economies Past*, accessed December 27, 2024, https://www.economiespast.org/; on Locke and travel literature see Arneil, *John Locke and America*, 22; John Harrison and Peter Laslett, *The Library of John Locke* (Oxford University Press, 1971); Ann Talbot, *"The Great Ocean of Knowledge": The Influence of Travel Literature on the Work of John Locke* (Brill, 2010), 143–160.

the eight English Lord Proprietors of the new colony. They were to pass on some of their power and authority to those settlers who would become landowners in the new colony. Three-fifths of the land in Carolina was meant to be granted to settlers. Prior to receiving their Carolina land grants, some of the Lord Proprietors had been involved in the colonization of Barbados, a highly profitable undertaking because of the sugar boom in the 1640s. Among the investors in Barbados was Locke's future mentor and patron, Lord Ashley, who was part owner of a sugar plantation worked by nine African slaves. Barbados became the template for the colonization of Carolina, as well as for other colonization projects in the British Empire. Hopes ran high for Carolina. It would become Ashley's "darling," and, according to James Farr, Ashley himself would be "the dynamo of the colony." Through "Planting and Trade," as Ashley wrote in 1671 in a letter to Governor William Saile, he sought to make Carolina as profitable an enterprise as Barbados. To that end, Ashley and other proprietors sought to attract English settlers in Barbados who were able and willing to resettle with their African slaves in Carolina. Quite often, the written exchanges about Carolina called it "the plantation."[26]

In 1667, when hired by Lord Ashley as a personal physician, secretary, and tutor to Ashley's son, Locke had been a tutor at Oxford University's Christ Church College for seven years. Given Ashley's role in the colonization of Carolina, it is not surprising that Locke became Secretary to the Lord Proprietors of Carolina from 1668 to 1675. He attended their regular meetings and had a staggering amount of paperwork on the new colony pass through his hands. In 1669, Locke was awarded the title of a landgrave in Carolina. With the title came 12,000 acres of land in the colony, the standard size of a so-called barony, which in Locke's case seem to have never yielded any rent. Locke's interest and investment in Britain's American colonies extended well beyond Carolina. From 1673 to 1676, he was also a secretary of the English government's Council of Trade and Plantations, which met twice a week and administered the colonies. In 1675, he invested 100 British pounds as a merchant adventurer in the Bahamas trade, the equivalent of 25,000 US dollars in 2025. Five years earlier, the Bahamas had been given to the Lord Proprietors of Carolina by King Charles II, which had set the stage for a massive slave economy

26 The letter from Ashley to Saile is quoted after Vicki Hsueh, "Giving Orders. Theory and Practice in the 'Fundamental Constitutions of Carolina'," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 63, no. 3 (2002): 447; Robert Bernasconia and Anika Maaza Mann, "The Contradictions of Racism. Locke, Slavery, and the Two Treatises," in *Race and Racism in Modern Philosophy*, ed. Andrew Valls (Cornell University Press, 2005), 89–107; James Farr, "'Absolute Power and Authority': John Locke and the Revisions of the Fundamental Constitutions of Carolina," *Locke Studies* 20 (2020), accessed December 27, 2024, https://ojs.lib.uwo.ca/index.php/locke/article/view/10310; Daniel C. Littlefield, "Slavery," in *South Carolina Encyclopedia*, accessed December 29, 2024, https://www.scencyclopedia.org/sce/entries/slavery/; Arneil, *John Locke and America*, 120. On Barbados as colonization model in the British Empire, see Jack P. Greene, "Colonial South Carolina and the Caribbean Connection," *South Carolina Historical Magazine* 88, no. 4 (1987): 192–210; Matthew Mulcahy, *Hubs of Empire: The Southeastern Lowcountry and British Caribbean* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 2014); L.H. Roper, ed., *The Torrid Zone: Caribbean Colonization and Cultural Interaction in the Long Seventeenth Century,* (University of South Carolina Press, 2018); Michael D. Bennett, "Caribbean Plantation Economies As Colonial Models: The Case of the English East India Company and St. Helena in the Late Seventeenth Century," *Atlantic Studies* 20, no. 4 (2023): 508–539; Brad Hinshelwood, "The Carolinian Context of John Locke's Theory of Slavery," *Political Theory* 41, no. 4 (2013) 4: 577, for the number of Africans enslaved on Ashley's Barbadian plantation.

on the archipelago. Furthermore, in 1674 and 1675, Locke invested 600 British pounds (the equivalent of 150,000 US dollars in 2025) in the Royal African Company, which had been granted a monopoly in the slave trade with the colonies by the English Crown when founded in 1660.[27] When Locke left England for France in 1675, his interest in Carolina and the English colonies did not wane. After his return from political exile, he served as Commissioner for the Board of Trade and Plantations from 1695 to 1700 and was responsible for overseeing the affairs of Carolina's neighboring colony Virginia.

All this shows that throughout his career and life, Locke was deeply involved in the colonization process and was undoubtedly familiar with the details of colonial life in Carolina and other colonies. Both as a private person and in his official capacities, he read and wrote reports and participated in both the occupation of Native American land and the enslavement of Africans. It is also likely that he frequented Carolina Coffee House, located in the commercial center of London and the epicenter for conversations about Carolina. There, information about the promises and opportunities of Carolina was traded and passages on ships to the colony were sold.[28]

It is important to keep in mind that Locke's active engagement in the colonization process and his drafting of liberal theory overlapped. Both happened in the same intellectual-political context and time periods. This becomes even clearer when we look at Locke's role in writing and revising the "Constitutions of Carolina." In 1669, as secretary to the Lord Proprietors and as Lord Ashley's personal secretary, he helped draft the first constitution for the colony. He was also involved in revising the document in 1682, when he was not officially working for the Lord Proprietors any longer, and when his work on *Two Treatises of Government* went through a crucial period. In 1698, when he was a Commissioner for the Board of Trade and Plantations, Locke contributed once again to revisions of the Carolina constitution. Thus, his engagement with Carolina and its constitution lasted from a few years before he began working on his new political anthropology to a few years after the publication of its key texts: *Two Treatises of Government*, *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, and *On Education*.[29]

Locke's colonial engagement, and particularly his contributions to the Carolina constitution, have been the topic of a contentious scholarly debate. A major point of discussion is the constitution's explicit endorsement of slavery. In its original 1669 version, article 110 maintains that "every freeman of Carolina shall have absolute power and authority over his negro slaves, of what opinion or religion soever." Thus, in John Locke's Caro-

27 On the value of the Pound in 1675, see Eric W. Nye, *Pounds Sterling to Dollars: Historical Conversion of Currency*, accessed December 3, 2024, https://www.uwyo.edu/numimage/currency.htm; According to what we know about Locke's annual income in the early 1670s, this was a substantial amount of money for him; see Cranston, *John Locke*, 115, 120 on Locke attending the meetings of the Lord Proprietors; Hinshelwood, *The Carolinian Context*, 577 on the development plans for the Bahamas.

28 Arneil, *John Locke and America,* 74, 88, 118; Farr, "Absolute Power and Authority," 11; Farr, *Locke, Natural Law, and New World Slavery,* 497; Hinshelwood, *The Carolinian Context*, 573 on Locke and Carolina after 1675; Nic Butler, "The Carolina Coffee House of London," *Charleston County Public Library Blog*, accessed April 20, 2025, https://www.ccpl.org/charleston-time-machine/carolina-coffee-house-london.

29 Hinshelwood, *The Carolinian Context*, 574.

lina even converting to Christianity would not save a Black person from being enslaved and subjected to "absolute power and authority."[30] On its face, this contradicts Locke's liberal political anthropology shaping the human being as voluntary agent, and it is not surprising that some Locke scholars consider this "an embarrassing fact," as maintained by Wayne Glausser. To a certain extent, the academic debate revolves around the question how intense Locke's involvement in the writing of the constitution was and if his involvement was not so marginal that it is negligible (which is obviously considered saving his liberal theory from being tainted at its core for recognizing slavery).[31] However, given Locke's fascination with American colonization, his professional position, and his financial investments, the question is not whether he was involved in establishing slavery in Carolina and the Greater Caribbean. The more fitting question is about what his involvement means for our understanding of liberal subjectivity, its paradigms and historicity. How does it affect our understanding of both a supposedly essential human ability for voluntary action and voluntariness as a political principle? Considering the historical context of seventeenth-century America and Carolina helps answer these questions.

The new world was built by unfree labor[32]. In seventeenth-century America, a large and diverse group of people lived and toiled under the power and authority of "freemen." Their chance to act voluntarily and decide about their motions was extremely limited. First, most white immigrants came as so-called indentured servants to the new world, particularly to the Southern colonies, where indentured servitude was the predominant type of labor until the late seventeenth century. Immediately after its founding in 1606, the Virginia Company had invented this system of fronting the costs for the transatlantic voyage of penniless English workers, who repaid the debt with up to seven years of their freedom and labor in return. Given the high mortality rate in the hostile environment

30 Article 110 disappears from the 1682 version, but this version of the constitution clearly takes slavery for granted in its article 113 on "charity": "Since Charity obliges us to wish well to the Souls of all men, and Religion ought to alter nothing in any man's civil estate or right, it shall be Lawful for Slaves, as well as others, to enter themselves and be of what Church or profession any of them shall think best, and thereof be as full members as any freeman; but yet, no slave shall hereby be Exempted from that Civil dominion his master has over him, but be in all things in the Same state and condition he was in before;" see *The Fundamental Constitutions of Carolina - August 17, 1682*, accessed January 2, 2025, https://www.carolana.com/Carolina/Documents/fundamental_constitutions_1682_august.html. In the 1698 version, the charity article becomes article no. 37 and the slavery article from 1669 returns as article no. 40; see *The Fundamental Constitutions of Carolina - April 11, 1698*, accessed January 2, 2025, https://www.carolana.com/Carolina/Documents/fundamental_constitutions_1698.html.

31 For the debate about John Locke's involvement, see for instance David Armitage, "John Locke, Carolina, and the Two Treatises of Government," *Political Theory* 32, no 5 (2004) 5, 602–627; Farr, "Absolute Power and Authority"; Holly Brewer, "Slavery, Sovereignty, and 'Inheritable Blood': Reconsidering John Locke and the Origins of American Slavery," *American Historical Review* 122, no. 4 (2017) 4: 1038–1078, seeks to minimize Locke's impact; see also Holly Brewer, "Whose Fundamental Constitutions? Locke, Slavery, and Manuscript Evidence," *Locke Studies* 24 (2024), accessed January 2, 2025, https://ojs.lib.uwo.ca/index.php/locke/article/view/17536. "Embarrassing fact" after Wayne Glausser, "Three Approaches to Locke and the Slave Trade," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 51, no. 2 (1990): 199–216. *The Fundamental Constitutions of Carolina – March 1, 1669*, accessed January 2, 2025, https://avalon.law.yale.edu/17th_century/nc05.asp. A similar debate on Kant has been discussed recently by Nikita Dhawan, *Die Aufklärung vor Europa retten: Kritische Theorien der Dekolonisierung* (Campus, 2024).

32 Peter Kolchin, *Unfree Labor: American Slavery and Russian Serfdom* (Harvard UP, 1987).

of the Southern colonies, many of them did not survive long enough to earn back their freedom.[33]

After the founding of Carolina in 1663, quite a few early settlers came as indentured servants to the colony. The colony also added to the practices of white bondage by introducing the so-called "leetman" to English North America. Leetpeople were at the bottom of Carolina's "proprietory absolutism," where freedom and political power, for instance holding an office, depended on one's property holdings.[34] At the lowest end of the white colonial hierarchy were those in debt, i.e. those with "negative property." An option to escape one's debt was signing oneself into serfdom by becoming what was called a leetman or leetwoman. Leetpeople were denied the "liberty to go off from the land of their particular lord," as stated by the Carolina constitution. When two leetpeople married, their lord had to provide them with ten acres of land, and they were obliged to pay one eighth of what they produced to their owner. The colonial administration trumpeted this as a promising prospect for the English poor. Yet leetpeople could be sold with the land they lived on, and they passed on their dependent status to their children. The difficult economic situation in the colony's early years led to an increase in the number of leetpeople. If a settler was too poor to pay for what he needed to survive, and many of them were, he was given the option by the constitution to "voluntarily enter himself a leet-man in the registry of the County Court." Obviously, for the poor white population, the human ability for voluntary choice and active agency meant the option to choose unfreedom.[35]

Second, the buying and selling of American Indians as slaves was common practice in early colonial North America. Virginians enslaved American Indians from early on, particularly by turning war captives into slaves (which was consistent with the "just war"-theory according to Locke), but also by kidnapping them, as well as by buying them from other colonies or from those American Indians who were enslavers themselves. Time and again, seventeenth-century colonial authorities imposed regulations against American Indian enslavement by English settlers, but those laws were difficult to enforce and commonly flouted. Carolina was no exception in this regard. The original 1669 Carolina constitution did not endorse American Indian servitude, and a set of supplementary laws from December 1671 even contained an explicit provision against the enslavement of American Indians. For John Locke, their individual rights deserved protection, even though their political and property rights did not, as I will argue below. Despite all constitutional provisions, South Carolinian settlers were heavily involved in

33 David W. Galenson, "The Rise and Fall of Indentured Servitude in the Americas: An Economic Analysis," *Journal of Economic History* 44, no. 1 (1984): 1–26; Christopher Tomlins, "Reconsidering Indentured Servitude: European Migration and the Early American Labor Force, 1600–1775," *Labor History* 42 (2001): 5–43.

34 Farr, "Absolute Power and Authority."

35 Baltes, *The Empire of Habit*, 95–96; Mulcahy, *Hubs of Empire*, 87; Hinshelwood, *The Carolinian Context*, 578; Hsueh, *Giving Orders*, 439–440; *The Fundamental Constitutions of Carolina – March 1, 1669*, art. 22–26, accessed January 7, 2025, https://avalon.law.yale.edu/17th_century/nc05.asp; *The Fundamental Constitutions of Carolina – August 17, 1682*, accessed January 7, 2025, https://www.carolana.com/Carolina/Documents/fundamental_constitutions_1682_august.html, article 21–25.

the Indian slave trade. When colonists engaged in frontier trade with American Indian tribes, they treated Indian captives as a commodity, made them work as slaves, and traded them in the region and throughout the Greater Caribbean.[36]

Third, English colonists in Virginia enslaved Africans beginning in 1619. Yet during the first half century of English colonization, the status of non-free Black laborers in the North American colonies was unclear and often not so different from that of white indentured servants or enslaved American Indians. Then, in the 1660s, Black enslavement began to emerge as the "peculiar institution" of the Southern colonies.[37] Several events marked that transition: In 1661, the English colony of Barbados passed the first comprehensive slave code, which was meant to regulate slavery, and explicitly put Black slaves on a level with "other goods and Chattel." The Barbados slave code would become a model for England's Southern colonies in North America, including Carolina. (Recall that Lord Ashley and other proprietors of Carolina were deeply involved in the colonization of Barbados and its sugar plantations.)[38] Also in 1661, the colony of Virginia enacted the first law that distinguished explicitly between temporary white servitude and permanent Black enslavement. In 1662, another Virginia law set precedent for the rule that the status of enslavement was to be passed on through the mother. That put the female body and sexual violence at the center of the slave system and made enslavement hereditary.[39] Another year later, in 1663, Carolina was founded. Making the colony a profitable enterprise without unfree labor was unimaginable to its proprietors. To attract settlers, they promised 100 acres of land to any formerly indentured servant who had earned their freedom. Also, the Lord Proprietors of Carolina promised to each first-year settler additional land grants of twenty acres for every male slave and of ten acres for every female slave they brought with them. In the following five years, it would be ten and five acres.[40]

36 Hinshelwood, *The Carolinian Context*, 562–590; Bhikhu Parekh, "Liberalism and Colonialism: A Critique of Locke and Mill," in *Decolonisation of Imagination*, eds. Bhikhu Parekh and Jan Nederveen Pieterse (Zed Books, 1995), 81–98, 92; Andres Reséndez, *The Other Slavery: The Uncovered Story of Indian Enslavement in America* (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2016); Alan Galley, ed., *Indian Slavery in Colonial America,* (University of Nebraska Press, 2010), particularly chapters by C. S. Everett, "'They shalbe slaves for their lives': Indian Slavery in Colonial Virginia," 67–108, and Alan Galley, *South Carolina's Entrance into the Indian Slave Trade*, 109–145; Armitage, *John Locke, Carolina, and the Two Treatises of Government*, 610; Bernasconia and Mann, *The Contradictions of Racism*, 102.

37 Kenneth Milton Stampp, *The Peculiar Institution: Slavery in the Ante-Bellum South* (Knopf, 1956).

38 *Barbados Slave Code*, preamble, accessed January 3, 2025, https://slaverylawpower.org/nhprc-sample-documents/barbados-slave-code/; Ed Rugemer, "The Development of Mastery and Race in the Comprehensive Slave Codes of the Greater Caribbean during the Seventeenth Century," *William & Mary Quarterly* 70, no. 3 (2013): 429–458.

39 Jennifer L. Morgan, *Reckoning with Slavery: Gender, Kinship, and Capitalism in the Early Black Atlantic* (Duke University Press, 2021).

40 Farr, *Locke, Natural Law, and New World Slavery*, 497; Commissioners of the Lord Proprietors of Carolina, Proposals made to all such Persons as shall undertake to become the first Settlers on Rivers, Harbours, or Creeks, whose Mouth or Entrance is Southwards or Westwards of Cape St. Romana in the Province of Carolina, and execute the same at their own hazard and charge of Transportation, Ammunition, and Provision, as is hereafter expressed, &c., § 13, in: William Hilton, A relation of a discovery lately made on the coast of Florida (from lat. 31 to 33 deg. 45 min. north-lat.) / by William Hilton, Anthony Long and Peter Fabian, in the ship Adventure, which set sayl from Spikes Bay, Aug. 10. 1663. and was set forth by several gentlemen and merchants of the Island of Barbadoes; giving an account of the nature and temperature of the soyl, the manners and disposition of the natives, and whatsoever else is remarkable therein; together with proposals made by the commissioners of the lords proprietors to all such persons as shall become the first settlers on the rivers, harbors, and creeks there, London 1664, 32.

Thus, when John Locke became secretary for the Proprietors of Carolina in 1668, they were soliciting slaveholding planter settlers, particularly from Barbados. The sugar boom had triggered a massive increase in plantation values and a concentration of capital in Barbados, so it was mostly small landholders and indentured servants who had finished their terms of servitude who saw better opportunities for themselves in Carolina. In the first decade after its founding, more than half of the free settlers in the Southern part of Carolina were Barbadians, most of them former owners of ten acres or less in Barbados. The additional land grant for every slave they brought to the new colony, along with article 110 of the 1669 constitution, were meant to attract Barbadian planters to Carolina, provide them with landed property, and legally protect their property rights in human beings. The revised versions of the Carolina constitution in the following decades support the argument that the enslavement of Black people was recognized as self-evident right of landowners.[41] In Carolina, Black slaves trafficked from Africa and the West Indies were seen as the major (and necessary) source of labor.

Some scholars have pointed out that plantation chattel slavery did not yet exist in early Carolina when John Locke was involved in its affairs. White propertied settlers worked side by side with their slaves, indentured servants and leetpeople, so Carolina was a society with slaves, but no slave society, according to those scholars. That argument was intended to diminish the contradictions between John Locke's political philosophy and his role in the entrenchment of chattel slavery and his role in establishing chattel slavery in England's North American colonies.[42] However, even if small landowners worked alongside unfree laborers of different kinds, some early Carolinians clearly had "power and authority" over others. Some could do voluntarily what they wanted to do or go voluntarily where they wanted to go, others could not. Moreover, even if Carolina did not have an established plantation economy before the early eighteenth century, it was the only English colony on the North American mainland that was built on African slave labor from the very beginning. Again: The blueprint of Lord Ashley and the other proprietors for the colonization of Carolina was Barbados, and its thriving slave plantation economy dated back to the mid-seventeenth century. Carolina's would take off after 1700, when the Black population grew from 2,500 to 39,000 within three decades. Against this backdrop, John Locke must be seen as present at the creation. The spokesman for voluntariness inarguably helped give birth to a slave society in Carolina and make the colony part of the plantation economy in the Greater Caribbean.[43]

41 On the early settlement of Carolina see Richard S. Dunn, "The English Sugar Islands and the Founding of South Carolina," *South Carolina Historical Magazine* 72, no. 2 (1971): 81–93; Richard Waterhouse, "England, the Caribbean, and the Settlement of Carolina," *Journal of American Studies* 9, no. 3 (1975): 259–281; Greene, *Colonial South Carolina and the Caribbean Connection*, 197; Mulcahy, *Hubs of Empire*, 86–88; Hsueh, *Giving Orders*, 440–41.

42 Talbot, *The Great Ocean of Knowledge,* 297–300, drawing on Ira Berlin, *Many Thousands Gone: The First Two Centuries of Slavery in North America* (Belknap Press,1998), for the distinction between a society with slaves and a slave society.

43 Mulcahy, *Hubs of Empire*; Greene, *Colonial South Carolina and the Caribbean Connection*, 205 for the Black population growth; Simon P. Newman, *A New World of Labor. The Development of Plantation Slavery in the British Atlantic* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013), 191 mentions that by 1656, 46,000 enslaved Africans had been taken to Barbados.

Property was a key element to both English seventeenth century colonization and Locke's political anthropology. Regarding the former, recall first that King Charles II gave the colony of Carolina as property to eight members of the English nobility. Second, settlers from Europe and the Caribbean who came to Carolina were mostly attracted by the promise of owning property in land. Some of the Lord Proprietors' early provisions suggest that they sought to respect American Indian land needs and boundaries. Such provisions were often ignored by colonial governments and settlers, who also disregarded the fundamentally different concepts and practices Native American had about land and property. It never even occurred to Locke and other colonizers, writes political scientist Bhikhu Parekh, "that land might be used but not owned, that it might be owned but not to the exclusion of others, or that the idea of owning land might appear odd and sacrilegious."[44] Third, property in people played an important role in the colonization of Carolina. Some settlers came as freemen, others came as temporary quasi-property and spent years in servitude, driven by their social and political subordination in England, their poverty, and their desire for owning a piece of land. Still others were brought as property to the new world from Africa or from West Indian plantations. They worked other settlers' land as slaves and transformed it through their labor into what these settlers considered their rightful property. "The turfs my servant has cut […], become my property," John Locke explicitly writes in *The Second Treatise*.[45]

When it comes to John Locke's political anthropology, an elaborate theory of property provided a discursive rationalization of English settler colonialism. His political anthropology and his colonial practice interacted. According to Locke, the earth was originally "common to all men" and given to them by God "for their benefit" and "the support and comfort of their being." Moreover, Locke claimed that man held property in himself and in his labor. Together, this meant that by investing labor into land, land was transformed from a common good into private property. With labor and land as private possession came the fruits of both. "As much land as a man tills, plants, improves, cultivates, and can use the product of, so much is his property," writes Locke in *The Second Treatise of Government*. That property included the land worked by unfree laborers in a man's power. The world, according to Locke, was given "to the use of the industrious and rational," and its land should not "always remain common and uncultivated."[46]

The colonial context of his property theory is evident in almost every line of *The Second Treatise*'s key chapter "Of Property." This becomes obvious when Locke claims that "it was quite otherwise […] in the beginning," and as we know, America represented "the

44 Galley, *South Carolina's Entrance into the Indian Slave Trade*, 112; William Cronon, *Changes in the Land: Indians, Colonists, and the Ecology of Colonial New England* (Hill&Wang, 1983), 64–81; Parekh, "Liberalism and Colonialism," 90.

45 Locke, *Two Treatises of Government*, 2.V.28, accessed October 8, 2025, https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/Two_Treatises_of_Government_(1764)/Book_II; Joanne Boucher, "Male Power and Contract Theory: Hobbes and Locke in Carole Pateman's 'The Sexual Contract'," *Canadian Journal of Political Science* 36, no. 1 (2003), 33.

46 Locke, *Two Treatises of Government*, 2.V.26 ("common"), 2.V.34 ("benefit"), 2.V.26 ("support"), 2.V.35 ("the condition"), 2.V.32 ("as much"), 2.V.34 ("to the use" and "always remain"), accessed January 13, 2025, https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/Two_Treatises_of_Government/Book_II; on the significance of property for Locke's political theory, see Macpherson, *The Political Theory of Possessive Individualism*.

beginning" or the original, pristine state of nature to him. For Locke, colonizing Carolina meant, in the literal sense of the word, to overcome the state of nature by cultivating the soil ("colere" in Latin) and forming landed estate ("colonia" in Latin). Locke refers to "tobacco and sugar" as exemplary fruits of laboring the land, products the colonial plantation economies in Virginia and Barbados were known for. Those colonies were the models for the colonization of Carolina when Locke was writing *Two Treatises* in the 1680s. Locke underlines his reasoning on property by claiming that "there cannot be a clearer demonstration of any thing [sic], than several nations of the Americans are of this." In other words, rendering seemingly vacant land useful and creating a plantation economy of private proprietors meant fulfilling God's plan.[47]

For Locke, enslaving people and exploiting the labor of Africans, American Indians, and of the land-hungry English poor obviously did not contradict his political anthropology. On the contrary, Locke saw those practices as validation of his theory. If a man was entitled to owning the land he could work, and if owning land meant liberty, calling unfree laborers one's property provided a person with the means to work and own a larger piece of land and, thus, to be freer. After all, those early settlers who brought slaves to John Locke's Carolina were assigned additional land. Locke's complex discussion in *The Second Treatise of Government* of the rightfulness and wrongfulness of slavery and how it related to the "just war"-theory obviously did not pertain to enslaved Black Americans. They were considered closer to the "inferior creatures" he refers to in *The Second Treatise*, and were not perceived as "men," i.e., those with "property in [their] own person."[48] Obviously, in the world of John Locke, envisioning a "voluntary society" defined by active agency and "power by consent" was fully compatible with a new world plantation economy where proprietors purchased their labor force in the form of either "slaves or horses," as Locke put it in *The First Treatise*. Being and becoming a free subject in the world of John Locke demanded owning property in the form of land and people. A free society based on plunder and enslavement did not occur to Locke as inherently contradictory.[49]

Conclusion

Even if the ability for voluntary action, hence the ability to decide if we transform desire into action, is ingrained in the human being, it did not gain discursive and political momentum before the second half of the seventeenth century. John Locke contributed sub-

47 Locke, *Two Treatises of Government*, 2.V.35 ("quite otherwise"), 2.V.40 ("tobacco and sugar"), 2.V.41 ("there cannot"), accessed January 13, 2025, https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/Two_Treatises_of_Government/Book_II; on Locke and American Indian land see James Tully, *An Approach to Political Philosophy. Locke in Contexts* (Cambridge University Press, 1993), 137–176; Arneil, *John Locke and America*, 109–126; Angebauer and Wesche, *Theorien des Eigentums zur Einführung*, 47–68; Sofia Bianchi Mancini et.al., eds., *Relating to Landed Property* (Campus, 2024).

48 Locke, *Two Treatises of Government*, 2.IV on slavery, 2.V.27 ("inferior"), accessed January 13, 2025, https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/Two_Treatises_of_Government/Book_II.

49 Locke, *Two Treatises of Government*, 1.XI.131, accessed January 6, 2025, https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/Two_Treatises_of_Government/Book_I.

stantially to this momentum by shaping a human subject defined by its active agency. He made that subject the center of his political anthropology, which he developed within the historical context of England in the final third of the seventeenth-century. At the time, Locke was actively involved in both the upheaval against the power and authority of the king and the colonization of North America and the Greater Caribbean, particularly Carolina. Both historical developments are interconnected through the Lockean idea of a genuinely human desire for and right to self-determination and landed property. "The reason why men enter into society, is the preservation of their property," John Locke states in *The Second Treatise of Government*. Voluntariness was elemental for Locke, who argued that forming a society is the voluntary *Ur*-act of man as political being, and that the human subject is defined by its ability to choose how to respond to desire—in other words, to act voluntarily. Against this backdrop, Locke posits property (land) as the original desire of man, and therefore the goal of his voluntary action. He depicts ownership of land as "the chief end" of forming a voluntary union and therefore the driver of both the rebellion against the king and colonization in America. Voluntariness and property were inseparably intertwined, and the colonies seemed to offer what England would and could not provide.[50]

Yet voluntariness describes more than just a relation between "man," "desire," and "action." It also "governs relations between people," as Regula Ludi and Matthias Ruoss write.[51] As I have argued in this article, such people are defined by the potential for voluntary action that is assigned to them according to their class, gender and race. That potential governs their relations to each other and to the body politic. To be more concrete, in the world of John Locke, voluntariness unites free Englishmen to a body of peers who are acknowledged as subjects with active agency. At the same time, voluntariness establishes a relation between free Englishmen and their unfree laborers, who are obviously seen as not quite human. Their capability for voluntary decision making and active agency is curtailed, and their exploitation by means of enslavement and land theft is legitimized. For the Lockean subject, voluntarily transforming a desire for and right to property into action meant appropriating American Indian land and building one's own freedom through landed property and the unfree labor of others. Against the backdrop of history, voluntariness and freedom on the one hand, and plunder and enslavement on the other, prove to have been not mutually exclusive, but entangled and even synergetic. Clearly, John Locke's role in the history of colonialism and enslavement has to be recognized. To do otherwise is inappropriate and unproductive given the contradictions of his ideas and actions. Yet the historical depiction of these ambivalences does not mean an unconditional condemnation of voluntariness as a political principle. Both as a principle and a practice, voluntary action is too important in the ongoing struggle for emancipa-

50 Locke, *Two Treatises of Government*, 2.XIX.222, and 2.IX.124, accessed January 6, 2025, https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/Two_Treatises_of_Government/Book_II.

51 Regula Ludi and Matthias Ruoss, "Dialektiken der Freiwilligkeit: Editorial," *Historische Anthropologie* 31, no. 2 (2023): 206 (translation by the author).

tion from "non-autonomous subjectivity." I am saying this with a nod to philosopher Nikita Dhawan and her call to rescue the enlightenment from Europe.[52] As philosopher Tilo Wesche and historian Matthias Ruoss emphasize in this special issue, voluntariness also means self-activation with the potential to make social and political change.[53] This article has shown that voluntariness is deeply entrenched in the history of a land-grabbing, enslaving colonialism, and that it is also a resource for anti-authoritarian politics. Historicizing voluntariness and its interlocking contradictions is crucial for a more profound understanding of the Lockean subject in its multiple facets. Finally, regarding the contemporary critique of the desire-driven Lockean subject in relation to the climate crisis, we need to recall that for Locke, voluntariness also means the ability to act "with sense and reason" and forbear motion. The Lockean subject can abstain from the immediate satisfaction of desire for the purpose of achieving a greater good. This, he even claims, is "the source of all liberty." According to Locke, having the ability to act voluntarily includes the ability to choose and act wisely. Arguably, that would include choosing to act respectfully and sustainably in the face of environmental crisis.[54]

52 I am leaning on the argument on Immanuel Kant by Dhawan, *Die Aufklärung vor Europa retten*, 38–40.

53 Stefanie Büttner and Jürgen Martschukat, "Voluntariness in a Global Perspective: A Conversation with Silke van Dyk, Matthias Ruoss and Tilo Wesche," the following contribution in this issue.

54 Locke, *An Essay*, 2.XXI.48, accessed October 8, 2025, https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/An_Essay_Concerning_Human_Understanding_(Troutman_%26_Hayes_1853)/Book_2/Chapter_21, and 3.VI.3, https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/An_Essay_Concerning_Human_Understanding_(Troutman_%26_Hayes_1853)/Book_3/Chapter_6. On the hubris of the Lockean subject, see Chakrabarty and Latour, *Im Globalen offenbart sich das Planetarische*; on active agency, see Wood, Locke, *Active Power, and a Puzzle about Ascription*.