

On John Locke and Karl Marx: Contested Interpretations of the Good of the Commons under Capitalism

Mary Lihong Peng

“I am not included within the pale of this glorious anniversary! Your high independence only reveals the immeasurable distance between us. The blessings in which you, this day, rejoice, are not enjoyed in common!”¹

To Frederick Douglass, the light of democracy does not shine on the enslaved, and the joy of freedom escapes the oppressed. His poignant outcry for equality points to the problem of the divided commons entrenched not only in the state of slavery, but also in the framework of capitalism. After all, slavery, one may argue, was a source of phenomenal capitalist wealth and the foundation of American prosperity by the dawn of the Civil War. John Locke speaks of the “common stock of mankind”² in the justification of the good and virtue of capitalist accumulation and possessive individualism. Yet, the ideal state of the Commons, where freedom, mobility, and wealth diffuse equally to all constitutes of the Commons, departs from the reality of class antagonism and structural misery delineated by Karl Marx. This paper thus sets out to interrogate the meanings of the good of the Commons in Locke’s and Marx’s deliberations of possessive individualism, with the aim to account for their contrasting ethical judgements of capitalism and illuminate the source of divergence between their envisioned material expressions of capitalism. To accomplish so, I will first elaborate Locke’s and Marx’s differing theorizations of the Good of the Commons, establishing a contrast between the equal possibility of prosperity and unequal oppressions among the Commons respectively emphasized by Locke and Marx, which justifies different verdicts on the ethical nature of capitalism. Next, I propose the breakdown of labor-value alignment as an account for the discrepancies between Locke’s and Marx’s interpretations of the good of the Commons. Ultimately, I propound the greater validity of Marx’s critique of capitalism in light of contemporary capitalist reality.

Two important caveats must be clarified prior to further argument. First, “the Commons” could refer to the entirety of the general public, whereby the good of the Commons would mean the aggregate good of a collectivity, or all the individual constitutes of the public, whereby the good of the Commons then connotes the good of every common individual. This paper utilizes the Commons and the good of the

¹ Frederick Douglass, “The Meaning of July Fourth for the Negro,” Speech, July 5, 1852. 6.

² John Locke, Second Treatise of Government, Chapter 5 On Property, Sect 37. 15

Commons in the latter individual sense, that deals with individual good within a collection rather than the collective good. Second, while there is relatively less contention on Marx's view of labor, Locke's often ambiguous definitions of labor, property, and value have led to variegated interpretations of his argument.³ For example, Macpherson reads Locke's theory as a justification of private ownership, private property, and capitalist accumulation,⁴ whereas Tully postulates that Locke justifies the individuation of common property rather than possessive individual ownership.⁵ This paper does not wish to argue that Locke presents a singular interpretation of labor, property, and value; rather, for the sake of a focused and nuanced discussion, this paper espouses the interpretation of Locke as justification of private property and capitalist accumulation, and adopts the common understanding of Marx's theory of labor power that differentiates the capacity to work, labor power, from the physical act of working, labor.

The good of the Commons bears significance not only because it is at the heart of the perennial tension between individual's and society's interests presented by all economic systems or any institution of social contract for that matter, but also because, for this exact reason, its justification contributes to Locke's and Marx's diverging ethical judgements of capitalism. In general, Locke's theory is interpreted as the moral foundation and justification of private ownership and capitalism, whereas Marx the denouncer of capitalism's inherent inequality. Locke's and Marx's different interpretations of whether capitalism can serve the good of the Commons could offer an explanation for such contrasting ethical considerations.

Locke's theory implies the belief that all members of the Commons, the poor and the rich, can benefit from the constant creation and accumulation of property value through private ownership. As articulated in *On Property*, "he who appropriates land to himself by his labour, does not lessen, but increase the common stock of mankind: for the provisions serving to the support of human life, produced by one acre of inclosed and cultivated land, are (to speak much within compass) ten times more than those which are yielded by an acre of land of an equal richness lying waste in common".⁶ By extending the definition of the good of the Commons from individuals' ownership of private property to the potential improvement of each individual's life, Locke ingenuously accomplishes the following tasks. First, he removes the very limitation of natural rights and the natural law of self-preservation, that, proposed by himself, justify individuals' ownership of private property. He tackles the paradox of individual and common interests by arguing that the Law of Nature, within the bounds of which private ownership operates, has an innate

³ Karen I. Vaughn, John Locke and the Labor Theory of Value. *Journal of Libertarian Studies*, Vol. 2. No. 4 pp 311-326. Pergamon Press Ltd. 1978. 311.

⁴ Collin Macpherson, *The Political Theory of Possessive Individualism; Hobbes to Locke*. Oxford: Clarendon Press. 1972.

⁵ James Tully. *A Discourse on Property: John Locke and His Adversaries*. Cambridge University Press. 1980.

⁶ John Locke, *Second Treatise of Government*, Chapter 5 On Property, Sect 37. 15.

solution to the paradox because the Law dictates that one has a right to private possession only inasmuch as there is an sufficient amount of property left for others to possess for their own self-pervations. Written as such, “for this labour being the unquestionable property of the labourer, no man but he can have a right to what that is once joined to, at least where there is enough, and as good, left in common for others”.⁷ Therefore, possessive individualism, a foundational component of capitalism, is argued to have the capacity to serve the interests of all individuals of the Commons as the fruit of private ownership can create good well-being or good life for common individuals even if there is not sufficient property to be owned by every individual. The sufficiency limitation of the natural law thus no longer impedes the justification of possessive individualism. The second accomplishment, the implication of the first, is the moral justification of capitalism, a system of virtue that defends the freedom, rights, and above all, the good of the Commons.

On the contrary, Marx conceives of possessive individualism and capitalism as innately incapable of ensuring the good of the Commons, but systematically favorable to some within the Commons and oppressive to the others. I do not assert that Locke perceives the Commons as homogenous or classless; rather, his theorization of the good of the Commons is argued to diverge from Marx’s on the basis of whether different divisions within the Commons could all benefit, more or less equally or simultaneously, from possessive individualism and capitalism, to which Marx utters a resounding no. Marx places the bourgeoisie and the proletariats in an intrinsically unequal relationship, one of “oppressor and oppressed, (that) stood in constant opposition to one another”.⁸ Capitalism imposes “new forms of struggle” upon the proletariats⁹, because the bourgeoisie has “revolutionized the instruments of production”¹⁰, “concentrated property in a few hands”¹¹, and subsequently the “workman becomes an appendage”¹² to the capitalists and their generation of wealth. As opposed to Locke’s vision that private accumulation of property allows more individuals to possess and benefit--- “for I ask whether in the wild woods and uncultivated waste of America left to Nature, without any improvement, tillage or husbandry, a thousand acres will yield the needy and wretched inhabitants as many conveniences of life as ten acres of equally fertile land in Devonshire where they are well cultivated?”¹³---Marx views the bourgeois’ exploitation of the proletariats as the inevitable fruit of possessive individualism. Marx proclaims, “in proportion as the use of machinery

⁷ John Locke, *Second Treatise of Government*, Chapter 5 On Property, Sect 27. 13.

⁸ Karl Marx, “*Manifesto of the Communist Party*”, Chapter I. Bourgeois and Proletariats. 1848. 2.

⁹ Karl Marx, “*Manifesto of the Communist Party*”, Chapter I. Bourgeois and Proletariats. 1848. 2.

¹⁰ Karl Marx, “*Manifesto of the Communist Party*”, Chapter I. Bourgeois and Proletariats. 1848. 5.

¹¹ Karl Marx, “*Manifesto of the Communist Party*”, Chapter I. Bourgeois and Proletariats. 1848. 6.

¹² Karl Marx, “*Manifesto of the Communist Party*”, Chapter I. Bourgeois and Proletariats. 1848. 8.

¹³ John Locke, *Second Treatise of Government*, Chapter 5 On Property, Sect 37. 16.

and division of labour increases, in the same proportion the burden of toil also increases, whether by prolongation of the working hours, by the increase of the work exacted in a given time or by increased speed of machinery, etc. modern Industry has converted the little workshop of the patriarchal master into the great factory of the industrial capitalist".¹⁴ The good of the Commons is thus divided and unequal under capitalism, where the proletariats do not enjoy the same benefits of, in Locke's vocabulary, "life, liberty, and property" as the bourgeoisie, but enslaved under the command of the capitalist class. As such, Locke and Marx present fundamentally different propositions for whether a capitalist institution predicated on possessive individualism can serve the good of the Commons, the impoverished and the wealthy alike, from which two distinct portrayals of the ethics of capitalism emerge--one of virtue and equality, and one of oppression and inequality.

I now propose the alignment of labor-property and its breakdown as a potential explanation of Locke's and Marx's divergent arguments regarding the good of the Commons. I argue that Locke defines the value of property in its use value and labor as the source of use value, and crates an alignment between labor and property, whereas Marx debunks the alignment by breaking down the unity of labor in the commodification of labor that turns relation of labor-power to the actual labor of a private individual to the relation of exchange-value to use-value.

To elaborate, according to Locke, the appropriation of property is rendered possible by the transfer of labor. "Though the Earth, and all inferior Creatures be common to all Men, yet every Man has a Property in his own Person", maintains Locke. Property becomes privately possessions as men invest their labor in it, whereby the transfer of ownership transpires from mans' unquestionable ownership of his own labor, determined by man's natural right, to the thusly justified ownership of the destination of his labor. Subsequently, Locke argues that "for 'tis labor indeed that puts the difference of value on everything; and let anyone consider. what the difference is between an acre of land planted with tobacco, or sugar, sown with wheat or barley; an acre of the same land lying in common without any husbandry upon it, and he will find, that the improvement of labor makes far greater part of the value", suggesting that the value of property originates from labor. The value of property is then associated with utility "to the best advantage of life, and convenience", ¹⁵an "intrinsic value, which depends only on (its) usefulness to the life of man"¹⁶. Thus, Locke, in his theorization of private ownership, presents an overarching equivalence among the value and use value of property and the value of labor. Coupled with his proposed rules of limitation,

¹⁴Karl Marx, "Manifesto of the Communist Party", Chapter I. Bourgeois and Proletariats. 1848. 9.

¹⁵ John Locke, Second Treatise of Government, Chapter 5 On Property, Sect 26. 12.

¹⁶ John Locke, Second Treatise of Government, Chapter 5 On Property, Sect 37. 15.

namely the aforementioned sufficiency limitation and the spoilage limitation whereby men can only possess “as much as anyone can make use of to any advantage of life before it spoils; so much he may by his labour fix a Property in”¹⁷, equal possibility for all of the “industrious and rational”¹⁸ commons to benefit from private ownership is rendered possible because the value of one’s property is determined by the amount of labor he effects and investment of greater labor would thus warrant the greater value of his property. Regardless of the unequal endowment of resources in the state of nature, “wherever any one was pleased to employ it (labor) upon what was common”, the fruits of private ownership are believed to create equal opportunity for more use value, more convenience, and more possession of value for the all of the Commons.

On the other hand, Marx’s critique of possessive individualism breaks down the aforementioned labor-property alignment through the theorization of labor commodification, from which capitalists’ abstraction and exploitation of proletariat labor arises, rendering capitalism an oppressive system where the capitalists reap benefits from the misery of the proletariats. “The bourgeoisie has resolved personal worth into exchange value...for exploitation, veiled by religious and political illusions, it has substituted naked, shameless, direct, brutal exploitation”¹⁹, protested Marx. The simplified alignment between the use value of property and the value of one’s own labor proposed by Locke thus no longer determines the true value of one’s private property under Marx’s critique, where, instead, labor itself becomes commodified and exchange value is imposed upon labor power in the capitalist market, where the value of private property is no longer based on one’s own unified labor but the appropriation of alien labor that inevitably benefits the bourgeoisie—who owns the means of production. Alienated from their products and acts of production, the proletariats become wage-laborers, who no longer have any choice but to sell their labor power, lose their property, and consequently be bound to the demands of the capitalists. The competitive nature of capitalist markets that dominate exchange value, whereby “as the repulsiveness of the work increases, the wage decreases”²⁰, renders proletariats perpetually exploited by the capitalists, as capitalists attempt to extract the maximum surplus value from wage laborers. The breakdown of the alignment between one’s labor-property through the commodification of labor produces relationship of appropriation that gives birth to appropriators that benefit and victims of appropriation that suffer from the totality of private property accumulation. For Marx, the good of the Commons is thus a fundamentally divided notion, where

¹⁷ John Locke, *Second Treatise of Government*, Chapter 5 On Property, Sect 31. 14.

¹⁸ John Locke, *Second Treatise of Government*, Chapter 5 On Property, Sect 34. 14.

¹⁹ Karl Marx, “Manifesto of the Communist Party”, Chapter I. Bourgeois and Proletariats. 1848. 4.

²⁰ Karl Marx, “Manifesto of the Communist Party”, Chapter I. Bourgeois and Proletariats. 1848. 9.

the bourgeoisie that appropriates alien labor constitutes the powerful few among the Commons whose “good” is served by the capitalist economy and the working class, whose labor is commodified, labor power reduced to exchange values (wages), and exchange values exploited, constitutes the miserable commons.

In short, I have demonstrated three layers of argument. First, Locke and Marx harbor different ethical judgements of capitalism, where Locke justifies the moral foundation of capitalism and Marx criticizes the unethical and oppressive nature of capitalism. Second, the differing ethical verdicts arise from contested interpretations of the good of the Commons, where Locke defends the capacity of possessive individualism to serve the good of all of the Commons, the poor and the rich, thus rendering capitalism a system of virtue, while Marx argues for the divided benefit and misery created by possessive individualism along class lines among the Commons, thus condemning capitalism as a system of inequality. Here I must acknowledge an assumed relationship between equality and virtue, the negation of which could undoubtedly produce alternative arguments. Third, the unified and divided good of the Commons derive from disparate theorizations of property value and labor-property relations. Locke’s vision of the common good is predicated on the alignment of labor-property where property derives its value from use value generated by labor, which renders it feasible for all, who invest their labor accordingly, to enjoy the good of the Commons either through more possession of private property or enjoyment of better living, fruits of others’ private ownership. Marx dissolves the alignment of labor-property and breaks down the unified value of labor and property through the distinction of use value and exchange value, laying out the mechanism of capitalist commodification and appropriation and the production of unequal prosperity and misery between the property-owning and property-less classes of the Commons.

Lastly, I would like to present a brief verdict on the validity of Locke’s and Marx’s theorization of capitalist possessive individualism. I believe validity to be situational, whereby assessment of any theory should be divorced from the contextualized reality of material conditions. In the post-industrialization capitalist economy, I thus question the validity of Locke’s theory on the basis that it does not consider “the gigantic means of production and of exchange”²¹ and the “epidemic of over-production”²² in industrialized capitalist societies that fuel the bourgeoisie’ “destruction of mass productive forces (the proletariats)”²³ as means of control and correction of crisis. The resultant breakdown of labor-property

²¹ Karl Marx, “Manifesto of the Communist Party”, Chapter I. Bourgeois and Proletariats. 1848. 7.

²² Karl Marx, “Manifesto of the Communist Party”, Chapter I. Bourgeois and Proletariats. 1848. 7.

²³ Karl Marx, “Manifesto of the Communist Party”, Chapter I. Bourgeois and Proletariats. 1848. 8.

alignment, produced by the altered relations of production and exchange, become almost inevitable in such a material reality, in which Marx grounds his theory of labor. It is indeed unfair to judge Locke's writing in 1689 against Marxist ideology born from the economic reality of the 19th century. My evaluation of Locke and Marx is thus only a parochial judgement of their situational validity that pertains to the context of post-industrialized modernity, which inevitably favors Marx's theory due to its greater affinity to the current material conditions of capitalist economy.

In conclusion, in this paper, I started off with Locke's and Marx's contrasting ethical judgements of capitalism, and presented an inverse progression of vertical arguments, where Locke's ethical justification of capitalism and Marx's condemnation of capitalist inequality are explained by their diverging interpretations of the good of the Commons, which is then accounted for by their differing theorizations of labor-property relations. I ultimately produced an assessment of Locke's and Marx's theories against the backdrop of modern industrialization, that, albeit not negating the validity of Locke's theory in its own logic and imagination, endows Marx's ideology with greater situational relevance and validity. After all, it is only sensible to address oppression when oppression is the lived reality of many under modern capitalism. The misery of slavery so vehemently decried by Douglass perhaps has taken on an insidious form of economic enslavement in modern capitalist nations.