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TS History

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This week, readings included “Brief Account of the Devastation of the Indies” by Bartolome de Las Cases, an excerpt from *Two Treatises of Government* by John Locke, and the first chapter from *Harvest of Empire: A History of Latinos in America* by Juan Gonzalez.

In “Brief Account of the Devastation of the Indies”, Bartolome de Las Casas writes of the atrocities committed against the Natives by the Spanish in a region called Hispaniola. Bartolome de Las Cases characterizes the native peoples as the most pure, weak, and simple peoples created by God, subjected to horrendously cruel killing, rape, slavery, and torture. The writing strongly appeals to the reader’s pathos and uses it to object to the Spanish conquest.

John Locke introduced in an excerpt from *Two Treatises of Government* the concept of individual property, a right to property not given by the government and by recognition from others. God gave the earth to everyone; every man has ownership over his body and hence his labor; therefore, a man that adds his labor to the earth makes it his property. The purpose of society is to protect property – not only material, but properties of life and liberty. Locke makes clear that one man’s right is not a harm to another, although he acknowledges limitations on property – for example, one must leave enough for others and avoid hoarding goods that will spoil.

In *Harvest of Empire: A History of Latinos in America*, Juan Gonzalez argues that the discrepancies in Anglo American and Latin American cultures are primarily due to their colonial

English and Spanish politics and culture. Political and religious turmoil within England meant colonists set to the Americas with, primarily, the intent of establishing a homogenous society separate from Native Americans; Gonzalez uses this to explain racial hostility and an eventual conflict between the two parties. On the other hand, Spain – a religiously unified Catholic nation – approached conquest with the goal of (often) forceful conversion and assimilation; this led to barbaric atrocities committed against Native Americans by the Spanish.

In *Two Treatises of Government*, John Locke argues that the right to property pre-exists a government and the others' consent; applying your labor, something only you have a right to, to nature, something given by God to all, makes it your own. As John Yolton writes in *The Locke Reader*, this idea proposes that "...privacy can arise out of what is common." (Yolton 296). At a root level, I agree with Locke's statement that your labor – at least, idealistically – is what generates unique value and makes it *yours*; a society that protects property recognizes the individualistic nature of labor, and hence protects the common welfare. However, I contend that Locke's theories centralize only around the *creation* of property and too little on its distribution, dynamics, and ownership; this weakens support for the political and moral feasibility of private property altogether. Locke dismisses the need for the latter component on the basis that there will always be more property to appropriate: "...every man should have as much as he could make use of, would hold still in the world, without straitening any body..." (Locke 293) This is logically unsound – not all land and the attainment of it is equally valuable; furthermore, even if there is more proper land, it is not infinite.

Locke writes *Two Treatises of Government* as a rebuttal to monarchy – proposing natural individual property rights, opposed to a monarch who controls the property rights to all, and thus, immorally, owns and controls the labor and bodies of the citizens. As a result, unfortunate members of the population have no right to property, depending on the monarch's decisions.

Similarly, if one appropriates highly valuable and contested land as his property, he controls others' labor, who must venture further into the wilderness to appropriate land to "...afford him the conveniences of life" (Locke 295). One who appropriates land at the head of a river and redirects it controls the labor of a water-mill operator downstream. Given that appropriable property is limited, those that do not reach it soon enough to appropriate it do not have a right to any of it, for there is nothing to expend their labor upon; this does not differ much from the outcome or morality of a monarchy; it is, in fact, an oligarchy, in which the aristocrats control natural resources through private property protections. This violates the very Bible verse Locke cites to justify that the resources of nature are provided for all – Psal. cxv. 16, "[God] has given the earth to the children of men." Locke partially addresses these concerns by claiming outright that "...it... [is] impossible for any man... to intrench upon the right of another," (Locke 293) but admittedly under the weak assumption that all men take only what they need for survival and enjoyment. It follows, then, that Locke's statement only is true in a utopia where survival and enjoyment are available to all and in which humans are not fundamentally greedy. On the other hand, incorporating the *management* of private property – for example, the protection of fundamentally public properties like waterways that span across properties – distinguishes the outcomes of private property from the dangers of monarchy in a practical world.

Clearly, faults form when the notion of private property – a fundamentally moral one, in my view – is outlined solely by its creation and its dynamics are neglected. The earth is not fundamentally private, something Locke admits as a premise, and therefore by neglecting regulation of privacy in favor of the constant creation of it, Locke fails to defend the purpose of private property and individual liberties itself from logical and moral fallacies.