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'John Locke in Liberal Memory'

About the Author

As an undergraduate Jeffrey Collins studied History at Middlebury College, Vermont, graduating *summa cum laude* in 1992. He then went to do graduate work at Harvard, where Mark Kishlansky was his main adviser, especially concerning matters of politics and religion. On the intellectual history side, he worked with Richard Tuck (then recently arrived in the Government Department), James Hankins, and also Bernard Bailyn. It was an eclectic set of influences, through which Collins came to supplement an interest in 'Cambridge'-style political thought with an intricate knowledge of the relevant political history, producing a dissertation in 1999 that was subsequently published by Oxford in 2005 as *The Allegiance of Thomas Hobbes*. It is a remarkable study, one which re-examines Hobbes's Civil War and Interregnum allegiances, and reconstructs the debate over the Church of England between 1640 and 1660 in an Erastian vein. Collins' book has enabled scholars to view Hobbes in a fresh perspective, drawing attention to a range of clerical and other contributors to the debate, to whom other scholars are only now turning.

After his doctorate, Collins taught for two further years at Harvard before winning a Harper Postdoctoral Fellowship at the University of Chicago, where his broader interests in political theory were reinforced, in part through the interdisciplinary seminar culture there, then involving figures such as Mark Lilla, Philip Hamburger, and Steven Pincus. He is now Associate Professor in the Department of History at Queen's University, Kingston, Ontario, where he teaches courses on the rise of the British empire, Tudor and Stuart England, early modern European intellectual history, and the English Revolution. This year, he has been on sabbatical from Queen's and is here in Cambridge as a Visiting Fellow at Clare Hall.

Collins writes of his current research:

My present book project is in mid-stream. It will be pitched a bit differently than my first book, but will investigate the same broad problem: namely, the intersection of political practice and thinking with a Christian religious culture in transition. This book will locate itself in the Restoration period and early 18th century, largely in an English-speaking context. It will investigate how the various strands of political theory adjusted to the realities of religious

pluralism with strategies of toleration or civil religion, with an eye to throwing some new light on modern historical mythologies of liberalism. John Locke will be a central figure, but the “Restoration” Hobbes will figure in the book as well. I’ve somewhat gingerly titled the project, *John Locke and the Origins of Liberal Order*.

Abstract of the Paper

That John Locke in some measure belongs to the liberal tradition is a commonplace within political theory, but a provocation within intellectual history. Indeed, undermining the notion of “Lockean liberalism” was an original project of early Cambridge school contextualism. This paper, while acknowledging the vast advances in historical understanding attained by contextualist methodology, will gently push back against this broad reluctance to consider Locke’s place within the liberal tradition.

First, the paper will offer a critique of John Rawls’s historical account of Locke’s contribution to liberalism. Locke’s influence over modern liberal thinking is a discontinuous one, and in any account of that influence Rawlsian thought must enjoy pride of place. Rawls framed his attack on utilitarian thinking as a revival of the Lockean social contract tradition. He believed himself to be “perfecting” a system of thought originating with Locke and running through Rousseau and Kant. Given the recent dominance of his own political philosophy, Rawls’s portrayal of Locke’s proto-liberalism has been particularly consequential. That account, however, is historically awkward at best, as the present paper will attempt to demonstrate. It fixates, reductively, on Locke’s theory of consent, in an effort to cast the social contract tradition as an historical source for Rawls’s own distinctive rational choice theory.

The paper will then offer an alternative account of some affinities between Locke’s thought and Rawlsian liberalism. It will foreground the religious context of the late 17th century, and particularly the pressure toward toleration produced by religious pluralism. In justifying his appropriation of Lockean thought, Rawls often gestured toward the importance of this history, but he rarely went beyond such gestures. This paper will attempt to elucidate one particular dimension of the problem. It will offer some historical analysis of Locke’s reluctance to extend toleration to Roman Catholics. It will then argue that Locke’s struggle with the question of Catholicism prefigured, in striking ways, the difficulties posed by corporate religion within Rawlsian liberalism. Rawls’s account of “public reason”, far more than his understanding of consent, echoes aspects of Locke’s thought.

Rawls exaggerated the affinities between Locke’s theory of consent and his own, and he implicitly minimized the parallels between his own account of public religion and that of Locke. This paper will conclude by offering some speculations as to why Rawls’s appropriation of Locke entailed these errors of omission and commission.

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