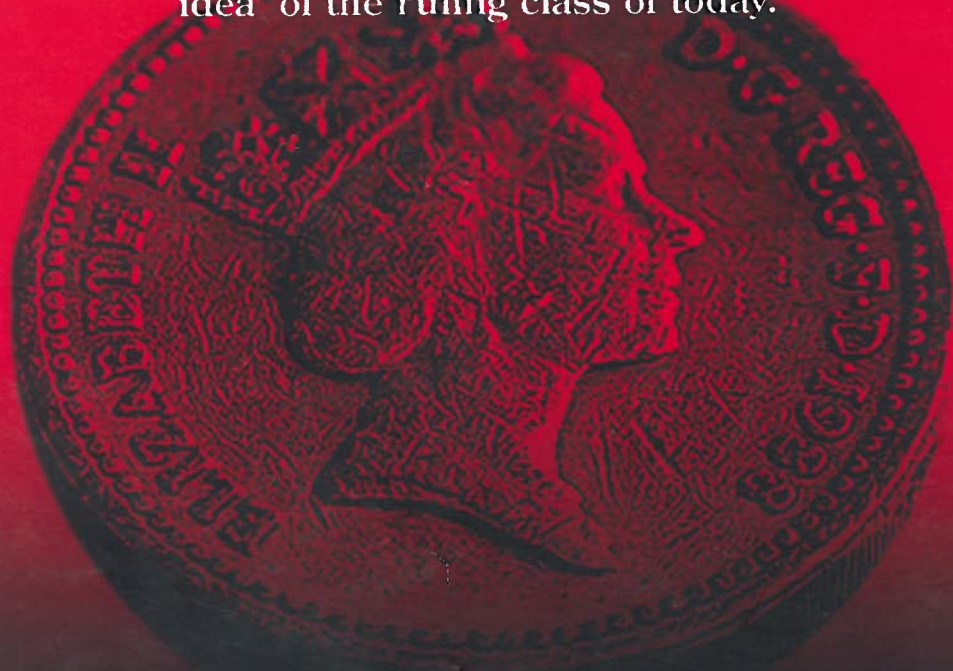
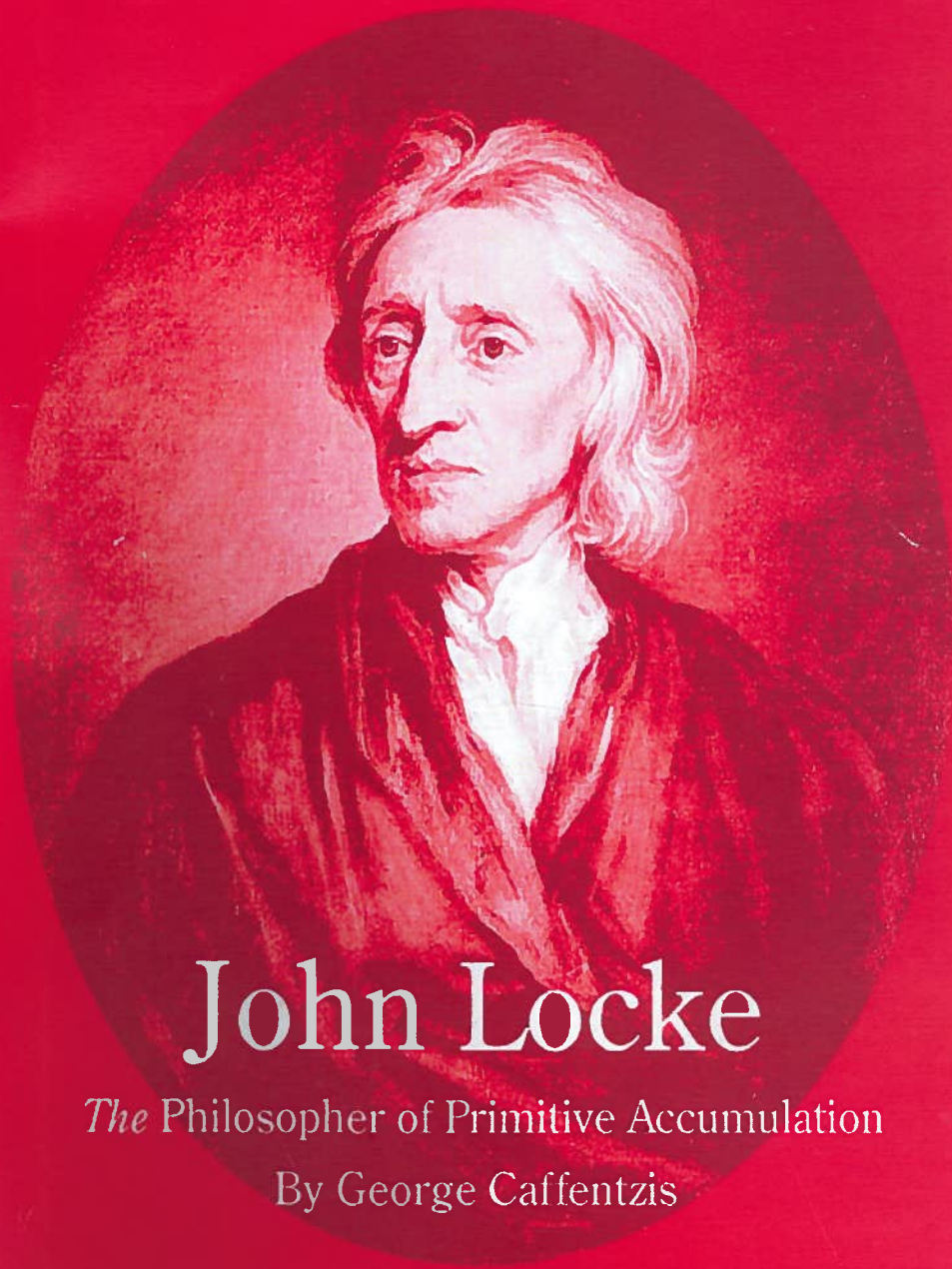


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# John Locke

*The Philosopher of Primitive Accumulation*

By George Caffentzis

BRISTOL RADICAL  
PAMPHLETEER #5

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**John Locke,  
*The Philosopher Of Primitive  
Accumulation***

**By George Caffentzis**

**Dedicated to the Bristol Radical History Group**



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[Locke] even demonstrated...that the bourgeois way of thinking is the normal human way of thinking (Marx 1970: 76).

## Introduction

John Locke is Bristol's most famous philosopher. He was born in Wrington, Somerset in August 29, 1632 and brought up in the market town of Pensford, about seven miles south of Bristol. He was the scion of a West Country lawyer and Puritan who fought for the Parliament in the Civil War. Before he went to Westminster School in London at age fourteen he undoubtedly had exposure to the economic winds that were blowing across the Atlantic (both from the west--British America--and from the south--West Africa). For after all, Bristol and West Country merchants were a major source of investment for the sugar, tobacco, slave and cod fishing trades in the early 17<sup>th</sup> century (Hornsby 2005: 28-30).

Aside from being a Bristol 'home boy,' Locke is also important for our investigation of the commons. For his philosophy has been deeply implicated in the enclosure of two of humanity's most important commons: the North American indigenous people's commons and the commons of intellectual production. In this paper I will show the relationship between Locke philosophy and these two enclosures and will justify my claim that this local wizard was indeed *the* philosopher of primitive accumulation.

In passing I should point out that Locke is not only the main intellectual founder of liberalism, but also of *neoliberalism*, the 'ruling idea' of the ruling class of today. I wrote my book on Locke, *Clipped Coins, Abused Words and Civil Government*, in Nigeria at the time of nation-wide debates and discussions, riots and demonstrations, concerning the imposition of structural adjustment programs (the political-economic vehicles of neoliberalism) on the Nigerian people. So for me, the book is a critique of primitive neoliberalism (which, as we shall see, is not so different from its present version!)

In order to carry out my plan a word should be said about the idea of primitive or 'original' accumulation. The classical discussion of primitive accumulation is the last Part of Karl Marx's *Capital*, Vol. 1. Like all the Parts of *Capital*, it is a critique of an important idea of the political economy of Marx's day. As Marx points out in this chapter, capital presents itself to the mind as a seamless, hermetic system moving in a never-ending circle where each node presupposes another...forever. If we are to 'get out' of the circle we must first conceptualize an end to it, but to do

...this we must be able to conceptualize its beginning. The ultimate revolutionary vision of 'the expropriation of a few usurpers by the mass of the people' requires rethinking primitive accumulation which he describes as 'the historic process of divorcing the producer from the means of production...And this history, the history of [workers'] expropriation is written in the annals of mankind in the letters of blood and fire' (Marx 1976: 874-5).

Marx's critique of in political economy with respect to 'so-called primitive accumulation' is not directed to the concept (which is a logical necessity for revolutionary thought and action) but toward the 'nursery tale' or 'theological anecdote' told of it (like original sin arising from Adam biting an apple from the tree of knowledge of good and evil). Marx critically substitutes a narrative of blood and fire for the euphemistic nursery tale of the industrious capitalist ant and the shiftless worker grasshopper. But Marx was being a bit too hasty and unhistorical here in his anxiety to get on with the job of revealing the 'secret' of primitive accumulation that he does in the last sentence of the book: 'The only thing that interests us is the secret discovered in the New World by the political economy of the Old World, and loudly proclaimed by it: that the capitalist mode of production and accumulation, and therefore capitalist private property as well, have for their fundamental condition the annihilation of that private property which rests on the labour of the individual himself; in other words, the expropriation of the worker' (Marx 1976: 940). Marx references Adam Smith's *Wealth of Nations* and the abhorrent Adolph Thiers' *De la Properte* and that is that. However, there is a long and complex history of reflection on the origin of what was to be called in the 19<sup>th</sup> century 'capitalism' that Marx might have reserved for another time and place (although he did not).(1)

Yet not all discussions of the presupposition and origins of capitalist accumulation were simply and blatantly 'nursery tales.' In fact, John Locke's philosophy as expressed in the *Two Treatises on Government* and *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* is a study of the origins of the accumulation of money, land, ideas and knowledge. These origins have as their common base *labor* that Locke ironically turns from the subject to the object of the accumulation process.

In this presentation I argue that Locke should be considered to *the* philosopher of primitive accumulation. This effort will have a semantically anachronistic character since Locke, of course, never uses the term, 'primitive accumulation.' But he was clearly concerned with the question: how can the accumulation process of land and ideas begin? As far as the accumulation of land is concerned, he was con-

cerned with the practical aspects of colonization (an process that Marx believed revealed the 'secret of primitive accumulation' which was 'discovered in the New world by the political economy of the Old World' long before Wakefield in the 19<sup>th</sup> century). As far as ideas and words are concerned, Locke was concerned to create a notion of property in ideas and to defend an early version of copyright of texts (King 1984: 202-209).

The interplay of these original accumulations of land and ideas torn from the commons of the earth and mind that lay the foundation of a self-sustaining (but always conflictual) process of accumulation.

### The Origin of Property in Land and Money

At first glance, Locke's version of primitive accumulation of land can be characterized as a variant of Thier's 'nursery tale.' Locke divides humanity between the 'rational and industrious' and the 'quarrelsome and contentious.' God was apparently (and inscrutably) inconsistent with respect to land, since, though he gave the land as a common to all, he was also committed to have the former own the earth and the latter to be their landless servants: '[God] gave [the world] for the use of the industrious and rational (and labor was to be his title to it); not to the fancy and covetousness of the quarrelsome and contentious.' (Locke, 2, 34).

According to a standard account, Locke is deploying in this passage the Puritan ideology concerning the 'sanctity' and 'dignity' of labor. It was an important addition to the conceptual armory of enclosure and expropriation. But he was also extending the Cartesian *cogito* into the political and legal sphere. Locke transforms Descartes' performative deduction of the self (by the very act of thinking of myself, I create myself) into a performative deduction for the creation of my property: 'I labor on X, therefore X is part of me.'

It is a clever argumentative move that has taken center stage in the assessment of Locke's influence on the development of property and on the historical course on primitive accumulation. But Locke was a much more sober and precise a thinker of primitive accumulation than the remaining 'the nursery tale' aura in his writing on the topic suggests. He introduces two caveats to the tale that are often passed over in silence by commentators.

First, he distinguishes between the commons in America and 'the commons in England, or any other country, where there is plenty of people under government,

who have money and commerce.' The common land in England cannot be treated like the common land in America. In England 'no one can inclose or appropriate any part, without the consent of all his fellow-commoners' for two logical reasons: mereological--'after such inclosure, [the part of the land remaining in common] would not be as good to the rest of the commoners, on the whole as when they could all make use of the *whole*'--and quantificational--'though [the English commons] be common to *some* men, it is not so to *all* mankind' (my italics).

Together these two reasons create a fundamental distinction in the notion of the commons and of primitive accumulation.' One kind of primitive accumulation involving common land requires the consent of the commoners (in England) while the other does not (in America). This consent is not immediately forthcoming in England because there is often an advantage in *using the whole*. The commons in America was altogether different because there were 'plenty of people living under governments with money and commerce.' America was a universal common that was open to settlement by all of humanity, without the consent of the present inhabitants. Title to land was given by 'inclosure' and agricultural labor (not hunting and gathering!) that would provide for the subsistence of the possessor.

But there was the rub; although Locke's labor theory of property justified in an influential way the course of primitive accumulation in the British Americas, the land that could be appropriated was limited by subsistence and the ancient prohibition on spoilage: 'if either the grass of his inclosure rotted on the ground, or the fruit of his planting perished without gathering, and laying up, this part of the earth, notwithstanding his inclosure, was still to be looked upon as waste, and might be the possession of any other' (Locke, 2, 38). This is a symmetric argument, however, since if a statement applies to all, then it applies to some. If the English, according to Locke's logic, are simply subsuming their actions under a universal maxim, then, in reply and equally logically, so can the American Indians. The English are welcome (according to this logic) to go to the Americas to gain their subsistence, but who would accept this invitation but those could not subsist in England? Moreover, such poor beings would not be able to claim, under Locke's labor theory of property title, more than a miniscule part of the American land. Only if the English could logically break out of the subsistence trough, would the Lockean doctrine be of any use as the justification for the primitive accumulation of American land.

This is where Locke's second caveat is important and shows us that Locke was not providing a simple 'nursery tale' account of primitive accumulation. Labor (=ratio-

nality+industriousness) is not enough to initiate a process of accumulation. It is only enough to provide for subsistence. Hence, up until this point in his origin story, Locke could be considered the philosopher of the subsistence. Money is the *deus ex machina* that makes it possible to put the 'accumulation' in 'primitive accumulation.' Locke's conceptual addition of money to labor creates the equation that will set the stage for the accumulation process. Money, not labor, is what creates the stimulus for surplus labor and hence accumulation. As Locke noted:

Thus in the beginning all the world was America, and more so than that is now; for no such thing as money was any where known. Find out something that hath the use and value of money amongst his neighbors, you shall see the same man will begin presently to enlarge his possessions (Locke, 2, 49).

Thus money is the real 'secret' of primitive accumulation for Locke, since it (not labor alone) makes accumulation (hence capital) possible. In effect, the Lockean ideology of labor became something of a smoke screen for the real source of the accumulation process. In this Locke is not unique. In the great 17<sup>th</sup> and early 18<sup>th</sup> century outpouring of sermons, judicial opinions, newspaper editorials justifying English land grabbing in the Americas that Barbara Arneil reviews in her *John Locke and America*, the key issue is always labor, agricultural labor, to be precise (Arneil 1996: 169-187). Their lament being, 'we' (the English) labor on the land, 'they' (the American Indians) simply live off it.

'Peopling' America with subsistence farmers was not the intention of colonization supporters. Their aim, for the most part, was to turn the 'wastes' of America into 'true original' zones of money and commerce that would justify the expansion of 'productive' land and the investment (of both money and workers). Therefore, as Locke incisively recognized, there was a logical need for money that would set the conditions for surplus labor (and mere barter with neighboring colonists or Indians for necessities was not enough). His originality was to see past the smoke screen of labor into *terra firma* of money, the logical element of primitive accumulation. If American land was not linked to money, title to it would mean nothing. (This maxim echoes down to this day in the so-called sub-prime mortgage crisis).

Indeed, Locke conceived of a 'state of money' as a transition from the state of nature to the formation of civil society (Caffentzis 1989: 129-164). This state of money had three stages and was based not on either natural law or civil law, but on 'secret and tacit consent' and 'the law or opinion or fashion.' As I explain in my

book, the three stages are as follows:

Stage A: The first exchanges were inadvertent; pleased with the color of gold or silver or the sparkling of a diamond a man exchanges perishable goods for them.

Stage B: Slowly there is a growing 'mutual consent' or 'tacit agreement' to take gold, silver or diamond as payment in general.

Stage C: An impulse to accumulation takes shape as some parts of the population 'enlarge their possessions' while others, of course, find theirs diminished (Caffentzis 1989: 129).

Stage C is a one of endemic class struggle that eventually led the propertied to gather together to create the laws, magistrates and police of civil society to defend their 'enlarged possessions.' Money, along with the introduction of Interest and Inheritance, amplified and eternalized differences between the 'industrious and rational' versus 'quarrelsome and contentious' of one generation to future ones. Indeed, Interest and Inheritance amplified and eternalized class war itself, since one can inherit debt as well as wealth!

The charging of interest makes clear that *money is not a common good* that is to be used by the community, i.e., if you are not using your money, then the fellow member of the community who has need of it should have it without cost (like a tool that one borrows from a neighbor which is to be returned, but without payment of a rental fee). The Hebrew and later Christian prohibitions on interest were clearly intended to create and protect a common of money (or commonwealth) for the use of the community (as were the Jubilees that periodically canceled debts) and to discourage the excessive 'enlargement of possessions.' Locke clearly defended Interest as a part of his general critique of commons (in this case the commons of money) and as a tool for inclosure as well.

Inheritance is another source of accumulation directed against the common. For why shouldn't the accumulated money a person owned and used in life not become part of the common wealth on his/her death? As Locke asks, when a father dies, 'why does [his property] not return to the common stock of mankind?' This question is especially telling when capital still existed largely in family capital units:

In inter-family inheritance lies the immortality of property: though inheritance is

supposed to preserve the descendents, it also preserve the property (if it is money, and can be preserved). This makes possible an inter-generational accumulation process where the function of the descendents is to preserve the property not vice versa. Property loses its status as continuously re-affirmed, laboriously acquired, decomposing thing when it becomes money: it becomes that which continues beyond death, to such a point that the family capital will go on to embody the family (Caffentzis 1989: 159).

Locke's contribution, then, to the discussion of primitive accumulation was the recognition that without money, there cannot be accumulation (primitive or otherwise). The paths he took to this insight, e.g., through the anti-spoilage prohibitions of *Leviticus*, are often uncomfortably bizarre for neoliberal commentators today. But the logic is impeccable. The state of money is a crucial preliminary for the formation of civil society, otherwise one is stuck with imputing to humanity an innate sociality or an innate hostility, and Locke, as we shall see, was vitally interested in rejecting any innate ideas or passions.

### Enclosing the Common of Ideas

The intellectual territory of Locke's labor theory of land ownership has been the object of a huge political and scholarly discussion that goes down to this day. My contribution to it has been simply to point out that Locke's introduction of money into the analysis of primitive accumulation of land is not an idiosyncratic move, it is, rather, an essential logical presupposition of primitive accumulation. But there was another aspect of the accumulation process that Locke was also involved in that is just as crucial as that of land today--the accumulation of capital on the basis of the production of ideas and knowledge. This too has been another aspect of Locke's impact on contemporary politics. Selling 'intellectual property' as a major source of capital accumulation and imposing copyright and patent requirements in all the major international 'trade agreements' (NAFTA, WTO, and dozens of SAPs) in the last twenty years is an important part of the neoliberal program. Locke set up the intellectual framework for the creation of 'intellectual property' although, as we shall see, he was not yet able to found the accumulation of capital on the property claims to ideas and knowledge.

Just as with the barriers against usury (i.e., the commodification of money), the barriers against commodification of ideas and knowledge began to tumble with the rise of capitalism in the 16<sup>th</sup> century. As money became again the universal mediator, a new relation between ideas and knowledge and the commodity form

was inevitably posed and the ancient Sophists (who demanded a monetary exchange between the owners of ideas and knowledge and those who would use them) were given a new hearing. Perhaps the most decisive legal sign of this change was the Statute of Queen Anne (8 Anne c. 21) of 1710 that is often dubbed the first true copyright law in history. The Statute gave copyright to authors in Britain for a period of at most 28 years. It is no surprise that this law was crafted under a new discourse on property and thought that was decisively influenced by John Locke. The impact of John Locke's 'labor theory of property' in his *Second Treatise on Civil Government* on modern concepts of property has been widely noted by historians of economics and politics. Less well known was how Locke's work in the *Essay on Human Understanding* meshed with his views on property to challenge the Platonic separation between knowledge and property. For Locke argued for two distinctly anti-Platonic positions: (1) the non-existence of innate ideas and (2) thought was a labor process.

The animus behind Locke's rejection of the doctrine of innate ideas (which constitute the common of thought, since they are available to all equally) lay in his suspicion that the doctrine tended to make people lazy and 'collectively inclined' in intellectual matters. 'If everyone believes X from birth, then so should I, even if the only evidence I have is the others' beliefs,' is a kind of reasoning Locke rejected. In trying to explain why there was such a long adherence to the existence of innate ideas from Plato to Leibniz, Locke wrote:

When men have found some general propositions that could not be doubted of as soon as understood, it was, I know, a short and easy way to conclude them innate. This being once received, it eased the lazy from the pains of search, and stopped the inquiry of the doubtful concerning all that one once styled innate. And it was of no small advantage to those who affected to be masters and teachers, to make this the principle of principles--*that principles must not be questioned* (Locke 1959: 116, I.iii, 25).

Or, as A. C. Fraser, his editor glossed this passage: '[Locke] protests the indolence which thus blindly reposes on the opinions of the community, and which grudges the private judgment by which each man is detached from the community and becomes *himself*' (Locke 1959: 116, n. 1).

Locke not only hoped to enclose humans from the common of ideas and knowledge. He developed the view that thought was labor (or it was worthless). This

view was diametrically opposed to Plato's or Aristotle's who both categorized thought as an activity that is an end in itself. As I wrote in *Clipped Coins*:

For Locke, real thought is laborious: a hard, time-bound process which is a means to something beyond itself. We do not think, according to Locke, for the pleasure of thinking; rather thinking is the work we must do to arrive at pleasure. Thought has no life of its own, it is suspicious of images and forms, beauty and mimesis. Here we find the bourgeois mentality at its most self-reflexive: thought too must labor to advantage, otherwise it is not thought (Caffentzis 1989: 131).

Instead of collective products of thought, internally available with no labor, Locke only recognized products of thought as being an individual's property, just as the physical labor in gathering acorns from the common ground transformed them into the gatherer's private property. As Mark Rose pointed out in his essay on the genealogy of modern authorship, Locke's labor theory of property discourse when 'extended into the realm of literary production... with its concern for origins and first proprietors, blended readily with the aesthetic discourse of originality' (Rose 1994: 30). Locke's conception of property and thought was a remarkable intervention in the field and justified the claim that the author of a text, the inventor of the design for a machine, the creator of a theory are proprietors.

Locke, however, was not involved in earning a living from the book trade (the way Hume was later to be). But he was familiar with the international book trade, especially due to his long stay (in exile) in Holland. His main writing on the trade was his 'Observations on the Censorship' in 1694 which is a list of objections to the 'Act for preventing abuses in printing seditious, treasonable, and unlicensed Books and Pamphlets, and for regulating Printing and Printing-Presses' (King 1984: 202-209). Locke was extremely critical of the Act and was probably a force behind its eventual demise in 1694 (at the very time of his work on his monetary pamphlets). In the conclusion of his observations Locke refers to property in texts in the following words:

That any person or company should have patents for the sole printing of ancient authors is very unreasonable and injurious to learning; and for those who purchase copies from authors that now live and write, it may be reasonable to limit their property to a certain number of years after the death of the author, or the first printing of the book, as, suppose, fifty or seventy years. This I am sure, it is very absurd and ridiculous that any one now living should pretend to have a propriety

in, or a power to dispose of the propriety of any copy or writings of authors who lived before printing was known or used in Europe (King 1984: 208-209).

Locke is here laying down a common of texts, a permissible enclosure, and something of a no-man's-land. Texts of authors from ancient times to the fifteenth century are definitely part of the common of texts while property in texts would be limited to fifty or seventy years after the death of the author or the printing of the book. There is a bit of laxness here concerning private property, whereas the claims of the commons are clear: Tully is in the commons, Shakespeare's plays' are in the no-man-land (after all, they were written and produced more than seventy years before 1694 and Shakespeare himself died in 1616).

In the sixteen years between the demise of the so-called Printing (or Censorship) Act in 1694 and the Statute of Anne of 1710, Locke's framework became the basis for the claims of those who wish to totally commodify intellectual life. Indeed, the Statute of Anne of 1710 was something of a compromise between the full blown application of 'freehold' or 'full ownership' notions of property to texts, inventions and theories and the older Platonic 'commonist' conception of ideas that rejected property claims and payments for the use of things that we were all born with and merely had to be stimulated to remember (as Socrates did for the slave boy in the *Meno*).

This compromise was decisively tested in the case of Donaldson vs. Becket that was tried before the House of Lords in 1774. It was a celebrated and widely followed case, even among school boys. As Rose observes: 'Having been reprimanded for stealing an old woman's gingerbread cakes baked in the form of letters, a cheeky schoolboy was supposed to have defended himself [in 1774] by explaining that 'the [House of Lords] had lately determined that lettered Property was common.' (Rose 1994: 24)

The London booksellers, represented by Thomas Becket, brought Alexander Donaldson to court because the latter published a cheap reprint of James Thomson's *The Seasons*, a work composed more than 28 years before. Becket and his supporters claimed that copyright was 'a common law right' and hence should be perpetual. The House of Lords decisively rejected this claim and their decision has stuck for almost three centuries. But they did not entirely reject the property claims of the author:

...the Lords' decision did not touch the basic contention that the author had a property in the product of his labour. Neither the representation of the author as a proprietor nor the representation of the literary work as an object of the property was discredited (Rose 1994: 45).

We might say that the complete victory of Locke's enclosure of the commons of ideas and knowledge is still in doubt and as is the enclosure of the common of land. These enclosures are tremendously contested throughout the planet. One need only see that the anti-Lockean commoners of the present are rejecting the enclosure of both the earthy as well as the airy commons.

(1) The three volumes of *Theories of Surplus Value* were to be the repository of Marx's direct critique of the texts of political economy whereas *Capital*, Vol I-III were to be critiques of the system itself. In *Theories of Surplus Value*, however, there is no systematic review of the bourgeois texts dealing with the origins of the accumulation process.

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