Investigating the foundations of equality

God, Locke and Equality by Jeremy Waldron

By Ann Talbot
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Jeremy Waldron, *God, Locke and Equality*, Cambridge University Press, 2002

Professor Jeremy Waldron's latest book is an examination of the theory of equality put forward by the seventeenth century English philosopher John Locke. This is a subject that is highly relevant today as the widening social gulf between the super rich and the rest of the population increasingly undermines the political institutions that have been based on the maintenance of at least a measure of social and economic equality. Under these conditions a study of equality as a theoretical principle is to be welcomed.

Locke has some claim to be one of the key sources of modern theories of equality and any discussion of the political implications of social inequality needs to be well grounded in his work. In his *Two Treatises of Government* Locke maintained that all men were naturally in a state of perfect liberty and equality. He envisaged that by common consent they had agreed to join together into a political or civil society, which ought to be governed by majority decisions. On entering civil society they granted their right to enforce justice to some form of government but they retained the right to resist this government and, if necessary, to overthrow it by force of arms.

The fact that almost a century after his death American revolutionaries could regard it as self-evident that all men were equal was in large part due to Locke's influence. Whole phrases from the *Second Treatise* appear in the Declaration of Independence, as though Thomas Jefferson either had the book open on his desk as he drafted the document or had so thoroughly internalised its ethos that its language came most naturally to him. Even when he changes Locke's words, as when he substitutes "Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness" for Locke's "Life, Liberty and Property", Jefferson shows a profound understanding of Locke's thought and the way in which it needed to be modified to make it most relevant for his own times. In this form the ideas that Locke defended became part of the subsequent development of democratic theory.

This history makes Locke the inescapable starting point for any consideration of equality as a modern political concept, but at the same time he himself is not a modern thinker. He was born in 1632 and grew up during the English Civil War (1642-48), was at school in Westminster when Charles I was executed a few hundred yards away and went to Christ Church College, Oxford just after the victorious parliamentary forces had purged the academic staff. His youth and early adulthood experiences were shaped by a political struggle that was expressed in a religious form and in which the Bible was regarded as a political handbook. Often this historical background to Locke's thought is elided in the works of modern political theorists, but it certainly influences his thinking since for Locke human beings are equal because they are made in the image of God and are all sent into the world to do his business. Waldron's book attempts to reinstate the religious foundations of Locke's political theory in what he aims to make an historically sensitive account.

In recognising that the roots of Locke's thought lie to a great extent in the revolutionary struggles of the English Civil War, Waldron is able to give more emphasis than is often the case to the radical aspects of his writings that are easily obscured when he is seen in a later context. Waldron recognises Locke's debt to the most plebeian elements of the English revolution and thinks that he is closer to the Levellers than is often supposed. He rejects the argument put forward by C. B. Macpherson who suggested that Locke thought, "members of the laboring class do not and cannot live a fully rational life." [1]

Locke has a very distinctive view of labour that relates both to his political and economic theories. Labour, for Locke, is the source of value and the basis of property rights since people could, in his view, only own that which they had appropriated through their labour. Waldron traces Locke's conception of labour to his religious outlook, specifically to his attitude to the Fall of Man. Waldron quotes Locke's comment that when Adam was expelled from Paradise, "God sets him to work for his living, and seems rather to give him a Spade into his hands, to subdue the Earth, than a Scepter to Rule over its Inhabitants."

Rather than being doomed to a state of original sin, humanity is obliged to work for a living in Locke's version of the Fall from Paradise.

The picture of Locke that emerges from Waldron's pages is not of a defender of the seventeenth century status quo, but of someone who was prepared to challenge orthodox ideas and the existing property relations. Ever since the Putney debates of 1647 the way in which economic inequality inevitably undermines political equality had remained an insoluble problem that the Levellers had never managed to resolve. Waldron sets Locke's discussion of equality in the context of this seventeenth century debate about the relationship between political and economic equality. He concludes that Locke seems to have regarded an unequal distribution of property as inevitable in an economy based on money, but that he was critical of the English inheritance customs that tended to produce large landed estates. He favoured the division of property among heirs, a practice that, it was thought, would result in a more equitable division of land.

So fundamental are Locke's religious conceptions to his political and economic ideas, Waldron argues, that "bracketing off the God stuff from the equality stuff" is simply not going to work. This is true to the extent that for Locke the idea of equality is logically derived from God since all human beings are equal because they have been divinely created. But does this mean that we cannot separate the principle of equality from the theological character it has in Locke's thought? It is significant that even before Locke's death in 1704 editions of his *Two Treatises* appeared in France without the *First Treatise*, which was the most explicitly religious of the two. It was this French version of the work that was eventually translated and published in America. Locke is in this sense very much a transitional figure who stands between the religiously based conceptions of the English Civil War and the increasingly secular arguments for equality that emerge in the American and French revolutions. "Bracketing

off the God stuff from the equality stuff " is exactly what did happen to Locke's theory in practice.

Waldron's determination not to separate Locke's theory of equality from its theological foundations casts an interesting light on the direction of liberal thought at the turn of the twentieth century. John Rawls, the political theorist who died earlier this year, drew on the work of Locke, Rousseau, Kant and Mill to develop a political theory that was highly influential throughout the post-war period. He always argued that it must be possible to defend the principle of equality in terms that all members of society, whether religious or secular, could accept and find compelling because there existed an overlapping consensus of ideas. For Rawls all individuals are equal because they have a sense of justice and a conception of the good and because they have the ability to reason.[2]

Waldron used to accept this argument 20 years ago, he writes, but now finds that he cannot and doubts that a non-religious foundation for the principle of equality is viable.

This shift reflects the fact that 20 years ago it was possible for Rawls or Waldron to take for granted a certain consensus on fundamental political principles. There might be sharp differences in their practical application, but principles such as equality were accepted by the right and left in mainstream political life. This is no longer the case today and it has become impossible to base a liberal political philosophy on the assumption that the principle of equality can be taken for granted.

The theological basis that Locke found for equality is certainly not adequate for the beginning of the twenty-first century, a fact that the traditional liberal theory of equality always recognised and so tried to find a generally acceptable secular theory. To attempt to return to a theological conception of equality at this point would be entirely retrogressive.

Waldron does not examine the foundations of equality in the present day or elaborate a theory of his own that goes beyond a rather tentative critique of Rawls and gives the impression of floundering when he suggests that the justification of the principle of equality must exist at some "deeper level". It is to his credit that he insists that individuals were inherently worthy of respect in late seventeenth century and they are inherently worthy of respect in the twenty-first century too, but having rejected Rawls' mid-twentieth century liberalism he seems to have cut himself adrift from any theoretical anchor points for this conviction.

While Waldron's close focus has some definite advantages because it sets Locke's thought in an appropriate historical context, it is not sufficient in studying such an influential figure or in exploring such a complex concept as equality, which has a profound resonance over a long historical period. One of the features that Waldron himself emphasises about Locke's thought is that he wrote in a pre-Linnaean, pre-Darwinian world in which evolutionary or historical arguments had no explanatory force. This is extremely important for understanding Locke because our thought has been so thoroughly infused with historical and evolutionary concepts in the course of the last 300 years that it is often difficult to put ourselves into Locke's mental world.

We think of species as evolving, societies as evolving and ideas as evolving in a way that Locke did not.

There is, however, no reason why we should artificially confine ourselves to Locke's mental world and deprive ourselves of a whole range of more modern intellectual equipment in reaching an understanding of his thought. Writing in a world before Vico and Herder, before Hegel and certainly before Darwin and Marx, an historical understanding of the principle of equality was not open to Locke but it is to us. We have to step outside Locke's essentially a-historical worldview, in which equality existed as a timeless principle based on divine dispensation and an unchanging human nature, and adopt a more historical approach than the one either Locke or Waldron offers us.

The problem is not just that Locke's theological theory is inadequate today, but that it was philosophically inadequate in the seventeenth century too. God's opinions are so notoriously varied that they have never made a sound basis for philosophy. In John Locke's mind God may have created all men equal but many of his contemporaries were just as sincerely convinced that God had ordained inequality since he had given kings a divine right to rule over their subjects. Why then did the theory of equality become so powerful?

Equality could only have become a self-evident idea because it made sense in terms of the experience of a great many people. This may seem anomalous in a world that was dominated by absolute monarchies, in which there were immense socio-economic divisions and when most people's daily experience was of inequality not equality. Landlord and tenant, master and servant, king and subject—these were the relationships that governed the majority of people's lives in the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Even Locke himself accepted a system in which political rights were proportionate to landholding and slavery was legally recognised when he helped to draft the constitution of colonial Carolina.

Despite this social reality the concept of equality had deep roots and a complex history. It had always led a double life as both part of the official Christian ideology of natural rights theology that was developed by Thomas Aquinas and part of the ideology of plebeian heresy and rebellion.

The Reformation (1516) and the German Peasant War (1524-6) lent it a powerful impetus, as did the French Wars of Religion (1562-98). One of the conclusions drawn from the Thirty Years War (1618-48) was that the only way to maintain social peace was to treat everyone as though they were equal. Under the impact of these political experiences and the economic developments connected with European colonial expansion, the old scholastic theory of natural law and natural rights was dusted off and revived in a modern form that placed greater emphasis on the political implications of equality and the active right of resistance.

The political ideas expressed in Locke's *Two Treatises* represent a codification of the principles of equality and resistance, which had emerged in a practical and unsystematic way in the course of the struggle against King Charles I. They retained a continuing relevance after the restoration of the monarchy in 1660 when it became clear that the king was moving in an absolutist direction as, fortified with subsidies from Louis XIV, Charles II found that he could afford to ignore Parliament and insist on the succession of his brother James II, who was a Roman Catholic. This directly threatened the lives, liberties and properties of Protestant Englishmen who feared that the religious orders would claim back their estates, that they would be excluded from office and that a programme of persecution would be instituted as it had been under Mary Tudor.

Under these circumstances the alliance of wealthy merchants and landlords with more radical urban artisans that had played an important role in the Civil War re-emerged. Locke was very much part of this loose movement that came to be identified as the Whigs.

One of Locke's practical political actions was organising the legal defence of Stephen College, "the Whig joiner", when he was on trial for his life in Oxford on charges of sedition. The *Two Treatises* was part of a whole body of Whig literature that included Algernon Sydney's *Discourse Concerning Government*—which also had an impact on the American Revolution. Sydney was convicted of treason and executed for his involvement on the strength of the views he expressed in the *Discourses*. Locke was more fortunate but he expressed similar ideas in the *Two Treatises*.

Locke has been thought of as exclusively the spokesman for the wealthy merchants and landlords, but his conception that the poor have the right to take what they need from the surplus of the rich is incompatible with any accepted notions of capitalist economics. Locke certainly is a spokesman of these privileged groups, but at the same time he speaks for their supporters among the labourers and artisans. Waldron is right to identify

Locke with the Levellers. Indeed Locke is not so far from the more radical Diggers in advocating that the poor should be allowed to dig up common land and that the rich should not be allowed to engross more land than they can use.

Locke's political ideas reflect the alliance of classes that jointly opposed the drive to absolutism in mid and late seventeenth century England. We may recognise these classes as having inherently incompatible interests, but Locke did not. He expressed a compromise between class interests, but one that rapidly became untenable.

Within a comparatively short space of time the Whigs became the party of the establishment, maintaining power through a system of corruption, and their revolutionary past was transformed into an assertion of the ancient rights of Englishmen—propertied ones in particular. Locke is often identified with this later Whig tradition, but he never attempts to justify revolution on the grounds that Englishmen could claim certain rights under an ancient constitution. His arguments in *The Two Treatises* are always universalist in nature and point toward the Enlightenment tradition of natural rights rather than to the constitutional tradition of ancient prerogative and privilege. Locke's arguments are far more theological in character than later theories of natural rights were to be because he effectively bridges the transition between the religious ideology of the English Civil War and the later American and French Revolutions, where if God appears at all it is in the guise of the "God of Nature".

God, Locke and Equality is a valuable contribution to the debate about the origins of the modern conception of equality because it recognises the radical aspect of Locke's thought and his connection with a revolutionary tradition, but it demands to be taken further.

Locke's conception of God, a conception that was far from satisfactory to the orthodox thinkers of his day, was a philosophical portmanteau—which, if unpacked, we would find contained some highly material historical content. In it we could trace the influence of the history of European wars, religious conflicts and revolutions on his thought and in addition identify the new scientific developments of the age that encouraged him to adopt an anthropological approach to political and religious questions. Professor Waldron has left the bag packed.

Notes:

[1] C. B. Macpherson, *The Political Theory of Possessive Individualism* pp.232.

[2] John Rawls, *Political Liberalism*, p19