

# On land, life, and labour: Abundance and scarcity in Locke, Smith, and Ricardo

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In the modern age, and not before, men began to doubt that poverty is inherent in the human condition... This doubt, or rather the conviction that life on earth might be blessed with abundance instead of being cursed by scarcity, was prerevolutionary and American in origin; it grew directly out of the American colonial experience... Theoretically speaking, the stage was set when first Locke... and then Adam Smith held that labour and toil, far from being the appanage of poverty, the activity to which poverty condemned those without property, were, on the contrary, the source of all wealth.

Hannah Arendt (1977)

Ricardo inverts the terms of this analysis... What makes economics possible, and necessary... is a perpetual and fundamental situation of scarcity: confronted by a nature that in itself is inert and, save for one very small part, barren, man risks his life... [I]t is related... to the biological properties of a human species...; it is related also to the situation of those living beings that run the risk of not finding in their natural environment enough to ensure their existence; lastly, it designates in labour, and in the very hardship of that labour, the only means of overcoming the fundamental insufficiency of nature and of triumphing for an instant over death.

Michel Foucault (2002)

As these epigraphs attest, the emergence of economic thought has long been understood by theorists as a crucial development for politics in the modern era. These comments appear in the context of quite different projects. For Arendt, the concern was how what she termed the “social question”—that of the existence of poverty—had informed the development of revolutionary thought and practice since the late 18th century. Foucault, instead, made his observations as part of what he termed an “archaeology of the human sciences,” an investigation that provided crucial foundations for his subsequent—more explicitly political, and today more famous—genealogy of modern

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“government.” In spite of their divergent aims, the comments of Arendt and Foucault revolve around a remarkably similar constellation of ideas: Both are concerned with notions of abundance and scarcity, and both link this to a discourse on labour. Perhaps less intuitively, both give centrality to new understandings of “life,” Arendt through a critique of how economic analysis placed “the life process of society... at the very centre of the human endeavour” (1977);<sup>1</sup> Foucault by arguing that the emergence of political economy marked the birth of a new kind of political rationality—a “biopolitics” centered around the government of life (see also Foucault, 2008, 2009).<sup>2</sup>

Although these passages read almost as if they were a continuous commentary, this is something of a sleight of hand. In fact, neither thinker traced Locke–Smith–Ricardo lineage in this way: Arendt did not acknowledge a subsequent shift in liberal political economy marked by Ricardo and the economists of the early 19th century; Foucault, meanwhile, was not here comparing Ricardo to Locke or Smith—though he did address their work elsewhere—but rather to the French Physiocrats. Yet, it is more than a linguistic accident that these comments seem to speak so directly to each other. In fact, the genealogy suggested by the juxtaposed quotes traces an important lineage, though one with which neither Arendt nor Foucault engaged in detail. While not addressing directly the arguments of either of these two thinkers, therefore—the resonances and tensions between which have already been explored in some depth elsewhere (Blencowe, 2010)—this article takes their provocative respective commentaries as a fruitful starting point for tracing a new approach to the development of a modern politics of life.

As insightful as these commentaries are, I seek to go beyond an anthropocentric bias that has been the focus of recent criticism within political theory (Bennett, 2004; Krause, 2016), and for which Foucault in particular has been criticized (Lemke, 2015). What interests me especially is how setting these three canonical discussions side-by-side helps chart the transformation of notions of life, understood not only as specifically *human* life, but rather in terms of the relationship between humans and the broader panoply of *nonhuman* life on earth. In short, I suggest that Arendt and Foucault were *both* right—that Locke and Smith should be regarded as thinkers of abundance, while Ricardo should be seen as a thinker of scarcity—but that making sense of this shift, and its ramifications, requires coming to terms with changing underlying ontologies of nature. While the natural law influence in Locke and Smith’s work placed emphasis on the human capacity to adapt the abundance of nonhuman life on earth to meet human ends, Ricardo’s modern political economy represented a loss of faith in the essential fecundity of nature, and the ability of humans to overcome environmental limits through technological and sociopolitical innovation.

In order to carry out this investigation, I turn to an important though often overlooked category that was touched on by both Arendt and Foucault, but which was for neither a central focus—that of land. Here, rather than assuming a view of land—more conventional in political theory—as a purely passive “resource” that is subject to appropriation,<sup>3</sup> I look at how, within a specifically British tradition of thinking about “improvement” within discourses on government, land acted as a privileged site of the action—even *agency*—of nature, with property rights forming the principal means through which relations between human and nonhuman life were articulated. In particular, I suggest, contra Foucault, that it was this discourse, which here I trace through the work of Locke and Smith, that was the theoretical precursor to the new “biological” political rationality of which Ricardo’s work is emblematic. Viewed in these terms, the birth of 19th-century political economy appears not as the sudden irruption of life into theories of government, but rather a radical schematization of earlier ideas about life, marked by the disavowal of the spontaneous agency of nature, and the hardening of a separation between the human and the nonhuman.

As much as Arendt and Foucault did not focus on land specifically, their respective comments on life, and their shared concern for the concept of labour, still provide crucial guidance. It is well known both that land was the primary object of labour for Locke and that the conceptual affinity between land and labour was foundational to what is often called by economists the “classical economics” of Smith and Ricardo (e.g., Hollander, 2016)—even if, as this article goes some way to demonstrating, the discursive unity that this label implies is one that should be treated with caution.<sup>4</sup> For both Arendt and Foucault, however, the significance of labour goes beyond both appropriation (traditionally more a concern of political theorists) and the creation of value (traditionally more a concern of political economists) and instead points to more fundamental questions around subsistence, understood as the survival of biological life. While, for Foucault (2009), the political economy of the 19th century embodied a new understanding of man as a “species,”

crystallized especially in the concept of “population,” I suggest that this, in fact, represented the *disappearance* of a view of man as one species amongst many, and the emergence of a new and anthropocentric lens for understanding subsistence that has informed economics to the present day.

The argument proceeds in three sections. The first section addresses the famous chapter “Of property” in book two of Locke’s *Two Treatises of Government* (2017; hereafter *TT*), emphasizing the ways in which regimes of property are seen to encode shifting relations between humans and nonhuman nature, as well as the important work done here by notions of death and decay. Section two moves to Smith’s seminal *The Wealth of Nations* (2014; hereafter *WN*), reading the central arguments of the work, and the stadial history on which they hinge, as essentially an elaboration of the schema sketched by Locke, but sharpening the sense of property as articulating relations between human and nonhuman life. Section three turns to a work read by Foucault and others as the quintessential statement of political economy in the early 19th century, Ricardo’s *Principles of Political Economy and Taxation* (2004; hereafter *PPET*), arguing that its treatment of land in fact represents a radical departure from the Lockean/Smithian schema, inverting ideas about the inherent fecundity of nature, and instantiating a much bleaker reading of human–environment relations. The conclusion returns to a discussion of Arendt and Foucault.

## 1 | LOCKE’S TWO TREATISES OF GOVERNMENT

Locke’s *Second Treatise* famously placed questions around land at the heart of a theory of government. Private ownership of land, he argued, was the very basis of “civil”—by which he meant *civilized*—society, “the chief end whereof is the preservation of property” (*TT* II.85). His work distinguished itself from that of other major 17th-century legal theorists such as Hugo Grotius and Samuel von Pufendorf, however, by suggesting that private property rights were derived not simply from the use of land, in a general sense, but specifically from the application of *labour* in order to better the condition of land for cultivation, an idea understood through the distinctively English concept of “improvement.” It was this argument that required Locke to expand at some length on the nature of this labour, and, by extension, on the relations between human and nonhuman life that it encoded.

While the notion that an input of labour granted rights to a product was a long-standing idea, found at least since Aristotle, the idea that labour granted property in the land itself was new (Garnsey, 2007). Essential to Locke’s reasoning was that there existed a natural right of property of “every man... in his own *Person*” (*TT* II.27; all italics in original). By extension, he reasoned,

[t]he *Labour* of his Body, and the *Work* of his hands,... are properly his. Whatsoever then he removes out of the State that Nature hath provided, and left it in, he hath mixed his *Labour* with, and joined to it something that is his own, and thereby makes it his *Property*. (*TT* II.27)

Crucially for Locke, then, labour entailed some kind of modification of nonhuman nature. This could be as simple as the labour expended in hunting or foraging the uncultivated “Fruits of the Earth” (*TT* II.31), which was enough to grant a natural right of ownership. But it could also include more substantial modifications of nature, through labour applied to the earth *itself*. As he pronounced in another well-known passage:

As much *Land* as a Man Tills, Plants, Improves, Cultivates, and can use the Product of, so much is his *Property*. He by his *Labour* does, as it were, inclose it from the Common. (*TT* II.32)

For Locke, then, the concept of labour was above all associated with subsistence—understood as the preservation of human life—and it was this irrevocable connection that underpinned justifications for property of all kinds.<sup>5</sup>

Yet, property in land was not an immutable fact of human existence. In fact, the toil of gathering uncultivated wild goods, and the patient industry of agriculture and husbandry represented, for Locke, starkly divergent modes of human

interaction with the natural fertility of the earth, associated with very different phases of human social development. In fact, as various commentators have noted, though not developed in detail, Locke's commentary hints at a notion of the development of societal subsistence in distinct stages. Recent scholarship has helped to reveal this by stressing the central role of animal life in Locke's text (Guha-Majumdar, 2020). Such work captures something essential about Lockean property rights: They are expressed first and foremost not merely in terms of the relations between humans that they necessarily imply, but, more fundamentally, in terms of how they articulate modes of relation between humans and a broader web of life on earth. Nevertheless, these arguments can be extended to think not only about animals, but nonhuman life in general, including plants.

The "Fruit, or Venison, which nourishes the wild *Indian*" (TT II.26) provides the quintessential image of subsistence in the first stage. Under such a hunter-gatherer regime, property was said to be limited to possession of those "beasts" and "fruits" provided, as Locke put it, "by the spontaneous hand of nature" (TT II.26). Crucially, this meant no property in the earth itself—as he suggested, the "*Indian*... knows no Inclosure" (TT II.26). In this supposedly prepolitical condition, Locke conjectured that there was no positive law as such, but rather an adherence to the "Law of Nature," which permitted appropriation of any of the Earth's products that an individual could use. But, importantly, this right was limited by the capacity of the individual to consume what they appropriated.

[I]f the Fruits rotted, or the Venison putrified, before he could spend it, he offended against the common Law of Nature, and was liable to be punished; he invaded his Neighbour's share... (TT II.37)

This was a central point for Locke—humans had a natural right to appropriate plant and animal life, but only insofar as they could make use of these goods before they spoiled. Property over *nonhuman* life, that is, could be justified only by the preservation of *human* life. Anything else was an infraction against natural law, and, indeed—what for him amounted to the same thing—the will of God (TT II.31). The impetus of this natural right carried into his theory of government.

Though frequently overlooked, the chapter on property in fact hinted at another distinct nonsedentary mode of subsistence, that of pastoralism.<sup>6</sup> The implications of this are not developed by Locke, but it seems clear enough that he saw this as implying quite a different mode of interaction between human and nonhuman life. This described a system based around the domestication of animal life, but "*without any fixed property in the ground they made use of,*" discussing through biblical examples societies that "wandred with their Flocks, and their Herds, which was their substance" (TT II.38).

Clearly, however, the key development for Locke was not the domestication of animals, but rather the instantiation of sedentary agriculture. It is only at this point, he suggested, that the "chief object of Property" shifts,

being now not the Fruits of the Earth, and the Beasts that subsist on it, but the Earth it self; as that which takes in and carries with it all the rest (TT II.32)

For Locke, then, property in land was explicitly understood in terms of the command over plant and animal life that it grants. While appropriation of land was synonymous with "inclosure" (e.g., TT II.33), it was not simply the erecting of boundaries—real or imagined—that interested Locke. Rather, it was the labour expended in *improving* the land that explained and justified private appropriation of the earth.

Locke's comments drew on a by-then well-established English discourse on improvement (Linklater, 2014). In keeping with this, he sometimes spoke of improvement as a kind of adjunct to cultivation, implying the use of various technical practices to increase the ease and productivity of farming that were the topic of contemporary agricultural treatises (Tribe, 1978). More fundamentally, however, improvement denoted the conversion of uncultivated wilds to agricultural land. Leaning on biblical support, Locke emphasized man's duty to,

subdue the Earth, i.e. improve it for the benefit of Life, and therein lay out upon it something that was his own, his labour (TT II.32)

Undoubtedly, by “life,” here, he intended specifically *human* life. Improvement was thus specifically the process of directing a fertility always-already present in nature by directing it toward the production of those goods that met human needs.

Locke’s theory therefore suggested that, with the instantiation of agriculture, an individual had the right to appropriate unimproved land. But, importantly, this was only true insofar as the individual could make use of the products of the land they had appropriated. For Locke, the same prohibition against the spoilage of appropriated plant and animal life that played a key role in the natural justice of the hunter-gatherer stage also operated here.

The same *measures* governed the *Possession of Land* too: Whatsoever he tilled and reaped, laid up and made use of, before it spoils, that was his peculiar Right; whatsoever he enclosed, and could feed and make use of, the Cattle and Product was also his. But 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 on as Waste, and might be the Possession of any other. (TT II.38)

This so-called no spoilage proviso was accompanied by another qualification of the right to appropriate land, which suggested that, according to the law of nature, this was only justified if there was “enough, and as good left” for others (TT II.33).

What is sometimes overlooked, however, is that Locke’s provisos were immediately nullified by the introduction of money. His well-known proclamation that “in the beginning all the World was *America*” occurs in the midst of a discussion of commerce and its relation to property and spoilage, and these words are immediately followed by the less well known, “and more so than that is now; for no such thing as *Money* was any where known” (TT II.49).

His argument was that the introduction of precious metals as a form of money radically modified the question of the justice of property.<sup>7</sup> This was since, unlike consumable subsistence goods derived from plants and animals which were subject to death and decay, money was nonperishable. With this invention, for Locke, humans had tacitly agreed to forego equal access to resources.

[I]t is plain, that Men have agreed to disproportionate and unequal Possession of the Earth, they having by a tacit and voluntary consent found out a way, how a man may fairly possess more land than he himself can use the product of, by receiving in exchange for the overplus, Gold and Silver, which may be hoarded up without injury to any one, these metals not spoiling or decaying in the hands of the possessor. (TT II.50)

Indeed, though the implications of this change are only hinted at by Locke, it is even possible to suggest that there is at least a hint here of an additional property regime, one which no longer reflected property relations conceived as expressing the form of a society of subsistence cultivators, but which was instead premised on an extended division of labour, and the primacy of commerce.

Although there are doubts amongst scholars regarding the extent to which Locke’s comments constitute a stadial history of the kind that came to assume a prominent role in 18th-century thought (Palmeri, 2016), it seems clear that there is at least a nascent sense of distinct regimes of property within the *Two Treatises*, and also a sense of progress through these regimes.<sup>8</sup> Most obviously, the development of agriculture is seen unambiguously as superior when compared with the supposed poverty of hunter-gatherer subsistence, allowing the conversion of unproductive “waste” land to productive cropping and husbandry. To the extent that commerce appears—according to Locke’s

reasoning—to do away with the problem of spoilage, the introduction of monetized subsistence relations appears too as a clear advance.

Underpinning this sense of progress is a consideration of population that, whilst not theorized explicitly, runs throughout the property chapter. The following passage, for example, which follows a discussion of hunting in the state of nature, is indicative:

[C]onsidering the plenty of natural Provisions there was for a long time in the World, and the few spenders,... there would be then little room for Quarrels or Contentions about Property so establish'd.  
(*TT II.31*)

Here and elsewhere, Locke's writing reveals a concern for the relationship between forms of property and population density at a given stage of development. Later, he clarifies that, "in the Beginning," though labouring the earth may have provided an original right of property, it was not until "the Increase of People and Stock... had made Land scarce" (*TT II.45*) that such property rights would have been formalized through a kind of compact between men.

Underpinning the Lockean conception of property, then, was a very materialist set of ideas about human population and the subsistence relations proper to different phases of societal development. As the increase of population led to scarcity of resources, labour and the improvement of the earth that followed appeared as the necessary ways of overcoming natural limits. Indeed, while Locke's theory imagined a fertility always-already present in nature, it was only through labour that the natural state of the earth could be converted into an abundance for humanity. He expressed this idea through the language of value—as he stressed, it was labour that "*puts the difference of value on every thing*" (*TT II.40*). As Arendt rightly noted, it was unambiguously North America that provided the touchstone for this argument.

There cannot be a clearer demonstration of any thing, than several Nations of the *Americans* are of this, who are rich in Land, and poor in all the Comforts of Life; ... And a King of a large and fruitful Territory there feeds, lodges, and is clad worse than a day Labourer in *England*. (*TT II.41*)

Value was created by improving the natural fertility of the land, directing it toward the fulfillment of human needs. In this way, Locke was able to argue that private appropriation, far from diminishing the resources available for others, actually served to increase what he termed "the common stock of mankind" (*TT II.37*).<sup>9</sup>

Foucault suggested that it was only somewhat later that saw the sudden irruption of "life" into theories of government, with a new concern for humanity considered as a "species." But in fact Locke already thought in terms of a human species, using the term explicitly throughout the *Two Treatises* (e.g., *TT II.79*), and embedding ideas of population dynamics deep within his political theory. To an extent, he had inherited such a way of thinking from the natural law tradition.<sup>10</sup> But in Locke's hands, and especially modulated by English ideas of improvement, this was sharpened into what was already a clear, if still nascent, account of the historicity of human subsistence relations, understood in terms of relations to nonhuman nature. It was this, most importantly, I suggest, that he bequeathed to a tradition that would subsequently give rise to modern political economy.

## 2 | SMITH'S *THE WEALTH OF NATIONS*

Within *The Wealth of Nations*, the only direct references to Locke are to other writings on currency, with Locke appearing here as one of Smith's "mercantilist" adversaries.<sup>11</sup> Nevertheless, it is clear that Smith was well aware of the content of the *Two Treatises*, as is evident from the surviving records of his *Lectures on Jurisprudence* (Meek et al., 2014; hereafter *LJ*) delivered during his tenure at Glasgow University.

While Locke's commentary on property provided an important reference point for Smith and his Scottish Enlightenment contemporaries, in theoretical terms, Smith's account of property in fact diverged significantly. He continued to insist, echoing Locke, that,

The property which every man has in his own labour, as it is the original foundation of all other property, so it is the most sacred and inviolable. (WN I.x.c.12)

Yet, he rejected the applicability of a "labour theory of property" beyond the most primitive forms of appropriation.<sup>11</sup> Smith's work also diverged from Locke in the crucial respect that it jettisoned the notion of a distinct "state of nature." In this view, as Foucault aptly noted of the work of Smith's Scottish contemporary Adam Ferguson, "civil society is an historical-natural constant for humanity" (Foucault, 2008). Rather than theorizing a transition from a "natural" state to a "civil" one—which for Locke required positing an instantiating contract between men—Smith instead sought to explain a more gradual development of social institutions.<sup>12</sup>

Nevertheless, as significant as these differences might be, focusing on them detracts from broader continuities in the overall scope of their arguments, specifically around land and property. Locke's defense of private property had hinged on the claim that, by encouraging the improvement of the earth, this institution served to increase the "common stock of mankind." Although pointing to supposed examples, in the form of a contrast between the few "conveniences" afforded to Native Americans and the many to day labourers in England, he stopped short of attempting any kind of analytical demonstration of exactly *how* private property and improvement would increase societal wealth. Nearly a century later, however, Smith attempted precisely such a demonstration.

In a strikingly similar, if geographically displaced, comparison in the first chapter of *The Wealth of Nations*, Smith pondered how it could be that,

the accommodation of an European prince does not always so much exceed that of an industrious and frugal peasant, as the accommodation of the latter exceeds that of many an African king, the absolute master of the lives and liberties of ten thousand naked savages. (WN I.i.11)

Within the literature, this parallel has been noted most forcefully by Hont and Ignatieff (2010), who found in both Locke and Smith's work a recognition of an apparent "paradox of commercial society"—as they put it, why was it that a modern society which did not return the whole produce of labour to the labourer provided a better standard of living to the very poorest than the societies of the past? Smith's answer, though developed in much more detail and at vastly greater length, paralleled that already suggested in Locke's *Treatises*: private property in land, and the improvement that this engendered, was understood as the foundation of a productive societal order based around commerce and an advanced division of labour that ultimately increased resources for all.

It was not only these central concerns that the two shared, but also their mode of reasoning by appeal to a conjectural history of human development. In particular, the central place of improvement within *The Wealth of Nations* led Smith to place a similar emphasis on the ways in which different regimes of property expressed and mediated relations between human and nonhuman life.<sup>13</sup> Whereas a sense of societal stages remained largely implicit in Locke's work, in Smith's a stadial history was fully formed. This was laid out in the greatest depth in his *Lectures*, where he had instructed students explicitly that, "[t]here are four distinct states which mankind passes through:—first, the Age of Hunters; secondly, the Age of Shepherds, thirdly, the Age of Agriculture; and fourthly, the Age of Commerce" (LJ(A) i.27), but the same understanding plays a central role also within *The Wealth of Nations*.<sup>14</sup>

In another phrase strikingly reminiscent of Locke, Smith stated that hunter-gatherer societies were wholly reliant on the "spontaneous productions of the earth" (WN II.iii.3). Because of the nature of this kind of subsistence, he suggested, "there is scarce any property, or at least none that exceeds the value of two or three days labour" (WN V.i.b.2). This was thought to change, however, with the inception of extended property in animals in shepherding societies, which, for Smith, marked a decisive advance over the hunting stage. As he explained more fully in his lectures,

The step betwixt these two is of all others the greatest in the progression of society, for by it the notion of property is extended beyond possession, to which it is in the former state confined. When this is once established, it is a matter of no great difficulty to extend this from one subject to another, from herds and flocks to the land itself. (*LJ(A)* ii.97)

Smith's treatment of this highlighted problems that Locke, in his insistence that it was only after the inception of agriculture that civil society emerged, might have faced had he tried to develop his comments on pastoralist societies further. For Smith, extended property in *live* animals—as opposed to the natural property granted in the carcass of a hunted wild animal—represented a crucial development since it necessitated, for the first time, a “regular administration of justice” (*WN* V.i.b.2). As he elaborated in the *Lectures*,

When once it has been agreed that a cow or a sheep shall belong to a certain person not only when actually in his possession but where ever it may have strayed, it is absolutely necessary that the hand of government should be continually held up and the community assert their power to preserve the property of the individualls. The chase can no longer be depended on for the support of any one. All the animalls fit for the support of man are in a great measure appropriated. Certain individualls become very rich in flocks and herds, possessed of many cattle and sheep, while others have not one single animall. (*LJ(A)*, iv.21)

For Smith, this innovation enabled pastoralists to support a far greater number of individuals on “the same extent of equally fertile territory” (*WN* IV.vii.c.100). And yet the concentration of animals in a single space necessitated that a shepherd “should frequently change his situation, or at least the place of his pasturing, to find pasture for his cattle” (*LJ(A)* i.48–49).

In this schema, the inception of agriculture marked another crucial development, albeit one perhaps less momentous than for Locke, instantiating fixed habitation. As opposed to the previous modes of shifting habitation, this stage also saw control asserted over plant life. As Smith put it:

The most important operations of agriculture seem intended, not so much to increase, though they do that too, as to direct the fertility of nature towards the production of the plants most profitable to man. (*WN* II.v.12)

Through this direction, “the labourers and labouring cattle” (*WN* II.v.12) were able to produce well in excess of their own subsistence, allowing the further extension of a division of labour, as expressed, in particular, in the historical divide between the agricultural countryside and the trade- and manufacturing-oriented towns (*WN* III).

And yet, as Smith was also keenly aware, especially looking at the condition of parts of his native Scotland, agriculture too raised its own problems in relation to the direction of nature's fertility. In particular, soil could quickly become “entirely exhausted” (*WN* I.xi.k.3) without careful attention, and the feudal property regimes that had dominated across Europe—and which, for Smith, provided the archetype of the agricultural stage of society—had provided cultivators with neither the resources nor the incentive to maintain the condition of land (*WN* III.ii). It was this question, in fact, that lay at the heart of Smith's tentative optimism regarding the prospects of a burgeoning fourth, “commercial” stage of society.

Like Locke, Smith invoked the concept of “wastes,” but his treatment of the topic was more nuanced and historically sensitive. While the agricultural stage was characterized by the cultivation of certain key cereal crops and vegetables, Smith noted that, in practice, within feudal societies, surrounding uncultivated areas had continued to play a crucial role for many, providing for a range of subsistence needs, from the gathering of timber and firewood to space for the communal grazing of animals. Indeed, as he noted, this enabled even the “poorest occupiers of land” to maintain animals:



The little offals of their own table... supply those animals with a part of their food, and they find the rest in the neighbouring fields without doing any sensible damage to any body. (WN I.xi.k.10)

But, as he observed, with progressive enclosure and conversion to commercial farming, such “unimproved wilds” (WN I.xi.b.6) were diminishing, decreasing the availability of various subsistence goods, and thus raising their exchangeable value, creating incentives for landowners to convert land specifically to commercial forestry or pasture.

It was the keeping of cattle that particularly interested Smith. Stressing issues of soil fertility, he argued that a key limiting factor in traditional agricultural societies was their reliance on “night soils” from nearby towns as a means of fertilization, which restricted the area across which such practices could be conducted.

In all farms too distant from any town to carry manure from it, that is, in the far greater part of those of every extensive country, the quantity of well-cultivated land must be in proportion to the quantity of manure which the farm itself produces; and this again must be in proportion to the stock of cattle which are maintained upon it. The land is manured either by pasturing the cattle upon it, or by feeding them in the stable, and from thence carrying out their dung to it. (WN I.xi.k.3)

By increasing the exchangeable value of animals and increasing conversion of land to pasture, the rise of commerce thus offered new opportunities for improved farming practices. What Smith envisioned, then, was that commercial society would continue to enhance soil fertility until a point at which the “compleat improvement and cultivation” (WN I.xi.k.12) of the country had been reached, at which point it would be “fully peopled” (WN I.ix.14). For Smith, it was not only agriculture that would benefit. Rather, this improved direction of the earth’s fertility was the foundation for the advancement of human industry in general and the increase of societal wealth (Steeds, 2022).

Here, as in Locke’s work, population appeared as the key driver of evolving property relations (Smith, 2020). Each successive societal stage represented, for Smith, an improvement in the mode of relation between human and non-human life, such that a greater human population could be sustained, and, indeed, with ever greater access to the “necessaries, conveniences, and amusements of human life” (WN I.v.1). In this way, his argument, albeit elaborated in far more detail, paralleled central threads of Locke’s thought around property.

However, while Smith’s argument can be read, and indeed has been, as putting forward at least an implicit justification of private property in land,<sup>15</sup> as a work of political economy the main conclusions of the text operated on another level, addressing what Smith termed matters of “police.” Key to his intervention in this respect was his introduction of a theory of capital. While his stadial theory suggested that the “natural” course of societal development was one in which the rise of commerce would lead to the improvement of land, Smith’s argument was that the misguided policy of European states to date had frustrated this process, through misguided attempts to privilege high-value manufacturing exports in the hope of bringing bullion into the territory. This, he suggested, had held back investment in agriculture, slowing the progress of improvement. His famous promotion of the “natural liberty” (WN IV.ix.51) of the market was premised on the idea that removing government attempts to steer industry would provide the surest means to encourage the natural progress of land improvement and the increasing abundance that this engendered. It was this idea that the growth of capital should be a central focus of government that was to set the direction for political economy in the nineteenth century.

### 3 | RICARDO’S PRINCIPLES OF POLITICAL ECONOMY AND TAXATION

Like Locke and Smith, Ricardo put forward an argument that accorded questions around land and improvement a central place. As in Smith’s political economic text, the only direct reference to Locke in Ricardo’s *Principles* is to his work on currency (PPET, 369), but unlike Smith, there is no evidence that Ricardo was also familiar with the *Two Treatises*.

The influence of Smith is unambiguous, however, and indeed much of the work is set up as a response to *The Wealth of Nations*.

From the very first paragraphs of the *Principles*, Ricardo sought to set himself up as the humble inheritor of Smithian ideas. As he assured the reader:

The writer, in combating received opinions, has found it necessary to advert more particularly to those passages in the writings of Adam Smith from which he sees reason to differ; but he hopes it will not, on that account, be suspected that he does not, in common with all those who acknowledge the importance of the science of Political Economy, participate in the admiration which the profound work of this celebrated author so justly excites. (PPET, 6)

This preface accordingly outlines a number of distinctly familiar themes, from a concern for agriculture and the way that the “produce of the earth” is realized by labour, to the notion of “different stages of society” and the way that these affect the returns to the labourer (PPET, 5). Indeed, sufficiently closely does Ricardo follow a number of Smith’s key concepts that the two have frequently been read by many economists as elaborating essentially continuous lines of analysis.<sup>16</sup>

And yet, as others have noted, in many ways Ricardo’s work represents a distinctively new discursive formation (Tribe, 1978). His distance from Smith is reflected most obviously in their respective conclusions. Smith’s cautious optimism about commercial society was founded on the assumption that the dynamics leading to the improvement of land would benefit all sections of society. While acknowledging that the wages of the labouring class would tend toward a bare subsistence rate, for Smith, the prognosis for the foreseeable future was that increasing societal wealth would tend to ameliorate their condition too, at least until an inevitable “stationary state” was reached at some distant point in the future (WN I.viii.43). Ricardo, instead, was far less convinced that a rising tide would lift all boats, or, indeed, that the high tide was so far away.

This divergence from Smith’s conclusions hinged on a quasi-mathematical argument that claimed to demonstrate that Smith had failed to understand the distributional implications of population growth in a market system. Like Smith, Ricardo assumed that wages would always tend toward a subsistence rate, but he followed the inflection of this idea popularized by his friend Thomas Malthus, which emphasized that the class of labourers—which acted as a proxy for population in general—not only would tend to increase as the demand for labour rose but would also decrease as demand fell, suffering what Malthus had termed the “positive checks” of privation (PPET, 94). For Ricardo, this appeared straightforwardly as an aspect of what he termed the “laws” of distribution in a market system, and even well-intentioned attempts to ameliorate the condition of the poor were ultimately doomed to be counterproductive (PPET, 105–109).

What concerned him above all was not the condition of the poor, however. Rather, it was the impact of a human population pressing against the limits of available land area on the accumulation of capital, and its potential to bring a halt to societal progress. One of Ricardo’s central arguments was that Smith had misunderstood the nature of agricultural rents. Smith had argued that these were the payment for a kind of surplus generated by the action of nature. In agriculture, he had suggested, “nature labours along with man” (WN II.v.12)—rents were thus payment for “the produce of those powers of nature, the use of which the landlord lends to the farmer” (WN II.v.12).

Ricardo dismissed the quaint notion that rents were the result of the unpaid labour of nature. Rather, he argued, rent payments were a consequence of the fundamental scarcity of land, and its differential fertility. Mimicking Smith’s tone, he summarized:

The labour of nature is paid, not because she does much, but because she does little. In proportion as she becomes niggardly in her gifts, she exacts a greater price for her work. Where she is munificently beneficent, she always works gratis. (PPET 76n)

Ricardo's argument was that, as the population grew, ever less fertile land would be brought into cultivation, and, as this happened, the owners of more fertile land would find themselves able to charge higher and higher rents to farmers for its use. Simultaneously, the cultivation of ever less fertile land would demand increasing application of inputs, in the form of labour and capital, in order to derive the same product. These two effects would squeeze the profits of the farmer until they reached zero (PPET, 120–121). Since Ricardo assumed the profits of capital to equalize across all industries, the alarming consequence was that, as the population increased, profits would decline to zero, and the accumulation of capital would come to a grinding halt (PPET, 120–121).

Ricardo's text did more than simply offer alternative conclusions to Smith, however. Discretely, and perhaps unwittingly, it refounded the discourse around land on quite different theoretical foundations. Unlike Locke and Smith, Ricardo was not concerned to defend the link between private property in land and improvement. In fact, within the *Principles*, property rights received barely a mention, other than to affirm that the security of (private) property was a "principle which should ever be held sacred" (PPET, 204). Rather, property rights formed an assumed prerequisite of the more specific distributional analysis Ricardo undertook. This represented a fundamental shift in the terrain of analysis, dispensing with the whole jurisprudential framework within which Locke and Smith operated, reconstituting in its place an analysis of production conceived as a self-contained sphere of human activity.

Foucault seems to have recognized the discursive shift in Ricardo's text when, in his earlier work, he read Ricardo as marking the completion of an epistemic break, representing the birth of the modern political economy. While he paid little attention to the questions around land, property, and nonhuman life that are the focus here, his brief comments are nevertheless remarkably insightful. As he noted in the passage quoted at the beginning of the article, what, for Ricardo, "makes economics possible, and necessary... is a perpetual and fundamental situation of scarcity" (Foucault, 2002). For Foucault, this new understanding pertained to "the biological properties of a human species" (Foucault, 2002). As we have seen, however, thinking in terms of a human species was far from a novelty at the time Ricardo wrote, but rather an integral part of the tradition on which, through Smith, he drew heavily.

It is not, then, the sudden irruption of life into a discourse on government that defined the transformation heralded by Ricardo's work. In fact, explicit discussion of humans as a species disappeared, appearing not once within the *Principles*. With the vanishing of property as an explicit focus, the idea of stages of societal subsistence that I have suggested played such an important role in Locke and Smith's work retreated too. While Ricardo did gesture toward the notion of societal stages, this was purely vestigial, being divested of any substantial content. What loose appeal he did make to the idea of stages was restricted exclusively to thought experiments related to the labour theory of value (PPET, Chapter 1) and the progress of land rents (PPET, 112). His theory, in other words, was concerned solely with the dynamics of a market economy, and any consideration of human subsistence beyond this was entirely beyond the purview of analysis.

This change was reflected too in the treatment of land improvement. Like Locke and Smith, Ricardo saw this as an important issue. But his focus was much more narrowly on the effects that different kinds of improvement would have on prices (PPET, 79–84). This change reflected the broader shift in the premises of the analysis. Whereas Locke and Smith had both thought in eminently material terms about the relation between labour and the earth, Ricardo reasoned almost exclusively in terms of exchanges of value. Another of Foucault's comments captures this divergence when he said that Ricardo's work,

is not the first to give labour an important place in the economic process; but it explodes the unity of that notion, and singles out in a radical fashion, for the first time, the worker's energy, toil, and time that are bought and sold... (Foucault, 2002).

This was in fact only one of two important senses that the concept of labour continued to operate in Ricardo's work. As we have seen, the other was as a shorthand for the class of labourers, which in turn served a crucial theoretical role as a proxy of population in general. Yet, what Foucault's comments do brilliantly capture, if only implicitly, is the loss of

a third meaning of labour that was even more important for both Locke and Smith. This was labour understood as the direction of the earth's natural fertility.

This vastly narrowed perspective is crucial to the transformation of understandings of land and life. Foucault, while largely overlooking questions about nonhuman life and the environment more broadly, nevertheless seems to have put his finger on the essential quality of this shift. For Locke and Smith, the relationship between labour and the earth was one of the human direction of a fertility always-already present—even abundant—in nature. Indeed labour, for both, as the foundation of all property, appeared as a mode of relating to the earth. Their perspective situated this as a natural part of the behavior of the human species, and one that situated the human, certainly in a position of dominion, but within a broader sphere of life on earth.

There was a decisive change in Ricardo's work. What had disappeared was a faith in nature's essential fertility and adaptability to human ends that had previously served to keep in check—for both Locke and Smith—the direst implications of a system of competitive market exchange. This loss of faith in nature's essential abundance marked an inversion of the Smithian schema. Competition no longer ensured abundance but was rather an inevitable outcome of a perpetual and unending condition of scarcity. Improvement was no longer the means of fitting nature's inherent abundance to man's needs, but rather a merely temporary means of forestalling the inevitable resurgence of insufficiency. Crucially, labour no longer appeared as the means to achieving an abundance for all. Rather, absent the overarching conviction that societal institutions would act to mediate relations between humans and the earth, such as to achieve an equilibrium, labour appeared much more starkly as the only means by which the individual could hope to triumph another day over scarcity.

In the Ricardian framing, property, therefore, appeared no longer as a way of mediating and indeed mitigating environmental limits. Instead, property was a given, and it was the market that assumed in a radical fashion the role of arbiter of the proper level of population, determining life and death for the labouring class. Land, certainly, appeared as necessary to sustain the life of the labourer, but no longer as the site of the interaction with nonhuman life. Though "productive," it was essentially inert, lacking any "spontaneous" agency. For Ricardo, societal productivity was not conceived, as it had been for Locke and Smith, in terms of the direction of the fertility of nature, through the management of plant and animal life, as mediated through relations of property. Considering the longer history of human subsistence appeared as no longer relevant within this frame of reference; rather it was the market economy that appeared as the sphere in which a kind of Hobbesian war of all against all pertained. The rather grim conclusion was that the lot of man could not be bettered. All that could be wished for was the continued accumulation of capital, in the hope that the growing availability of basic subsistence goods could continue to outrun population, at least for the foreseeable future.

## 4 | CONCLUSION

Arendt's claim that ideas of abundance arose from the colonial experience is true in a double sense. Firstly, for both Locke and Smith, it was precisely the contrast between the supposed poverty of indigenous inhabitants of North America, in particular, and the burgeoning world of capitalist commerce that provided the sense that poverty could be overcome by reconfiguring relations between humanity and the nonhuman world—especially through property, and private ownership of land in particular. Secondly, that same assumed profusion of uncultivated, "unclaimed" land that represented the poverty resulting from a lack of improvement simultaneously promised immense abundance if the life that it encompassed could only be subjected to the rigors of commerce.

Foucault was also right that political economy, such as it emerged in the 19th century marked a radical disjuncture in understandings of life in the domain of government, but he failed to link new understandings of population to this earlier tradition. While for Locke and Smith, human life was understood through its relation to the rest of life on earth, and labour, as a concept, was crucially associated with the direction of a natural earthly fertility that was always-already abundant, this was not the case for Ricardo. As Foucault noted, in Ricardo's world, the human condition was

one of being confronted by a constant and fundamental scarcity, in the face of which individuals must labour in the hope of forestalling the inevitable confrontation with environmental insufficiency. As he also noted, this was a world that was essentially barren, save for the action of labour (and specifically *paid* labour).

The genealogy traced here, therefore, helps to make sense of the suggestive but underdeveloped comments of both Arendt and Foucault on notions of abundance and scarcity, and puts them productively into conversation. The findings counter a recent tendency to assume that early modern philosophers such as Locke held a view of nonhuman nature as simply “dead matter” (Krause, 2016), instead tying this view to a tradition of economics that arose around the turn of the 19th century, of which Ricardo was the leading exponent. More broadly, the investigation contributes to placing contemporary debates around environmental limits in longer perspective and hopes to stimulate further interrogation of the environmental ideas that have informed the development of modern political thought.

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## ENDNOTES

- <sup>1</sup> A critique addressed, above all, to the economic aspect in Karl Marx’s work, which, Arendt claimed, had displaced freedom as the ultimate aim of revolution by focusing instead on abundance.
- <sup>2</sup> On Foucault’s treatment of “life,” see Paul Patton (2011).
- <sup>3</sup> See, for example, Jeremy Waldron (2020); for a recent counterexample, however, also drawing on Arendt, see Bonnie Honig (2016).
- <sup>4</sup> On this point, see also Keith Tribe (1978).
- <sup>5</sup> Indeed, as Etienne Balibar (2002) has pointed out, “life” and “property” function essentially as synonyms within the *Two Treatises*.
- <sup>6</sup> Guha-Majumdar (2020), for example, while noting the relevant passage, does not reflect on the extent to which this might be seen to represent a distinct stage of property in its own right.
- <sup>7</sup> This is a point that has been stressed by both István Hont (2009) and Stefan Eich (2020).
- <sup>8</sup> On this point, my interpretation is in line with that of Ronald Meek (1976), who, tracing the prehistory the “four stages” theory, found in Locke’s work “for the first time... the idea of an orderly sequence or succession of different modes of subsistence through which societies could be conceived as progressing over time.”
- <sup>9</sup> As scholars have stressed, Lockean notions of improvement have long served to justify disappropriation of indigenous inhabitants of land (Tully, 1993; Arneil, 1996; Bhandar, 2018). In spite of Arendt’s work acting as inspiration for recent anti-colonial and postcolonial critique, her own comments on settler colonialism reveal at least a partial acceptance of this logic of improvement (Temin, 2019).
- <sup>10</sup> See, for example, Grotius’s (1625/2012, II.ii.2) similar comments on population. On this, see Salter (2010). On Locke’s broader inheritance from the natural law tradition, see Meek (1976).
- <sup>11</sup> As John Salter (2010) has explained, Smith departed from Locke and other Scottish contemporaries who embraced the “labour theory of property,” instead drawing on the work of Grotius to explain a more gradual development of rights of property.
- <sup>12</sup> For a detailed account of the relation between Smith and Locke on the history of government, see Hont (2009).
- <sup>13</sup> As Christopher Berry (2006) has argued, the affinities between Locke and Smith also extend to Smith’s reliance on an essentially Lockean model of human cognitive development which equated primitive societies with infancy, and saw a development from the concreteness of immediate bodily needs to the abstraction of advanced forms of property.
- <sup>14</sup> Ronald Meek (1976) saw the stadial theory as an “organising principle” of much of Smith’s later work.
- <sup>15</sup> As Samuel Fleischacker (2004) has demonstrated, property was not, strictly speaking, a matter of justice at all for Smith, who opposed the proto-utilitarianism in David Hume’s work.
- <sup>16</sup> A classic and particularly strong version of this view is found in Samuelson (1978). More broadly, the term “classical economics” is used frequently within the history of economic thought literature to refer to a school of which Smith and Ricardo are generally taken to be the central thinkers Hollander,(2016).

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