

Locke: the Key to Jefferson's Native American Policies

Comparing and Contrasting the Philosophy of John Locke to Thomas Jefferson's Policies

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Purpose

In 1492, when Columbus sailed the ocean blue, he discovered the Americas. Ever since then, America has revolutionized and undermined European thinking. John Locke emerged as a philosopher when the basis of human society was being questioned, and as the importance of the New World was taken into account. When he looked towards the American colonies, he was interested in the Native Americans and began to understand human society in a very different way. John Locke started to ponder whether all humans started out like the natives, and then slowly progressed to the large-scale societies of England. Just as Locke thought of the Native Americans in a different light, so did Thomas Jefferson. Although the two men lived during two very different eras, the policies carried out by the latter ran parallel to many of Locke's ideas.

Hypothesis

While Native American policy during the eighteenth century reflected John Locke's theories, Jefferson's desires to obtain more land from the Native Americans led to a divergence from Lockean ideals. Ultimately, this divergence set the precedent for future interactions and policies with the Native Americans.

Analysis of Sources

Locke's *Second Treatise of Government* looked towards British America and the Indians to understand the different stages of human development. The Indians of British America were different from those that resided in South America. For example, the Incas and the Aztecs had formed civilizations where they built permanent housing, created monumental temples, formed water ducts and sewage systems. In contrast to the complex societies of the Incas and Aztecs, the Indians of British America had small scale, simple societies. The uncorrupted and underdeveloped lifestyle of these "American Indians" allowed Locke to think about the origins

of society in an entirely different manner. Through an analysis of the state of the Native Americans, Locke believed that "... in the beginning all the World was *America*, and more so than it is now..." (Locke 301). In this work, he referred to the lifestyle of the Indians as the State of Nature (Locke 269). When men live in the State of Nature, they are equal and have the freedom to do as they please, as long as what they do is within the limits of the Laws of Nature.

Locke described the Law of Nature as a set of laws created by God when he formed the world. Humans have the ability to access these rules through reason. Reason teaches men "no one ought to harm another in his Life, Health, Liberty, or Possessions" (Locke 271). The Laws of Nature include a sense of morality. Within an equal community everything is shared and men live their lives to not only preserve themselves, but the rest of mankind as well. Locke hypothesized that all men would naturally remain in such a state until they consent to be governed. Locke stated, "*the first and fundamental positive Law of all Commonwealths is the establishing of the Legislative Power; as the first and fundamental natural Law...is the preservation of the Society, and of every person in it*" (Locke 355-56). This means that a government has the responsibility to protect every individual's right to life, liberty and property (Locke 289). The government is empowered by the consent of the governed. By forming a society, the government must fulfill their responsibilities, in doing so the governed also have the responsibility to keep the government in check and to also comply with the laws they create, so long as they are not tyrannical. In order to create a thriving and sound society, Locke emphasizes that men must forfeit some of their natural rights. After all, the people have put the government in charge and its laws are for the people. Therefore, since a new state of laws has been put in place, the governed must be willing to accept them and forfeit some of their natural rights for the benefit of society. Although it is necessary to sacrifice some natural rights,

individuals do retain most of their rights, including life, liberty and property, and most importantly the people have the right to equality and the right to overthrow a tyrannical government. If at any time the government overextends its powers and becomes tyrannical, the people have the right to revolt and institute another form of government.

The concept of equality is not only a main idea in Locke's philosophy but also a driving force in Thomas Paine's pamphlet *Common Sense*. Thomas Paine wrote this pamphlet during the American Revolution and published it in 1776. This document inspired the masses to fight for independence from England. In the years leading to the American Revolution, British citizens living in America were tired of living under the rule of their mother country. The people believed that King George III was a tyrannical leader who unfairly imposed strict laws and high taxes on the colonists. The way the colonists were treated seemed to be inexcusable, thus through *Common Sense*, Paine encouraged colonists to not only fight for their independence but create a democratic republic. Paine argued "THE LAW IS KING. For as in absolute governments the King is law, so in free countries the law ought to be King; and there ought to be no other" (Paine 98). Paine believed that the people should create a government with laws that were primarily concerned with maintaining the peace and equality of the nation.

During the American Revolution, the colonists fought for their basic natural rights, rights that were so unjustly taken from them by England's tyrannical government. According to Lockean ideas, the people have the right to fight, to fight for independence and to rid of such an unfair government. Thus, the Americans fought valiantly against the English because they believed that they had a right to be treated fairly. These ideas of equality originated from men, such as Thomas Paine and Thomas Jefferson, men who fought for these great ideals, ideals that countries today are still fighting so desperately for.

Thomas Jefferson, one of America's founding fathers tried to create an equal America. In his draft of the Declaration of Independence, he himself wrote, "We hold these truths to be self evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their creator, with certain unalienable rights" (Jefferson 19). However, as soon as he became president these ideals he took so much pride in eventually vanished when it came to the Native Americans. Jefferson's policies of equality were exclusive to only those who chose to assimilate. The American ideas he fought for and wrote about were so easily turned on when an obstacle, such as the Native Americans, came in his way. Similarly, Locke's definition of equality also tends to be a bit vague, and full of loopholes, as he stated that all men are created equal, except for those that have been destined by God to rule over others. Locke defines the State of Equality as

Wherein all the Power and Jurisdiction is reciprocal, no one having more than another ... unless the Lord and Master of them all, should by any manifest Declaration of his Will set one above another, and confer on him by an evident and clear appointment an undoubted Right to Domination and Sovereignty. (Locke 269)

This very idea destroys the definition of equality as it contradicts itself. There can be no equal society if one has the ability to dominate another. In both cases it seems as though these men are contradicting the values they preached. The values Jefferson fought so hard for meant nothing when he chose to abuse his power. Through this abuse of power, American government was acting just as tyrannical as Britain's. Although both men place a great emphasis on the importance of equality they contradict themselves in more ways than one. Despite the fact that these two men lived during two very different eras, both Locke and Jefferson share many of the same principles. Locke's philosophy was essentially turned into a reality by Jefferson's Native

American policies. And when Lockean ideals were not enough for Jefferson, he waned away from them and resorted to violence.

A prime example of Jefferson going against the very principles he fought for can be seen through, how he treated the Native Americans, in a letter to Benjamin Hawkins, on February 18, 1803. Jefferson supported an agrarian vision for America and was worried that this nation would become over-civilized and industrious. In order to ensure that it became an agriculturally dominated society, he believed that a constant supply of land was needed. However there was one problem, the Indians. In Lockean terms, the Indians lived in a State of Nature, and had communal land. Since land was communal, the Indians did not need to work the land. Rather than farm, the Indians hunted and gathered. In contrast, Jefferson's vision included, "[t]he promotion of agriculture, therefore, and household manufacture, are essential in their [Indians] preservation, and I am disposed to aid and encourage it liberally" (Jefferson 1115). Jefferson wanted to "civilize" the Indians by forcing them to labor the land and essentially become farmers. As opposed to the Lockean ideals of a natural progression into a state of society, Jefferson sought to forcibly assimilate the Indians into civilization

Thomas Jefferson was genuinely interested in the Indians, and although he disapproved of their way of life, he was willing to "civilize" them. This idea is referred to as Jeffersonian Philanthropy, one that advocates for the assimilation of Native Americans. Jefferson claimed that "...our [the nation's] increasing numbers will be calling for more land, and thus a coincidence of interests will be produced between those who have lands to spare, and want other necessaries, and those who have such necessaries to spare, and want lands" (Jefferson 1115). Instead of exterminating the Indians, Jefferson wanted to put them to work. He theorized about having the Indians assimilate, and live a life of progress and modernity. In doing so, the Indians would no

longer need their land, and would give it to the United States. Jefferson believed that the country and the Indians would benefit from this deal. He essentially tried to make this grand scheme look like a win-win situation.

In Lockean terms, Jefferson wanted to bring the Indians out of the State of Nature by forcing them to farm. He wanted the Indians to switch from a hunter-gatherer lifestyle to one that was dominated by agriculture. Jefferson assumed that the Indians would accept his offer and assimilate into society. As a part of the deal, the Indians would also cede their land to the United States. Giving up their land would allow for the expansion of the nation and support Jefferson's agrarian vision for America. Jefferson believed that "[i]ncorporating themselves [Indians] with us [Americans] as citizens of the U.S., this is what the natural progress of things will of course bring on, and it will be better to promote than to retard it" (Jefferson 1115). He talks about assimilation as a "natural" process, as though the Indians wished to simply cede their land and join this country. Locke also claimed this to be a natural process; the process of moving from the State of Nature into society, however, Jefferson seemed to be speeding it up.

By naturally moving into society, Jefferson believed that Indian culture would go extinct. This theory is referred to as the extinction narrative. The extinction narrative suggests that the Indians were on their way out, that they were not part of modernity, but of the past. Jefferson looked at the Indians' lifestyle as a disappearing way of life. As Americans moved further West the Indian population would slowly decrease, and eventually become extinct. This was Jefferson's hope, as it suggested the extinction of Indian culture and incorporation of the Indians into the American melting pot.

Like John Locke, George Catlin set out on a journey to find the natural man living in harmony with nature (Catlin 1). Due to his interest in the origins of society, Catlin chose to

document the Native Americans' uncorrupted lifestyle before it went extinct. The extinction narrative is best illustrated by George Catlin's painting *Dying Buffalo, Shot with an Arrow* (see Figure 1). The way the natives hunted buffalo seemed to intrigue Catlin. Thus, Catlin painted an image of a dying buffalo that is pierced by an arrow on its lower right side. At first glance, the bright red blood captivates the viewer as it spews out of the buffalo's nose and mouth. Catlin strategically places a drop of blood near the buffalo's eye to suggest that the animal is crying blood. The eye is very simple and tiny, but indicates the buffalo's pain, instilling sympathy within the viewer. Although Catlin paints the buffalo as a black furry beast, a sense of remorse is felt, and the idea of the buffalo as more than a beast forms.



Figure 1. This is George Catlin's painting of *Dying Buffalo, Shot with an Arrow*. "Search Collections." *Dying Buffalo, Shot with an Arrow* by George Catlin / *American Art*. Smithsonian Institution, n.d. Web. 11 Jan. 2015. <http://americanart.si.edu/collections/search/artwork/?id=4039>.

The death of the buffalo symbolizes the extinction of not only the entire buffalo population, but of the Indians' way of life as well (Catlin 137). Indians were killing bison in larger numbers, not just for their own use, but for trading opportunities as well. Westward expansion also contributed to the extensive killing of bison. As people continued to move west,

the demand for meat, fur and bones became prevalent for manufacturing several products (Catlin 137). The art historian, Joan Troccoli, analyzed the painting and claimed that the “[r]apid consumption of buffalo also served a broader U.S. government policy of killing bison to further break down native cultures and increase their dependence on the government” (Catlin 137). Buffalo was the main source of food for the Indians. Thus, if the buffalo were to go extinct, the Indians would lack an important source of food, have to assimilate, and rely on the American government for survival. This situation gave Jefferson the opportunity to teach the Indians how to farm. In exchange for assimilating the Indians into society, Jefferson believed that the Indians would cede their land to the United States. Thus, this idea goes back to Jefferson’s dream of westward expansion and agrarianism.

Furthermore, in a letter to John Adams on June 11, 1812, Jefferson explained how the Cherokee and Creek nations were two tribes that decided to assimilate. Jefferson said,

That nation, consisting now of about 2000. warriors, and the Creeks of about 3000. are far advanced in civilization. They have good Cabins, inclosed fields, large herds of cattle and hogs, spin and weave their own clothes of cotton, have smiths and other of the most necessary tradesmen, write and read, are on the increase in numbers, and a branch of the Cherokees is not instituting a regular representative government. (Jefferson 1263)

These were two tribes that chose to assimilate into American society and become farmers. Jefferson described this as a natural process, however he also took into account what to do when the Indians chose not to assimilate. In this case, he claimed that he would forcefully remove the Indians from their land and throw them further back into their miserable and barbaric lifestyle (Jefferson 1264). Although Jefferson believed that it was natural for the Indians to move into American society, he made a stark contrast between the words natural and inevitable. He

believed that it was natural for the Indians to willingly give up their land and join American society. However, if the Indians chose not to assimilate, he said that acquiring land would be inevitable; force would be used to obtain it.

Locke places importance on consent of the governed, whereas, Jefferson is merely concerned with the expansion of the nation, at the cost of the Indians. Locke places an emphasis on consent, establishing that moving from the State of Nature into society requires the consent of those who wish to join. Jefferson, on the other hand, was willing to use force to acquire land. He believed that the Indians were primitive and did not make proper use of the land, claiming that “their [Indians] steady habits permit no innovations, not even those which the progress of science offers to increase the comforts, enlarge the understanding, and improve the morality of mankind” (Jefferson 1263). Unlike the Americans, the Indians were not utilizing the land “properly,” thus Jefferson arrived at the conclusion that the land should belong to America. He was optimistic about the Indians and believed that they had the potential to become “civilized” individuals. He wanted them to drop their primitive lifestyle for modern society. Jefferson truly believed that he was correct, and generous for giving the Indians a chance to join society. But, when the Indians rejected his offer, Jefferson used that rejection as a justification for using force. Locke on the other hand believed that all human beings have natural rights, the right to life, liberty and property. On the contrary, Jefferson was willing to push these natural rights aside for the sake of the country’s expansion. He claimed “the backward will yield, and be thrown further back. These will relapse into barbarism and misery, lose numbers by war and want, and we shall be obliged to drive them, with the beasts of the forest into the Stony mountains” (Jefferson 1264). Again, Jefferson was willing to use force and go against the Law of Nature “for the good of the country.”

Although Jefferson wanted the Indians to assimilate into American society, majority of the tribes rejected Jefferson's offer and wanted to live on their own land. Catlin portrays this situation in the painting, *Pigeon's Egg Head (The Light) Going to and Returning from Washington* (see Figure 2). Catlin creates a before and after portrait of Pigeon's Egg Head. On the left side, Pigeon's Egg Head is beautifully dressed in his traditional Indian buckskin suit, with bright, vivid colors and a tomahawk. In the background, the Capitol building can faintly be seen, indicating his arrival to Washington D.C. On the right side, Pigeon's Egg Head is dressed in "modern" American clothing; dressed in navy blue tails, white gloves and high-heeled boots. Tepees can be seen in the background, indicating that he has returned home, back to his tribe, dressed in American clothing. Pigeon's Egg Head looks less pleasant and out of place in his modern clothing, though he may look more "civilized," he does not fit in. Catlin stereotypically paints Pigeon's Egg Head in bright red to indicate that he was Indian. This intense red coloring serves as a stark contrast with the background and the clothing that he wears on both sides of the painting. The painting serves as a portrayal of what happens when Indians go to America, that they become "brainwashed."

Catlin encountered Pigeon's Egg Head on his way back from Washington D.C., and created this painting to portray how civilization destroys Indian culture (Catlin 202). Pigeon's Egg Head arrived in D.C. and was given dozens of gifts including an umbrella, fan and bottles of whiskey (Catlin 202). He entered D.C. as an Indian and left as an American. When Pigeon's Egg Head returned to his tribe, "[h]is tribesmen rejected his descriptions of the white man's cities, and his persistence in telling 'evil lies' eventually led to his murder" (Catlin 202). The Indians killed Pigeon's Egg Head because he had come back as a different human being; he had traded in his culture for modern luxuries. Catlin's message is clearer than ever; civilization and society

literally destroy Indian culture. Pigeon's Egg Head left as an Indian, and was completely stripped of his culture when he returned. This idea goes hand in hand with the extinction narrative. Jefferson was trying to rid of Indian culture and to have Indians and Americans live under one, modern, civilized society. On the other hand, the Indians wanted to preserve their way of life. Even Locke believed that all human beings had natural rights that could not be violated. However, Jefferson threw these rights out the window and simply focused on land.



Figure 2. This is George Catlin's painting of *Pigeon's Egg Head (The Light) Going to and Returning from Washington*. "Search Collections." *Wi-jún-jon, Pigeon's Egg Head (The Light) Going To and Returning From Washington* by George Catlin / *American Art*. Smithsonian Institution, n.d. Web. 11 Jan. 2015. <<http://americanart.si.edu/collections/search/artwork/?id=4317>>.

Results

While John Locke's philosophy and Thomas Jefferson's reality run parallel, there are several instances in which the two veer away from one another. Locke's philosophy supported the people and placed an emphasis on natural rights. Jefferson was also for natural rights, but only if they supported the country's expansion. Natural rights were pushed aside when the Indians rejected Jefferson's "generous" offer of assimilation. And as a result, Jefferson used this rejection as a justification for using force against the Indians. It is this idea of force that set the precedent for future Indian removal policies.

Initially, Jefferson viewed the Creek nation as "one of the good ones," as they were a tribe that chose to assimilate. Despite Jefferson's acceptance of this Indian nation, force seemed to be the only idea that was carried out after The Age of Jefferson. Andrew Jackson serves as the prime example of a president who enforced these harsh policies. He was described as "the most aggressive enemy of the Indians in early American History" (Zinn 127). When Andrew Jackson was a general, he dislocated Indian tribes and destroyed entire villages. For instance, when purchasing settlements in Florida, Jackson tried to relocate the Native American tribes that inhabited the area. However when the American settlers moved onto the land, Seminole Indians attacked them. Many atrocities were committed on both sides. However, when Seminole villages refused to surrender those accused of killing the American settlers, Jackson ordered for the destruction of the entire village. He encouraged America to fight the Seminole War of 1818 in order to acquire Florida. Although American history textbooks simply label the acquisition of Florida as the Florida Purchase of 1819, it was actually land taken by means of brute force.

These harsh measures against the Native Americans only worsened when Andrew Jackson became president in 1828. "As soon as he became president, Georgia, Alabama, and

Mississippi began to extend the states' rule over the Indians in their territory" (Zinn 133).

Although federal law was against the action taken by these states, at the time, Congress did not have the power to enforce its laws. President Jackson was the only person with the power to stop these states, however, he actually supported the unjust treatment of the Native Americans.

Jackson supported these states because he believed that the Native Americans were children who needed guidance from him. He believed that the Native Americans were barbarous savages who should not be allowed to interact with the civilized American settlers.

Andrew Jackson's Indian policies eventually led to the Trail of Tears. The Trail of Tears included the removal of the Cherokee tribe, an Indian nation that chose to assimilate into American society. Although Indians were being displaced throughout Jackson's term, the displacement of the Cherokee tribe under Van Buren's term highlights the atrocities the Indians faced. In 1838 President Van Buren ordered the military to remove the Cherokee from their land by any means necessary. On October 1, 1838 the first group of Cherokee tribes were rounded up and pushed westward. "As they moved westward, they began to die-of sickness, of drought, of the heat, of exposure. Grant Foreman, the leading authority on Indian removal, estimates that during confinement in the stockade or on the march westward four thousand Cherokees died" (Zinn 148). In reality, this was a mass genocide of the Cherokee Nation, however, in December 1838, President Van Buren spoke to Congress and said that he was happy to announce the removal and relocation of the Cherokee nation.

Conclusion

Although the founders of the United States said that this country was built upon ideas of equality, a look at the untold stories of American history show that America was built on the backs of other people. Force was the only idea that seemed to be carried out after the Age of

Jefferson. And although Jefferson was not alive for these extreme policies, his mentality influenced Jackson's ideas. For centuries, John Locke, Thomas Jefferson, and even Andrew Jackson, have been glorified for their actions. Not many people tend to look at the negative aspects and events that occurred during their time. As influential as these men were, they all contradicted themselves on one idea that is central to this nation's foundation, equality. Locke's definition of equality gave way to domination based on divinity. Jefferson fought for independence and justice from a tyrannical Britain, only to act tyrannical later on in life. Jackson simply had no mercy for the Native Americans whatsoever, and this was mainly due to the violent policies carried out by Jefferson. As a result, Jefferson's use of force still haunts the United States to this day and has led to much controversy with the Indians. As accomplished of a man as Jefferson was, he had several faults. The man who wrote, "all men are created equal," treated the Indians in a horrible manner. His agrarian vision for America was more important to him than being humane. As amazing as Jefferson was, he was full of contradictions and set the standard for horrid Indian policies that came after him.

In the end, it should be clarified that this essay is not trying to paint these men in a horrible manner, in fact, these three individuals made contributions to society that have made America what it is today. These men were integral components in shaping not only American democracy, but those of various governments around the world as well. Locke, Jefferson, and Jackson can and should be considered heroes. However, for years, people grow up with one historically glorified view of these men. Never do people truly think or consider what else these men may have done. This essay, is in no way trying to ridicule these men, rather it is trying to bring a different, often overlooked perspective, of these heroic men to light.

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