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Makers of American ideology

John Locke and Adam Smith as misunderstood founding fathers

By [David Armitage](#)



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Milton Friedman wearing an Adam Smith tie, 1983 | © Roger Ressmeyer/CORBIS/VCG via Getty Images

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AMERICA'S PHILOSOPHER

John Locke in American intellectual life
280pp. University of Chicago Press. £28 (US \$35).
[Claire Rydell Arcenas](#)

ADAM SMITH'S AMERICA

How a Scottish philosopher became an icon of American capitalism
384pp. Princeton University Press. £30 (US \$35).

Glory M. Liu

Ancestor worship is not peculiar to the United States, but Americans do revere some peculiar ancestors. Days before he reluctantly left office in January 2021, Donald Trump issued an executive order proposing a National Garden of American Heroes populated with 244 statues, ranging from Hannah Arendt and Humphrey Bogart to Shirley Temple and Alex Trebek, host of the long-running quiz show *Jeopardy*. More predictable was the parade of presidents, civil rights leaders and founding fathers slated to join them. A pair of British members of the national pantheon were noticeably absent: John Locke and Adam Smith. Locke and Smith never set foot in the new world, but they are firmly canonized as makers of American ideology. Two neatly complementary new books, Claire Rydell Arcenas's *America's Philosopher* and Glory M. Liu's *Adam Smith's America*, tell the winding stories of how they became honorary Americans.

Locke thought and wrote a great deal about the Americas as a colonial administrator in the 1670s and 1690s, as did Smith in his capacity as a political adviser during and after the American Revolution. Locke directed parts of his *Second Treatise of Government* towards justifying settler colonialism in what is now North and South Carolina, and in later position papers he planned the fate of established settlements from Virginia to present-day Canada. Meanwhile, Smith's *The Wealth of Nations*, published not at all coincidentally in March 1776, ended with a balance sheet that supported American independence for the benefit of Britain, once it had been released from its debilitating "golden dream" of empire. Locke's American interests were discussed, often critically, for decades after his death in 1704; Smith's were obvious to any reader who waded through *The Wealth of Nations*. Yet it was not for their identifiable engagements with America that they were naturalized as American.

Locke and Smith were both touchy about their reputations and invested in their legacies. Yet each was later co-opted into projects they could not have envisaged, for purposes they would hardly have approved. As Arcenas and Liu show, with detailed documentation and persuasive narrative strung around what Liu calls "inflection points in the history of canonization", Americans deformed and truncated them into "Locke" the alleged father of liberalism and "Smith" the putative apostle of free trade. The historical Locke had no more knowledge of liberalism than he did of the internal combustion engine; only by selectively interpreting a few lines from the 1,100 pages of *The Wealth of Nations* could Smith be fashioned into the progenitor of neoliberalism. Yet these partial, unhistorical and aspirational images persist in the US (and, due to American influence, far beyond), in a display of craving for authority that marks at least parts of American intellectual life as more atavistic than independent.

It was not ever thus. With regard to "Locke's polyvalent influence", Arcenas argues that for two centuries after his death he was almost omnipresent in colonial libraries, college reading lists and periodical polemics, and almost as well known for counsel on card-playing and commonplacing as for epistemology or

educational prescriptions. Thomas Jefferson held Locke to be among “the three greatest men who ever lived”, and gave his portrait pride of place at Monticello alongside the two others, Bacon and Newton. Many young boys, like the future Harvard president Josiah Quincy III, suffered from sodden feet as their parents followed Locke's sometimes eccentric prescriptions in *Some Thoughts Concerning Education* (1693). And no graduate worth his (*sic*) salt escaped grappling at length with *Locke's Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1690). Yet a great reversal took place after the First World War. Arcenas confirms the findings of generations of scholars that Locke's *Two Treatises of Government* were almost entirely missing from discussion between 1773 and 1917. Indeed, if Locke appeared as a political thinker at all, it was usually to condemn the “crude and monstrous scheme of government” he was involved in drafting for the anti-democratic, aristocratic and slavery-driven settlement of Carolina (see “That excellent forme of Government”, *TLS*, October 22, 2004). Sir William Blackstone, the Baron de Montesquieu and the Swiss jurist Emer de Vattel bulked vastly larger in the actual historical foundations of American political thought. All proved too unwieldy to sanctify when university teachers and Cold Warriors formed the modern American canon.

The American Revolution only emerged as *la faute à Jean Locke* following his belated and anachronistic transvaluation as a “liberal” in the 1930s. Only after 1945 was he enlisted as a defender of that then novel political construction, “liberal democracy”. By the 1950s American promoters of Great Books courses and political theory syllabi generally whittled down his sprawling oeuvre to the *Second Treatise* alone. Locke's transformation into a liberal was complete and, for most Americans, impervious to evidence or argument. The contentious political philosopher Leo Strauss was thus wholly orthodox when he wrote in 1960 that, “Locke the liberal is the chief or perhaps sole idol in the temple of liberalism”. Cold War politics cemented his dominance. The communists had Marx. American liberals now had Locke as their indispensable ideologue.

They would soon enlist Smith too. The shy Scot - the invisible man behind the invisible hand - was far from forgotten in the two centuries after 1776. Jefferson hymned *The Wealth of Nations* as “the best book extant on political economy” and, as Liu elegantly argues, Madison, Hamilton and a host of opponents to tariffs invoked his magnum opus across the antebellum era. Yet Smith's legacy was even more swiftly constricted than Locke's when much of his science of man, pre-eminently *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, dropped out of discussion. German students of *Das Adam Smith Problem* - the supposed dilemma of squaring sympathy with self-interest in his two treatises - brought it back into focus. By contrast, University of Chicago economists such as Jacob Viner, Frank Knight and “Smith's best friend”, George Stigler, largely determined “who Adam Smith was and who he became in America”. The Chicago boys excised his moral theory and excerpted *The Wealth of Nations* to affirm the weight of their unfolding theory of price. By the time of the book's bicentennial in 1976, Stigler could famously describe Smith's masterwork as “a stupendous palace erected on the granite of self-interest”.

That would have surely have surprised Smith the reviser of *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* up to his death, Smith the anatomist of civil government as created for “the defence of the rich against the poor”, and Smith

the big government proponent of public works, public education and inoculation against the civic lassitude and poisonous religious “enthusiasm” engendered by proto-industrial production. The Chicago construction of Smith does not survive much contact with history, or indeed with Smith’s entire, unfinished intellectual system. The “invisible hand” was not a general prescription for economic deregulation, but either an elaborate joke, drawing on Ovid (who in the *Metamorphoses* describes a killer’s hand as invisible because hidden deep in the guts of his victim, a centaur) and Macbeth (who refers to night’s “bloody and invisible hand”), or a highly specific account of mercantile investment strategy. All those Adam Smith neckties sold in the age of Reagan and Thatcher - 10,000 and counting by 1982 - were emblems of a flattened and even frivolous figure.

Liu’s history of Smith’s American reception - of how Smith became American more than America became Adam Smith’s - culminates in the 1980s and the era of John Rawls and Robert Nozick, as does Arcenas’s account of Locke’s trajectory. How the two thinkers have fared in America over the past forty years - post-Cold War and postcolonial, neo-liberal and supposedly post-ideological - will be for others to trace. Each author could also have calibrated the American reception of each thinker against their uptake in other countries: global histories of *The Wealth of Nations*’ circulation already exist, even if so far we lack anything as elaborate for Locke. And both could have said more about the politics of authority and the craving for approval bound up in the appropriation of these two unlikely avatars of Americanness.

The stunted Smith retains his stranglehold on American imaginations, just as Locke’s *Second Treatise* still stands proxy for “liberalism” on syllabi across the US: more than 6,000 of them at last check. (*The Wealth of Nations* is not far behind, at 5,500 appearances.) Perhaps the time has come for Americans to abandon obeisance to authority and “do our thinking for ourselves”, as Glory M. Liu, channelling Quentin Skinner, puts it in her conclusion. Trump and his advisers may inadvertently have been right to banish Locke and Smith from the garden in favour of more thoroughly domesticated heroes.

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