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[See table of contents](#)

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Article abstract

Review of Claire Rydell Arcenas's *America's Philosopher: John Locke in American Intellectual Life* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2023)

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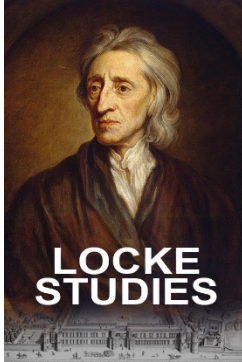
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Review of *America's Philosopher: John Locke in American Intellectual Life* by Claire Rydell Arcenas

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Abstract: Review of Claire Rydell Arcenas's *America's Philosopher: John Locke in American Intellectual Life* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2023)

Keywords: Locke, Declaration of Independence, intellectual history, American political thought

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Claire Rydell Arcenas. *America's Philosopher: John Locke in American Intellectual Life*. Chicago and London: Chicago University Press, 2023. 280 pp. \$25.00 (pb). ISBN: 978-0-226-82933-3.

Reviewed by BENJAMIN HAINES

Who is John Locke to the United States? According to Claire Rydell Arcenas's *America's Philosopher: John Locke in American Intellectual Life*, he is not the philosopher of the American Revolution, the mind behind the Declaration of Independence and Constitution, or the heartbeat of American political thought. Rather, his primary role in American intellectual history is that of empiricist and moralist—not as the author of the *Two Treatises of Government* but of *An Essay concerning Human Understanding* and *Some Thoughts Concerning Education*.

The history of Locke in America, Arcenas says, begins in 1700 with the arrival of the *Essay*, *Some Thoughts*, the *Treatises*, and *The Reasonableness of Christianity* and its *Vindications* on the shores of Pennsylvania. Perhaps because they were the only ones bearing Locke's name, the former two works skyrocketed Locke to fame in the colonies and became "some of the most important books in early America." For the next century, colonists came to celebrate Locke as a "man of good character": a "guide" for how to raise a family, study the Bible, and better "themselves and their communities" (8-9). Locke's celebrants from this period included Benjamin Franklin, the famed pastor and theologian Jonathan Edwards, and professors and students at Harvard and Yale, where Locke's *Essay* was an essential component of the curriculum.

As the eighteenth century progressed and tensions between the colonies and Great Britain increased, "the nature of Locke's political authority" changed and the readership of the *Treatises* increased (32). Nevertheless, the influence of that work was minor; it was the *Essay* that maintained the philosopher's celebrity. To the extent that colonists viewed Locke as a political thinker, it was for his reputation as a moderate, not a revolutionary. Two exceptions to this rule were John Adams and Thomas Jefferson. Adams cited Locke, alongside Algernon Sidney and John Harrington, as a defender of "revolutionary" principles and as a "model for leading a republican and civic-minded life" (46). For his part, Jefferson greatly admired and frequently cited Locke but did not intend his political theory to be the animating force behind the Declaration. After the Revolution, Americans either continued to favor Locke as the author of the *Essay* or criticized him due to the problems presented by the *Fundamental Constitutions of Carolina*, which many viewed as the dangerous product of "government born from abstract political theories" (59).

The Locke of the *Essay* and the Locke of the *Constitutions* remained predominant in the United States until the Reconstruction Era and Gilded Age, when Locke almost faded into obscurity. It was not until the early twentieth century and the advent of the formal study of American political thought that scholars revitalized Locke's reputation. Several decades later, after the Second World War, scholars refashioned Locke's thought from that of the moralist of the *Essay* into the revolutionary liberal of the *Treatises*—into "the source and symbolic essence of what was beginning to be called the American Political Tradition." Locke's true, historical reputation was forgotten and remade into an American politico-philosophical icon (123).

Arcenas is interested in restoring the historical Locke and dispelling the mythological creations of the twentieth century. Locke, she argues, is not at the heart of

American principles but is one part of a much larger and more complex story. This story is not a simplistic narrative revolving around the ideas of one man, however important in modern philosophy. Rather, it shows the ways in which Americans searched for ways to make the country succeed and improve, even if that meant refashioning the past to fit the needs of the present. The story of Locke, in other words, reveals “how Americans have, over time, addressed what is arguably the central question of any democratic-republican society: how to ensure its (continued) flourishing” (4).

As a work of history, the book is successful. Well-argued and meticulously researched, *America's Philosopher* shows how the memory of Locke changed over time, often in accordance with the needs of the United States at a given moment. Particularly compelling is the book's history of twentieth-century Lockean historiography, Locke's role in the development of the American Political Tradition, the challenges to that Tradition presented by Gordon Wood and others, and the divergent ways in which scholars have used Locke as a muse for their own ideas—from Leo Strauss to John Rawls to Robert Nozick.

However, the book contains little of theoretical significance. As the author admits, this book is not really about Locke but rather about the reception of his ideas; it is not “about John Locke, the seventeenth-century philosopher, but rather a book about how Americans over time have understood and made sense of him, his work, his ideas, and his relevance” (4-5).

This explains the book's main weakness. Because it is so focused on the reception of Locke's ideas, as opposed to the ideas themselves, there is little within its pages to sufficiently demonstrate the theoretical claims it asserts, particularly about Locke's role in the American Founding. Take, for example, Arcenas's (and others') argument about the meaning of the right to “happiness” in the Declaration, which she says was not identical to Locke's natural right to property defined in the *Treatises*. “[H]appiness,” she says, “as Jefferson used it was synonymous with public, social happiness resulting from a people's well-being—their safety and security—and their ability not as atomistic individuals but as a society to ‘judge whether or not a particular government made [them] happy’ and either reject it or accept it, accordingly” (51). Put another way, Jefferson's happiness was the result of the American Enlightenment.

There are at least three challenges to this argument which are unaddressed by the author. First, Locke himself was a part of the American Enlightenment and contributed to its notion of happiness. Second, Locke's own discussion of happiness is absent from the book, which he most clearly presents in the *Essay* and *Some Thoughts*—works that, according to the author, are the centerpiece of his American intellectual legacy. Third, given that Locke was an extremely systematic thinker, it stands to reason that there are connections between his notion of happiness and the notion of property, especially since property is essential to human flourishing. To remove Locke's presence from the creation of the Declaration would require a more abstract, philosophical analysis than what the author offers; simply because there are few explicit references in the historical record to Locke's influence on the American Founding does not mean he is absent from it.

Consequently, *America's Philosopher* is not for those interested in understanding more about Locke and his ideas; a truly rigorous discussion of them is not to be found within its pages. Instead, it is a work for those interested in American social, cultural, and intellectual history. This does not mean that this book is not important—indeed, there is much to be gleaned from it—but it should be noted that it is not a comprehensive or

definitive statement on Locke's legacy in the United States. Arcenas provides an insightful narrative but simultaneously leaves one wondering if history has the power to do the work of philosophy, the queen of the sciences.

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