

# *Should John Locke Institute Change Its Name?*

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**Abstract:** John Locke, an English philosopher, faces increased scrutiny over his affiliation with slavery at the height of the Black Lives Matter movement. The educational organization, John Locke Institute, continues to honor the name of Locke, despite the rising controversy. The aim of this paper is to examine the principal *legacy* of Locke and assess his involvement in the institution of slavery. This paper concludes that the John Locke Institute should not change its name, providing insight into the principles of renaming and offering a comparison to other acts of renaming monuments and institutions in the status quo.

**Keywords:** Renaming, slavery, legacy

## 1. Introduction

In the wake of George Floyd's tragic death, America and the rest of the world has been forced to evaluate the complex legacy of racism and how it rears its ugly head even today, centuries after the abolishment and emancipation of people held in bondage. Tens of thousands of people have taken to the streets to protest, sparking an initiative to rename and remove monuments and institutions named after figures associated with problematic views—most notably, fervent support or callous indifference towards the institution of slavery.

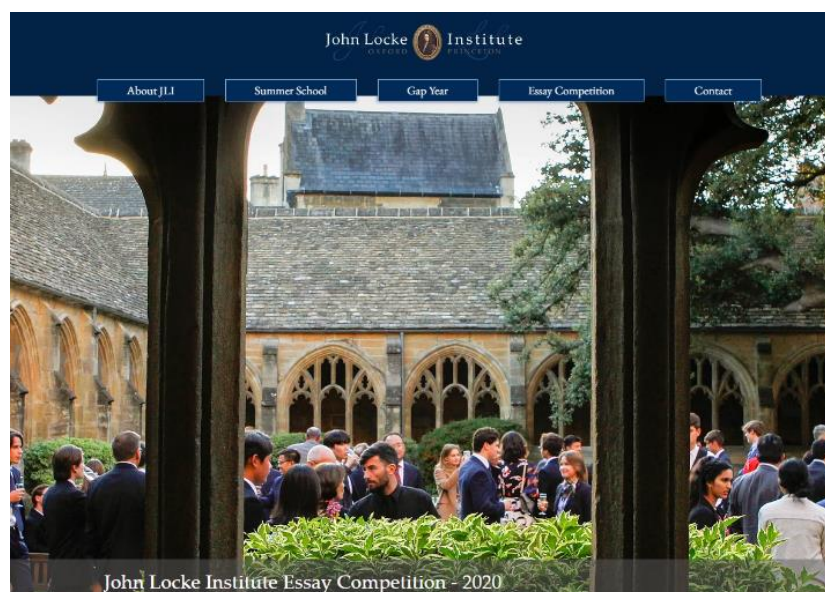


Figure 1: John Locke Institute

Campuses and educational institutions around the world are facing public scrutiny over symbols, monuments and building linked to controversial figures. Prestigious universities such as Princeton and Yale, under mounting public pressure, have renamed some of their oldest schools (Wood [1]). However, despite widespread application of this tool, advocates of renaming have not reached a consensus as to the criteria for such actions. Therefore, as this essay focuses on the John Locke Institute, an independent educational organization, similar educational institutions can be used as precedent with a set of principles to which John Locke, the namesake, can be evaluated against.

This essay will argue against the John Locke Institute changing its name on an adjusted set of criteria trial-and-tested: a) whether the principal legacy of the namesake is in conflict with the mission and values of the educational institution b) strength and clarity of historical evidence provided. If the namesake, John Locke, fulfills both requirements, then there is a need to rename John Locke Institute.

Note that this essay seeks to argue against renaming John Locke Institute on the grounds that renaming itself is justified, meaning this essay avoids the philosophical debate of judging and condemning past historical figures using the moral lens of today and instead assumes that renaming is ethical.

## 2. Principal Legacy of John Locke and the Mission of John Locke Institute

**John Locke,  
Father of  
Classical  
Liberalism.  
The Equal  
Right to Life,  
Liberty, and  
Property.**

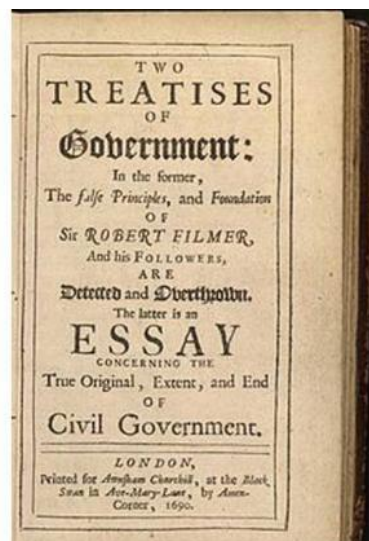


Figure 2: John Locke

John Locke, an English philosopher and physician, is widely regarded as one of the greatest thinkers of the modern period and the “Father of Liberalism.” Living through a century of conflicts between the Crown and the Parliament, the Protestants, Anglicans and Catholics, Locke’s accomplishments echo through his enduring political works that inspired generations of pioneers. He authored the *Two Treatises of Government*, asserting that all men are created equal with rights, which serves as a foundation for understanding legitimate forms of political government in which people in the state of nature choose to transfer power to the government for security. This established a fundamental defense for revolutions, since the premise that governments exist by the consent of the people also articulates why governments can be replaced and overthrown if they fail in their duty (Uzgalis [2]).

In essence, John Locke gave birth to modern understandings of freedom and human rights, which justifies a defense against renaming the John Locke Institute. He is remembered for, first and foremost, the principles of government being based on consent of the governed, that all people are created equal and endowed with inalienable rights, that most people can make rational decisions for themselves, and not moral evils such as slavery. The advancement of liberty and the recognition of

inalienable rights derived from critical thinking and rational discourse is worthy of praise and embodies the mission of John Locke Institute, which is to “teach the principles of logical, analytical and rational thought” (Cox [3]). Though every historical figure has a multitude of identities and suffers from controversy, John Locke is primarily remembered by scholars and the public alike for his aforementioned virtues; his enduring legacy is that of freedom and liberty, not a defense of slavery, which justifies the use of his name in the public sphere.

Given Locke’s principal legacy is bringing political liberalism to the forefront of discourse, this begs the question: How has political liberalism interacted with the institution of slavery? Many critics argue that Locke’s liberalism is fundamentally hypocritical and detrimental given its application in the slave trade. Though Locke’s political principles seem to be contradictory to slavery, historians such as CB Macpherson have pointed out in *The Political Theory of Possessive Individualism* that Locke regards private property to be above all else, including property in slaves. Recent works by Abigail Swingen and William Pettigrew argue “that liberalism led to freedoms for whites, including especially their ability to have ‘free trade’ in slaves,” drawing an implicit connection to Marx’s economic and political theories that maintained liberalism and capitalism are inextricably intertwined (Brewer [4]). Paradoxically, liberalism in the South translates to rights for whites and the oppression of slaves, under the South’s conviction that “the rights proclaimed by liberalism were not for blacks” (Cottrol [5]). Thus, opponents of Locke believe that the champion of liberalism must also be morally culpable in the application of liberalism in the slave trade.

This argument against liberalism ignores the nuance of the historical context surrounding slavery. First, as Brewer argues, “Slavery did not emerge within a liberal paradox.” Slavery as a concept was historically legitimized through ideas of hereditary status championed by monarchies, the hierarchical nature of feudalism that “connected property in land to property in people.” In the absence of liberalism, slavery still would’ve existed under the guise of white superiority or hereditary status, given that slavery existed long before Locke’s writings gained any influence. Furthermore, the capitalistic nature of slavery is also in no way synonymous with political liberalism. In fact, Brewer argues that “forced labor requires the power of the state, and its navies and armies and militias and slave patrols and county court judges.” These ideas are contradictory to political liberalism that emphasized liberty and attempts to limit the power of governments. Therefore, liberalism cannot be blamed as a political theory for slavery, as its very emergence was in “opposition to slavery and absolutism” (Brewer [4]). Second, though liberalism may have helped in the transaction of slaves, it also served the foundation for emancipation in the future. Locke cannot be blamed for Southern interpretations of liberalism that intentionally leaves out slaves. Instead, the emergence of abolitionists and the conclusion of the Civil War in Union victory and the progress made in emancipation from following amendments are directly influenced by liberal principles of human rights and freedom (Ladd [6]). Thus Locke’s ideas of liberalism are not complicit in the moral evil of slavery, which also justifies the name of John Locke Institute.

Other historical figures under public scrutiny do not share the same breadth of achievements nor the innocence of John Locke’s principles. For example, Calhoun college, named after John C. Calhoun, was recently renamed to Grace Hopper college by Yale. John C. Calhoun was a leading Southern statesman that advocated slavery as a positive good and defended white supremacy. As the President of Yale puts it, “Unlike other namesakes on our campus, he [Calhoun] distinguished himself not *in spite of* these views but *because of* them” (Salovey [7]). Even contemporaries of Calhoun, Benjamin Silliman Sr., a fellow Yale graduate, connected the legacy of his peer to the moral evil of slavery: “[Calhoun] in a great measure *changed the state of opinion* and the manner of speaking and writing upon this subject in the South, until we have come to present to the world the mortifying and disgraceful spectacle of a great republic—and the only real republic in the world—standing forth in vindication of slavery, without prospect of, or wish for, its extinction. If the views of Mr. Calhoun,

and of those who think with him, are to prevail, slavery is to be sustained on this great continent forever” (Fisher [8]).

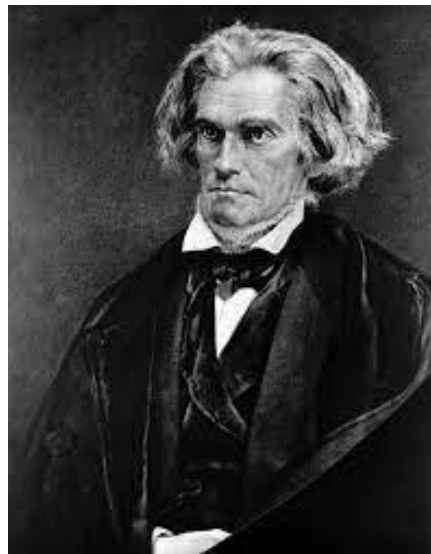


Figure 3: John C. Calhoun

Calhoun’s contemporaries and scholars today believe that Calhoun’s principal legacy was his racist beliefs written into laws and the attempted expansion of slavery across America. Though defenders of Calhoun may argue against this characterization, Calhoun’s preeminence as a public servant is directly linked to his unyielding support of slavery and advocacy of white supremacy (Grove [9]). This distinction must be taken into account in an evaluation of John Locke and his lasting contributions to the world. A defense of slavery is not central to the public persona of John Locke, and therefore also do not sufficiently justify a renaming, even assuming such sentiments existed (which will be further discussed in the second section).

### 3. Strength and Clarity of Historical Evidence



Figure 4: Fundamental Constitutions of Carolina



Other than the application of John Locke's political liberalism in slavery, opponents of Locke often point to his direct personal involvement in the slave trade. Contemporary Locke scholars have always struggled to reconcile two aspects of Locke's political beliefs. On the one hand, Locke was an ardent supporter of human rights who proclaimed, "slavery is so vile and miserable an Estate of Man, and so directly opposite to the generous Temper and Courage of our nation" (Locke [10]). On the other hand, Locke is seemingly involved in authoring the Fundamental Constitutions of Carolina that guaranteed an Englishman's authority over slaves in the South Carolina colony, the purchase of stocks in the Royal African Company, which dealt in slave trade, and his support for just-war theory used in application of slavery (Hinshelwood [11]). These three pieces of historical evidence suggest that Locke is deeply hypocritical, though upon closer examination, Locke's link to slavery is not as clear.

First, Locke, at worst, was only indirectly involved in the drafting of the Fundamental Constitutions of Carolina. Brewer describes Locke writing the Carolina's constitution as "a lawyer writes a will," as he was paid to "revise it and to make copies, and key principles of the document preceded his involvement" (Brewer [4]). Locke's involvement in the Fundamental Constitutions of Carolina was mandatory in the sense that these are "the conditions he dealt with daily as secretary to the Proprietors and as Shaftesbury's confidant," his employer (Hinshelwood [11]). One can argue that Locke knew slavery was incompatible with his own theories, but real-life circumstances forced him to draft documents contradictory with his ideals. Locke's moral complicity in the institution of slavery then, under compulsion and coercion of his peers, is greatly diminished. Therefore, this piece of historical evidence surrounding John Locke is morally ambiguous and cannot justify a need to rename the John Locke Institute.

Second, Locke's investment in the new Royal African Company which dealt in slave trade is also nebulous in nature. Historians suspect that the reigning monarch Charles II had to pay Shaftesbury and John Locke in 1672 over their services in regard to colonial affairs by Royal African Company stocks instead of crown payments because of internal financial issues. This suggests that Locke's involvement in the Royal African Company may not be entirely in his control. Furthermore, Locke sold his shares by 1675 and condemned Charles II's "increasing absolutism as the enslavement of all subjects," eventually fleeing the country in fear of retribution. In active opposition to "absolute monarchy and slavery," his Two Treatises of Government published in 1689 challenged these two ideas and served as the rationale for future revolutions and liberation movements (Brewer [4]). Hence, evidence of Locke's involvement in the Royal African Company is circumstantial and misses the larger historical context, especially considering Locke's objection towards slavery immediately after selling his shares.



Figure 5: Royal African Company

Third, Locke's support for slavery under the framework of just-war theory never justified the forms of brutal oppression common during that era. Locke specifically limits the institution of slavery by the exclusion of the enslavement of women and children and the nullification of hereditary institutions of slavery, both common practices in the colonies (Hinshelwood [11]). Locke specifically asserts that captives of a just war, subjects who may harm others, can be under control and dominion given the "right of self-preservation" of others who are at risk (Farr [12]). As such, political slavery was never justified in Locke's belief of human rights and consent of the governed. At worst, Locke was a victim to the accepted ideas of that time, that war and extreme harm can justify taking away certain freedoms. Therefore, Locke's moral complicity in the dominant political theories used to justify slavery is relatively weak given his numerous objections to aspects of slavery.



Figure 6: Just War Theory

#### 4. Conclusion

John Locke's contributions to the advancement of human rights and democracy cannot be overstated; they are his lasting legacies upon the world. Locke's liberal ideas were not complicit in the justification of slavery and, instead, also gave birth to later arguments against slavery, such as the enshrinement of human rights. Slavery was never integral to the public persona of Locke and how we understand his legacy. Furthermore, the lack of clear and convincing historical evidence describing Locke's involvement in slavery is not enough to justify renaming the John Locke Institute under this essay's set of criteria. Therefore, The John Locke Institute should proudly bear its namesake and continue to embody his intellectual spirit.

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