



REVIEW ESSAY

Better to Receive Than to Give

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Claire Rydell Arcenas, *America's Philosopher: John Locke in American Intellectual Life* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2022)

Glory M. Liu, *Adam Smith's America: How a Scottish Philosopher Became an Icon of American Capitalism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2022)

Three generations ago, intellectual historians wrote books in which central texts and intellectual figures were held to be the sources of entire bodies of thought. The metaphors of “influence” and “origins” were common; particular arguments associated with those texts and thinkers were imagined as shaping and creating traditions of thought. Adjectives like “Lockean,” “Jeffersonian,” “Nietzschean,” and “Kantian” attached themselves to whole strains and schools of philosophical, political, and social thought. Two generations ago, a wholesale shift in intellectual historiography, best represented by the Cambridge school historians Quentin Skinner and J. G. A. Pocock, but evident well beyond them, pushed historians away from the centrality of major figures and texts understood as shaping long traditions, and toward “languages” and “discourses” that were historically localized and bounded. Individual texts were to be understood not as the source of a stream of ideas, but as creatures of very specific discursive and ideological environments; understanding their history meant understanding authorial “intention” contextually, rather than “influence” and long-term consequence. Along with this turn was a commitment to historical discontinuity and an understanding of the alterity and “otherness” of past ways of thinking. Whatever our vision of Kant might be today, said this school of thought, it is not the Kant of the eighteenth-century world in which he thought, and we should be wary of projecting our contemporary understandings into that foreign world.

Now, in our generation, intellectual historians have returned to the major thinkers and texts of intellectual traditions, but with a fundamental difference. Having absorbed the lessons of contextualism and historicism, they have inverted the relationship between text and tradition. The present is not shaped by the past so much as the past is shaped by the present. Ideas are not stable and static, fixed in their moment of origins, but are now conceived of as “in motion” and “in circulation.”¹

¹Daniel T. Rodgers, “Paths in the Social History of Ideas,” in Joel Isaac, James Kloppenberg, Michael O’Brien, and Jennifer Ratner-Rosenhagen, eds., *The Worlds of American Intellectual History* (New York, 2017), 307–23.

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Instead of the influence of thinkers upon one another in a historical lineage, we have later thinkers reinventing earlier ones, using them for their own purposes in their own later contexts. The old vision gave causal force to the ideas of what were imagined as “major” thinkers: Marx, Rousseau, Dewey, Darwin, Freud, among many others. Later thinkers were seen as the result, or effect, of earlier ones, the past forever shaping new ideas coming into being. The newer vision gives causal power to later thinkers, who are imagined as shaping the understanding of prior thought. The classic texts of an intellectual tradition could be reinterpreted in antifoundational terms; the many versions of Darwin, for instance, are possible because the history of Darwinism provides no stable and fixed foundation in an originary moment we might access through reading *On the Origin of Species*, but only texts to be read and reread in terms of the changing needs and contexts of readers. It turns out, in this view, that Marx did not create Marxism, but that Marxism created Marx—or the many versions of Marx that are a product of this tradition. Texts and thinkers are now imagined as discursive constructions, rather than as the fount of intellectual traditions. They are creatures of their ever-changing contexts.

This historiographical shift goes under the name “reception history.” A spate of works has appeared in recent years: Jennifer Ratner-Rosenhagen’s *American Nietzsche*, Drew Maciag’s *Edmund Burke in America*, Mary Jo Buhle’s *Feminism and Its Discontents*, Daniel Rodgers’s *As a City on a Hill*, Martin Woessner’s *Heidegger in America*, David Armitage’s *The Declaration of Independence: A Global History*, Antii Lepistö’s *The Rise of Common-Sense Conservatism*, among others. Shaped, although often indirectly, by reader reception theory in literary studies, and the writings of thinkers such as Hans Robert Jauss, Stanley Fish, Hans-Georg Gadamer, and Janice Radway, the focus on reception has come late to intellectual history. The field in which reception history has had its most pronounced recent development is in biblical study, which suggests even more powerfully the move to desacralize foundational texts in favor of the never-ending interpretive practice of readers, understood as rooted in particular contexts.² If I can be permitted an interpretive statement in the frame of the “old” intellectual history: reception history is the late-born child of the dominant forms of late twentieth-century social thought—the linguistic turn, social constructionism, Foucauldian genealogy, Kuhnian paradigms, Geertzian symbolic anthropology. Concerned that we no longer have access to texts and their traditions in an unmediated way, that we read ideas through our own webs of signification and culturally sanctioned epistemic frames, some historians have shifted their angle of vision: if we no longer believe we have a clear and unequivocal view of what, say, Mary Wollstonecraft said, we can historicize the writings of those who read her and wrote about her, those who constructed multiple Wollstonecrafts, that spoke to the needs of the particular times and places in which they read. The objects of reception history are not the passive recipients of ideas, shaped and coerced by their power, but the creative readers, who generation after generation reinvent the thinkers and texts from the past. The constructive power of readers—always foregrounding some ideas and eliding

²Michael Lieb, Emma Mason, Jonathan Roberts, and Christopher Rowlands, eds., *The Oxford Handbook of the Reception History of the Bible* (New York, 2011).

others—can now be imagined as the basis of a refocused intellectual history. Ideas are appropriated, texts are poached, and the ideological needs of particular eras and conditions constitute the uses of texts and ideas taken up from previous eras. Perhaps we can no longer see a singular stable Wollstonecraft, marching from the past to the present, but only the various uses to which she has been put in the nearly two and a half centuries since she wrote. Our understanding of *The Vindication of the Rights of Woman* is an understanding of its interpretive history, rather than an understanding of the text itself, let alone its original context.

And now we come to two of the latest iterations of reception history: Claire Rydell Arcenas's *America's Philosopher: John Locke in American Intellectual Life*, and Glory Liu's *Adam Smith's America: How a Scottish Philosopher Became an Icon of American Capitalism*. These are both fine studies, exemplars of the genre, clearly argued and written, and in command of large bodies of evidence. Both are based on dissertations written at Stanford; both emphasize an American national frame of reception for a British thinker; both aim to unpack, demystify, and historicize the work that was done in the mid-twentieth century to elevate an early modern philosopher to the status of an icon identified with the political and economic forms of American life; both are concerned with suggesting that there were early modern alternative understandings of their central figures that were eclipsed by ideological commitments to social visions represented by a single authored text of each of these men. Both aim to show shifts in which the understandings of these philosophers were narrowed from their eighteenth- and nineteenth-century meanings, at the same times as they were made central symbols of an American way of life; their meanings were simultaneously reduced and inflated. Each reads as both a history of the image and uses of these men and their ideas, and as a critique of the long shadow of mid-twentieth-century thought in shaping American ideologies in the present. These are parallel texts: John Locke became an icon in the political sphere, his name attached to a vision of liberalism; Adam Smith became an icon in the economic sphere, his name attached to a vision of capitalism. Historians and political scientists did the ideological work in one case, economists and policy-oriented theorists in the other, both under the aegis of the Cold War and the post-New Deal reconstruction of American politics and economy.

Both are books that illuminate a series of transformations over centuries, helping to bring back into intellectual history an older commitment to long-range history in a new key.³ Both also, having absorbed the transnational turn and the notion, following Benedict Anderson, that the nation is an “imagined community,” focus on how an American idea was constructed, rather than on the elements of a naturalized American intellectual tradition. Not surprisingly, both Arcenas and Liu studied with Caroline Winterer at Stanford. Like Winterer's *American Enlightenment*, these books cut through the fog of mid-twentieth century ideological constructions of history to reveal the alterity of an early modern past, a world where John Locke was something other than a shorthand for American liberal political theory, and Adam Smith was something other than the father of

³David Armitage, “What’s the Big Idea? Intellectual History and the *Longue Durée*,” *History of European Ideas* 38/4 (2012), 493–507.

free-market economics. What Winterer did for “the American Enlightenment,”—demonstrate that it was a mid-twentieth-century ideological construction of the Cold War and not an artifact of eighteenth-century thought—Arcenas and Liu have done for their own Enlightenment philosophers.⁴ So not only does this style of reception history represent a turn back to long-range intellectual history in a new key; it also represents a turn back to an American national frame, also in a new key. If suspicion of mid-twentieth-century American exceptionalism has helped drive a transnational turn in historiography, Arcenas and Liu have absorbed that shift and redirected it. The creation of American ideas and ideologies as a process, both argue, should be seen in a transnational context; the American readings of Locke and Smith are variants, actively engaged with interpretations in Britain and Germany, for instance, rather than defined by a sharp opposition between American culture and European thought.⁵

Each charts a major shift, not just in the interpretation of texts, but in the propensity to identify the meaning of Locke’s and Smith’s philosophies with a particular text. During the eighteenth century, the Locke that was a point of reference for American colonists was the Locke of the new psychology and epistemology introduced in *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*. Arcenas convincingly demonstrates that colonists looked to Locke for guidance on matters involving child rearing and self-development, knowledge and its foundation, ways to read the Bible, and moral education, not so much as a guide to political principles. The text that early and mid-twentieth-century historians and political theorists such as Merle Curti, Carl Becker and Louis Hartz defined as the core of Lockean philosophy, the *Two Treatises of Government*, was not unknown to colonists, but it took a decided backseat to the Locke who reinvented the human mind, and when colonists went looking for political principles, Locke also took a backseat to Montesquieu and many others. Arcenas argues, further, that in the wake of the Revolution, Locke’s political theory was increasingly out of step with the dominant trends in the science of politics. Abstract theorizing based on a fictive social contract and a state of nature had little traction in the early republic. So not only was a commitment to Locke’s political theory not a cause of the ideology of the American Revolution; it also wasn’t a consequence of the Declaration and Constitution. Throughout the nineteenth century, many volumes of Locke’s writings had multiple editions. The *Two Treatises of Government*, however, had no American edition published between 1773 and 1917, according to Arcenas. The association of Locke’s political philosophy with the American Revolution, as if Thomas Jefferson simply wrote Locke into the Declaration of Independence, and nineteenth-century Americans internalized the Lockean principles of government, was the product of a later generation. Those twentieth-century thinkers made a series of generalizations about individual rights, the centrality of property, and limited governments as an American civil religion they imagined as being in

⁴Caroline Winterer, *American Enlightenment: Pursuing Happiness in the Age of Reason* (New Haven, 2016), 1–17.

⁵On transnationalism in intellectual history see David Armitage, “The International Turn in Intellectual History,” in Darrin M. McMahon and Samuel Moyn, eds., *Rethinking Modern European Intellectual History* (New York, 2014), 232–52.

place in practice prior to the American Revolution, and as a continuous element of the American political tradition. The Locke of epistemology and education, of *tabula rasa* and moral development, gave way to the Locke of universal fixed natural rights and political individualism, the one eclipsing the other in an inversion of their relationship in the eighteenth century. In this sense, *The Two Treatises of Government* is a twentieth-century text, written into the past as foundational.

One of Arcenas's compelling arguments is that Locke's status as authority in a wide range of fields, but especially in matters of epistemology, education, and religion, gave way over the course of the nineteenth century to a new understanding of Locke as a historical figure. That is, as new ways of understanding the world came into being, especially in the second half of the nineteenth century, Locke was increasingly recognized for his historic contributions rather than his practical authority—he came to seem dated. If the Scottish Common Sense philosophy that became institutionalized at American colleges in the early republic built on Lockean epistemological foundations, the philosophical schools of the late nineteenth century imagined that they had moved beyond Locke. German idealism following Kant imagined a more active mind than the blank-slate epistemology of Locke; pragmatism might gesture to the historical figures of empiricist philosophy, but it utterly rejected the vision of the human mind and the foundationalism of Locke in favor of a philosophy that looked to consequences rather than first principles, and sought to overcome the dichotomies of early modern thought. The new disciplines of the social sciences also had use for Locke mostly as a historical figure. The living Locke of earlier generations was, even for those who disagreed with him, a force and an authority to encounter; by the end of the nineteenth century, he was not worth arguing with. Having been relegated to the status of a figure of his time, it is all the more startling that Locke could be reborn in the twentieth century as the representation of a continuous, vital, and living American identity—although not in the fields of epistemology and psychology.

Tracing the transformation of college curricula in the twentieth century, as well as the work of political scientists and historians, Arcenas argues that the Locke of the *Second Treatise of Government* became ubiquitous and foundational to a vision of American political culture, eclipsing the long prominence of *The Essay Concerning Human Understanding* in the image of Locke. For instance, she notes that St John's College adopted its Great Books curriculum in 1937 and included Locke's *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* in its initial iteration; in 1940–41, it was permanently replaced by the *Second Treatise of Government*. Throughout the 1940s and 1950s, Locke's *Second Treatise* was made a central feature of Great Books courses and in discussions of American political values and culture. Even the critics of Locke, such as Leo Strauss and his students, ended up affirming the centrality of Locke and the *Second Treatise* to American liberalism. Here is one place where I think the argument might be overstated. That is, the *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, as Arcenas indicates, didn't simply vanish from courses in great books and Western civilization. I suspect if one examined philosophy curricula in the twentieth century, the *Essay* would appear frequently; the construction of the twentieth-century understanding of a sharp opposition between the empiricist and rationalist traditions in modern philosophy has repeatedly invoked the *Essay* in opposition to Descartes's *Meditations*. I read both the

Essay and the *Second Treatise* in my modern-humanities course as an undergraduate in the early 1980s, and it is my distinct memory that the stress was heavily on the greater significance of the *Essay*. Memory is deceiving, of course, but the *Essay* and Lockean epistemology themselves have taken on a political character. Steven Pinker's *The Blank Slate*, for instance, points to a widespread reaction against the image of human malleability that Locke created, and its association with various modern philosophies of human reconstruction, especially in the wake of sociobiology and the so-called "Darwin wars" of the late twentieth century.⁶

The situation with Adam Smith was different, but the early Smith had not been identified exclusively or predominantly with *The Wealth of Nations* (1776), in part because the idea that Smith was the father of a discipline called "economics" came much later. In fact, Smith was a moral philosopher and a broad-based social thinker. His earlier work, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (first edition 1759), he continued to revise and add to as late as 1790 in a sixth edition. Because political economy was still an "emergent discourse" (Liu, 67) in the late eighteenth century and the early nineteenth, Smith could be imagined as a much broader thinker, his works available for use in a variety of contexts. He was not yet a canonical thinker, and while some, like John Adams, drew on Smith's *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, as in Adams's *Discourses on Davila*, Smith's fame as a moral philosopher was eventually eclipsed by fellow Scots Francis Hutcheson, Thomas Reid, and, later, Dugald Stewart, all of whom offered more stabilizing and satisfactory forms of moderating "common sense" and moral sentiment that were consonant with the ideological needs of the American elite. The story Liu gives us is one in which Smith gradually emerges as a figure of *laissez-faire*, and is then beset by a set of variations on what gets called *das Adam Smith Problem*, which she sees being reinvented in the twentieth century as "the Chicago Smith problem." The problem, as it was originally conceived, was how to reconcile the moral theory, based on a human nature that was imagined as motivated by the sympathetic imagination and a concern with the judgments of others, with the political economy, imagined as defining a human nature driven by rationality and self-interested behavior. How could man the sympathetic animal be reconciled with man the rational actor? More broadly, how could the question of wealth and its generation be reconciled with a vision of social ethics? By the time the Chicago school of economists got hold of Smith, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* and the issues it raised about the moral fabric of the social order were pushed away from a concerted ideological move to identify *The Wealth of Nations* as a freestanding fount of free-market economics. The idea that Smith was an ethical thinker, and that his vision in both texts was one concerned with the social basis of ethics, vanished. Smith wrote in opposition to eighteenth-century practices of state policy; the Chicago school turned him into a critic of Keynesianism, communism, and twentieth-century liberal democratic forms of managed economies. Milton Friedman and the Chicago economists abstracted a generalized theory of human motivation, a self-regulating "invisible hand," and an antistatist creed from his text, and collapsed the historical difference between the eighteenth and twentieth centuries.

⁶Steven Pinker, *The Blank Slate: The Modern Denial of Human Nature* (New York, 2002).

For those who came to associate Smith's *Wealth of Nations* with the image of "the invisible hand," guiding self-interested market behavior in a benevolent direction absent state direction, Liu shows how little that image was associated with Smith prior to Chicago school reconstructions. The term "is probably the most discussed and debated idea in Smith's works, even in the history of economic thought," she says, but it appears only three times in all of Smith's corpus, and only once and passing in *The Wealth of Nations*. Prior to the Chicago economists, it was barely noticed. What Liu calls Milton Friedman's "invisible hand waving" essentially created a popularized vision of Smith as the author of a vision of markets liberated from "human and institutional contexts," the very contexts that were actually centrally important to Smith's thought (240–43). Friedman's move was to take what he regarded as a scientific discovery—the self-regulating nature of markets—and turn it into a political vision of human freedom as opposed to state action. George Stigler, the other chief creator of the Chicago Smith, identified Smith's vision with the centrality of a decontextualized idea of human motivation based on rational self-interest, and, in doing so, "fashioned Smith into a modern economist like himself" (229). Earlier thinkers, such as Jacob Viner, had treated Smith's image of human motivation as marked by a more expansive, tension-filled, and ambiguous "self-love" that could refer to matters emotional, psychological, and social. Stigler's version of Smith jettisoned *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* as having anything to do with the vision of human nature proffered in *The Wealth of Nations*. The Chicago school economists do not fare well in Liu's account—they come off not only as ideologists of the first order, but also as bad readers. Like the historians and political scientists who constructed a John Locke as the patron saint of American liberalism, the Chicago economists constructed an Adam Smith as the patron saint of American capitalism—we are still trying to crawl out from under both images.

The treatment of the afterlife of the Cold War versions of these two philosophers is an important part of each of these books, because it suggests that, in the late twentieth century, the constructions that had been created in the mid-century came under sustained critical rethinking, but without entirely dismantling the powerful iconic images that preceded them. Arcenas analyzes three bodies of thought—the conservative anti-Lockeans such as Willmoore Kendall and Russell Kirk, the political theorists Robert Nozick and John Rawls, and the American historians such as Gordon Wood who constructed a republican alternative to Lockean liberalism. Each sought to complicate or undo the image of Lockean liberalism; none really succeeded in effectively putting forward an alternative to it. In the case of Smith, the various attempts to reinterpret Smith through the lens of a broader vision associated with the Scottish Enlightenment seemed only to tie Smith's association with American capitalism more tightly. After 1976, "the interpretation of Smith as a moral theorist of capitalism," says Liu, "has become a convenient ideological holding pen for beliefs on opposite sides of the political spectrum, with those on the 'Right' appealing to Smith in order to defend conservative moral sensibilities, and those on the 'Left' appealing to Smith in order to defend a view of capitalism that also promoted social justice" (260). As much as late twentieth-century thinkers tried to push back against the Cold War Locke and Smith, both authors seem to be suggesting, they were caught in associations and symbolic connections that they could not transcend.

What both Arcenas's and Liu's texts suggest, for all their virtues, is an evasion at the heart of reception history, a kind of interpretive conundrum. Are John Locke and Adam Smith blank slates, open to the possibility of any kind of rereading and interpretive construction, or does each text and thinker set limits to the possibility of alternative readings? More bluntly: does reception history require the historian to establish a firm baseline of a text's meaning, from which various readers, under the pressure of their particular contexts, depart? Or are the various versions of Smith and Locke entirely the projections of readers and their contexts? Both of these histories do seem to posit a relatively stable meaning as a baseline, but they aren't explicit about it, nor about the extent to which such a meaning imposes upon its readers and compels particular readings, or at least limits them. Arcenas, in particular, does speak of Locke's "influence" in shaping American ideas and practices, but then seems to pivot away from the idea of influence—her book is not a study of Locke or Locke's thought, but of "how Americans over time have understood and made sense of him, his work, his ideas, and his relevance" (5). Liu is more theoretical and analytical in describing what the basis of her reception history is:

Reception explains the difference between what Smith might have originally meant or intended and what subsequent readers might have made of his ideas. Thus, I am less interested in providing a definitive account of what Smith originally intended or meant than I am in elucidating the demands that his readers have brought to his works and that colored the lessons they have extracted from them.

Reception, says Liu, "is a process of active creation, invention, and transformation" (2–3). The ideas of Cold War Lockean liberalism and Smithian free-market economics, they seem to suggest, are distortions of Locke's *Second Treatise* and of Smith's *Wealth of Nations*, not implicit meanings that were already present before the twentieth-century historians and economists got a hold of them.

But what was in these texts and thoughts must have provided the fodder for the meanings that were made by others. To have some notion of distortion seems to imply that there is an object that can be seen clearly, a Smith or Locke in its undistorted reality. But to the extent that the authors provide some sense of the meaning of Locke and Smith independent of the interpretations others have made of them, they are providing their own interpretation, which would seem to have no more claim to authority than that of previous thinkers—they are no longer outside their object of study, but inside it, engaging in a kind of reception of their own. The safer bet is to take an agnostic position, bracketing the question of what Locke or Smith really said, of what their texts and thought really meant, and asking only what their readers made of them. Locke, after all, did posit a state of nature and a social contract, and if not the source of a modern liberal tradition of thought, that tradition of thought could not do without the elements that made up his argument. I don't see any explicit claim in either Arcenas or Liu for the power of texts and historical thinkers to contain or limit the reading of them. But there is a reason why no readers could, or would, have successfully made the argument that Adam Smith was saying the same thing Karl Marx was—there is nothing in any of his writings to support that conclusion. So, if historical figures went beyond the texts they remade, adding things that

were not there, or alternatively repressing elements of them that didn't fit their purposes and vision, we might still want to imagine that these texts and thinkers had a power to compel their readers to come to some conclusions and not others. The problem, of course, is that today's historians operate in a post-deconstructionist moment, aware that the internal logics of texts themselves render them unstable, that every reading necessarily produces a different interpretation, that there is no singular "Smith" or "Locke" that lies at the bottom of our investigations. Safer to say that the focus will be on the creative power of readers, rather than trying to provide an analysis of what the philosophers meant or intended, and how those readers deviated from that intention.

If intellectual history is to be understood as a dialectical process in which changing contexts encounter already existing texts and remake them to serve new ends, then historians are going to have to figure out the extent to which texts and ideas are open to being used for purposes other than those intended in the contexts in which they were created. Skinner and the Cambridge contextualists made a historiographical point about how to interpret texts in their original contexts. But the texts and authors they studied had an afterlife. They didn't stop meaning or being read when the original contexts for which they were designed evaporated. Instead, they became part of new contexts, and were read in new ways, ways that accumulated, sometimes flourished, and sometimes expired, over longer periods of time. The history of the Lockean tradition, then, is the history of the interpretation of Locke, rather than the handing down over generations of a set of principles. Our interpretation of this intellectual history is guided by what all good history is guided by—the need to remake the past anew for the purposes of the present. Neither Arcenas nor Liu is trying to give us a Locke or Smith for our age (let alone "the ages"), nor are they interested in a timeless and definitive Locke or Smith. But both seek to liberate their philosophers from the interpretations that previous generations have made of them, to recast the inherited ideological images in a new light. If we are at a moment when widespread questioning of both liberalism and capitalism is afoot, when once again alternatives to the present are sought, what reception history can tell us is that our history is not wedded to a consistent philosophical outlook, or grounded in a foundational text. We don't need a new Locke or a new Smith for our age—we just need to reject the ideology that claims that we do, that tries to use singular figures and texts as condensed symbols of a way of life. History as a discipline contains a strong tradition of demystification, denaturalization, a revelation that the present is not a product of necessity but of historical conditions and contingencies. Revealing the historical nature of the symbolic association of Locke and Smith with "America" is a step toward seeing our past and present more clearly. We are indebted to Arcenas and Liu for these fine studies, for letting us see the creation of these philosophical identities through a long-term genealogy. We now have the American Nietzsche, the American Burke, the American Locke, and the American Smith. We can look forward to the American Marx, the American Kant, the American Hume, the American Rousseau. The old mid-twentieth-century canon is back, but remade and received.