

AMERICAN POLITICAL THOUGHT  
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Supplementary Material

Chapter 2: The Colonial Era – Equality and Status

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*John Woolman, Some Considerations on Keeping Negroes (1762)*<sup>1</sup>

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*John Woolman was born into a New Jersey farming family in 1720. Raised as a devout Quaker, he was deeply attracted to religious texts from an early age. As an adult, he worked in various trades as necessary to support himself and his family but primarily dedicated himself to a traveling ministry. Over the course of his travels, he was exposed to and became increasingly critical of slaveholding. In the 1750s, he composed a two-part work denouncing slavery. His advocacy of abolitionism helped persuade the Philadelphia Quakers to officially endorse emancipation, and the Quakers became an important early antislavery force in America. He died of smallpox while visiting England in 1772.*

*Woolman was particularly conscious of the influence of custom, self-interest, and racism played into the persistence of slavery in America. In constructing his arguments to fellow Christians, he urged them to see how the moral imperfections of the slaveholders tempted them to rationalize slavery and the race and condition of the slaves in America encouraged whites to distance themselves from the humanity and suffering of the slaves. Seeing the evil of slavery clearly required stepping back from the familiar and perceiving what slavery involved with fresh eyes.*

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Men may pursue means which are not agreeable to perfect purity, with a view to increase the wealth and happiness of their offspring, and thereby make the way of virtue more difficult to them. And though the ill example of a parent, or a multitude, does not excuse a man in doing evil, yet the mind being early impressed with vicious notions and practices, and nurtured up in ways of getting treasure, which are not the ways of truth; this wrong spirit getting first possession, and being thus strengthened, frequently prevents due attention to the true spirit of wisdom, so that they exceed in wickedness those before them. And in this channel, though parents labor, as they think, to forward the happiness of their children, it proves a means of forwarding their calamity. . . .

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To suppose it right, that an innocent man shall at this day be excluded from the common rules of justice; be deprived of that liberty, which is the natural right of human creatures; and be a slave to others during life, on account of a sin committed by his immediate parents; or a sin committed by Ham, the son of Noah; is a supposition too gross to be admitted into the mind of any person, who sincerely desires to be governed by solid principles.

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That the liberty of man was, by the inspired Lawgiver, esteemed precious, appears in this; that such who unjustly deprived men of it, were to be punished in like manner as if they had murdered them. He that stealeth a man, and selleth him; or if he be found in his hand, shall surely be put to death. This

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<sup>1</sup> Excerpt taken from John Woolman, *Some Considerations on Keeping Negroes*, Vol .2 (Philadelphia: Franklin & Hall, 1762).

part of the law was so considerable, that Paul, the learned Jew, giving a brief account of the uses of the law, adds this, It was made for men-stealers, I *Tim.* 1:10.

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Some who keep slaves, have doubted as to the equity of the practice; but as they knew men, noted for their piety, who were in it, this, they say, has made their minds easy. To lean on the example of men in doubtful cases, is difficult: For only admit, that those men were not faithful and upright to the highest degree, but that in some particular case they erred, and it may follow that this one case was the same, about which we are in doubt; and to quiet our minds by their example, may be dangerous to ourselves; and continuing in it, prove a stumbling-block to tender-minded people who succeed us, in like manner as their examples are to us.

But supposing charity was their only motive, and they not foreseeing the tendency of paying robbers for their booty, were not justly under the Imputation of being partners with a thief, *Prov.* 29:24, but were really innocent in what they did, are we assured that we keep them with the same views they kept them? If we keep them from no other motive than a real sense of duty, and true charity governs us in all our proceedings toward them, we are so far safe: But if another spirit, which inclines our minds to the ways of this world, prevail upon us, and we are concerned for our own outward gain more than for their real happiness, it will avail us nothing that some good men have had the care and management of negroes.

Since mankind spread upon the earth, many have been the revolutions attending the several families, and their customs and ways of life different from each other. This diversity of manners, though some are preferable to others, operates not in favor of any, so far as to justify them to do violence to innocent men; to bring them from their own to another way of life. The mind, when moved by a principle of true love, may feel a warmth of gratitude to the universal Father, and a lively sympathy with those nations, where Divine Light has been less manifest.

This desire for their real good may beget a willingness to undergo hardships for their sakes, that the true knowledge of GOD may be spread amongst them: But to take them from their own land, with views of profit to ourselves, by means inconsistent with pure justice, is foreign to that principle which seeks the happiness of the whole Creation. Forced subjection, on innocent persons of full age, is inconsistent with right reason; on one side, the human mind is not naturally fortified with that firmness in wisdom and goodness, necessary to an independent ruler; on the other side, to be subject to the uncontrollable will of a man, liable to err, is most painful and afflicting to a conscientious creature.

It is our happiness faithfully to serve the Divine Being, who made us: His perfection makes our service reasonable; but so long as men are bluffed by narrow self-love, so long an absolute power over other men is unfit for them.

Men, taking on them the government of others, may intend to govern reasonably, and make their subjects more happy than they would be otherwise; but, as absolute command belongs only to him who is perfect, where frail men, in their own wills, assume such command, it hath a direct tendency to vitiate their minds, and make them more unfit for government.

Placing on men the ignominious title SLAVE, dressing them in uncomely garments, keeping them to servile labor, in which they are often dirty, tends gradually to fix a notion in the mind, that they are a sort of people below us in nature, and leads us to consider them as such in all our conclusions about them. And, moreover, a person which in our esteem is mean and contemptible, if their language or behavior toward us is unseemly or disrespectful, it excites wrath more powerfully than the like conduct in one we accounted our equal or superior; and where this happens to be the case, it disqualifies for candid judgment; for it is unfit for a person to sit as judge in a case where his own personal resentments are stirred up; and, as members of society in a well framed government, we are mutually dependent. Present interest incites to duty, and makes each man attentive to the convenience of others; but he whose will is a law to others, and can enforce obedience by punishment; he whose wants are supplied

without feeling any obligation to make equal returns to his benefactor, his irregular appetites find an open field for motion, and he is in danger of growing hard, and inattentive to their convenience who labor for his support; and so loses that disposition, in which alone men are fit to govern.

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It is a happy case to set out right, and persevere in the same way: A wrong beginning leads into many difficulties; for to support one evil, another becomes customary; two produces more; and the further men proceed in this way, the greater their dangers, their doubts and fears and the more painful and perplexing are their circumstances; so that such who are true friends to the real and lasting interest of our country, and candidly consider the tendency of things, cannot but feel some concern on this account.

There is that superiority in men over the brute creatures, and some of them so manifestly dependent on men for a living, that for them to serve us in moderation, so far as relates to the right use of things, looks consonant to the design of our Creator.

There is nothing in their frame, nothing relative to the propagating their species, which argues the contrary; but in men there is. The frame of men's bodies, and the disposition of their minds are different; some, who are tough and strong, and their minds active, choose ways of life requiring much labor to support them; others are soon weary; and though use makes labor more tolerable, yet some are less apt for toil than others, and their minds less sprightly. These latter laboring for their subsistence, commonly choose a life easy to support, being content with a little. When they are weary they may rest, take the most advantageous part of the day for labor; and in all cases proportion one thing to another, that their bodies be not oppressed.

Now, while each is at liberty, the latter may be as happy, and live as comfortably as the former; but where men of the first sort have the latter under absolute command, not considering the odds in strength and firmness, do, sometimes, in their eager pursuit, lay on burdens grievous to be borne; by degrees grow rigorous, and, aspiring to greatness, they increase oppression, and the true order of kind Providence is subverted.

There are weaknesses sometimes attending us, which make little or no alteration in our countenances, nor much lessen our appetite for food, and yet so affect us, as to make labor very uneasy. In such case masters, intent on putting forward business, and jealous of the sincerity of their slaves, may disbelieve what they say, and grievously afflict them.

Action is necessary for all men, and our exhausting frame requires a support, which is the fruit of action. The Earth must be labored to keep us alive: Labor is a proper part of our life; to make one answer the other in some useful motion, looks agreeable to the design of our Creator. Motion, rightly managed, tends to our satisfaction, health and support.

Those who quit all useful business, and live wholly on the labor of others, have their exercise to seek; some such use less than their health requires; others choose that which, by the circumstances attending it, proves utterly reverse to true happiness. Thus, while some are diverse ways distressed for want of an open channel of useful action, those who support them sigh, and are exhausted in a stream too powerful for nature, spending their days with too little cessation from labor.

Seed sown with the tears of a confined oppressed people, harvest cut down by an overborne discontented reaper, makes bread less sweet to the taste of an honest man, than that which is the produce, or just reward of such voluntary action, which is one proper part of the business of human creatures.

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He who reverently observes that goodness manifested by our gracious Creator toward the various species of beings in this world, will see, that in our frame and constitution is clearly shown that innocent men, capable to manage for themselves, were not intended to be slaves.

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Through the force of long custom, it appears needful to speak in relation to color.—Suppose a white child, born of parents of the meanest sort, who died and left him an infant, falls into the hands of a person, who endeavors to keep him a slave, some men would account him an unjust man in doing so, who yet appear easy while many black people, of honest lives, and good abilities, are enslaved, in a manner more shocking than the case here supposed. This is owing chiefly to the idea of slavery being connected with the black color, and liberty with the white:—And where false ideas are twisted into our minds, it is with difficulty we get fairly disentangled.

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Selfishness being indulged, clouds the understanding; and where selfish men, for a long time, proceed on their way, without opposition, the deceivableness of unrighteousness gets so rooted in their Intellects, that a candid examination of things relating to self-interest is prevented; and in this circumstance, some who would not agree to make a slave of a person whose color is like their own, appear easy in making slaves of others of a different color, though their understandings and morals are equal to the generality of men of their own color.

The color of a man avails nothing, in matters of right and equity. Consider color in relation to treaties; by such, disputes between nations are sometimes settled. And should the Father of us all so dispose things, that treaties with black men should sometimes be necessary, how then would it appear amongst the princes and ambassadors, to insist on the prerogative of the white color?

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Negroes are our fellow creatures, and their present condition amongst us requires our serious consideration. We know not the time when those scales, in which mountains are weighed, may turn. The Parent of mankind is gracious: His care is over his smallest creatures; and a multitude of men escape not his notice: And though many of them are trodden down, and despised, yet he remembers them: He sees their affliction, and looks upon the spreading increasing exaltation of the oppressor. He turns the channels of power, humbles the most haughty people, and gives deliverance to the oppressed, at such periods as are consistent with his infinite justice and goodness. And wherever gain is preferred to equity, and wrong things publicly encouraged to that degree, that wickedness takes root, and spreads wide amongst the inhabitants of a country, there is real cause for sorrow to all such, whose love to mankind stands on a true principle, and wisely consider the end and event of things.