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John Wesley and the political economy of enclosure

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John Wesley and the Political Economy of Enclosure

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Abstract

This article engages two pamphlets written by John Wesley in 1772, "Thoughts on the Origin of Power" and "Thoughts on the Present Scarcity of Provisions," in which he addressed issues of politics and economics. Wesley rejected republican understandings that power emanates from the people, arguing instead that God is the source of power, although his description of God as "governor" troubles the notion of sovereign power he upholds. This article describes this as an incongruency that need not be harmonized as it reveals how the shifting nature of power impacted Wesley's theology. Writing about the "scarcity of provisions," Wesley associated food inflation with the "monopolization of farmland," a process tied to land enclosures in Great Britain. This article argues that Wesley refused to recognize the power of "gentlemen farmers" as divine. In its conclusion, the article derives some lessons for political theology in dialogue with Wesley.

[1] I would like to express my sincerest gratitude to the two anonymous reviewers for their critique and encouragement of an earlier version of this essay. I would also like to thank the Theology and Ethics members of the Fifteenth Oxford Institute of Methodist Theological Studies, where this essay was first presented. Finally, I thank Stephen Nicholson for his thorough work on copyediting the piece and Kathy Armistead for administrative and editorial support.

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Introduction

Interest in John Wesley's political and economic perspectives captivates much of recent scholarship in Wesleyan studies as scholars in the field have offered contributions that range from an interest in systematizing Wesley's thoughts to interpreting its relevance for Methodist communities today.[2] Admittedly, this is a debate that transcends any interest in simply reconstructing Wesley's views, for it is clear that thinking with him about politics and economics implicates us in our own political and economic contexts. It is therefore symptomatic that an interest in Wesleyan political theology gains momentum in a time of rising political tension, deepening economic inequalities, and a surge of nationalist movements around the globe. Can a reading of Wesley inform and guide a response to the crises of our times? How does one read Wesley's thoughts on politics and economics in this landscape given the profound differences that separate us from his context?

In this article, I pursue the task of reading Wesley's thoughts on politics and political economy by focusing on a particular moment in his life and ministry. I am less interested in providing a systematic account of a Wesleyan political theology and more intrigued by observing how he negotiated his inherited theological views in a time of rapid and constant political and economic changes. This article will not narrate the details of Wesley's political and economic context, but rather attend to subtle shifts in theological accounts of power reflected in two of Wesley's political and economic writings.[3] My task is

[2] For a representative list of titles, see, Theodore R. Weber, *Politics in the Order of Salvation: New Directions in Wesleyan Political Ethics* (Nashville: Kingswood Books, 2001); Richard P. Heitzenrater, ed., *The Poor and the People Called Methodists* (Nashville: Kingswood Books, 2002); David Hempton, *Methodism: Empire of the Spirit* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005); Joerg Rieger, *Grace under Pressure: Negotiating the Heart of the Methodist Traditions* (Nashville: General Board of Higher Education and Ministry, The United Methodist Church, 2011); Joerg Rieger, *No Religion But Social Religion: Liberating Wesleyan Theology* (Nashville: Wesley's Foundery Books, 2018); Ryan Nicholas Danker, *Exploring a Wesleyan Political Theology* (Nashville: Wesley's Foundery Books, 2020); Glen O'Brien, *John Wesley's Political World,* Routledge Methodist Studies Series (Abingdon: Routledge, 2023).

[3] I have benefitted greatly from historical and social accounts of eighteenth-century Great Britain, but will have to keep my references to them to a minimum so as to retain my focus on Wesley's "Thoughts Concerning the Origin of Power" and "Thoughts on

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to read closely two essays that Wesley published in 1772, each responding to a perceived crisis in politics and in economics. I situate both essays in social crises of the 1770s, a context that led Wesley to reflect continuously on matters of politics and political economy.[4] The first, "Thoughts Concerning the Origin of Power," deals with different socio-political systems and makes a case that God is the only possible source of power.[5] Despite Wesley's confident appeal to divine sovereignty, I show that his use of the terminology of God as "Governor" is impacted by political shifts in the notion of governance and that the political theology he received from his Tory background is challenged by his own sense of divine power as co-operative. I suggest that there is an incongruency in the image of "government" when Wesley uses it to talk about political structure and when he uses it to talk about God. I take this incongruency as revealing and generative. It points to a change in the received notion of sovereign power that Wesley seeks to embrace even when his own theological imaginary responds—and embraces—a different view of power.

Next, I offer a reading of "Thoughts on the Present Scarcity of Provisions," an essay that showcases Wesley as a commentator on social reality and an interpreter of the economic condition in Great Britain as he offers his reasoning

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the Present Scarcity of Provisions." For studies that offer context to Wesley's social and political context, see Linda Colley, *In Defiance of Oligarchy: The Tory Party, 1714–60* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982); J. C. D. Clark, *English Society, 1660–1832 : Religion, Ideology, and Politics during the Ancien Régime, 2nd ed* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000); Hempton, *Methodism*; William Gibson, *Samuel Wesley and the Crisis of Tory Piety, 1685–1720* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021), https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780198870241.001.0001; O'Brien, *John Wesley's Political World.*

[4] According to the historian Glen O'Brien, between 1768 and 1772 Wesley turned to political matters in response to the unrest caused by the imprisonment of John Wilkes, a radical member of the British Parliament. O'Brien, *John Wesley's Political World*, 9. Similarly, this period was marked by significant economic turmoil and Wesley seems to have increased his attention to political economy, especially in the fall of 1772, just before he wrote on "Thoughts on the Present Scarcity of Provisions."

[5] John Wesley, "Thoughts Concerning the Origin of Power," in *The Works of John Wesley*, ed. Thomas Jackson, Thoughts, Addresses, Prayers, Letters, vol. XI (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1958), 46–53.

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for a spike in the price of food.[6] In one of his more poignant claims, Wesley names the "monopolizing of farms" as one of the root causes of food inflation in the country. By doing that, he touches on the historic process of land enclosure whereby farmland that could previously be used by small subsistence farmers is transferred to the hands of a small number of landowners. Land enclosure is knowingly related to social processes that led to the formation of industrial capitalism and appears to be in Wesley's mind in a moment marked by significant social and economic unrest. His critique of the "monopoly of farmland" is indicative of his suspicions against private property and of the land enclosure process in Great Britain.

These two essays, published just months apart, reveal how Wesley negotiated his theological heritage in a changing political and economic landscape. They also reveal some slippages, as I will try to indicate. Rather than treating these as inconsistencies that need to be corrected or systematized, I address them as openings that can indicate paths for a Wesleyan political theology that confronts the challenge of enclosure. By reading these pamphlets together, I hope to track how Wesley developed something akin to a socio-theological frame of analysis that allowed him to discern social evil. Moreover, I will be suggesting that Wesley's political and economic views were not immune from the radical transformations that were taking place in British society in the 1770s. At times, he sought to retrieve theological wisdom from the past so as to resist these changes. When describing economic crises, an exasperated Wesley often calls upon his fellow Methodists and Britons to repent and return to God. His evangelical piety beckons him to understand God's power in ways that contradict the calls for liberty, political rights, and democratic principles. On the other hand, a certain political theological intuition guides Wesley in

[6] John Wesley, "Thoughts on the Present Scarcity of Provisions," in *The Works of John Wesley*, ed. Thomas Jackson, Thoughts, Addresses, Prayers, Letters, vol. 11 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1958), 53–59. The pamphlet was first written as a letter to the editor of the *Lloyd's Evening Post* and later published as a pamphlet in early 1773. Robert Kingdon tracks further apparitions of the pamphlet in different newspapers in subsequent days. In addition to its publication in *Lloyd's Evening Post* on December 21, 1772, it also appears in *Leeds Mercury*, December 29, 1772 and in the *London Chronicle*, December 17–19, 1772. See Robert M. Kingdon, "Laissez-Faire or Government Control: A Problem for John Wesley," *Church History* 26, no. 4 (1957): 352, https://doi.org/10.2307/3161414.

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noticing the threat imposed by land enclosure and the monopolization of farmland at the height of the Industrial Revolution.

I will be arguing that Wesley's socio-theological response to this context was an effort to calibrate motifs in Christian theology to this reality. This negotiation is marked by some incongruencies, which I interpret as a sign that social and economic changes impacted Wesley's theology, even as he tried to retrieve motifs in Christian thought. I will argue that his reflections on divine sovereignty, though couched in a traditional interpretation of Christian political theology, bespeak some changes in how Wesley interpreted the power of God in a social landscape where republican ideals challenged the assumed power of monarchs and land enclosure transferred power away from the commons and into the hands of a few "gentlemen farmers." I will especially attend to slippages in Wesley's thinking on politics and suggest that these incongruencies in his writings may be a sign of a mind trying to negotiate the complexities of his own theological heritage and the perceived crises that his evangelical ministry presented to him. I describe Wesley as a keen observer of his social reality while also suggesting that, at times, his theological imaginary was challenged by political and economic changes occurring around him.

Sources of Power

"Thoughts Concerning the Origin of Power" starts with a definition that we will need to revisit time and again. For Wesley, power has to do with "supreme power, the power over life and death, and consequently over our liberty and property, and all things of an inferior nature."[7] Let us, tentatively, mark the following hypothesis: for Wesley, sovereign power must be located in a single source, God; and this supreme power over life and death has consequences for how one thinks of liberty and property. Wesley will unpack those implications in his attack on the republican principle that power emanates from the people, though his conclusions will not be as definitive as he may not intended them to be.

After offering this definition of power, Wesley asks himself about the source of power. He acknowledges the difficulty of the question and opts to answer it with an "experiment." "Let us (without pretending to dictate, but desiring every one to use his own judgment) try to find out some ground

[7] Wesley, *Works* (Jackson), 1958, 46.

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whereon to stand, and go as far as we can toward answering the question."[8] In response, let us note here that Wesley's offering of the experiment builds on a rather democratic principle of reasoning, which we may assume he takes from the Enlightenment tradition. Wesley does not want to "dictate" anything and invites his readers to draw their own conclusions. We will need to see if Wesley indeed carries out this hermeneutical principle at the conclusion of the essay.

It is unclear if the experiment has begun when Wesley writes, with a touch of sarcasm, that he "cannot but acknowledge" that he believes an "old book, commonly called the Bible, to be true."[9] From the old book, Wesley picks up the classic text of Christian political theology: "There is no power but from God: The powers that be are ordained by God" (Rom 13:1). Wesley derives from the Epistle to the Romans the claim that all authority on earth is derived from and authorized by God. Not surprisingly, sovereignty is named for the first time in the pamphlet right after the reference to Romans 13: "And there is no supreme power, no power of the sword, of life and death, but what is derived from God, the Sovereign of all."[10]

Wesley now embraces the experimental genre as he pushes a series of questions that seek to trouble the republican principle that power emanates from the people. If it is such, he wonders, how does one define what a people is? Who is entitled to give and take power? Wesley points out, not without insight, that all republican experiments of his time had a limiting view about who belongs to the power-giving and power-taking community. Women, youth, and people without property do not belong. "I ask," Wesley proceeds, "by what argument do you prove that women are not naturally as free as men?"[11] He suggests that the only possible explanation is based on force.[12] Wesley's quick overture into gender difference and patriarchal power is meant to demonstrate that the argument that power comes from the people is contradicted by the exclusion of women from the political realm. The same is true for people under twenty-one, who British law forbid from voting.[13] For Wesley, the inability to define what constitutes the "people" undermines the claim that power comes from the people.

[8] Wesley, 47.
[9] Wesley, 47.
[10] Wesley, 47–48.
[11] Wesley, 49.
[12] Wesley, 49.
[13] Wesley, 49.

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At this juncture, Wesley's experiment gains an intriguing tone as he addresses restrictions on voting against men who do not own property. English law only gives political rights to "freeholders," that is, men who make more than forty shillings a year. This economic hurdle to political rights interests Wesley, and the pamphlet shifts its attention from a matter of political representation to a debate around the material basis for democracy. Wesley writes, with renewed ironic flair: "After depriving half the human species of their natural right for want of a beard; after depriving myriads more for want of a stiff beard, for not having lived one-and-twenty years; you rob others (probably some hundred thousands) of their birthright for want of money!"[14]

Let us recall that Wesley is *not* experimenting with these questions to expose the limitations of democracy nor to demand universal suffrage. The question at stake for Wesley is that republicanism identifies the wrong source of power:

> See, now, to what your argument comes. You affirm, all power is derived from the people; and presently excluded one half of the people from having any part or lot in the matter. At another stroke, suppose England to contain eight millions of people, you exclude one or two millions more. At a third, suppose two millions left, you exclude three-fourths of these. And the poor pittance that remains, by I know not what figure of speech, you call the people of England![15]

Wesley's accounting of the percentages that constitute the "people" is the corollary to his experiment. Republican claims for power emanating from the people are based on gender, age, and class exclusions. By portraying the people as the source of power, republicanism will always fail to deliver on its promises. Hence, Wesley derives his conclusion: the people cannot be the true origin of power.

For Wesley, naming the wrong source of power is a capital mistake with grave consequences. He believes that his task in the essay is to retrieve the Pauline notion that the origin of power is God. Yet, the closing of "Thoughts Concerning the Origin of Power" uses an intriguing metaphor for God, which may interfere with Wesley's intention of reclaiming divine sovereignty as he believes it to be established by the Apostle Paul in Romans 13. In the final two paragraphs, Wesley states that no person has the right to dispose of their life for one cannot give what one does not have. We should recall here that the

[14] Wesley, 49–50.
[15] Wesley, 50.

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essay opens with a definition of power that associates power over life with "supreme power." Wesley proceeds to say:

> The Creator of man has the sole right to take the life which he gave… It plainly follows, that no man can give to another a right which he never had himself; a right which only the Governor of the world has… No man therefore can give the power of the sword, any such power as implies a right to take away life. Whatever it is, it must descend from God alone, the sole disposer of life and death.[16]

Wesley is clearly rejecting the principle of natural rights, suggesting instead that whatever claim we might have to give or take something must be derivative, not natural.

This position is aligned with the political theology adopted by Tory politicians and church leaders in the eighteenth century. In it, God's power is established from on high and "biblical tenets" demand obedience to the monarchy and the political order established by it.[17] As historian J. C. D. Clark remarks, the political theology embraced by Wesley in "Thoughts Concerning the Origin of Power" is a "standard Anglican" position against the contractarian theory regarding the origins of government.[18] The view embraces passive obedience and accepts that the British Constitution and the monarchy that it upholds has been instituted by God. As long as the sovereign rules according to the Constitution, no rebellion against him or her is justifiable.[19]

However, in the closing paragraphs of "Thoughts Concerning the Origin of Power," Wesley goes from referring to God as the "Creator" to then calling upon God as "Governor." Wesley's use of the term is consistent with Anglican eighteenth-century liturgical sources and coheres with the political theology of his epoch.[20] Yet, in the sentence that I am about to cite, one notices that the reference to "governors" refers to political subjects chosen by the people. Wesley writes: "The supposition, then, that the people are the origin of power, is every way indefensible. It is absolutely overturned by the very principle on which it is supposed to stand; namely, that a right of choosing Governors

[16] Wesley, 52.

[17] Gibson, *Samuel Wesley and the Crisis of Tory Piety, 1685–1720*, 4.

[18] J. C. D. Clark, *English Society 1688–1832: Religion, Ideology and Politics During the Ancien Régime* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 288.

[19] Clark, *English Society*, 293.

[20] The Book of Common Prayer often refers to God as "Governor of all things" and includes a series of prayers to the "governors of the nation." It is also notable that the king and queen are referred to as "Supreme Governors of the Church of England."

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belongs to every partaker of human nature."[21] Here, the use of the principle of governance stands in contrast to Wesley's previous application of the term in reference to God. In the former, God as Governor suggests a stable view of power against the principle of natural rights. In the latter, governance is used in reference to the ability to select representatives. These are not synonymous uses of the term, and Wesley's position is that only a power coming from God can constitute a true governor. It is indisputable that Wesley wants to align himself with the Tory political theology and its vision of government, one that recognizes that power is given by God to the sovereign of the nation, who is then equipped to administer properly this divine gift to his or her subjects. Still, Wesley recognizes that some "governors" are chosen by the people. He disputes the notion that this is a natural right but appears to accept the fact that the authority to govern has been given to some by the people. Is the power to select them as leaders also derived from God and, if so, why is this gift offered to the people and not to the sovereign of the nation? And what about Wesley's experiment and his desire not to impose any conclusions?

Let this question serve as the mark of an incongruence that may reveal an opening in Wesley's text. As we come to the closing paragraph of "Thoughts Concerning the Origin of Power," we are now witnessing Wesley's final attack against natural rights and the republican principle of representative power. For Wesley, despite claims that power comes from the people, no one has ever defended universal suffrage. He predicts no one ever will. The confidence with which Wesley makes the prediction is strange, at least for those of us who have seen the expansion of political rights to include more people in the decision-making process as well as to those of us who know the grave perils and social suffering when these political rights are interrupted or unduly restricted. But even stranger is the abrupt ending to Wesley's essay. By pointing out the exclusion in the republican notion of the people, Wesley believes that he has achieved something much larger that brings to the ground the "whole superstructure" of republicanism. His conclusion is that power cannot come from the people. And so, he closes the tract with a confident note: "So common sense brings us back to the grand truth, 'There is no power but of God.'"[22]

Is this return to Romans as definitive as Wesley portrays it to be? It appears that the appeal to common sense shows more of a desire to close the argument than confidence in the conclusion to his thought experiment. If earlier in the pamphlet Wesley introduced the experiment and invited readers to formulate

[21] Wesley, *Works* (Jackson), 1958, 52–53.
[22] Wesley, 53.

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their own opinions, this conclusion suggests much lesser interest in readers' ability to do so. The appeal to "common sense" runs against the experiment and functions as a rather clear demarcation of authority, as if Wesley himself felt connected to the source of sovereign power. The essay on the origin on power thus claims that power must come from God, and Wesley seems to want to wield that power in naming that his conclusion is as self-evident as common sense. The virulence of the rhetoric may also obscure some misgivings that Wesley harbors against a sovereignty construed as a unilateral power from God, a theme that we will explore shortly.

Theodore Weber points out that the identification of divine power, from above, is a non-negotiable in Wesley. And, as Weber correctly stresses, this poses problems for Wesley's readers:

> [No] amount or quality of research can exorcise the fundamental problem with Wesley's political thought, namely, his antidemocratic, antirepublican sentiments—his exclusion of the people from political responsibility and involvement and from any role in the conferring of authorization for the use of governmental power. No aggressive investigation, no artful revisionism can overcome the fact that Wesley denied political role to the people, and that he never wavered from this conviction. What makes this stance especially intractable is that he grounded it theologically, and not only in the alleged lack of competence of the people to comprehend and prescribe for the complicated issues of public policy. In Wesley's unwavering view, authority for governing derives from God, is conferred by God on the one or ones at the peak of political responsibility in the society, and is delegated by them to lower functionaries. Authority moves from above to below, not from below to above.[23]

Weber's points are necessary in posing the problem that whatever political theology one would like to take from the Wesleyan inheritance will need to wrestle with and very likely disavow some of the main political ideas that Wesley upheld. This is particularly true in an age of rising authoritarianism, violent nationalism, and fascist reoccurrence. Democracies to come will face renewed challenges, and it appears that a Wesleyan political theology cannot hesitate to disown some of Wesley's deeply-held political views. It is possible that his fundamentally vertical images for divine sovereignty will need to go as well.

While it is true that no "artful revisionism" can deny Wesley's antidemocratic preferences, the task of observing some of his slippages is still worth the effort. For my part, I am less surprised to notice that Wesley grounded his

[23] Weber, *Politics in the Order of Salvation*, 32.

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antidemocratic ideas theologically—perhaps because we are surrounded by so many iterations of authoritarian and fascist forms of Christian nationalism that also base their political theology in a reading of Romans 13. Rather, I am more intrigued by the curious deployment of a democratic idiom precisely at the moment in "Thoughts Concerning the Origin of Power" when Wesley is trying to repudiate republicanism. Above, I refer to his metaphor for God as "Governor of the world."[24] It is noteworthy that the word appears twice in the two closing paragraphs of the essay, each functioning on very different registers. First, Governor stands in as the name for God as the sovereign from whom power comes. Then, Wesley appears to deploy the republican use of the term as in the governors that are chosen by the people to rule a country. By offering the contrast, Wesley appears to demand the subordination of the latter to the former, in consort with his general argument that all power on earth is derived from God. In sum, the Governor above grants power to governors here below.

But Wesley's own reflections on God as "Governor of the world" are not as easily reduced to this scheme. Randy Maddox has suggested that pairing God as Creator and God as Governor is a common feature of Wesley's writings on sovereignty. There is no divine attribute that has intrigued Wesley more than sovereignty, Maddox claims, though Wesley's distinct take on it is nuanced by his overriding concern to depict "God's power not to be defined or defended in any way that undercuts human responsibility."[25] Here, the distinction between creation and governance is instrumental in allowing Wesley to stress how God's power as "governor" is never unilateral, but a force that allows and empowers human activity. Maddox argues that the best way to capture Wesley's views on sovereignty is to "say that he construed God's power or sovereignty fundamentally in terms of *empowerment*, rather than control or *overpowerment*. This is not to weaken God's power but to determine its character!"[26]

This sensibility appears to be operative but not fleshed out in "Thoughts Concerning the Origin of Power," where Wesley presents the distinction between God's attributes as creator and governor while associating the latter with the task of selecting governors for a nation. He must insist that the "right" to choose governors is not natural to humans. To do that, however, he needs to

[24] John Wesley, *The Works of John Wesley*, ed. Thomas Jackson, Thoughts, Addresses, Prayers, Letters, vol. 11 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1958), 11:52.

[25] Randy L. Maddox, *Responsible Grace: John Wesley's Practical Theology* (Nashville: Kingswood Books, 1994), 54.

[26] Maddox, 55.

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neglect that the "responsibility" to choose is inscribed in all people as a gift from God's grace.

After exposing the limitations of the republican stance on power, Wesley believes he has reached the necessary common-sensical position that identifies God as the sovereign and the source of all power. Yet, as Weber observes, "[common] sense… does not bring us back necessarily to God as the source of authority, once Wesley has demolished the case for the popular sources. It may bring us simply to the arbitrariness of power."[27] But this arbitrary dimension of power is exactly what Wesley does not want to uphold when considering God as "governor." In the sermon "On Divine Providence," Wesley explicitly rejects the notion of a unilateral, top-down view of governance:

> [God] is infinite in wisdom as well as in power: And all his wisdom is continually employed in managing all the affairs of his creation for the good of all his creatures. For his wisdom and goodness go hand in hand: They are inseparably united, and continually act in concert with Almighty power, for the real good of all his creatures. His power being equal to his wisdom and goodness, continually co-operates with them… And we cannot doubt of his exerting all his power, as in sustaining, so in governing, all that he has made… For he created man in his own image: A spirit like himself; a spirit endued with understanding, with will or affections, and liberty; without which, neither his understanding nor his affections could have been of any use, neither would he have been capable either of vice or virtue… If, therefore, God were thus to exert his power, there would certainly be no more vice; but it is equally certain, neither could there be any virtue in the world. Were human liberty taken away, men would be as incapable of virtue as stones. Therefore, (with reverence be it spoken,) the Almighty himself cannot do this thing. He cannot thus contradict himself, or undo what he has done. He cannot destroy out of the soul of man that image of himself wherein he makes him: And without doing this, he cannot abolish sin and pain out of the world. But were it to be done, it would imply no wisdom at all; but barely a stroke of omnipotence. Whereas all the manifold wisdom of God (as well as all his power and goodness) is displayed in governing man as man; not as a stock or stone, but as an intelligent and free spirit, capable of choosing either good or evil. Herein appears the depth of the wisdom of God, in his adorable providence; in governing men, so as not to destroy either their understanding, will, or liberty. He commands all things, both in heaven and earth, to assist man in attaining the end of his being, in working out his own

[27] Weber, *Politics in the Order of Salvation*, 187.

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> salvation, so far as it can be done without compulsion, without over-ruling his liberty.[28]

The attribute of God as "governor" appears here as an empowering mechanism, a way in which God acts to empower human agency without ever "destroying" the human ability and responsibility to choose. In the sermon, Wesley very directly depicts divine governance and God's power in "co-operative" terms, as a co-operation between wisdom and goodness.[29] Moreover, divine power is limited by God's own attribute as creator of humanity as Wesley speaks of God as being unable to "contradict himself" by curtailing human liberty.

Wesley's use of the word "Governor," both in the sermon above as in his "Thoughts Concerning the Origin of Power," is contaminated by a political context that Wesley is trying to disavow but that keeps coming back to him. In his attempt to persuade his imagined adversaries of the futility of the notion of power emanating from the people, Wesley's essay must borrow a common idiom from republicanism to make his case for divine sovereignty. Likewise, he must rhetorically position his argument in favor of the divine origin of sovereign power through a notably democratic "experiment," which he needs to abort precisely at the moment he concludes his attack on natural rights. In the political theology one can distill from these texts from Wesley, the very image of God as Governor does not presume the general features of a sovereign who simply takes life away by a "stroke of omnipotence." While he professes the more traditional interpretation of Romans 13, Wesley's political theology is already touched by a view of power that echoes the political environment from which he speaks. Sovereign power, as the power to give and take life, is undergoing changes and Wesley's preferences appear to reflect these changes, despite his best efforts to cling to sovereignty.

As I have been suggesting, I do not perceive the apparent incoherence between Wesley's insistence on a sovereign God and his antidemocratic stance as a contradiction that needs to be straightened out. Rather, I see the incongruency as a symptom of a shift in power that is reflected in Wesley's theology.

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[28] John Wesley, *Sermons II, 34–70,* ed. Albert C. Outler, vol. 2, *The Bicentennial Edition of the Works of John Wesley* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1985), 540.

[29] Wesley's emphasis on the "co-operative" dimension of God's power brings to mind Joerg Rieger's work on worker cooperatives and theology. For a brief summary of Rieger's work, see "For the Transformation of the World: Worker Cooperatives and Faith Communities," (October 8, 2020), https://www.joergrieger.com/blog-home/forthetransformationoftheworld.

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The slippages in his writings on power and governance are signs of negotiations between his inherited political theology, on the one hand, and a new concept of power that was being shaped as republicanism gained traction in the British context, on the other. As I am about to suggest, changes in the flow of power are also tangible in the centralization of land in the hand of monopoly farmers. As power and access to agricultural land starts to be concentrated in the hands of a handful of "gentlemen farmers," peasants are forced out of the commons and into precarious labor conditions in urban centers. Wesley tracks these changes in his attack on the "monopolizing" of farmland. As we turn our attention to Wesley's commentary on the scarcity of provisions, written not too long after his thoughts on the origin of power, the issue of sovereign power will not be posed, but it will be discernible in Wesley's attacks on the monopolization of farmland.

Against Enclosure

If in "Thoughts Concerning the Origin of Power" Wesley is concerned about origins, "Thoughts on the Present Scarcity of Provisions" is concerned about causes. Wesley inquires after the causes of the present scarcity of provisions. In his definition of power in the former essay, Wesley had included the question of property, a theme that will be central to his social analysis in the latter essay. Power for Wesley, we recall, is defined as the "supreme power, the power over life and death, and consequently over our liberty and property."[30] No question regarding property is posed directly in the essay on the scarcity of provisions, but a concern over the power of some landlords over farmland will appear as one of the causes Wesley names for food inflation in England. In the "Scarcity" pamphlet, Wesley appears to question the claim that "gentleman farmers" make over a land that is given by God, which raises the question: how does his previous definition of power align with Wesley's suppositions about property and farm monopolies?

"Thoughts on the Present Scarcity of Provisions" is widely known by commentators interested in Wesley's views on social and economic issues.[31]

[30] Wesley, *Works* (Jackson), 1958, 46.

[31] Though comments on "Thoughts on the Recent Scarcity of Provisions" are ample, O'Brien is probably correct when he suggests that there is a gap in the literature on Wesley's political and economic writings, one that he hopes might be addressed with the publication of the planned volume 15 of *The Bicentennial Edition of the Works of John Wesley*. See O'Brien, *John Wesley's Political World*, 1.

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References to it are a part of classics in Wesleyan ethics, such as Kathleen Walker MacArthur's *The Economic Ethics of John Wesley* and Leon Hynson's, *To Reform the Nation*, as well as historical engagements with Methodism, such as Bernard Semmel's *The Methodist Revolution*.[32] More recently, the pamphlet is mentioned in renewed engagements in Wesleyan theology and social ethics, such as Theodore Runyon's *The New Creation*, Theodore Weber's *Politics in the Order of Salvation*, and Joerg Rieger's *No Religion But Social Religion*.[33] Wesley's essay also features prominently in Ted Jennings' *Good News to the Poor*, a book that sought to establish a strong connection between Wesley's theology and ministry with the insights and commitments of liberation theology.[34] Scholars have also signaled to the pamphlet to argue for Wesley's contributions to political and public theology.[35] This lists ought to suggest that there is an established tradition of reading "Thoughts on the Present Scarcity of Provisions" as a central text in Wesley's engagement with political economy.

The 1770s was a decade of significant economic distress in Great Britain and one can see the impact that this context had on Wesley by tracking the themes he addressed in his sermons and letters in the period. Albert Outler stresses how economic motifs occupy a great number of Wesley's sermons in the period between 1776–1790, going as far as to suggest that this could be perceived as a "vigorous" and "even strident" critique of Adam Smith's "defense

[32] Kathleen Walker. MacArthur, *The Economic Ethics of John Wesley* (New York: Abingdon Press, 1936), 105–12; Leon O. Hynson, *To Reform the Nation: Theological Foundations of Wesley's Ethics* (Grand Rapids: Francis Asbury Press, 1984); Bernard Semmel, *The Methodist Revolution* (New York: Basic Books, 1973).

[33] Theodore. Runyon, *The New Creation: John Wesley's Theology Today* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1998), 186–89; Weber, *Politics in the Order of Salvation*; Rieger, *No Religion But Social Religion*, 6–7, 20–21.

[34] Theodore W. Jennings, *Good News to the Poor: John Wesley's Evangelical Economics* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1990).

[35] David N. Field, "John Wesley as a Public Theologian: The Case of Thoughts upon Slavery," *Scriptura* 114 (2015): 8; Gregory P. Van Buskirk, "Stewardship and Response: The Moral-Theological Heart of John Wesley's Economics," *Wesley and Methodist Studies* 13, no. 1 (2021): 4, https://doi.org/10.5325/weslmethstud.13.1.0001; Ryan N. Danker, "Social and Political Thought," in *The Routledge Companion to John Wesley*, ed. Clive Murray Norris and Joseph W. (Joseph William) Cunningham, Routledge Religion Companions (Abingdon: Routledge, 2024), 242, https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003037972.

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of surplus accumulation" in *The Wealth of Nations*, published in 1776.[36] Though there is no direct evidence that Wesley read Smith, it is clear that he tracked closely the economic conditions of Great Britain in the period and derived significant conclusions from his observations. This reality was high on Wesley's mind and ministry in the fall of 1772 when he visited Norwich (26 October) and observed an unusually large crowd attending the Methodist field preaching, a fact that led him to the conclusion that the people were jobless.[37] At Colchester on 3 November, Wesley noted how the Methodist society there is poor and there is "greater want than ever through scarcity of business."[38] By the end of the year, Wesley demonstrated his exasperation, writing in his *Journal* on 31 December: "Being greatly embarrassed by the necessities of the poor, we spread all our wants before God in prayer, believing that he would sooner 'make windows in heaven' than suffer his truth to fail."[39] Finally, on 8 January, 1773, Wesley spends the day fasting and praying "on the account of the general want of trade and scarcity of provisions."[40]

It is in this context that Wesley writes his "Thoughts on the Present Scarcity of Provisions." The pamphlet marks Wesley's interest in the incipient discipline of political economy as he offers commentary on the economic reality in Great Britain, tries to identify the causes of food inflation and scarcity, as well as offering solutions to ameliorate the situation.

W. Reginald Ward and Richard Heitzenrater describe Wesley's attitude toward poverty in the months leading up to the publication of the pamphlet as a "mixture of indignation, practical assistance, and pietism."[41] There is little doubt that indignation was the major effect behind Wesley's idea of writing "Scarcity of Provisions." In his typical style, he opens the pamphlet with his first-hand observation of poverty, exemplified by his eye-witness account of people scavenging for food in the streets of London and his awareness of rampant unemployment in several parts of the country. Wesley interpreted that

[36] Albert Cook Outler, *The Wesleyan Theological Heritage: Essays of Albert C. Outler*, ed. Thomas C. Oden and Leicester R. Longden (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1991), 117.

[37] John Wesley, *Journal and Diaries V (1765–1775)*, ed. W. Reginald Ward and Richard P. Heitzenrater, vol. 22, *The Bicentennial Edition of the Works of John Wesley* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1993), 350; see O'Brien, *John Wesley's Political World*, 152.

[38] Wesley, *Works*, 1993, 22:352.

[39] Wesley, 22:357.

[40] Wesley, 22:358.

[41] Wesley, 22:350, fn. 46.

Published in *Methodist Review: A Journal of Wesleyan and Methodist Studies*
ISSN: 1946-5254 (online) • URL: www.methodistreview.org

food scarcity was related to massive unemployment as he noticed that people lacked food and resources because they had no work.[42] And people are without employment because their employers could no longer pay workers, which led to massive layoffs. For Wesley, this is due primarily to food inflation.[43] This interest in the price of food is what launches Wesley's social analysis after the causes for generalized scarcity.

For Wesley, there are four main causes for this scenario. The first is distilling, a business that uses most of the corn and wheat in the country for the production of whiskey and gin. Wesley calculates that close to half of the wheat produced in England goes into distilling, which amounts to "converting [wheat] into a deadly poison; poison that naturally destroys not only the strength and life, but also the morals, of our countrymen."[44] A second cause for food inflation is that oats and other sorts of grains are grown to feed horses intended for coaches and chaises of the British elite.[45] Breeding horses is also responsible for meat inflation as fewer and fewer farmers raise sheep and cattle, opting instead for the more profitable business of horse breeding. A third cause is named for the rise in the price of pork, poultry, and eggs, which Wesley identified as the "monopolizing of farms." He describes it as "perhaps as mischievous a monopoly as was ever introduced into these kingdoms."[46] Wesley's reading of this social phenomenon is rather brief, but not devoid of insight:

> The land which was some years ago divided between ten or twenty little farmers, and enabled them comfortably to provide for their families, is now generally engrossed by one great farmer. One farms an estate of a thousand a year, which formerly maintained ten or twenty. Every one of these little farmers kept a few swine, with some quantity of poultry; and having little money, was glad to send his bacon, or pork, or fowls and eggs to market continually. Hence the markets were plentifully served; and plenty created cheapness. But at present, the great, the gentlemen-farmers are above attending to these little things. They breed no poultry or swine; unless for their own use; consequently they send none to market. Hence it is not strange if two or three of these, living near a market-town, occasion such a scarcity of

[42] Wesley, *Works* (Jackson), 1958, 54.
[43] Wesley, 54.
[44] Wesley, 55.
[45] Wesley, 55.
[46] Wesley, 56.

Published in *Methodist Review: A Journal of Wesleyan and Methodist Studies*
ISSN: 1946-5254 (online) • URL: www.methodistreview.org

> these things, by preventing the former supply, that the price of them is double or treble to what it was before.[47]

It is likely that economists might consider the price analysis Wesley is conducting to be naïve and inaccurate.[48] Some readers have suggested that Wesley does not consider how the expansion and monopolization of farmland allowed for greater productivity, more innovation in agriculture, ultimately leading to reduced food prices. But these arguments stage an economic mode of calculation that is not present in Wesley and they miss the type of socio-theological analysis he is conducting here. As I have been stressing, Wesley is never too far from a concern about power. In this case, what intrigues him is land ownership and the monopolization of farmland, a social process he views with grave suspicion. Add to this the fact that Wesley also attributes food inflation to "luxury" and the wasteful lifestyle of the "nobility and gentry."[49] Wesley's attention to the issue of landownership leads him to the center of the social crisis of the 1770s and makes him a keen observer of the impact of land enclosure in Great Britain. We shall return to this theme momentarily.

The fourth cause for food inflation are taxes levied by the government. Wesley complains about the explosion of the national debt and its use to pay for "ridiculous" pensions of "some hundreds idle men, as Governors of forts and castles; which forts have answered no end for above these hundred years, unless to shelter jackdaws and crows."[50] In summary, Wesley concludes the first section of the pamphlet writing: "Thousands of people throughout the land are perishing for want of food. This is owing to various causes but above all, to distilling, taxes, and luxury."[51]

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[47] Wesley, 56.

[48] This is the case for Ward and Heitzenrater, who associate food inflation with the "difficulties" in industrializing farmland and food production in Great Britain in the period. Wesley, *Works*, 1993, 22:350, fn. 46. O'Brien describes Wesley's economic analysis as "naïve," though he credits Wesley for understanding the "systemic impact of economic and trade practices on the general population" and for offering "practical solutions designed to ease the pressure on the poor." O'Brien, *John Wesley's Political World*, 12. Manfred Marquardt has a similar view: "As the pronouncements of a lay economist, [Wesley's] study, its conclusions, and its corrective proposals, are in part naïve, sketchy, and unrealizable." Manfred Marquardt, *John Wesley's Social Ethics: Praxis and Principles* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1992), 44.

[49] Wesley, *Works* (Jackson), 1958, 57.

[50] Wesley, 58–59.

[51] Wesley, 57.

Published in *Methodist Review: A Journal of Wesleyan and Methodist Studies*
ISSN: 1946-5254 (online) • URL: www.methodistreview.org

For Wesley, this reality is "evil" and he set out to launch his proposals of solutions to generalized scarcity. He first proposes to impose a ban on distillers in hopes that corn, wheat, and other grains would flow to people's plates and not into their adult beverages. "By prohibiting for ever, by making a full end of that bane of health, that destroyer of strength, of life, and of virtue," Wesley predicts that much of the problem of food inflation would be solved. Second, Wesley proposes to reduce horse breeding in England by imposing a tax on horses exported to France and one on "gentlemen's carriages." These provisions would allow for the price of meat to fall as more pasture would be used to raise sheep and cattle. Third, and perhaps this is his boldest proposal, Wesley proposes to put a limit to the size of farms, which he associates with putting an end to luxury, "whether by laws, by example, or by both."[52] Finally, Wesley proposes to discharge the national debt in half by cutting luxurious expenses and thus reducing the amount of government monies used to pay the interest for the national debt.

As different scholars have noticed, Wesley's positions in "Scarcity of Provisions" put him at odds with the founding principles of bourgeois political economy. C. Robert Haywood asked in the 1960s whether Wesley's pamphlet makes him a political economist; and, if so, what position he sustains vis-à-vis the reigning mercantilism of his time and the rising theory of market equilibrium and self-interest provided by Adam Smith.[53] Haywood compares Wesley's position to Smith's, noting that their starkest disagreement would be related to their stances on land enclosure. Wesley bemoans how farmland has been privatized and shows no sign of sympathy for "gentlemen farmers." Smith, on the other hand, understood that if corn had been more lucrative, land designated for horse breeding would immediately be turned toward the production of corn. Smith held that the market regulates itself and the present scarcity of provisions Wesley worried about would be fixed by market forces.[54] Furthermore, Thomas William Madron emphasizes Wesley's differences with John Locke's emphasis on property as an "unalienable right." Wesley thought that property is not a right, but rather a temporary privilege bound to stewardship and the proper administration of God's gift to humanity.[55] Madron observes,

[52] Wesley, 58.

[53] C. Robert Haywood, "Was John Wesley a Political Economist?" *Church History* 33, no. 3 (1964): 314–21, https://doi.org/10.2307/3162642.

[54] Haywood, 318.

[55] Thomas William Madron, "Some Economic Aspects of John Wesley's Thought Revisited" (Association of Methodist Historical Societies, 1965), 36, *Methodist*

"[Wesley's] position is related not only to [his] view that God gave property to all men in common, but also to that aspect of his theology dealing with sanctification and man's capabilities after Christian conversion."[56] These facts may not signal that Wesley was an "early day English socialist," Madron concludes, but they do point out "the depth to which Wesley thought the principle of the stewardship of property should go."[57] Theodore Weber concurs as he suggests that Wesley's economic writings in the fall of 1772 cannot be disregarded as a one-off venture into political economy, but as reflective of "Wesley's deep and abiding concern for the poor, his suspicion of economic power, and his openness to the ranging concerns of government."[58] Edgardo Colón-Emeric draws a parallel between Wesley's critique of farm monopolies to Oscar Romero's ministry in El Salvador. "Admittedly," he writes, "Wesley does not propose a plan for land redistribution, but his call for restraining luxury and limiting the size of estates points in this direction."[59] For Glen O'Brien, while it is true that Wesley "had no opposition to trade or commerce, there is a profound social conscience in all his writings on economic conditions."[60] It appears clear that this "social conscience" and his overall socio-theological frame of analysis

History, http://hdl.handle.net/10516/1376. A slightly altered version of this same essay appeared as "John Wesley on Economics" in Theodore Runyon, ed., *Sanctification and Liberation: Liberation Theologies in the Light of the Wesleyan Tradition* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1981), 102–15.

[56] Madron, "Some Economic Aspects of John Wesley's Thought Revisited," 37. Madron further suggests that this principle informed Wesley's intention to require all Methodist preachers to hold property in common, something he included in his proposal to the first Methodist Conference of 1744. One Methodist preacher, Richard Viney, reported conversing with Wesley about the matter and stressing that his proposal would be equivalent to the socialist formula, "from each according to his ability, to each according to his need." It appears that this plan was not well received by the conference, which led to what Madron refers to as Wesley's "compromise" position, the one that would become the famous Wesleyan maxim of "gaining all you, saving all you can, and giving all you can." Madron, 37–38.

[57] Madron, 38.

[58] Weber, *Politics in the Order of Salvation*, 297.

[59] Edgardo Colón-Emeric, "The Word of Reconciliation: A Wesleyan Perspective on Public Theology," in *Exploring a Wesleyan Political Theology*, ed. Ryan Nicholas Danker (Nashville: Wesley's Foundery Books, 2020), 143 fn. 34. Runyon draws a similar parallel between Wesley's account of farm monopoly and the situation of Latin American societies in the twentieth-century. See Runyon, *The New Creation: John Wesley's Theology Today*, 186–87.

[60] O'Brien, *John Wesley's Political World*, 204.

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inform Wesley's resistance to land enclosure and the monopolizing of farmland in England.

Enclosure meant that open fields adjacent to villages were privatized. Previously, this land had been open to the use of villagers and peasants who could cultivate the land for their subsistence. Economic historians have shown that common rights and direct access to fields, marshes, and wastes was a central component for the subsistence of cottagers and squatters all the way to the eighteenth century.[61] O'Brien offers some perspective on the magnitude of this process: between 1700 and 1760, 312,000 acres were demarcated, a number that exploded to 5,500,000 acres by 1840.[62] This amounted to a profound transformation in the English landscape, its ecology, and food production. "Not since the introduction of the open fields in early medieval times had the character of large swathes of land changed so radically," writes historian Shirley Wittering.[63] Enclosure laws, as Theodore Runyon writes, gave landowners "absolute" rights and "authorized them to fence off their lands, denying access to what had been common lands where the peasants could graze their animals and plant their small vegetable plots, and thus be largely self-sufficient."[64] As enclosure law came into effect and access to land privatized, communities that relied on it were deprived of means of subsistence and income. The impact was especially harsh on women and children whose access to the land was essential to the family's subsistence.

A century after Wesley published his attacks on farm monopolies, Karl Marx devoted a full chapter in *Capital* to the theme of land enclosures where he echoed the attacks on the monopolization of farmland. The commentary comes in the context of Marx's discussion of "primitive accumulation," a social process that precedes and is indispensable to the formation capital. Famously,

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[61] Jane Humphries, "Enclosures, Common Rights, and Women: The Proletarianization of Families in the Late Eighteenth and Early Nineteenth Centuries," *The Journal of Economic History* 50, no. 1 (1990): 19, https://doi.org/10.1017/S0022050700035701; Gilbert Slater, *The English Peasantry and the Enclosure of Common Fields.*, Reprints of Economic Classics. (New York: A. M. Kelley, 1968); J. M. Martin, "Village Traders and the Emergence of a Proletariat in South Warwickshire, 1750–1851," *Agricultural History Review* 32, no. 2 (1984): 179–88.

[62] O'Brien, *John Wesley's Political World*, 153.

[63] Shirley Wittering, *The Ecology of Enclosure: The Effect of Enclosure on Society, Farming and the Environment in South Cambridgeshire, 1798–1850* (Oxford, England: Windgather Press, 2013), 83.

[64] Runyon, *The New Creation: John Wesley's Theology Today*, 186.

Marx compared primitive accumulation to the role played by original sin in Christian theology.[65] He highlighted how earlier processes of land enclosure, from the fifteenth to the sixteenth centuries, were marked by "individual acts of violence." In the eighteenth century, however, land enclosure becomes a legal process, endorsed and advanced by the British Parliament. "[The] law itself," Marx writes, "now becomes the instrument by which the people's land is stolen."[66] Marx concludes his discussion on the expropriation of the agricultural population in *Capital* with chilling words:

> The spoliation of the Church's property, the fraudulent alienation of state domains, the theft of the common lands, the usurpation of feudal and clan property and its transformation into modern private property under circumstances of ruthless terrorism, all these things were just so many idyllic methods of primitive accumulation. They conquered the field for capitalist agriculture, incorporated the soil into capital, and created for the urban industries the necessary supplies of free and rightless proletarians.[67]

Marx's comments offer an incisive account of the turmoil that provided the social context in which Methodism was born. It also adds helpful perspective as to how Wesley's attacks on farm monopolies put him at odds with the very structures of British government that he is believed to have endorsed with such piety and confidence. While it is true that the level of critique one finds in Marx can never be found in Wesley, it remains salient that his commentary on the food scarcity reads enclosure as a grave social evil.

Silvia Federeci took her cue from some of Marx's insights to point out that the enclosure of communal ownership created the conditions for the collapse of subsistence economies of pre-capitalist Europe. This collapse, in turn, imposed a very clear role for women in the non-compensated and "valueless" role of reproductive labor. In this setting, "production-for-market was defined as value-creating activity, whereas the reproduction of the worker began to be considered as valueless from an economic viewpoint and even ceased to be considered as work… [The] separation of commodity production from the reproduction of labor-power also made possible the development of a specifically capitalist use of the wage and of the markets as means for the

[65] Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, trans. Ben Fowkes, vol. 1 (New York: Penguin Books, 1990), 873.

[66] Marx, 1:885.

[67] Marx, 1:895.

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ISSN: 1946-5254 (online) • URL: www.methodistreview.org

accumulation of unpaid labor."[68] This attention to social reproduction and its role in the formation and expansion of capitalism marks Federici's point of departure from Marx, who treated reproduction as a "natural fact" as opposed to a social fact, indeed as a form of labor.[69] Federici goes on to suggest that land enclosure was followed by a certain socialization of the female body. In pre-capitalist Europe, she argues, women were debased but they had the commons; under capitalism, they became the commons, as their work was defined as a "natural resource."[70]

Historian Jane Humphries further connects land enclosure with the "proletarianization" of the British population and its impact on women. "If proletarianization is seen as a process of gradual elimination of sources of family subsistence other than wages, a causal link between the loss of common rights and wage dependence is reestablished."[71] As Humphries shows, a reliance on wages was not a novelty introduced by enclosure laws because the majority of the rural population in Britain could be said to live under a "semi-proletarian" model, with most men working for wages while women derived income from working on the commons and producing goods (milk, vegetables, greens) that could be sold in the local market. Enclosure therefore did not create wage labor but rather made it the only possible form of income and subsistence. For this reason, as many economic historians have noted, the effects of this were particularly harsh on women.

Wesley ought to be perceived as an observer of these social processes, even when he may lack the epistemological and disciplinary resources to conduct a "systemic" analysis of his own context. But there are some intriguing observations in Wesley's treatise that reveal a theological mind cultivating a way of thinking about economic reality. Wesley's suspicions against monopolies cannot be addressed apart from his theological views on God's sovereignty and the human responsibility of acting as stewards of God's creation. As I have been insisting, these positions are not always systematically articulated in Wesley, but his writings on divine power and stewardship are shaped by his material conditions. Ted Jennings associates Wesley's ministry with the poor with his concept of God to formulate claims about the nature of God as justice and

[68] Silvia Federici, *Caliban and the Witch: Women, the Body, and Primitive Accumulation* (Brooklyn, NY: Autonomedia, 2004), 74–75.

[69] See Federici, 91.

[70] Federici, 97.

[71] Humphries, "Enclosures, Common Rights, and Women: The Proletarianization of Families in the Late Eighteenth and Early Nineteenth Centuries," 19.

Published in *Methodist Review: A Journal of Wesleyan and Methodist Studies*
ISSN: 1946-5254 (online) • URL: www.methodistreview.org

mercy. Jennings does that by connecting the thought of the other in Barth, Levinas, and Derrida, while also acknowledging that the formulation that affirms God as the wholly other and thus with justice and mercy is not fleshed out in Wesley. "I do not intend to claim," Jennings writes, "that Wesley in any way anticipated the more radical claims of Levinas or Derrida. But I do wish to claim that these postmodern conceptualities offer us the opportunity to affirm even more consistently and thoroughly than Wesley could, the identification of the divine (transcendence) as justice and mercy."[72]

In my reading of Wesley's "Thoughts on the Present Scarcity of Provisions" and "Thoughts on the Source of Power," this identification seems even more needed. There is indeed a fissure in Wesley's understanding of sovereignty that interrupts the thought of God as standing above and untouched by the world. That insight appears to be operative when Wesley rejects attempts to portray divine sovereignty as analogous to the sovereignty of the landlord or the farmland gentleman. Wesley's attacks on the monopolization of farmland bespeak a different view of God, nascent as it was in his thought, but that strongly rejects the association of God's power with the power of the landlord. As sovereign power becomes increasingly associated with land ownership and the command over workers, Wesley may be read as moving away from sovereignty thus defined, opting instead for a principle of divine governance based on "empowerment" and "co-operation."

Power Slippages

Wesley ends the "Scarcity of Provisions" pamphlet with a mixture of exasperation and prophetic indictment of England. He is pessimistic about the prospects of the reforms he proposed. And he passes judgement on his beloved country pleading his cause for some form of economic justice: "[For] what good can we expect (suppose the Scriptures are true) for such a nation as this, where there is no fear of God, where there is such a deep, avowed, thorough contempt of all religion… It seems as if God must shortly arise and maintain his own cause. But, if so, let us fall into the hands of God, and not in the hands of men."[73] After spending months witnessing poverty, food insecurity, and

[72] Theodore W. Jennings Jr., "Transcendence, Justice, and Mercy: Toward a (Wesleyan) Reconceptualization of God, in *Rethinking Wesley's Theology for Contemporary Methodism*, edited by Randy Maddox and Theodore Runyon (Nashville: Kingswood Books, 1998), 81–82.

[73] Wesley, *Works* (Jackson), 1958, 11:59.

Published in *Methodist Review: A Journal of Wesleyan and Methodist Studies*
ISSN: 1946-5254 (online) • URL: www.methodistreview.org

impact of the monopolization of farmland, a tired Wesley comments on the lack of fear of God and contempt for religion.

It is common trope in the scholarship on Wesley's economic and political thought to say that his views on the economy were fundamentally theological views which he applied to his social analysis. Writing on Wesley's politics, Ryan Danker recently stressed that his "political theology built on the justice and sovereignty of God in whose image human life was fashioned."[74] Claims such as this are common, nearly self-evident: we derive political and economic principles from the Christian theological tradition. There are sufficient reasons to appreciate this position and there is more than enough evidence to ascertain that this is true in Wesley's case. In the case of his commentary of the origin of power, he claims that his views are derived from Scripture. But when Wesley "builds" his political theology on the notion of divine justice and sovereignty, it is less certain that these categories are received without interference from the broader context in which he writes. In 1772, Wesley came to the question of sovereignty and justice in the midst of a prevalent scarcity of provisions. Might the scarcity that so afflicted Wesley be perceived to run interference with his view on God's sovereignty and justice?

Social crises, such as the one Wesley went through in the 1770s with political turmoil and economic distress, are not simply a time when one must apply theological categories to a changing reality. Instead, crises are sites of transformation in the theological imaginary, where received categories are refashioned and molded in the friction with the material reality where they circulate. For this reason, when Wesley goes as he does in 1772 to themes such as power, sovereignty, liberty, scarcity, monopoly, and property, we do well to read him as not simply retrieving theological tropes that he needed to reinscribe in a society that was changing. Instead, it might be wise to interrogate how these themes that Wesley retrieves are also transformed in a decade where the thought of power, sovereignty, liberty, scarcity, monopoly, and property are themselves undergoing significant transformations.

The claim that Wesley's views are informed by a theological imaginary, though correct, may presume that there is a unidirectional flow from one's theology to one's political and economic thinking. But one's theological imagination is not always available and transparent to oneself. Nor does it necessarily operate congruently with one's actions. The issue in this position is that it may presuppose, if not impose, the need of a coherent whole in Wesley's theology

[74] Danker, "Social and Political Thought," 237.

Published in *Methodist Review: A Journal of Wesleyan and Methodist Studies*
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while failing to notice how he shifted and nuanced his positions as society and economics shifted around him. This methodological claim appears to be especially relevant in Wesley's case given his mode of theological reasoning. Joerg Rieger has picked up Outler's claim regarding Wesley as a "folk theologian" to suggest that his was not simply a desire to "simplify" theological truths, but actually a mode of producing theology that learned something with "folk."[75] As Jennings has suggested, Wesley's starting point is not the "enunciation of major themes like Christology or atonement, from which to draw conclusions about, say, freedom from sin. He is more likely to begin with from something like gossip or backbiting and show its incompatibility with love, and in the process say something about the divine nature or the end of 'Christ's coming.'"[76] As Jennings proceeds to argue, this is also the case for Wesley's views on economics as his "evangelical economics," while lacking in systematicity, is filled with intriguing theological insights stemming from an attention to social and economic reality and the pain therein.

Wesley's comments on the "origin of power" pose a special problem if we assume as our point of departure that his view of divine sovereignty is "applied" or "translated" into political and economic analysis. Theodore Weber, for example, is critical of Wesley for failing to adapt his Trinitarian theology to his understanding of power and governance. Weber's goal is therefore to stress the relational and bottom-up aspects of the Trinity so as to correct Wesley's own antidemocratic political preferences, which, Weber claims, stem from a preference for hierarchical images of the first person of the Trinity. Weber writes: "The full involvement in trinitarian theology in political thinking becomes possible only with the opening of participation and the process of authorization to those who are outside the system, namely, to those who are 'below.'"[77] Weber insists that the weakness of Wesley's trinitarian position informs his antidemocratic and antirepublican stances. We notice how the flow of the argument relies upon the primacy of theological thinking over politics and how a certain theory of translation operates in Weber's analysis: one must always translate one's theological ideas into politics. In failing to do that, Wesley had to appeal to "increasingly secular" claims at the expense of theological formulations, claims Weber.[78]

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[75] Rieger, *Grace under Pressure: Negotiating the Heart of the Methodist Traditions*, 92, ft. 8.

[76] Jennings, *Good News to the Poor: John Wesley's Evangelical Economics*, 15.

[77] Weber, *Politics in the Order of Salvation*, 201.

[78] Weber, 201.

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I share in the desire for a less hierarchical view of God and agree that Trinitarian thinking offers compelling resources to rethinking our images of God. But what I believe is taking place in Wesley's political and economic commentaries in 1772 is not a "secularized" argument that distances itself from theological wisdom. Nor a simple process of transference of theological ideas to the material reality that Wesley was so immersed in through his ministry. Rather, I perceive Wesley negotiating his theological inheritance with this material reality; the political and economic landscape he observed in the period is posing challenges to his theological imagination. What I suggest is not to perceive Wesley's political positions as incoherent with his soteriology or his Trinitarian thinking or the democratizing aspects of his doctrine of grace. Instead, I approach the positions adopted by Wesley in the two pamphlets studied in this article as sites to notice how his theology was impacted by his social environment and its material circumstances. On the realm of politics, Wesley does not embrace republicanism, though his perceptive comments on God's sovereignty and on "the power over life and death" suggests that he was not content in embracing the received notion of sovereign power. When speaking of God as a "governor," Wesley's view of power appears to be modulated by a growing concern over the presumed power of the sovereign over the people.

In the realm of political economy, the power over "liberty and property" is also modulated by Wesley's aversion to the monopolization of farmland. I suggest that a reading of the "Scarcity of Provisions" may reveal a moment where Wesley hesitates on his commitments to divine sovereignty as he is forced to recognize that not all who have authority have received it from God. His commentary on the economic conditions of England in the 1770s questions the authority exercised by monopoly farmers. I want to entertain the difference in Wesley's professed theology of divine sovereignty and his position on the monopolization of farmland. This difference might be an opening into a Wesleyan political theology that troubles the emerging social landscape shaped by the industrial revolution and the rise of capitalism. The privatization and monopolizing of farmland is one instance of a political theology that locates the sovereign as the master of tracts of land that used to be common land used by peasants for subsistence farming. The landlord assumes his power through this violent social process of enclosure, which Wesley attacked. He did not articulate this process theologically in any explicit manner nor did he give a full account of the structural changes that were happening in England in the 1770s. But neither does he assume that the power of the landlord to be derived from God.

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The political and economic positions Wesley assumed are not always congruent with his theological commitments. His view of God and God's grace, often nuanced by a democratizing and universalizing impetus, inform a rather strong commitment to a hierarchical view of God, who is portrayed as the sovereign source of power standing against any political project that seeks to establish power as emanating from the people. In writing on economics, Wesley is always adamant in speaking of the human role in stewarding but never owning any property, right, or gift. This insight is operative when Wesley decries the monopolization of farmland as a cause for the scarcity of provisions he attended to in 1772. I perceive Wesley's response to this scenario as tentative and yet courageous. And, more importantly, I notice in some of his own slippages and often incongruous responses a sign of a shifting theological imagination, as if Wesley allowed the harsh reality of the 1770s to reshape some of his theology, even when he refused to claim it.

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