The Infant Imaginary: Consent, Citizenship, and Pedagogy in Early America

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The poignancy of Henry James’s short novel, What Maisie Knew, lies in the ascription of liberal agency and powers of consent to a child: the young Maisie is repeatedly asked to choose between her divorced parents despite her circumscribed understanding of their adult lives and relationships. The limits of liberal consent thus appear, in James’s book, to be succinctly embodied in the dependent figure of the child. More broadly, James’s novel points to a question that has long troubled concepts of consent: what kind of (informed, rational) subject must be presupposed for consent to function as the expression of unfettered individual choice and agency? In her book, The Consent of the Governed: The Lockean Legacy in Early American Culture, Gillian Brown reverses the formula of James’s novel, finding in the figure of the child the basis of consent theory rather than its limit case. As such, Brown offers a profound and challenging revision both of the concept of consent and of the Lockean liberal subject.

Brown begins her book by considering John Locke’s “remarkable—and oddly unremarked—alignment of consent with childhood, which thereby links consent with frailty and contingency” (10). How is it possible to envision consent occurring in situations of dependence, constraint, and lack of resources? For Brown, consent—or more
importantly the consenting subject—never operates in conditions of total autonomy, even as an adult. Rather than critiquing consent in general on this account (as many critics have before her), Brown redescribes consent in relation to constraint: “Consent in a liberal society such as the United States is the subjection that we acknowledge to our circumstances when we are not rebelling from or objecting to them. If consent marks our subjection, it nevertheless accents this subjection as a chosen state, or more precisely, as a state we can alter” (20). Such an account of consent, in its emphasis on subjection, seems strangely akin to Louis Althusser’s concept of interpellation, or even a Foucauldian disciplinary model of the subject, rather than to more familiar descriptions of liberalism. Within Althusser’s model, for instance, individuals become subjects at the moment they allow themselves to be recognized by forms of social hailing; once hailed, the subject consents to a set of constraints but also constitutes him or herself as a recognized social being. Agency is thus at once established and compromised in Althusser’s moment of subjectification. Brown’s description of consent is similar, then, insofar as she imagines individuals to be constrained by social contexts rather than able to act autonomously at every moment.

Yet rather than resorting to Foucault or Althusser, Brown turns to Locke—albeit an unfamiliar Locke—to advance her claims concerning consent and subjection. While autonomy—the freedom to direct the self without constraint—has long been accounted the defining characteristic of the Lockean liberal subject, Brown makes it clear that she does not subscribe to this received wisdom. Rather, she explicitly takes to task critics who have seen the Lockean subject as ahistorical, disembodied, and unconstrained by social context and argues that such a view “completely misunderstands and misrepresents Locke” (185). The Lockean subject, according to Brown, is better characterized by the “continuous labor of crediting and discrediting ideas”(8): this labor bespeaks a constant engagement with historical circumstances. As such, the liberty of the liberal subject is determined less by any immunity to historical circumstances than by a thoughtful and, perhaps more importantly, judgmental engagement with them. Judgmental engagement is necessary to determine, at every minute, our consent to (or rebellion against) our present circumstances. Following Hannah Pitkin, then, Brown views political consent (“the consent of the governed” of the book’s title) less as a foundational act occurring at
some mythical moment in the past prior to the creation of the state than as an on-going process which serves to “rationalize current relations to political authority” (20). At every moment, the citizen is engaged in evaluating society and at every moment when the citizen does not rebel, he or she actively consents to be governed.

Brown’s rather fierce attachment to Locke becomes clearer at this point. While her initial account of consent to constraint might seem Althusserian, her emphasis on the active nature of consent points to a separate line of thought. When Brown’s liberal subject consents to current circumstances, he or she does not so much submit (and thus compromise a pre-existing autonomy) as begin to exercise the faculty of judgment (and thus begin to develop autonomy). In other words, the consent linked to subjectification has less to do with submission than with establishing the capacity of the individual to agree or disagree—to choose subjection or to rebel. In consenting, even when one is constrained to consent, it is as if a new muscle is discovered—a muscle which, once flexed, promises to yield a great deal of force when properly trained. Thus while “consenting to constraint” would seem to be a contradiction in terms, on Brown’s argument, it becomes a project of educational value—an exercise in the emergence and training of the will. Rather than an activity of submission, consenting to constraint becomes a calisthenics of the will.

Brown thus offers a serious challenge both to notions of the autonomous Lockean liberal subject and to contemporary accounts of social constructivism. On the one hand, she does not view the subject as ahistorical or transcendent, on the other hand, she does not imagine a subject who is wholly constructed from the outside in or lacking in a significant capacity for agency and self-determination. Yet if Brown is able to perform the fairly remarkable feat of clearing a middle ground between the polarized terms of on-going debates over the liberal subject (is the subject socially determined or self-fashioned?), she does so only by recourse to a developmental model of agency. While constraint may be ever-present, it is the promise of a soon-to-be-developed agency which sustains much of Brown’s imaginings of the liberal subject: that is, the freedom of the developed will seems to function more often in a promissory than a descriptive fashion. As Brown herself contends, agency inheres in ratiocination and thus in judgmental relations to the present which vault one into alternative futures: “agency is imaginative, outstripping and supplementing the
present”(28). Locke, according to Brown, locates freedom in the “putative realm: in the process of augmentations upon the present” (28). It is no surprise, then, that the child is the ideal figure of an agency-yet-to-come for Brown (and, she would argue, for Locke), and it makes sense, accordingly, that the first half of Brown’s book specifically concerns the treatment and education of children in the eighteenth century—a period which, Brown explains, focused on children and pedagogy in a new and more pervasive fashion precisely because of a new interest in consent.

The education of the child thus serves as a central site for discovering the workings and development of consent, and Brown turns to John Locke’s educational treatise, Some Thoughts Concerning Education as the copy text of the pedagogy of consenting subjects. A widely-read and enormously influential book in the Anglo-American colonies in the eighteenth century, Locke’s treatise on education would seem to be very much about developing a muscular will, albeit one which must be carefully trained so as to ultimately perform the work of self-discipline. Indeed, a developed capacity for consent, it turns out, involves an apprenticeship in the somewhat less complex activity of obedience: in order to train a child’s will toward the task of “composing” the self, the child must first be taught obedience to parental rule. Thus when Locke approves of a mother who beats her daughter eight times in one morning for refusing to leave her mother or her nurse, Brown concludes that Locke respects the child’s desires but only seeks to redirect them: “Locke’s schooling in self-denial seeks not to deny the fact of desire but to regulate or redirect it: toward more healthful foods, for example, or in the case of the little girl, from dependence to obedience” (33). The disciplinary bent of Locke’s education is at every moment validated, for Brown, by the fact that the child is not simply learning to obey but is also asked to participate in kinds of judgement about her own actions that will ultimately assist in the activity of self-fashioning. The child who learns self-control through redirecting her desires “learns to experience constraint as a benefit, as an opportunity for self-expression” (34). According to Brown (and following Locke) learning to submit to others will allow one to submit to oneself and thus ultimately to be capable of self-management and self-fashioning.

At times, Brown seems hard-pressed to ignore the overt paradoxes within this pedagogy (“constraint as a benefit”): indeed, one senses that in her effort to rehabilitate Locke, Brown may be overly wed to a vision
of a Locke who can do no wrong. Nonetheless, one of the strengths of this study is the close attention Brown pays to the pedagogical materials of the eighteenth-century colonies, including the *New England Primer* and popular books of fables. In her careful reading of these texts, Brown aims to explain precisely how Lockean concepts of education were put into practice in the daily lessons of school children and to demonstrate the pervasiveness of Lockean ideas within the culture at the time. Her reading of the *Primer* emphasizes the relation between the rhymed couplets for each letter of the alphabet and the wood-cut drawings accompanying these verses. While the opening verse—for the letter *A*—seems prescriptive, “In Adam’s fall/We sinned all,” the drawing of Adam with an apple in his hand allows a child to identify with Adam as he stands in the act of making a choice about whether to sin. The *Primer* thus emphasizes the child’s ability to make choices, what Brown describes as the child’s “own consensual relation” to the world around him or her.

The capacity for thinking through choices is heightened in the second set of texts that Brown analyzes—animal fables. Fables require a complex “associative thinking” as children parse the relation between the events in the story and the moral drawn from the tale. Far from prescribing a lesson that the child must follow in a mimetic fashion, fables taught in a Lockean vein emphasize the individual’s work in “considering and applying universals” (59) or “reasoning within context” (76). In this reasoning, then, lies the labor of consent as well—the labor of forming and consenting to judgments about the relations between stories and morals, between specific events and larger meanings. Fables taught in this consensual (as opposed to a prescriptive) fashion represent, for Brown, an “Americanization” of the classical genre, in which “transmission of an American social order occurs not through following statutes but by reviewing and ratifying the logic from which statutes emerge” (80). Brown is skilled at tracing variations in meaning across a single fable; for instance, she compares versions of one fable told by Locke and by Samuel Richardson in order to point to the consensual nature of Locke’s version and prescriptive nature of Richardson’s. Yet in larger terms, Brown is developing a theory of reading which tends to emphasize process over content. The value of reading (or the effect of reading the right kind of material) lies in our ability to puzzle over the meaning of a text and thus to exercise our ability to make judgments as well as to think narratively about the
effects of our own actions. Thus, while her argument about reading is grounded in the example of eighteenth-century fables, Brown’s discussion of the reading process that emerges from these fables bears more than a passing resemblance to Martha Nussbaum’s contemporary account of the value of reading novels. Novels, according to Nussbaum, teach a “valuable form of public reasoning” which involves a “play back and forth between the general and concrete”—a “style of ethical reasoning.” Brown’s resemblance to Nussbaum points up a shared ethical bent in both arguments: for Brown, consent has an implicitly ethical status, and the United States tends to emerge here as an ethical nation founded on consensual reason.

Yet if Brown is making an argument generalized to the act of reading at any age, she nonetheless pursues a number of claims that have direct bearing on the field of early American studies. Most importantly, perhaps, Brown contends that Lockean pedagogy prepared the way for the American Revolution. Brown suggests that consensual subjects, schooled in and by Lockean forms of reading, were well-prepared to demand a consensual government. Furthermore, she argues that Lockean liberalism need not be understood as antithetical to the civic-minded republicanism that characterized early national politics and culture. Because Brown’s Lockean individual is attuned to the surrounding world and concerned with interacting with this world, he or she is not “myopically individualist” but rather prone to civic concern. In a field where the dividing line between liberalism and republicanism has deeply marked scholarship, Brown joins a number of recent scholars who tend to repudiate that polarization: she does, however, move further than others in redefining precisely what liberalism meant in an eighteenth-century context and thus in pointing the way toward a thorough-going reconsideration of this long-term debate.

Brown places a further historical accent on her discussion of early national reading practices when she aligns an eighteenth-century concern with the developing child with early national concerns with the developing nation. In a chapter on the writing of Tom Paine, Brown traces Paine’s initial evocation of the nation as a child in need of protection (*Common Sense*) to his later rejection of images of childhood as figures for self-government (*The Rights of Man*). Paine’s trajectory across the two texts is emblematic, for Brown, of the promise of agency found in childhood and fulfilled in adulthood. “For Paine,” she concludes, “the crucial point to be taken from the paradigm of the
child’s progress from frailty to empowerment is that childhood ends” (106). Yet despite her endorsement of this narrative, it also seems that Brown is herself less than ready for childhood to end. This is the case because childhood offers a built-in narrative of progress and a promise of futurity which adulthood does not. Brown writes, for instance, that “Childhood supplies the pattern, remembered or imagined, of the potential for transformation” (106). If childhood supplies the pattern of change and development, then adults must become figurative children in order to partake of the promise of consensual thinking. This proposition is fully rendered, together with its troublesome implications, in the second half of the book, which focuses on women, instead of on children, as figures of consent in post-Revolutionary U.S. culture.

The promissory structure of Brown’s argument thus faces far less congenial material in the second half of the book when she turns to women, rather than children, as figures of consent. She articulates the shift from children to women in historical terms: women, she argues, became cultural icons of the difficulties of consent theory following the revolution. Although conceding that the woman is a more “pessimistic” exemplar than the child (since women are not so likely to change and develop out of dependency), Brown assimilates women to the promissory paradigm nonetheless: “Though women do not receive the entitlements conferred upon children, the very fact of their continued subjection constitutes in Lockean logic their right to self-determination” (121). Without the developmental motor of a temporal maturation, however, it becomes far less clear how and where a progressive emancipation might occur. Moreover, despite the strong assertion that women are seen as more “permeable” than men and thus prey to being in the control of others, very little account is offered as to why women become so strongly identified with constraint and limitation at this historical moment, making it difficult to diagnose how such a condition might change.

Two central problems with Brown’s model of consent thus emerge with some clarity as the book takes a turn toward women’s relation to consent. First, as I have suggested, Brown’s understanding of consent is progressive and future-oriented and thus relies heavily upon a notion of the developing self to account for the possibility of social change. At its worst, this argument promotes what might be seen as a dubious version of self-help logic in the service of social justice. In other words, the self rather than society tends to be seen as the primary site of
change and modification. Second, Brown emphasizes the extent to which consent is a matter of process (an exercise in judgment) rather than a matter of content. Brown’s consent to constraint, as I’ve argued, tends to be described as assisting the liberal subject to develop capacities for making judgments rather than as limiting the subject to a set of particular social norms. The content of social norms thus tends to be obfuscated when only the process is highlighted. As such, consent to constraint might apply to many forms of existing social injustice, including, most obviously, race and gender biases. While Brown might argue that a developed adult will would tend to enable the exercise of precisely the kind of judgment capable of acting against social injustice, much of the emphasis in her discussion of education lies on the need to “internalize proper social practices” (33) rather than modify the substance of these practices.

In her reading of two female types in the eighteenth-century novel—the coquette and the quixote—Brown describes both as figures for mistaken uses of consent. While appearing to consent, the coquette, in fact, withholds her judgment. The coquette thus misuses consent as a means of manipulating those around her rather than employing it as a means of self-representation. Brown sees Hannah Foster’s novel The Coquette as part of a feminist critique of coquetry intended to rehabilitate women’s consent—to portray it as the locus of agency rather than the site of misrepresentation and limitation. The female quixote, in turn, is a woman who fails to read according to a consensual model: rather, she understands a fictional text as operating prescriptively or mimetically, and thus incorrectly believes herself to inhabit the world described by the text. A novel such as Tabitha Tenney’s Female Quixotism describes the conversion of a woman away from quixotism (mimetic reading) toward a social realism (consensual reading), in which she affirms the values of the society she lives in rather than those she discovers in a book: “The reformation of the quixote,” according to Brown, “illustrates and celebrates the process through which individual citizens concur with their society” (160). While these schematic renderings of Brown’s argument do not do justice to the care of her readings of these texts, they do, nonetheless, point to a shared thread in the discussion of women; in the cases of the quixote and the coquette, the suggestion is that women need to reform themselves so as to consent to existing social realities rather than dissent or demure from them. While Brown occasionally indicates that
consensual thinking will lead to a principled objection to social norms, none of her detailed readings explores this possibility thus making her discussion of dissent seem gestural rather than substantive.

As much as Brown works to demonstrate the promise of consent, then, she stops short of addressing the limits of this consent, particularly for those to whom such a promise has not been extended. Brown briefly mentions Olaudah Equiano as a slave who frees himself by learning new habits of mind, but Ron Takaki’s discussion of racialization and concepts of self-management in the early Republic indicates that Lockean doctrines of self-control which hold so much promise for Brown in fact worked to exclude and further degrade African Americans and Native Americans during the eighteenth century. It is worth noting, as well, the troubling nature of the assertion that dependent or oppressed individuals implicitly consent to their conditions. Vicki Schultz’s research on contemporary women in the workplace indicates, for instance, the legal currency of the argument that women do not advance in the workplace because they don’t “want” to take on higher-ranking positions; Schultz thus demonstrates the way in which forms of oppression can be sustained and exacerbated by the presumption of consent.

In placing the (literal or metaphorical) child at the center of a theory of consensual citizenship, Brown joins another Americanist critic, Lauren Berlant, in identifying the significance of what we might call an “infant imaginary” to liberal political identity. Berlant has argued that a notion of “infantile citizenship” pervades contemporary politics, such that participation in the polity is “downsized” to a “mode of voluntarism and privacy” idealized in the passivity, privacy, and innocence of the infant if not the fetus. Any notion of the public good, according to Berlant, thereby tends to disappear into personal narrative, impoverishing the public sphere and the vocabulary of political debate. In distinct contrast to Berlant, then, Brown finds in the child the promise of a socially engaged and actively judging individual. Brown thus might counter Berlant by arguing that the liberal subject, properly understood, is at every moment engaged in making judgments about the government under which he or she consents to live. Yet because of her emphasis on developing habits of the mind coupled with the scant attention paid to the moments when consent might, following an act of judgment, not be forthcoming, Brown seems to offer far less in the way of a program of political engagement than she initially claims. Brown’s
book is relentlessly intelligent, well-researched, and makes a compelling claim upon the reader to actively engage in understanding and reconsidering the meaning of consent, yet it leaves, to my mind, a chapter unwritten concerning the ethics and pedagogy of dissent.

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