

John Locke:

“Of Civil Government,” from *Two Treatises of Government* (1690)

To understand political power aright, we must consider what condition all men are naturally in, and that is, a state of perfect freedom to do as they wish and dispose of their possessions and persons as they think fit, within the bounds of the law of nature, without asking leave or depending upon the will of any other man.

A state also of equality in which no one has more power or authority than another, there being nothing more evident than that the creatures of the same species and rank born to all the same advantages of nature and the use of the same faculties, should also be equal to each other without subordination or subjection. . . .

The state of nature has a law of nature to govern it, and reason, which is that law, teaches all mankind who will but consult it that, being all equal and independent, no one ought to harm another in his life, health, liberty, or possessions; for men being all the workmanship of one omnipotent and infinitely wise Maker; all the servants of one sovereign Master, sent into the world by His order and about His business; they are His property, whose workmanship they are, made to last during His, not one another’s pleasure. All men are naturally in that state, and remain so till, by their own consents, they make themselves members of some political society. . . .

If man in the state of nature is as free as has been said, if he is absolute lord of his own person and possessions, equal to the greatest and subject to nobody, why will he part with his freedom? Why will he give up this empire, and subject himself to the dominion and control of any other power? To which it is obvious to answer, that though in the state of nature he has such a right, yet the enjoyment of it is very uncertain, and constantly exposed to the invasion of others; for all being kings as much as he, every man his equal, and most of them no strict observers of equity and justice, the enjoyment of the property he has in this state is very unsafe, very insecure; and it is not without reason that he seeks out and is willing to join in society with others who are already united, or have a mind to unite for the mutual preservation of their lives, liberties and estates, which I call by the general name – property.

The great and chief end, therefore, of men uniting into commonwealths is the preservation of their property. . . .

. . . since it can never be supposed to be the will of the society that the legislature should be able to destroy that which everyone hopes to secure by entering into society, and for which the people submitted themselves to legislators of their own making; whenever the legislators try to take away and destroy the property of the people, or to reduce them to slavery under arbitrary power, they put themselves into a state of war with the people who are thereupon freed from any further obedience, and are left to the common refuge which God hath provided for all men against force and violence. Whensoever, therefore, the legislature shall break this fundamental rule of society, and either by ambition, fear, folly, or corruption, try to grasp themselves, or put into the hands of any other, an absolute power over the lives, liberties, and estates of the people, by this breach of trust they forfeit the power the people had put into their hands for quite contrary ends, and it is the privilege of people, who have a right to resume their original liberty, to establish a new legislature and provide for their own safety and security. What I have said here concerning the legislature in general holds true also for the executive, who having a double trust put in him, both to have a part in the legislature and to carry out the law, acts against both, when he goes about to set up his own arbitrary will as the law of the society. . . .

To this perhaps it will be said, that the people being ignorant, and always discontented, to lay the foundation of government in the unsteady opinion and uncertain humour of the people, is to expose it to certain ruin: and no government will be able long to subsist, if the people may set up a new legislature whenever they take offense at the old one. To this I answer, quite the contrary. People are not so easily got out of their old forms, as some are apt to suggest. . . . The slowness of the people to quit their old constitutions has, in the many revolutions which have been seen in this kingdom, in this and former ages, still kept us to, after some interval of fruitless attempts, still brought us back again to our old legislature of king, lords, and commons.

But it will be said, this hypothesis may lead to frequent rebellion. To which I answer. . . . such revolutions happen not upon every little mismanagement in public affairs. . . . But if a long train of abuses, prevarications and artifices, all tending the same way, make the design visible to the people, they cannot but feel what they lie under, and see whither they are going; it is not to be wondered at that they should then rouse themselves, and endeavor to put the rule into such hands which may secure to them the end for which government was first erected.

