

## At the origins of the American Republic and Democracy: John Locke's Philosophy

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### Abstract

The present research paper is principally intended to comprehensively examine the contribution of John Locke's Philosophy to the emergence of the American Republic and Democracy. The American founding fathers learnt from Locke the theory of the social contract as well as his concept of revolution. In other words, the article is an attempt to show that Locke's philosophy is one of the fundamental roots of the modern American political Thought.

**Keywords:** Locke, American, Republic, Democracy, Philosophy.

### ملخص

يهدف هذا المقال أساسا إلى تسليط الضوء على مساهمة فلسفة جون لوك في ظهور الجمهورية الأمريكية الديمقراطية. حيث تبين هذه الدراسة أن الآباء المؤسسون لأمريكا قد تعلموا من لوك نظرية العقد الاجتماعي، فضلا عن مفهومه للثورة، وبعبارة أخرى فإن هذه الدراسة تعد محاولة لإظهار أن فلسفة لوك هي واحدة من أهم الجذور للفكر السياسي الأمريكي الحديث.

**الكلمات المفتاحية:** لوك، أمريكا، الجمهورية، الديمقراطية.

## Introduction

In Europe of the Dark Age everything was interpreted by faith and emotion because of the dominance of religion and the church .Even poverty was considered as god's wrath that is why one cannot talk about humanitarianism at that time .The church together with the king with his divine right maintained their strong hold on the people's social and political life .In addition to this, it is worth adding that during that era the bible was the people's sole source of knowledge and laws .

After 1650 due to the development of science ,Europe saw a real revolution in thought and there was a radical change in the Europeans' world vision. The emergence of scientists like Isaac Newton who contributed to the flourishing of the scientific revolution led to a remarkable shift in the way the truth is perceived .In fact, there was a real departure from the traditional ways of searching for truth .Soon faith and revelation were replaced by reason because the scientific revolution consolidated the use of reason in interpreting the mechanism of the universe .Scientists such as Newton could argue that there were natural laws that governed the universe .This, in fact, could put an end to the traditional idea of God's interference in everything in man's life. About this shift from the emotion to reason Jonathan I. Israel writes:

During the later Middle Ages and the early modern age down to 1650, everything was based on a largely shared core of faith, tradition, and authority, by contrast, after 1650, every thing no matter how fundamental or deeply rooted was questioned in the light of philosophical reason and frequently challenged or replaced by startling different concepts generated by the New Philosophy and what may still usefully be termed as Scientific Revolution <sup>1</sup>.

## 1-Enlightenment Philosophy

As a matter of fact, this scientific spirit led to the emergence of deism which is the belief that God has created the universe and let it work by its own . In fact, deists are those who do not believe in god 's interference in man's life. In light of this fact , it is worth emphasizing that the Enlightenment was then an era during which the church felt insecure because of the spread of deism. That is the reason why the Bible became no longer the source of inspiration for people who became interested in political life more than any period before . Moreover, with the passing of time, political views on the philosophy of government gradually emerged. Despite their differences, Hobbes, Locke, and Rousseau, became the most influential political theorists in the world<sup>2</sup>. Their ideas and philosophies spread all over the world influencing the creation of many new governments. In fact, they could set forth the basis of republicanism that would be adopted as the official political system of the independent United States.

It is worth noting that the belief in natural rights made of egalitarianism and freedom the primary concerns of the era, Consequently, people started to be aware that changing the political system is a must to achieve the natural right of equality. As a matter of fact, due to the transatlantic circulation of ideology, those radical ideas did not find difficulty to creep to the American mind which was looking for a change and innovation especially when Puritanism as a philosophy of life was waning and people ceased to take everything for granted in an age depending on reason for the interpretation of every thing.

Since they suffered from monarchy and its injustice, the Americans displayed the desire and the willingness to fight against its perpetuation. To reach their goal , the Americans needed a philosophy that would help them establish a regime that would be different from the then prevailing monarchical system in that it

should protect the individuals' natural rights .They learnt from Old World philosophy especially that of John Locke

Broadly speaking, the Americans as a new nation, had to depend on different and various philosophical trends in order to be able to finally form their own philosophy of life which would be embodied in the principle of republicanism. It is therefore, important to search in the roots of republicanism as an integral part of the American philosophy of life and as one of the prevailing radical ideologies from which all the appeals of freedom, justice, equality, and democracy were inspired.

Assuredly ,many thinkers and politicians have influenced the founding fathers' thoughts and ideas. Voltaire<sup>3</sup>, along with Locke and Rousseau, wrote books dealing with social injustice, religious superstition, and ignorance by which they could challenge the unjust systems in the Old World that were all based on the myth of the king's divine right.<sup>4</sup> The ideas of those thinkers and others had a major impact on those who wrote the Declaration of Independence and later the American constitution. Confessing the impact of the Enlightenment philosophers on him and on the founding fathers, in fact, Jefferson declares:

I will put off till my return from America all of them except Bacon, Locke, and Newton, whose pictures I will trouble you to have copied for me: and as I consider them as the three greatest men that have ever lived, without any exception, and as having laid the foundation of those superstructures which have been raise in the Physical and Moral sciences, I would wish to form them into a knot on the same canvas, that they may not be confounded at all with the herd of other great men...<sup>5</sup>

What is noticeable is that these words by Jefferson, which significantly and straightforwardly demonstrate the European philosophical presence in the American mind , can be sufficient proof that the American elite were aware of the intellectual change that was brought by the radical Enlightenment. This therefore, can be an interesting starting point for demonstrating that the founding

fathers were not only aware of the ideological change in the Old World but deeply influenced by the Enlightenment philosophers thanks to whom a new and a sound conception of government was born.

In the present article, however, focus will be on the impact exercised by the John Locke who asserted that the government was the result of a social contract between the leaders and the led. Moreover , he maintained that before men came to govern themselves, they all existed in a state of nature. The state of nature is the condition men were in before political government came into existence, and what society would be if there was no social contract that was the very root of the government. Through the idea of the state of nature, Hobbes, Locke, and Rousseau created a revolutionary idea. He did not believe government should be organized through church, therefore he could lay the grounds for the radical principle of abandoning the idea of the divine right theory. This was absolutely the most radical theory of his time because it questioned the absolute authority of the monarch and shacked the legitimacy of the social hierarchy that characterized the social structure of that era

## **2-Lockeism :the Social Contract Theory**

What is remarkable is that Locke's theory of government begins with a pre-social state of nature in which equal individuals have natural rights to life, liberty, and estates .In the absence of government, however, these rights are of little value .They are almost impossible to be protected by individual action, and disputes over rights are themselves a powerful cause of conflict and chaos .Therefore, people took the decision to establish governments to enable themselves to enjoy their natural rights. John Locke suggests:

To understand political power right, and derive it from its original, we must consider, what state all men are naturally in, and that is, a state of perfect freedom to order their actions, 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.<sup>6</sup>

What can be deduced from this excerpt is that Locke assumed that the sole right to defend oneself in the state of nature was not enough to survive, so people established a civil society to resolve conflicts in a civil war. Locke also advocated governmental separation of powers and believed that revolution is not only a right but a duty in some circumstances an idea that would be adopted by Thomas Paine later. These ideas would come to have profound influence on the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution of the United States.

In this connection, one will note that most scholars interested in the roots of the American political thought and radicalism agreed that the phrase "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness," in the American Declaration of Independence, had its origin in Locke's theory of rights, though other origins have been suggested.<sup>7</sup> Because Jefferson and, perhaps, all the founding fathers learnt from Lock that in a natural state ,all people were equal and independent, and everyone had a natural right to defend his "Life, health, Liberty, or Possessions".<sup>8</sup> and that "Men being, as has been said, by nature, all free, equal and independent, no one can be put out of this estate, and subjected to the political power of another, without his own consent."<sup>9</sup>

What is remarkable is that the first idea in the Declaration of Independence was: "all men are created equal and that each man has the unalienable rights of life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness".<sup>10</sup> This is in line with Locke's philosophy: "A state also of equality, wherein all the power and jurisdiction is reciprocal, no one having more than another . . . should also be equal one amongst another without subordination or subjection".<sup>2</sup> The Declaration of Independence further proceeds to state that governments are established, by consent of the people, to protect this rights.<sup>3</sup> finally, it states that if the instituted government fails to protect these

rights, it is the right of the people to alter or abolish the government.

In this context, Locke said "There is therefore . . . another way whereby governments are dissolved, and that is, when the legislative . . . act contrary to their trust." <sup>11</sup>A simple analysis should demonstrate that the basic rights and foundations declared for American Citizens in the Declaration of Independence are heavily influenced by the ideas of John Locke.

Perhaps, what made Locke's ideas appropriate to the founding father's radical project was his scientific arguments for the necessity of protecting the human rights. The latter entered the main stream of political theory and practice in seventeenth century Europe. John Locke's *Second Treaties of Government* published in the wake of Britain's Glorious Revolution, presented the first fully developed theory of natural rights.

### **3- John Locke's Theory of the Right of Revolution**

In addition to Hobbes and Harrington, a third significant stream of thought that had a great impact on American ideology and can be considered as one of the major roots of American radicalism , as Jefferson had admitted, was the political philosophy of John Locke, including his theory of the "social contract" with its implied right of revolution . In fact, Locke's theory of the social contract had a great influence on the Revolution as it implied the natural right of the people to overthrow their leaders in case those leaders betray the agreements implicit in the leader -led relationship.

In this respect, it is interesting to state that John Locke (1632-1704) was the leading philosopher of the day. In his book *The Treaties of Government* (1690), a book which Thomas Jefferson read three times, he made a substantial contribution to the notion of individual's natural rights <sup>12</sup>.Locke insisted against Hobbes that "individuals in a stateless society would recognize a

moral law based on their common humanity, and so would find Mutual Corporation easier to maintain than Hobbes supposed.<sup>13</sup>

Locke's beliefs was the tight link between his theories and scientific empiricism, most famously embodied by Isaac Newton, who had propounded the notion of natural laws in the field of science in his 1687 work, *Mathematical Principles of Natural Philosophy*. Locke was one of the Enlightenment thinkers who raised the question :If natural laws governed the universe, why not the field of human relations, too? Humans were, therefore born in a state of nature and enjoyed certain natural rights; they were the same rights that Jefferson would call "inalienable", that no government could take away from them. Here it is important to refer to the fact that Locke and his contemporaries had to speak of natural rights in

As an observer of the impact of the philosophical legacy of the British Glorious Revolution outside the British Isles, John Locke wanted through his writing to show how the resulted Bill of Rights would be a one of the fundamental motifs of both the American and French Revolutions. That is the reason why he tended to stress his support the Glorious Revolution in his famous *Two Treatises on Government*.

In fact, in this work, Locke argues that the people, as represented by the Parliament are sovereign .He notes

“The power of the legislative, being derived from the people by a positive voluntary grant and institution, can be no other than what that positive grant conveyed, which being only to make laws, and not to make legislators, the legislative can have no power to transfer their authority of making laws, and place it in other hands.”<sup>14</sup>

In addition to this ,one can consider that the most radical belief in Locke's political philosophy is his firm conviction in the people's right of Revolution; he insisted that “revolt is the right of the people”<sup>15</sup>.He also adds;



for no man, or society of men, having a power to deliver up their preservation, or consequently the means of it, to the absolute will and arbitrary dominion of another; whenever any one shall go about to bring them into such a slavish condition, they will always have a right to preserve what they have not a power to part with; and to rid themselves of those who invade this fundamental, sacred, and unalterable law of self-preservation, for which they entered into society. And thus the community may be said in this respect to be always the supreme power...

According to Locke's theory, if a government proves unable to protect the natural rights of the individuals in society—commonly defined as life, liberty, and property—then, the people have the right to rebel in order either to overthrow the government or replace it by one that would be able to secure the protection of those natural rights. This justifies his claim that the people were right to replace the tyrannical James II and to declare their rights, through the Declaration of Rights. In stressing the ability of people to transfer power from a ruler to another, Locke asserts that “the legislative cannot transfer the power of making laws to any other hands: for it being but a delegated power from the people, they who have it cannot pass it over to others.”<sup>16</sup>

Indeed, in *The Two Treatises on Government*, Locke presents the Glorious Revolution as his philosophy of government and as his conception of the relation between the leader and the led. In reality, the Declaration of Rights could not protect the men's natural rights as Locke had defined them, and Parliament at that time represented only the rich, not the people as a whole. Nevertheless, Locke's idealistic interpretation of the Glorious Revolution paved the way for more significant revolutions in America and France in the eighteenth century and, therefore, played a leading role in the consolidation of more radical beliefs that would be adopted later not only in Europe but in the New World as well.

Historically speaking ,The overthrow of James II that Locke defended in 1690 must have played a significant role in founding a strong background for the American Revolution .Locke went beyond the negation of the divine right of kings ,when he proposed his model of government in which citizens would have the right to oppose or resist the ruler in case the latter violated their right to life, liberty ,and property .

Significantly, the above development can lead us now to conclude that John Locke with his radical ideas contributed to the promotion of American radicalism and as has been pointed out so far, Jefferson admitted the Americans' indebtedness to this philosopher. For instance, the colonists objected the stamp act because in their opinion, parliament had levied a tax without their consent because they were legally denied the franchise in parliamentary elections they were not represented in Westminster. Denied representation the parliament could not lawfully tax them otherwise, parliament would possess arbitrary power over them, a power which as Locke had shown, no government could not rightfully wield and as he considered revolt as the right of the people".<sup>17</sup>

#### **4-Gender and Race in Locke's Thought**

As a matter of fact, the strong belief in the human's natural rights made Locke one of the first intellectuals to defend women's property rights .He even thought that they should have the ability to divorce. This, in fact, can be considered as an anticipation of feminism .That is the reason why his defending of women's rights in that made of him an early feminist.

Moreover, Locke went beyond that to condemn slavery as a" so vile and miserable an estate of man."<sup>18</sup> Yet despite of his radicalism, he worked in the Royal African Company, which engaged in slave trading. He also helped draft the Fundamental Constitutions of Carolina in 1669, where "The proprietors

instituted a rigorous legal code that promised slave owners "absolute power and authority" over their human property".<sup>19</sup>

For this purpose, there is a need to clarify that for Locke, perhaps it was not strange to exclude slaves and other minorities from civil society because he was a product of his times. In fact, one can understand that it was difficult for him to rise above the racist stereotypes of the black people during his era and therefore, though convinced with the inhumanity of slavery, he was unable to practically challenge the fixed discriminating idea shaped by the social consciousness of his white dominated environment.

All in all, despite the contradiction between his idealized form of government and slavery as a social institution; it is undeniable that Locke's expansive and vigorous language in regard to natural rights and human equality succeeded to a great extent in creating a strong foundation for disfranchised and excluded groups to call for more rights in the future and to use his arguments as weapon to defend their natural rights through radical movements like the abolitionist movement in the American society.

### **5-Locke and American Republicanism and Democracy**

Now, there is a need to clarify that the reason that led the founding fathers to choose Locke's philosophies as the foundation for their call for independence and as a strong justification for the Revolution. Significantly, Locke was a liberal thinker as were the founding fathers. In fact, his philosophy that highlighted the libertarian ethic fitted their plan for the total separation from the British rule. Perhaps the founding fathers were aware that the full application of the Hobbesian political theory would make them appear as guilty of high treason; so they added Locke's ideas to secure the American peoples' natural rights and to legitimize the struggle against the perpetuation of any kind of despotism in the newly born nation.

The above discussion can lead me now to conclude that the founding fathers saw and appreciated the successful application of

Locke's 'right of revolution in the British Glorious Revolution which was principally supported by Locke. According to Locke's theory, King James II behaved tyrannically in England. That is why the right of revolution was needed . He removed Protestant Parliamentary Officers and replaced them with Catholics. He was acting in the best interest for himself, and he was ignoring the needs of his people. In short, the Glorious Revolution resulted in the overthrow of King James II and William of Orange ascending to the throne.

Undoubtedly, one of the earliest founding fathers influenced by Locke's ideas was James Otis whose *Rights of the British Colonies Asserted and Proved* (1764) really reflects his deep influence by the Anglo-American natural law tradition. Otis was "among the first colonists to question the universal British authority to govern its North American colonies".<sup>20</sup> Otis opposed efforts to tax the colonies on the radical grounds of individual rights and the natural law limits on legislative power. In the footsteps of Locke, Otis insisted that without colonial representation in Parliament, that British institution had no right to tax the colonies, for "if a shilling in the pound may be taken from me against my will, why may not twenty shillings; and if so, why may not my liberty and my life?".<sup>21</sup>

Indeed, it would be very interesting to know that in the imperial context, Otis amended Locke's traditional argument for natural limits on the legislature by adding an additional limit, which held "that a supreme legislature lacks the authority to alter or to abolish subordinate legislatures".<sup>22</sup> In other words, Otis could use ideas from Locke's philosophy as strong arguments to declare that the colonial assemblies have rights that the British parliament must take into consideration and respect.

It is worth noting that during the early stages of the imperial crisis, the great bulk of the American spokesmen simply could not conceive that natural law supported independence, nor thought they could dare shake their deep attachment to Britain and British

constitutional principles that is why they were reluctant in supporting the Revolution . As John Dickinson, one of the proponents of the moderate theory of empire admits:

If once we are separated from our mother country, what new form of government shall we adopt, or where shall we find another Britain to supply our loss? Torn from the body . . . we must bleed at every vein.<sup>23</sup>

Interesting, however, is the idea that "the radical theory of empire" found its way to the colonists' minds in the latter stages of the imperial crisis (1774–76). Thinkers such as Thomas Jefferson and James Wilson could persuasively confirm that it was time to think about separation. In fact, they could even question the imposed connection by arguing that the only legal relationship between the American colonies and Britain was through the Crown, not Parliament. At this stage, the colonies saw the first appearance of arguments that asserted the natural right of revolution as a theoretical justification for the American War of Independence.

It is worth noting that the radical theory of empire was based mainly on the idea that American membership in the British Empire was purely a matter of choice rather than a moral obligation to a sovereign power. For instance, in the *Considerations on the Authority of Parliament* (1774) James Wilson went beyond Otis to claim that the lack of colonial representation in Westminster meant that any form of parliamentary legislation was incompatible with colonial self-government. As Wilson argues:

It is repugnant to the essential maxims of jurisprudence, to the ultimate end of all governments, to the genius of the British Constitution, and to the liberty and happiness of the colonies, that they should be bound by the legislative authority of the Parliament of Great Britain.<sup>24</sup>

Obviously and in the light of this declaration, Wilson ,like all the founding fathers ,was putting into practice Locke's theory of revolution since revolt becomes sometimes a legitimate right in the hands of the led, Wilson here is openly announcing that it was time

for the American people to use this right in order to overthrow the unjust ruler, the then British king.

## Conclusion

Apparently, it was quite normal for the American founding fathers to be philosophically and intellectually inspired by the British philosophy especially that of Locke, and this was, of course, due to the strong, undeniable historical links between the Americans and their mother country .Locke's theory of the social contract as well as his theory of the people's right of revolution played a great role in shaping the American social and political thought .important is the idea that the Americans knew and were skilful in applying Locke's egalitarian and libertarian philosophy in all aspects of life in the new nation .Finally ,one can confirm that ,really, one of the fundamental origins of the American republic and democracy was Locke's philosophy.

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<sup>1</sup> Jonathan I. Israel *Radical Enlightenment: Philosophy and the Making of Modernity 1650-1750*, ( 2002)p.56.

<sup>2</sup> Video: Jonathan Israel and Philipp Blom Discuss Radical Enlightenment. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6Y4M8w8B3FM>. Accessed June 5, 2013.

<sup>3</sup> Voltaire is a French radical who was persecuted by the French authorities because of his revolutionary ideas and his hostility to all that hindered the fulfillment of man's freedom in France .In fact ,it is widely agreed among scholars that Voltaire's ideas about the freedom of speech had a great impact on the American founding fathers who stressed this democratic principle .Voltaire's famous saying is "I disapprove of what you say, but I will defend to the death your right to say it" Burdette

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<sup>4</sup> 2012 Annual Meeting: Session 134: *Radical Enlightenment: A Session in Honor of Margaret Jacob.*

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<sup>5</sup> Jefferson to Trumbull, Paris, February 15, 1789.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Wills, Garry *Inventing America: Jefferson's Declaration of Independence.* Houghton Mifflin Co., Boston, 2002), p.98.

<sup>8</sup> John, Locke. *Two Treatises on Government: A Translation into Modern English* (Industrial Systems Research, 2009), p. 81.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> The Declaration of Independence.

<sup>11</sup> John Locke, op. cit.

<sup>12</sup> John Locke, *The Second Treaties of Government* (1690), ed. Peter Laslet, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed.(Cambridge: Cambridge University Press,1988), p.160.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., p.45.

<sup>19</sup> Eric Foner, *Give me Liberty: An American History* (W.W. Norton, 2014), p.99.

<sup>20</sup> Timothy Patrick McCarthy, John Campbell, op.cit., Chapter: one American Revolution., p.9

<sup>21</sup> James Otis, "Rights of the British Colonies Asserted and Proved" (1764) in *Pamphlets of the American Revolution, 1750-76.* Bernard Bailyn, ed. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1965), pp. 419-70, esp. 461.

<sup>22</sup> Compare Otis, "Rights of the British Colonies," and John Locke, *The Two Treatises of Government.* Peter Laslett, ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), *Second Treatise*, section 134.



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<sup>23</sup> John Dickinson, "The Letters from a Farmer in Pennsylvania," (1767-68) in *Empire and Nation*. William E. Leuchtenberg and Bernard Wishy, eds. (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1962), pp. 3-85, esp. 18.

<sup>24</sup> James Wilson, "Considerations on the Authority of Parliament," (1774) in *Colonies to Nation, 1763-1789*, Jack P. Greene, ed. (New York: Norton, 1975), pp. 220-27, esp. 222.