

Subjects to citizens: locke, the enlightenment and the french revolution

[History](#), [French Revolution](#)



The idea of people as citizens rather than as subjects originates in 16th century Europe, during the Early Modern Period. During this period, European social order was in a state of flux as the rule of kings was confronted with a persistent and determined challenges defined by social forces that were pushing for more secular and democratic governments. There were both individuals and events that today may be seen as powerful drivers of those forces, and among them are John Locke, the Enlightenment, and the French Revolution. As such a force, the Enlightenment, which began during the mid-17th century and remained a major political and philosophical phenomenon until approximately 1800, had tremendous impact in the rise and triumph of democracy over monarchy. The Enlightenment was catalyzed by the persistent discourse of a number of philosophers and historians, one of the foremost of which was John Locke. The magnitude of change introduced by the Enlightenment is rendered more clearly when viewing that period in context of the preceding era—the Medieval Period, during which the rule of kings prevailed, sustained by an embedded religious institutions that qualified the lineages of kings for ruler ship through divine ordainment. The Church enjoyed considerable reciprocity from the crowns by doing so, because rulers recognized the equity that religion held in the minds of their “ subjects”, and found value in making mutually beneficial agreements with the church to preserve this closed loop cycle of maintaining and preserving a rigid social order. The losers of course were the “ subjects” of those kingdoms, who ultimately had little say in who ruled them, and who were indoctrinated into a life of mute slavery and poverty, deprived of both education as well as the right to imagine upward social mobility, much less

the access to opportunities to actually pursue such improved quality of life. It was the endpoint of these social dynamics, and the progressive deterioration of social responsibility throughout the dual leadership trees of church and crown, that catalyzed the French Revolution during the last decade of the 18th century. The French Revolution, in a nutshell, was the revolt of the long repressed peasantry against what they rightfully recognized as a corrupt governmental power cartel defined by the closed loop relationships between the crown and the Church. The French Revolution really punctuates the spirit of the Enlightenment, because the Enlightenment was all about waking people up to the notion that they had a right to select their leaders and that anybody was capable of exercising reason and logic in doing so, and most importantly that exercising those capacities was a much better answer to society's problems than continuing to rely on superstitious belief in the right of a lineage of kings to continue ruling despite worsening social conditions. It was not until the French Revolution however that the Enlightenment really manifested full force. John Locke died nearly a century before the French Revolution, but he played a key role in developing the philosophies that activated and drove the Enlightenment, particularly through his composition of the Two Treatises. In these documents, he makes an effort to refute the notion that people do not have the capacity or knowledge or political understanding to select their own rulers. Locke's philosophical arguments here really took those of opposing contemporaries like Sir Robert Filmer, whose viewpoints closely reflect the social order maintained by pre-Enlightenment establishment. Filmer's Patriarcha: The Natural Power of Kings Defended Against the Unnatural Liberty of the People, a composition

that presented arguments supporting the pre-existing social order of monarchic rule. The prevailing establishment justified monarchic rule through a number of arguments, both sociological and religious. Among these, they did so by arguing that a nation is like a family, with the population as the children as the king as the parent. Another argument was that to share the power of leadership in a democratic manner would be to invite and embrace the breakdown of social ethics, presumably because the natural disposition of a populace is to chafe under rules and laws and to desire more freedom, and that the endpoint of this would be excessive liberties, the deterioration of morality and ultimately the rise of an era where selfish and unjust rulers would take power. Rulers believed that the population simply could not, nor would they ever in a sustainable manner be capable of, responsibly selecting its own leaders. Locke challenged these ideas by introducing the concept of the Commonwealth, which would be defined by a social contract whereby the members of the Commonwealth participate in surrendering a certain level of liberty in order to ensure the stability of society and the preservation of the community. This surrender would only be the minimum required to preserve the peace, safety and security of the commonwealth, and part of this would involve the implementation of a democratic or republican system by which citizens would have at least a representative body in the government to ensure their needs were addressed. Notably, this was a key factor that activated in the French peasantry a desire to overthrow the First and Second estates, which they felt were taxing them without caring for their needs or interests.