

Burke and Locke on revolution essay sample

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



I hold it, that a little rebellion, now and then, is a good thing, and as necessary in the political world as storms in the physical. - Thomas Jefferson

Political rebellion takes place when the people of a country feel it is essential that a change in government is made. Different nations have different ideas about the responsibilities of government, and as a result there are many possible reasons for political rebellion. John Locke, an English medical doctor and philosopher who lived until 1704, published his liberal theories about government, property, and the rights of man, in his book *Second Treatise of Government*. Edmund Burke, a writer with a legal background who spent his life involved in English politics, published his opinions about revolution in 1790 in his book *Reflections on the Revolution in France*.

Both Locke and Burke support political rebellion, but Locke's belief that politics are based upon abstract natural rights drives his support for the complete dissolution of government in the event of rebellion, while Burke's belief that rights and morals are derived from the conventions of society makes his support for rebellion more reserved and conditional. This comparison is significant to any individuals considering revolution as a means of changing government. The outcomes of rebellion can depend on the underlying beliefs driving it, and both writers' positions are useful to establish the underlying reasons for revolution, and some of the risks involved depending on the extent of the change.

Locke believes that before we form civil society by consenting to establish government, we live in a State of Nature. He describes this pre-political state as, "...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 on the will of any other man. (Locke, 1980, p. 81)The State of Nature is ruled essentially by human nature. Liberty, equality, self preservation, reason, and property are the most prominent principles that Locke feels are innate to humans. Locke explains how nature intended for all men to be equal,...creatures of the same species and rank, promiscuously born to all the same advantages of nature, and the use of the same facilities should be equal amongst another... (Locke, 1980, p. 8)Locke comes to the conclusion that humans are self preserving in the State of Nature, through his observations that we are attracted to pleasure and have aversions to pain.

He believes that God gives us these attractions and aversions that preserve us, because we are essentially all the property of God. This limits the perfect freedom present in the State of Nature. Since we belong to God, we do not have the liberty to destroy ourselves. Although we are not all born with property (except through inheritance which Locke fully supports) the ability to acquire property is present in the State of Nature, for it is attained by our labor and resources. Our self preserving instinct produces a great desire among us to protect property that we have attained, therefore measures taken to protect our property are considered just. Since government does not exist in this state, individuals have the right to uphold the law. Locke believes that any individual, who breaks the laws of nature, proves that he is not ruled by reason and equality, as the rest of the inhabitants in the state are. Breaking the law can be defined as doing harm to innocent others, this includes stealing property or acts of physical harm.

These offenders are dangerous to mankind, and their peers must invoke punishment,...every man hath a right to punish the offender, and be the executioner of the law of nature. (Locke, 1980, p. 10) Punishment in the State of Nature takes on two distinct forms: reparation and restraint. Only the victim of the crime committed is entitled to reparation, to compensate for the damage he has received. Restraint is the method used to ensure that the crime will not be committed again, usually by causing repent. Since there is no judge to decide to what extent offenders should be punished, it becomes a decision based on the instinct and reason of the individuals involved. Locke outlines some details about invoking punishment to make this individual license more clear,...every man, in the State of Nature, has a power to kill a murderer, both to deter others from doing the like injury, which no reparation can compensate, ... and also to secure men from the attempts of a criminal, who having renounced reason, the common rule God hath given to mankind, hath, by the unjust violence and slaughter he hath committed upon one, declared war against all mankind... (Locke, 1980, p. 11)

While Locke gives complex details about this theoretical pre-political state, Edmund Burke does not believe it exists at all. Burke believes that we are born into civil society, and that the qualities Locke describes in the State of Nature, are not innate, but are derived from societal institutions. ...for I have in my contemplation the civil social man, and no other. (Burke, 1987, p. 522) Since our rights develop from experience, compromise, convention, and reason (which is learned) natural and abstract rights do not exist in a universal sense.

Burke believes that such abstract ideas about natural rights are too simple to fit into the real world, and if something were true, it would have to possess the ability to be contextualized.

...in the gross and complicated mass of human passions and concerns, the primitive rights of men undergo such a variety of refractions and reflections that it becomes absurd to talk of them as if they continued in the simplicity of their original direction. The nature of man is intricate; the objects of society are of the greatest possible complexity; and therefore no simple disposition of direction of power can be suitable wither to mans nature or to the quality of his affairs. (Ayling, 1988, p. 210) Burke also fears that abstract rights, expressed by philosophers such as John Locke, place too much emphasis on individualism, restricting essential human affections. Burke believes that affections preserve society; for it is the respect, love, and admiration of the past, those around us, and those who are not yet born that solidifies traditions and institutions.

On the scheme of this barbarous philosophy...laws are to be supported only by their own terrors and by the concern which each individual may find in them from his private speculations or can spare to them from his own interests...our institutions can never be embodied, if I may use the expression in persons, so as to create in us love, veneration, admiration, or attachment. But that sort of reason which banishes the affections is incapable of taking their place. (Burke, 1987, p. 68) Burke does believe that we posses liberties, but that they are flexible and particular to each society. These liberties are exercised through societal institutions, so if the

institutions are erased then so are our liberties. In the following quote, Burke explains his conception of the rights of man, by listing rights that are specifically satisfied by institutions such as law courts, hospitals, and educational facilities.

Men have a right to...do justice...they have a right to the fruits of their industry, and to the means of making their industry fruitful. They have a right to the acquisitions of their parents; to the nourishment and improvement of their offspring; to instruction in life, and consolation in death. (Burke, 1987, p. 51) Burke and Locke agree that humans have a need for government. Locke explains chaotic anarchy as the dark time in the State of Nature, the tragedy of the commons. This situation occurs after currency has been created in the State of Nature, leaving individuals free to accumulate money. The demise of the golden age (the era of harmony) is brought about by property disputes, greed, and insecurity. When the inhabitants of the State of Nature realize that they will not be able to cure the inconveniences of the state (the insecurity of property and inability to settle disputes due to lack of impartial judges) they realize the need for government and learn a system of political rationality.

Burke uses the example of the French revolution to illustrate the need for organized government. He believes that the state is an organic body; it can be adjusted but if it is destroyed total chaos is likely to result. Although the French attempted to set up new governments such as the National Assembly and later the National Convention, they were short lived and unstable. The French revolution brought about periods of anarchy, a state of a suspended

constitution, overturned laws, destabilized economy, and the closing of essential institutions. The violent era known as the Reign of Terror is certainly comparable to Lockes tragedy of the commons. When Napoleons Coup detat took place in 1799, the French people were desperate for an organized government to bring an end to the terror and re-build their society.

Locke stresses the importance of the social contract that occurs during the transition from the tragedy of the commons to civil society. Political power is manifested peacefully by a voluntary agreement between the people and the sovereign or ruling body. Burke does not acknowledge this specific moment of consent that Locke professes, but Burke values a consent of a more tacit nature. Burke attributes given consent far back in history, At some time or another...all the beginners of dynasties were chosen by those who called them to govern. (Burke, 1987, p. 13) and he implies that consent to the government is inherited through generations.

...we transmit our government and our privileges...in what we improve we are never wholly new; in what we retain we are never wholly obsolete... adhering in this manner and on those principles of our forefathers... In this choice of inheritance we have given to our frame of polity the image of a relation in blood, binding up the constitution of our country with the dearest domestic ties, adopting our fundamental laws in to the bosom of our family affections, keeping inseparable and cherishing with the warmth of all their combined and mutually reflected charities our state, our hearths, our sepulchres, and our alters. (Burke, 1987, p. 30)Burke might say that by being

born under any government, we are naturally subjects to it since we inherit the choices of our forefathers. Locke disagrees with this, taking into account that children can not be completely free, yet he still insists that there is a specific time in each person's life where they must give consent to the government in order to become part of the body politic.

...a child is born a subject of no country or government. He is under his father's tuition and authority, till he comes to the age of discretion; and then he is a free man, at liberty what government will he put himself under, what body politic he will unite himself to... (Locke, 1980, p. 63) Property is sacred to both writers. Locke and Burke agree that the main function of government is for the protection of our property. The government is also responsible for protection from external attack and from each other. Locke speaks of why men give up some of their natural liberties, such as punishing offenders, to the government, ...for the mutual preservation of their lives, liberties, and estates, which I call by the general name property. (Locke, 1980, p. 66) Burke also defends property as an important liberty, ...it is the property of the citizen, and not to the demands of the creditor of the state, that first and original faith of civil society is pledged. (Burke, 1987, p. 94)

Locke believes that government, the protector of our property, has no right to confiscate it, ...The supreme power cannot take from any man any part of his property without his own consent: for the preservation of property being the end of government... (Locke, 1980, p. 73) And Burke agrees with him by expressing his distaste for the massive amounts of church property that were confiscated by the National Assembly in the French Revolution. ...we do

not approve your confiscation of the revenues of bishops, and deans...It is in the principle of injustice that the danger lies... (Burke, 1987, p. 133)

He explains how the government's violation of property rights can lead to failure of government by angering the people. If governments provide for... debts by heavy impositions, they perish by becoming odious to the people. (Burke, 1987, p. 136) Tyranny is condemned by both Locke and Burke. Both support a system with a division of power in the government. When a government has power divided into different bodies it is forced to be held responsible for decisions made to the other branches of government, and to the body politic. This system of checks and balances makes arbitrary rule unlikely to occur. Citizens feel more secure and protected from the government, and since they are given a chance to assert their concerns (for example, England's House of Commons) drastic action like revolution becomes unnecessary.

Revolution to Locke means the dissolution of the government in power. The citizens then return to the State of Nature until they choose to give consent to create a new government. He supports revolution in two possible instances he describes the first, ...governments are dissolved, when the legislative, or the prince, either of them, act contrary to their trust. (Locke, 1980, p. 111) Locke gives examples of the government breaking the trust of the body politic as tyranny, usurpation, or the violation of the social contract that was established between the people and the government when civil society was formed. This social contract enabled the government to have

power, and the people agreed to obey the laws in return for government protection of property and rights.

The second instance in which rebellion is likely to occur is, When so ever... the legislative...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...and it devolves to the people, who have a right to resume their original liberty... (Locke, 1980, p. 111) Since the social contract that created the government commits the people only to the government they have chosen to lift them from the tragedy of the commons, the government does not possess the right to forfeit the body politic to another power by conquest. It is the responsibility of the government that was peacefully formed to protect the people from the conquest of arbitrary outside powers.

To Edmund Burke, revolution is the last resort to be used as a solution to a problem with the ruling body.

The line of demarcation where obedience ought to end and resistance must begin is faint, obscure, and not easily definable. It is not a single act, or a single event, which determines it. Governments must be abused and deranged, indeed, before it can be thought of; and the prospect of the future must be as bad as the experience of the past. (Burke, 1987, p. 27) His opinions differ from Lockes regarding the way that effective revolution should initiate change. Burke agrees that the government should be responsible for protecting its citizens, however in the event that the government breaks this trust we do not return to our natural liberty, as

Locke believes. Burke finds this return to natural liberty impossible, not only because of his disbelief in the existence of the State of Nature, but also because Burke flatly denies the people's right to form government for them.

He believes that we inherit liberties and government from our previous generations, and government contains more wisdom, captured through the state institutions, than one human is ever capable of possessing. He speaks of England, "...our constitution preserves a unity in a so great a diversity of its parts. We have an inheritable crown, and inheritable peerage, and a House of Commons and a people inheriting privileges, franchises, and liberties from a long line of ancestors...A spirit of innovation is generally the result of a selfish temper and confined views. People will not look forward to posterity who never looks backward to their ancestors. (Burke, 1987, p. 29) Burke believes that completely dissolving government and starting over with a blank slate is bound to fail, because a blank slate leaves no elements to form ideologies from, and is ignorant to the trials and errors of past governments. He uses the French revolution as an example, "...you chose to act as if you had never been molded into civil society and had everything to begin anew. You began ill, because you began by despising everything that belonged to you.

You set up trade without a capital...Respecting your forefathers, you would have been taught to respect yourselves. (Burke, 1987, p. 31) To clarify his expectations about successful and justified revolutions Burke uses the example of the Glorious revolution of England in 1688. King James the Second was a Catholic king. He was accused of not representing the

interests of the majority, since England was primarily of Protestant religion, and the King showed favoritism to Catholics. Burke explains the accusations against the King as, They who led the revolution grounded the virtual abdication of King James upon no...light and uncertain principle. They charged him with nothing less than a design, confirmed by a multitude of illegal acts, to subvert the Protestant church and state, and their fundamental, unquestionable laws and liberties; they charged him with having broken the original contract between king and people. (Burke, 1987, p. 24)

Burke admires this revolution because it was bloodless reform as opposed to violent rebellion. However, he admits that violence can be used to achieve change in government but only if absolutely necessary. In England it had become obvious that a change was needed in the government, and the people took only the necessary actions to complete the change and return the country to normal. King James abdicated the throne, and was replaced by a Protestant king. An irregular convulsive movement maybe necessary to throw off an irregular convulsive disease (Burke, 1987, p. 22) the glorious revolution made great improvements in English government.

Burke approves of the fact that the revolution did not begin until the leaders had accumulated evidence and facts that the King was irresponsible. The spirit of the revolution was not to dissolve society and begin anew, but had a more realistic spirit of eliminating the specific problem in the government while preserving societal institutions. ...they regenerated the deficient part of the old constitution through the parts that were not impaired. (Burke,

1987, p. 19) This type of revolution provided stability for the English people; their rights were re-asserted in Declaration of Right, and the government was made more responsible to the people.

They secured soon after the frequent meetings of parliament, by which the whole government would be under constant inspection and active control of the popular representatives and of the magistrates of the kingdom. (Burke, 1987, p. 24) Burke contrasts this example of effective revolution with The French revolution of 1789, which he believed was ill spirited and caused further problems in French society. He feels that the French did not have just cause to rebel, The French rebel against a mild and lawful monarch with more fury, outrage, and insult than ever any people has been known to rise against the most illegal usurper or the most sanguinary tyrant. Their resistance was made to concession, their revolt was from protection, and their blow was aimed at a hand holding out graces, favors, and immunities. (Burke, 1987, p. 34) Burke feels that their cause for revolution was unreasonable and foolish, ...rash and ignorant counsel in a time of profound peace. (Burke, 1987, p. 34) The National Assembly, the government created upon the execution of the King of France, had the potential to become tyrannous. Burke believes that since the assembly had been created from a blank slate it was a danger to society.

That assembly, since the destruction of the orders, has no fundamental law, no strict convention, no respected usage to restrain it. Instead of finding themselves obliged to conform to a fixed constitution, they have a power to make a constitution which shall conform to their designs. Nothing in heaven or

earth can serve as a control on them. (Burke, 1987, p. 39) Locke feels that people will impose restraints of power on their government as they see fit. He fully supports the division of powers, and believes that tyranny is a worse state for society to be in than the tragedy of the commons. The reason behind this being that a tyrannical government may force its citizens to live a life without liberties, but the tragedy of the commons although a dark and unstable time, is a time without government, where each man has natural liberties by the law of nature.

One of the commonly known reasons that the French people rebelled against their monarch, was because of the poor economy. However, Burke makes it clear that a poorly planned revolution can bring worse times than those of the past.

They have found their punishment in their success: laws overturned; tribunals subverted; industry without vigor; commerce expiring; the revenue unpaid, yet the people impoverished; a church pillaged, and a state not relieved; civil and military anarchy made the constitution of the kingdom; everything human and divine sacrificed to the idol of public credit, and national bankruptcy the consequence... (Burke, 1987, p. 34) People who are dissatisfied with their government, and considering revolution as a means of change must take both Burkes and Lockes positions into account. The individuals must define the rights that they feel entitled to, and decided if the government and society can reform to assert these rights. If they find revolution to be necessary, these individuals must decide what type of

political situation would embody these rights through institutions and government actions.

Both Burke and Locke see a need for revolution when government is ineffectual. However, they differ in opinion on how and when revolution should take place, because of their beliefs on what society is like without established government. Locke feels that the peoples return to the State of Nature is a chance to build a new civil society when they see fit, based on their desire to have their natural rights protected. Burke believes that there is no State of Nature for us to return to, escaping civil society is not possible. In order to preserve the lives of the people and the establishments that have been built by past governments, the government must be reformed rather than abolished. Thus summing it up I would say that the reflection of the ideas of Burke and Locke can definitely be seen today especially in democratic form of governments like our India.

Both Burke and Locke talk on the aspects of Liberty, equality, self preservation, reason, and property. They believe that these aspects are a must for governments in order to sustain continuity and thus we do see all these aspects in a modern democratic system of a government. Burke and Locke believe that revolution is not the correct method to achieve things in a democracy. They say that governments shouldnt be thrown out by means of a revolution. Revolution to them is merely a way of bringing about a change in government by exercising out rights and privileges that the democratic government system offers to us and not by dissolving a government by means of revolution as per the meaning during the 17th century.

Therefore Burke and Lockes ideas fit very well for new emerging, growing and existing democratic systems of government today and must be reviewed upon before taking extremist decisions like abolishing a government completely. And thus I see their ideas and views on revolution did have immense influence during the period they lived in and the importance of ideas and views of Burkes and Lockes continue to be of immense importance to governments today and tomorrow.

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