

Locke vs. burke: from political authority and glorious revolution to the interpre...

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



Even though much time has passed since the XVII century, putting the names of Locke and Burke in one sentence already seems quite provoking, as if two rivals have been seated at the same table.

Despite not being as known by the modern population as his opponent, Burke was also quite influential with his ideas at the time, and these ideas were quite conflicting with the concepts offered by Locke.

Taking a closer look at the ideas which the two philosophers expressed, one can possibly find a golden mean in their arguments.

Every state needs certain regulations to be based upon, and these regulations are to be provided by the people standing at the helm of the state. Without a decent political authority, a state cannot exist, which Locke and Burke both understood well.

Offering their interpretations of what an ideal political authority must be like, they provide the ideas which, of collided, appear to be the exact opposite of each other.

A true Liberalist at heart, Locke focused his idea of state power on the concept of freedom and equality, which tossed the philosopher into extreme liberal ideas. As Mack explains, Locke positioned personal freedom as the primary goal of every citizen, as a specific the law of nature.

Therefore, according to Locke, political authority should emerge only when there is an urge to use its power: " The motivating idea of state of nature theorizing is that we can determine what the purpose and proper extent of

political authority is by seeing what sort of problems would beset us in the absence of all political authority” (Mark, 2009, 23).

In a sharp contrast to Locke’s free-spirited and somewhat anarchist moods, Burke displayed the desire to establish strong and down-to-earth set of laws and regulations based on monarchist ideas.

It is quite peculiar that Burke not only exercises the principle of natural right – he takes it to another extreme: “ it became an exclusive criterion for the legitimacy of any political power whatsoever” (Parkin, 2011, 9).

However, in Burke’s reality, even the law of nature is supposed to support the idea of monarchy as the only possible political system.

It seems that the ideal solution is the golden mean between Locke and Burke’s ideas. It is not quite reasonable to offer complete freedom to people, for they need to be guided by certain regulations to live in a state.

However, the idea of natural right seems even less appealing – while people have to relate to nature, these are the basic moral standpoints that define their humanity. Hence, Locke’s ideas seem more applicable.

Unlike wars, which are usually planned in the most cool-blooded manner several months and even years before starting the actual attack on the enemy’s state, revolutions, which are headed against the government of the native country, are usually considered a sign of a rapidly approaching change.

There are many ways to consider revolutions from a historical perspective; and the example of Locke and Burke is a perfect way to show that revolutions cannot be taken for granted. Clashing in an argument, both philosophers offer a legitimate interpretation of the Glorious Revolution and its purpose.

Weirdly enough, Burke, the man who considered order and compliance with rules the basis for the society to ground on, seemed to approve of certain types of revolutions.

While interpreting the French Revolution as “ another manifestation of the regicidal, destabilizing forces unleashed during the English Civil War” (Rooney, 2012, 26), Burke seemed to approve of the Glorious Revolution.

However, he explained his opinion on the significance of the latter in his own manner of a logical yet unexpected argumentation, describing the Glorious revolution as a “ culmination of historical processes” (Rooney, 2012, 26).

While the French Revolution was destructive for the society, the Glorious Revolution spurred the state development and heralded the return to the ancient laws of England (Rooney, 2012, 26).

Unlike one might have expected, Locke shared Burke’s vision of the Glorious Revolution as the force which is bound to change the society for the better. However, Locke believed in the success of the Glorious Revolution for different reasons than his opponent, which defined the key difference between the two.

While Burke believed that the Glorious Revolution will help England return back to its traditions, unlike the French Revolution, which made the French society even less integrated, Locke supposed that the Glorious Revolution because he “ saw the Glorious Revolution as an opportunity to change the political situation” (Suckow, 2007, 8). Therein lies the difference between the two philosophers.

While the effects which the Glorious Revolution has had on England and its political situation, it is necessary to admit that it was, first of all, a huge bloodbath.

Hence, no matter what their political ideas could be, people felt that they have achieved something with a huge effort. Therefore, it seems that the Glorious Revolution was more of a revelation for the people of their power to choose and to change.

As it follows from the example of two great philosophers mentioned above, there is no way to choose the right ideology - both Liberalism and Conservatism seem quite legitimate when their basic ideas are applied to a specific situation in a specific context.

Therefore, it is highly unlikely that one of the given theories can be proven completely wrong; it is the time context and the political situation which predetermines the reasonability to resort to either Liberal or Conservative ideas.

However, if comparing and contrasting some of the basic Liberal and Conservative ideas, one can possibly decide which of the theories works for a certain person in a specific timeslot.

The concept offered by Locke, or “le Sage”, as his followers called him, seem quite in tune with the general idea of people’s rights and freedoms. Indeed, according to the key postulates of Liberals, the main idea behind their political theory lies in offering people their freedoms and leaving them to choose the path which they are going to take. As Kelly puts it,

It derives from a recognition of the equal moral worth and standing of all individuals, but it also claims that this view places limits on the scope of moral claims given the fact of reasonable pluralism of moral views in modern democratic societies. (Kelly, 2005, 3)

Hence, liberalism allows for the freedom of choice, yet this freedom is restricted by the moral standards governing in a certain state.

However, the theory of Conservatism seems rather legitimate as well. As Aughey, Jones, Terence and Riches explain, “the nature of conservatism at any one time in any one place is the distinctive (perhaps incoherent) discourse of its philosophical, dogmatic and policy expressions” (Aughey, Jones, Terence & Riches, 1992, 20).

Rooted in the state traditions and clinging onto the approaches which have stood the time testing, Conservatism seems rather resistant to the

innovative approaches yet more prone to the mistakes triggered by newly adopted solutions.

It seems that in the modern world, the liberal ideas are much more popular and appealing to people. Recognizing people's rights and freedoms, liberalism must be the key political force. However, people still need conservative ideas to balance the liberal ones out.

When it comes to deciding either which of the philosophers is more influential or which of them has contributed to changing the United Kingdom as people know it, there is no way to choose between Locke and Burke – both have shaped the politics of the state greatly, as well as contributed to the development of the English philosophical thought.

Despite the fact that some of the ideas which the philosophers offered seem a bit dated nowadays, e. g., Locke's Utopian concepts, or Burke's idea of keeping the traditions of the ancestors, which he drove to a complete extreme, there is still a lot to give the two philosophers credit for.

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