



## Research Article

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### John Locke's political philosophy

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#### Abstract

John Locke (1632-1704) was an English philosopher, very influential in the 17th century. He is considered the first English empiricist, where his ideas had an enormous influence on the development of epistemology and political philosophy. His writings later influenced Voltaire and Rousseau.

Regarding the examination of the natural state, Locke, like Hobbes, starts from the problem of what characterizes the natural state, when there is no political power. Unlike Hobbes, Locke thought that the state from nature was an affordable state characterized by reason and tolerance. As for the social contract, he understood it as "a way to ensure the natural morality of man in a more efficient way, not to throw away his ugly condition, but to achieve his goals, that is, peace and security" (Locke, 2012).

The paper also examines the influence and importance of Locke's ideas in the development of modern political thought, analyzing how these concepts have contributed to the shaping of democratic ideas and human rights. In conclusion, a critique and re-contextualization of Locke's theories in the contemporary context is offered, addressing their relevance to current issues of governance and justice in modern societies. This analysis aims to help deepen the understanding of Locke's political philosophy and assess its influence on today's political theories and practices.

**Keywords:** Political philosophy, state of nature, social contract, freedom, social and political community.

#### 1. Introduction

John Locke, one of the most important philosophers of the Enlightenment period, contributed to shaping political and philosophical thought through his theories on the state of nature and the social contract. In his works, Locke presents a profound and sophisticated vision of human nature and the structure of society, arguing for an order based on reason and justice. At the center of this philosophical treatment are two main concepts: the state of nature and the social contract, which are essential for

understanding Locke's political philosophy and its influence on the development of modern political thought.

The state of nature, according to Locke, is a hypothetical situation that describes the life of people before the formation of society and governing structures. In this state, individuals are free and equal, but also face a certain level of insecurity and conflict due to the lack of an organized authority to protect their rights. Locke presents this state as a stage where individuals, although free, need a system that guarantees the protection of property and other basic rights.

In an attempt to solve the problems that arise from the state of nature, Locke describes the concept of the social contract, which is a mutual agreement between individuals to create a government that will protect their rights and ensure order and justice. According to Locke, individuals agree to limit some of their natural liberties in exchange for the protection guaranteed by the constituted government. This concept of the social contract is fundamental to his political philosophy and has profoundly influenced the development of democratic ideas and human rights.

John Locke's political philosophy has had a tremendous influence on modern political theories and the practice of government. Through the analysis of the state of nature and the social contract, Locke provides a solid basis for understanding the reasons for the establishment of political institutions and for analyzing the legitimacy of governing authority. This approach has significantly shaped the debate on individual rights, the rule of law and the separation of powers, providing a clear and reasonable perspective on the organization of society and governance.

## **2. Research methodology**

The methodology used in the analysis of John Locke's theories includes a combination of conceptual and theoretical analysis, historical and critical approach, and logical and argumentative method. In this analysis, an in-depth approach is used to interpret and understand Locke's concepts, such as the state of nature and the social contract, placing this in the context of the historical period and the philosophical influences of the time. Textual analysis, historical contextualization, criticism and interpretation and comparative study are the main components in the framework of the methodology used in this scientific work.

## **3. Results**

The results of the analysis of John Locke's political philosophy provide a deep understanding of his main concepts, such as the state of nature and the social contract, thus helping to clarify how Locke conceives the liberty and equality of individuals before the formation of a government and how creating a social contract helps protect their rights and interests. These results highlight the continuing influence of Locke's ideas on the development of modern political thought, contributing to the shaping of democratic theories and human rights, and provide a basis for criticizing and refining

his ideas in the contemporary context, helping in addressing current governance and justice issues.

#### **4. Locke's state of nature**

Locke explains the natural state starting from what people in the natural state knew the moral law. This means that in order to be equal and independent, no one should infringe on another's life, health, freedom and property. Therefore, Locke's state of nature "is the state of full liberty to decide their actions, and to dispose of their property and persons as they think fit within the bounds of natural right, without asking permission and without depended on the will of another" (Locke, 2012). So, Locke does not understand the natural state as a state where man, from his selfish being, takes on his shoulders the ambitions of being omnipresent, and as a result of this, this state takes another direction. On the contrary, Locke understood the state of nature as a state of equality between people and that no one has more than the other. People in this state with their freedom do not aim to dominate everything that exists. Locke makes it clear that although people are in a state of freedom, they do not have any fixed destination in terms of their actions. Regarding this, he explains that the natural state, although it is a free state, is not a state of depravity, although man in this state has unlimited freedom to decide about his person or property, he does not have the freedom to kill himself, or either even any creature that is in his possession. So, the natural state of man is a state of perfect freedom and a state of equality, but it must be understood that this state of freedom is not at all a state of excess of freedom and that it does not bring about the war of all against all. This becomes more than clear, because his opinion on the natural state was based on the reason that the natural state should not be compared with another state and that in nature you find a state of freedom that should not be equated with the jungle" (Guchet, 2005).

Locke had a different view of the state of nature. Simply, he understands this state to be regulated by the law of nature, where he explains that it is the mind itself which teaches men, all being equal and independent, that no one should do harm to another, as much as is due his life, his health, his liberty and his wealth. Natural law is identified with reason, which is able to provide criteria and rules for resolving conflicts between people. This is because man in his natural state is not under the control of anyone else, except his mind. Therefore, the state of nature, according to Locke, is not a state of war, because men by their abilities bring about a harmony among themselves. Whereas, conflicts arise as a result of the threat of life by someone else, the pushing of passions, greed, ambitions towards property and, above all, failure to use reason. All these happen when there is no agreement of reason with natural law (Kullashi, 2005).

In this case, even though man is in the natural state and where everyone almost has an executive power, it becomes more than necessary to give an account in function of the action taken. Therefore, Locke points out that "in the state of nature, man can punish even for minor violations of this law, where political theory plays the role

of demonstrating practical reasons" (Chappel, 1994). It is about the natural law, in which case the action outside this law would coincide with the punishment. Further, he adds that "every crime which may be committed in the state of nature, may be punished in that state in the same manner, even to some extent, as in the state, where the exercise of power without rights leaves the people in a state of freedom" (Chappel, 1994). The state of nature according to Locke cannot be considered as a place where for the action done, you will not receive the punishment. However, what is missing in this natural state is a common judge, because man in this state is each his own judge. Such a description of the state of nature by Locke, in a way gives the impression that in the state of nature everything was in order. However, the natural state, on the contrary, proved that even though people are equal, they do not have the power to be a political or administrative body that would resolve disputes within the framework of something common. However, Locke thought that even in the state of nature there is a law that all people know and respect, as long as their interests do not conflict with it. This tells us that interest in the state of nature is above this law of reason.

In general, according to Locke, it can be concluded that "the state of nature is a state of equality, within which all power and jurisdiction is mutual, and where no man has more than others, who are endowed from birth with the same advantages of nature" (Rossen, Wolf, 2018). The state of nature is not governed by any law that society can produce, except the law of nature, which obliges all men to obey it. However, Locke points out, at the foundation of the law of nature lies reason, which enables people to gain awareness of this state, where everyone is equal and that no one should violate another's life, health, freedom or the wealth.

Locke, when he thought that everyone is his own judge, knew very well that such a state of affairs did not coincide with rationality, which was at the core of natural law, because everyone gives himself the right, without having a compelling reason. According to him, this happens for two reasons: "on the one hand, love for themselves or their friends would make people one-sided and, on the other hand, rudeness, passions and the desire for revenge will push them to the maximum punishment" (Rossen, Wolf, 2018). These two reasons make the actions of people in the natural state not coincide with the rational, which was considered as an important basis of the natural law.

Locke had an important attention to natural law, because its application aimed at the peace and preservation of the human race. He explains that "the execution of the natural law is left to each, giving to all the right of punishing the offenders of the law to such degree as may be necessary to prevent its violation" (Rossen, Wolf, 2018). This constitutes the main feature, which leaves no reason for a common survival in the natural state, because each person being a party and punisher does not coincide with the right and rational, which Locke called the essence of the natural state.

However, people who enjoyed many advantages in the natural state gave it up, moving to the other state. Why did this happen? To this, Locke answers that people were good in the natural state, but they still faced problems, which over time risked getting worse, therefore, in order to be better, they preferred the state of society.

Thus, Locke's state of nature consists of two stages: "first, no one dares to appropriate more natural products and land than he needs for personal needs. And the second, when people by agreement among themselves created money, where the surplus of products was replaced by gold, silver and diamonds. Thus, men began to produce not only for themselves, but also for the market" (Locke, 2022). Consequently, Locke regards this as the second stage of the natural state, which resembled a civil society.

#### 4.1 Out from the natural state

Locke explains the state of nature as an affordable state if there was no need for a common arbiter to settle disputes between people. Precisely, this means that the natural state could slip into war, which according to him was a permanent threat. However, Locke did not see the state of nature as a state of war. He even distinguishes between these two states, such as the distinction between peace, benevolence and mutual help, on the one hand, and the reign of enmity, malice and mutual destruction, on the other. Thus, leaving the natural state, according to Locke, would enable man to realize the goals of natural law.

Between the state of nature and the civil state, Locke does not see any fundamental difference between them. This is because "even in the natural state, sociability between people, the feeling of friendship and common moral norms are present" (Kullashi, 2005). Therefore, the difference between them does not consist in the principles and concepts that the social situation entangles among itself. Undoubtedly, the transition from the natural state to the social state leads to the goal of establishing the state and political society.

Locke emphasizes "that not every contract puts an end to the natural state between men, but only that when men agree with each other to enter into a community and create a body politic" (Locke, 2012e, p. 86). With this, he makes it clear that if the agreement between people is not shared, then it cannot be removed from the natural state. This is because the acceptance of a contract by only a few groups of people would not represent the common will for a political society. He then explains that "men may make promises to one another, and make other contracts, and yet remain as before in the state of nature" (Locke, 2012). This proves that any agreement that does not include all citizens does not have the right legitimacy for the formation of the political body that would represent the will of all people. And as a consequence of this, it remains in the natural state, until a common consent is reached among them. In this way, the formation of the body politic by the people of the natural state would avoid the outbreak of the state of war. Therefore, Locke explains that "people first agree to join a community, while after that they create a type of organism called the body politic" (Gyshe, 2005). This political community is created with the social contract, in which case power is created. So, power does not precede the social contract, but is a consequence of it. Locke explains that "every one, when he agrees with others to form a single body politic subject to a single government, undertakes to all the members of this society to submit to the opinion of the majority, and to accept the decisions of her" (Gyshe, 2005). So, this community created subject to the

rule of the majority, consists of a rational equality between them.

The transformation from a simple fact of nature, to a law of right, makes us understand that every social order requires the restriction of freedom in different ways. According to Locke, the benefit of the transition from the natural state to the social state cannot be easily determined, but that in this state enters a certain measure of security for life and property. Realistically, this can be defined as the welfare product that the state can bring, with its very establishment.

Locke conditions the social state with two features, which must be renounced from the natural state, because in the natural state man possesses two types of powers. For this reason, in order to enter the social state, both of these powers must be extinguished, in which case he emphasizes that “first man possessed the power to do everything he deemed necessary for the protection of himself and other people, but that he is now stripped of this power, transferring power to society, so that this power is regulated and administered by the laws of society” (Chevallier; Guchet, 2006). This makes the social situation special, because although man was equal in the natural state, on the other hand, as a result of the possession of power, he was his own judge.

While the second power, which man gave up with his transition to the social state, according to Locke was “the possession of the power to punish crimes committed against the laws of nature, means the power to use his natural force for the execution of these laws” (Locke, 2012). Man, also strips himself of this power in order to help and strengthen the executive power of the political society. On the basis of these two powers and the withdrawal from them in the social state, we can conclude that the social state plays an important role in the creation of a social order, which according to Locke will be guided by the right and tolerant spirit in the between the people.

In general, the exit from the natural state was accompanied by a multitude of changes in man as a human being, acting rationally in the transfer of a multitude of rights to the body politic of the social state. According to this, the citizens of Locke’s community could be said to have agreed to give up many of their rights in exchange for civil protection. Locke had in mind “sooner or later men in the state of nature will find that they must move from this state, and being reasonable they will understand how the processes work when man is not happy” (Sparks, Isaacs, 2004).

From all this arises the political society, as a result of stripping man of power and judgment. But it should be borne in mind that the uncertainty brought by the natural state does not count, if you compare it with the uncertainty brought by unlimited state power.

#### **4.2 Political society**

Political society is a push towards the establishment of new relationships between people, where only consent and not the use of force play a role in its formation. The formation of the political society coincides with the formation of the common power. Whereas, common power is a common shield for all people in the social state. So, the political society is under the authority of a power, which imposes the right for the benefit of the whole society.

According to Locke, despite the benefits that political society brings, care must be taken in preserving and respecting rights. By this, Locke meant that the institution should not be seen as a source of law, but that the citizen should be the one who, with his consent, has clothed the institution with power. As a result of this, the relations between them will not be irritated, because they develop reciprocal conditions among themselves. In this regard, Locke explains that “the legal theory would be based on the view that the rights of individuals should be protected by the state, which means that when a man suffers some kind of injury that will justify reparation according to the natural law, the law positive will dictate that repayment be made by the state” (Russell, 2005). In a way, political society does not allow the same way of resolving disputes as in the natural state. This is because, in the social state, new relationships develop between people, which were based on the common power of law. On this basis, Locke ruled out absolute arbitrary power, even if most members of society would agree to such a power, because by doing so they would violate their liberty and equality.

An important feature of the social state is the preservation of property of the people, which is taken as the main factor for which people unite in the state. This is also a guarantee, in the case of the transition from the natural state to the social one. According to Locke, “the natural state, which is by no means a jungle, but the lack of power that makes it fragile, pushes man to abandon natural equality and freedom” (Guchet, 2005). After that, a common power is created, when everyone must submit to the power, where the purpose of the contract is “to create a legitimate power in order to guarantee peace, security and public goods” (Guchet, 2005). These goals can only be fulfilled if there is a balanced and conditioning relationship between the people and the state.

So, political society came as a result of a situation where man did not have a power, law, court and force, which would make the imposition of law. For this reason, the formation of political society, according to Locke, gave way to the state and the law, so that man had a basis for action. undoubtedly, the social contract is considered the main factor of the transition to the social state, because with this people understood what they gave and what they received, in the sense of obedience and the imposition of law.

However, the difference between the thinkers of the 17th century lies in whether this was an agreement between people to give power to the sovereign even if the sovereign is not a party to the contract. Exactly, here lies the difference between Hobbes and Locke. Locke did not think this, because according to him “the government is a party to the contract and can be rightfully opposed, if it does not fulfill its part of the agreement” (Russell, 2005, p. 79). So, despite the fact that power is an authority in a country, it can be challenged if it does not adhere to the agreement.

Locke, in the formation of political society, did not take as a basis the arbitrariness of power as a result of the social contract. This is because people accepted this agreement as a general shield against evil, but by accepting this agreement it does not mean that the government can do anything, acting outside the content of this agreement. Jean-

Fabien Spitz, one of the researchers of John Locke's theory, states that "this is based on the idea that society is a network of rights and privileges produced by history and customs or habits and the unwritten rules of living of people" (Kullashi, 2005). So, even though people have moved to the social state, it does not mean that they are not equal, but that care must be taken against the arbitrariness of power and not allowing it to make arbitrary decisions to the detriment of society. In this regard, Locke explains that "people cannot live simply in nature, because they want the man-maker in an artificial environment governed by a mechanism directed towards human beings" (Sparks, Isaacs, 2004). Since, a special importance should be given to limiting the powers of the governor to be only the spokesperson of the rule of law. This means that the political power formed with the social contract has the duty to protect those rights that unite people, and which originate from human nature itself. Power, according to Locke, must have its limitations in its daily relations. He generally elaborates the social contract by protecting the freedoms and rights of citizens within a political society, alluding to the limitation of political power. In this way, the agreement between people according to Locke institutionalizes governance and the beginning of the formation of political society. However, according to Locke, "legislative power and executive power lose their power if they act contrary to the reason for which the state was formed" (Gyshe, 2005). Definitely, Locke attached special importance to the relationship between citizens and power, examining the circumstances and freedoms of individuals within a society in which they live. Therefore, he underlined the social contract as a contract between the people, on the one hand, and the government, on the other hand, considering the power as a party in this case. In general, the natural state and the exit from such a state, the reasons for the formation of the political society and the social contract, were the main objects of elaboration in this paper.

## 5. Conclusion

John Locke's political philosophy, presented mainly in his *Two Treatises of Government*, has had a profound and lasting influence on the development of modern political thought. Locke's key concepts—the state of nature and the social contract—form the core of his theory of building a just and stable society. Locke presents the state of nature as a situation in which individuals are free and equal, but face the risk of uncertainty and conflict due to the lack of an organized authority that guarantees the protection of their rights. This theoretical framework helps to illustrate the need to create a governance structure that can ensure order and stability, making it possible to protect the rights of individuals and their property. In this context, the social contract is central to Locke's philosophy as an agreement that individuals reach to create a government that will protect their common interests and natural rights. According to Locke, individuals agree to limit some of their natural liberties in exchange for better and more guaranteed protection from established authority. This concept is fundamental to his political theory and emphasizes the

importance of a government that relies on the consensus and authorization of individuals to function legitimately and effectively.

The conclusions of Locke's philosophy are important for several reasons. First, they contribute to the development of democratic theories and the rights of individuals, providing a solid basis for understanding and defending the principles of freedom and equality in an organized society. Second, Locke's philosophy has helped shape modern ideas on the separation of powers and the importance of the rule of law, becoming a valuable resource for analyzing and developing governmental systems. Third, the results of Locke's philosophy provide a critique used to address various challenges in political practice and to promote a reasonable and fair approach to solving various social and political issues.

In summary, John Locke's political philosophy has had a profound impact on the way we understand and practice government and the rights of individuals. His concepts of the state of nature and the social contract continue to provide an important framework for the analysis and development of political theory and practice, providing an important contribution to building just and sustainable societies.

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