

John Locke

THE ARCHITECT OF DEMOCRACY

THIS is the dream that John Locke dreamed. Frail in body, and sickly in health, he yet gave the world its most robust philosophy, one that has survived wars, epidemics, natural catastrophies, and revolutions. The modern idea of democracy, as espoused by this physician-metaphysician-psychologist-educator-economist-statesman, is officially the social religion of the so-called Anglo-Saxon world; ironically, it is as far from realization as when Dr. Locke, hiding somewhere in Holland, first startled the civilized world with its most celebrated political doctrine.

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How shattered England seemed in the seventeenth century! Kings and dictators succeeded each other in never-ceasing confusion; wars and revolutions raged; religious dogmas clamored for exclusive recognition; poverty in Great Britain was almost as widespread as it is today.

Through the chaos of this era, calmly—almost dully—moved the mind of John Locke. Confidential secretary to one of the king's most influential ministers, while personally tending in the direction of Puritan gravity, he lived through England's most turbulent period almost unscathed by its many revolts. He had fled a few times to escape persecution, but his biography would bore us today, were it not lit with the brilliant sunshine of his mind. He left us a heritage of intellectual grandeur, which, some day, the world may see achieved.

Absolutism, said John Locke, is the goal of those who rule, or who do not understand. Reason is as foreign to them as knowledge. They rely on force and faith, and prattle of "innate" or "revealed" knowledge, which, however, is neither innate nor revealed. All knowledge is derived from the sensory experience of each individual.

How, then, can there be "universal" knowledge? All there can be is exchange of ideas in the marketplace of free thought, and the more ideas the better. How stupid and criminal, therefore, is censorship, which attempts to substitute for the ideas and beliefs of all, the morality of a bigoted minority!

Similar in criminal stupidity is the attempt of a handful of tyrants to impose dictatorships on mankind. By virtue of what natural right do they enslave free individuals? All men's experiences seem to show that Nature is the source of all that they possess, and that man is born into Nature, and lives by its precepts alone. Prior to the institution of government, man lived in a state of Nature, and governed himself accordingly. "To understand political power aright, 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 . . . A state also of equality, wherein all the power and jurisdiction is reciprocal, no one having more than another."

This equality in the state of Nature is one of opportunity, and not of faculties and possessions. Given the same start in life each man is on his own. He possesses only these two natural rights in common with everybody else:

"Every man is born with a double right. First, a right of freedom to his person, which no other man has a power over, but the free disposal of it lies in himself. Second, a right before any other man to inherit, with his brethren, his father's goods."

It is with the guaranty of these two rights only that man lives in a state of Nature. "But though this be a state of liberty, yet it is not a state of license . . . The state of Nature has a law of Nature to govern it, which obliges everyone; and reason, which is that law, teaches all mankind who will but consult it that, being all equal

and independent, no one ought to harm another in his life, health, liberty, or possessions."

In the state of Nature, every man is his own judge and policeman. "And that all men may be restrained from invading others' rights, and from doing hurt to one another, and the law of Nature be observed, which willeth the peace and preservation of all mankind, the execution of the law of Nature is in that state put into every man's hand, whereby every one has a right to punish the transgressors of that law to such a degree as may hinder its violation."

But "if man in the state of Nature be so free as has been said, if he be absolute lord of his own person and possessions, equal to the greatest, and subject to nobody, why will he part with his freedom, this empire, and subject himself to the dominion and control of any other power? To which, it is obvious to answer, that though in the state of Nature he hath such a right, yet the enjoyment of it is very uncertain, and constantly exposed to the invasions of others. For all being kings as much as he, every man his equal and the greater part no strict observers of equity and justice, the enjoyment of the property he has in this state is very unsafe, very insecure. This makes him willing to quit this condition, which, however free, is full of fears and continual dangers; and it is not without reason that he seeks out and is willing to join society with others, who are already united, or have a mind to unite, for the mutual preservation of their lives, liberties, and estates, which I call by the general name, property."

What is "property"? "The earth and all that is therein is given to men for the support and comfort of their beings . . . Every man has a property in his own person; this nobody has any right to but himself. The labor of his body and the work of his hands we may say are properly his. Whatsoever, then, he removes out of the state that Nature hath provided and left it in, he hath mixed his labor with, and joined to it something that is his own, and thereby makes it his property. It being by him removed from the common state Nature placed it in, hath by this labor something annexed to it that excludes the common right of other men. . . . For it is labor indeed that puts the difference of value on everything . . . Of the products of the earth useful to the life of man nine-tenths are the effects of

labor."

Property is individual, and cannot be owned jointly, since to each laborer belongs his produce. How about land—the earth itself? "I think it is plain that property in that, too, is acquired . . . He that . . . subdued, tilled, and sowed any part of it, thereby annexed to it something that was his property, which another had no title to, nor could without injury take from him."

Does it mean that a person may own as much land as he desires? On the contrary. "The measure of property nature has well set by the extent of men's labor and the conveniency of life. No man's labor should subdue or appropriate all, nor could his enjoyment consume more than a small part . . . Every man should have as much as he could make use of, would hold still in the world, without straitening anybody, since there is land enough in the world to suffice double the inhabitants. . . ."

It was to protect these rights of property, therefore, that men entered into a social contract to form a civil government. "Because no political society can be nor subsist without having in itself the power to preserve the property . . . every one of the members hath quitted this natural power . . . and thus all private judgment of every particular member being excluded, the community comes to be umpire . . . And this is done wherever any number of men in the state of Nature, enter into society to make one people, one body politic, under one supreme government."

As long as the true government of men is responsive to their natural rights, peace and security will prevail. "The majority . . . may employ all that power in making laws for the community from time to time, and executing those laws by officers of their own appointing: and then the form of the government is perfect democracy."

Never must it be forgotten that the purpose of government is the protection of men and their property. The government exists for the individual, not the individual for the government. And woe to the government that exceeds its power and deprives men of their natural rights!

"The power that every individual gave the society when he entered into it, can never revert to the individuals again as long as the society

lasts . . . But . . . when by the miscarriages of those in authority it is forfeited, upon the forfeiture . . . it reverts to the society, and the people have a right to act as supreme, and continue the legislative in themselves; or place it in a new form, or new hands—as they think good.”

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The governmental pillars of England and America tower scornfully above the awe-struck heads of the prostrate citizens. Man the Individualist is merely a mocking tradition. Yet deeply meaningful are the eternal words of the great physician-philosopher:

“Wherever law ends, tyranny begins, if the law be transgressed to another’s harm; and whosoever in authority exceeds the power given him by the law, and makes use of the force he has under his command to compass that upon the subject which the law allows not, ceases in that to be a magistrate, and acting without authority may be opposed, as any other man who by force invades the right of another.”