

John Locke Part 1

Have you ever wondered where the concept of a government by the people, for the people came from? Or where the governments get their power? It didn't just happen overnight. The Age of Reason, or the Age of Enlightenment, was a movement in the seventeenth and eighteenth century that turned the world's idea of government on its head. The Enlightenment realized that kings held all the cards and that it was about time that the people shuffled the deck.

During the Age of Reason, just like the name says, reason and logic were valued very highly. People started trying to explain the world around them in scientific terms instead of with religion. Like, say a huge thunderstorm rolled into town. Before the Age of Reason, people may have wondered what they had done to upset their god enough to deserve lightning. But during the Age of Reason, people started looking to science to understand the weather. It was during this period that Isaac Newton decided it was a good idea to sit under an apple tree. We can thank that silly choice for the Universal Law of Gravity. In this Age of Reason, science wasn't the only thing being developed, though.

Society's idea of government was going through a major overhaul, too. The first thing on the chopping block was an idea called Divine Right theory. This theory claimed that a king's right to rule was from God. Thinkers started questioning this theory heavily. Did God really make them kings? If not, who actually gave them the power? Under the Divine Right theory, questioning a monarch was like questioning God himself. It was dangerous and very few risked it. But, if the Divine Right theory was thrown out, then kings were just men -- men that may or may not deserve to rule.

In order to understand the human condition, philosophers imagined the world in a State of Nature. State of nature just means what the world was like before governments. By imagining the world like this, Thomas Hobbes and John Locke hoped to figure out how governments formed in the first place. Why did people decide to be ruled? Where did the idea of kings come from? Hobbes and Locke had very different answers to these questions. Thomas Hobbes thought that before government, man was barbaric and life was chaotic. Hobbes figured that without a king, there couldn't be any peace, so he defended monarchies in his writings. John Locke, however, didn't share Hobbes' view of human nature. Locke was more optimistic and thought that in a state of nature, everyone respected each other's rights: life, liberty and property.

Thomas Hobbes and John Locke have both had huge effects on the way modern political philosophers think. The disagreement between Hobbes and Locke came down to one question: can ordinary people be trusted to do the right thing? The answer to this question shaped the governments of the world today.
