John Locke

A number of times throughout history, tyranny has stimulated breakthrough thinking about liberty. This was certainly the case in England with the mid-seventeenth-century era of repression, rebellion, and civil war. There was a tremendous outpouring of political pamphlets and tracts. By far the most influential writings emerged from the pen of scholar John Locke.

He expressed the radical view that government is morally obliged to serve people, namely by protecting life, liberty, and property. He explained the principle of checks and balances to limit government power. He favoured representative government and a rule of law. He denounced tyranny. He insisted that when government violates individual rights, people may legitimately rebel. These views were most fully developed in Locke’s famous *Second Treatise Concerning Civil Government*, and they were so radical that he never dared sign his name to it. He acknowledged authorship only in his will. Locke’s writings did much to inspire the libertarian ideals of the American Revolution. This, in turn, set an example which inspired people throughout Europe, Latin America, and Asia.

Thomas Jefferson ranked Locke, along with Locke’s compatriot Algernon Sidney, as the most important thinkers on liberty. Locke helped inspire Thomas Paine’s radical ideas about revolution. Locke fired up George Mason. From Locke, James Madison drew his most fundamental principles of liberty and government. Locke’s writings were part of Benjamin Franklin’s self-education, and John Adams believed that both girls and boys should learn about Locke. The French philosopher Voltaire called Locke “the man of the greatest wisdom. What he has not seen clearly, I despair of ever seeing.”

Then Locke affirmed an explicit right to revolution: “whenever the *Legislators endeavour to take away, and destroy the Property of the People*, or to reduce them to Slavery under Arbitrary Power, they put themselves into a state of War with the People, who are thereupon absolved from any farther Obedience, and are left to the common Refuge, which God hath provided for all Men, against Force and Violence. Whencesoever therefore the *Legislative* shall transgress this fundamental Rule of Society; and either by Ambition, Fear, Folly or Corruption, *endeavour to grasp* themselves, *or 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, for quite contrary ends, and it devolves to the People, who have a Right to resume their original Liberty.”

To help assure his anonymity, he dealt with the printer through his friend Edward Clarke. Locke denied rumours that he was the author, and he begged his friends to keep their speculations to themselves. He cut off those like James Tyrrell who persisted in talking about Locke’s authorship. Locke destroyed the original manuscripts and all references to the work in his writings. His only written acknowledgment of authorship was in an addition to his will, signed shortly before he died. Ironically, the two treatises caused hardly a stir during his life.

Locke’s Two Treatises on Government
Locke’s two treatises on government were published in October 1689 with a 1690 date on the title page. While later philosophers have belittled it because Locke based his thinking on archaic notions about a “state of nature,” his bedrock principles endure. He defended the natural law tradition whose glorious lineage goes back to the ancient Jews: the tradition that rulers cannot legitimately do anything they want, because there are moral laws applying to everyone.

“Reason, which is that Law,” Locke declared, “teaches all Mankind, who would but consult it, that being all equal and independent, no one ought to harm another in his Life, Health, Liberty, or Possessions.” Locke envisioned a rule of law: “have a standing Rule to live by, common to every one of that Society, and made by the Legislative Power erected in it; A Liberty to follow my own Will in all things, where the Rule prescribes not; and not to be subject to the inconstant, uncertain, unknown, Arbitrary Will of another Man.”

Locke established that private property is absolutely essential for liberty: “every Man has a Property in his own Person. This no Body has any Right to but himself. The Labour of his Body, and the Work of his Hands, we may say, are properly his.” He continues: “The great and chief end therefore, of Mens uniting into Commonwealths, and putting themselves under Government, is the Preservation of their Property.”
Locke believed people legitimately turned common property into private property by mixing their labor with it, improving it. Marxists liked to claim this meant Locke embraced the labor theory of value, but he was talking about the basis of ownership rather than value.

He insisted that people, not rulers, are sovereign. Government, Locke wrote, “can never have a Power to take to themselves the whole or any part of the Subjects Property, without their own consent. For this would be in effect to leave them no Property at all.” He makes his point even more explicit: rulers “must not raise Taxes on the Property of the People, without the Consent of the People, given by themselves, or their Deputies.”

Locke had enormous foresight to see beyond the struggles of his own day, which were directed against monarchy: “‘Tis a Mistake to think this Fault [tyranny] is proper only to Monarchies; other Forms of Government are liable to it, as well as that. For where-ever the Power that is put in any hands for the Government of the People, and the Preservation of their Properties, is applied to other ends, and made use of to impoverish, harass, or subdue them to the Arbitrary and Irregular.