

## John Locke's Political Philosophy and its Relevance to Democracy in Nigeria

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**Abstract:** The present problems associated with leadership challenges in Nigeria and African Countries in general calls to mind the need to review the type and system of government in Nigeria with the aim of trying to identify the problem and suggesting solutions. Democracy as practised in Nigeria seems not tally with Abraham Lincoln's definition as "the government of the people, by the people and for the people". Therefore, this paper aims at showcasing the relevance of John Locke's political philosophy to Democracy in Nigeria. We shall discuss Locke and the State of Nature, Locke's Social Contract Theory, Locke on the Natural Rights to property; Locke on Slavery, as well as Locke on Check and Balances. The paper concludes with a recommendation that if Locke's political philosophy is appreciated and practiced in Nigeria, it would go a long to correct the political anomalies the country is presently experiencing.

**Key words:** Politics • Philosophy • Democracy and challenges

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### INTRODUCTION

John Locke (1632 – 1704) was born at Wrington, near Bristol. His father was a West Country Lawyer and a puritan who fought with the parliamentarians. Locke studied at Oxford where he found a decadent form of Scholasticism being taught. The interested himself in chemistry, physics and medicine. Subsequently, he taught for some years at the University before entering the service of the Earl of Shaftesbury... he died at Oates in Essex in October 1704 [1, 2, 3].

Locke's greatest and principal work was his "*Essay Concerning Human Understanding*. He wrote two treatise of *Civil Government* (1690) and *A Letter on Toleration* (1689). According to Copelston, Locke argues in the *First Treatise of Civil Government*, that the theory of the divine right of kings as upheld in Sir Robert Filmer's *Patriarcha* (1680). The patriarchal theory of the transmission of royal authority is held up to ridicule. There is no evidence that Adam possessed a divinely granted royal authority" [4, 5]. *The Second Treatise of Government* was to investigate the actual basis of government and the actual source of political power. This led Locke to state that men existed in the state of nature before the advent of government-ruled states. Hence, our discussion beginning with John Locke and the state of nature [6, 7, 8].

**John Locke and the State of Nature:** Locke begins his political theory as Hobbes did, with a treatment of the state of nature. But he described this condition in a different way, even making Hobbes the target of his remarks. For Locke, the state of nature is not the same as Hobbes "war of all against all". On the contrary, Locke says "men living together according to reason without a common superior on earth with authority to judge between them are properly the state of nature [9].

From the above, it is clear that the theory of the state of nature was an important theme in Locke's Philosophy. Unlike Hobbes, Locke advocated a limited sovereign state. In Locke's word:

The state of nature is a state of perfect freedom to order their action and person as they think fit within the bounds of the law of nature, without asking leave or depending upon the will of other men.

The state dwells in matters strictly political in nature where supreme power rested on the people and their freedom were also guaranteed the state of nature. Writing on the state of nature, Ebeinstein points out that:

The state of nature is a state of enmity and destruction and therefore, declaring by word or action, not a passionate and hasty, but sedate,

settled design upon another's man's life, puts him in a state of war against whom he has declared such an intention and so has exposed his life to the other's power to be taken away by him, or any one that joins with him in his defence and espouses his quarrel of being reasonable and just I should have a right to destroy that which threatens me with destruction; for by the fundamental law of nature, man being to be preserved as much as possible, when all cannot be preserved, the safety of the innocent is to be preferred.

From the above, we see that in Locke's state of nature, men are free. There is freedom as well as equality for all men. Everyone likes the way he or she feels. The state is created by Locke through a medium of a contract in which each individual agrees with every other to give up to the community the natural rights of enforcing the law of reason, in order that life, liberty and property may be preserved. According to Appadorai, "Locke, unlike Hobbes, gives power to the community and not a Government. The contract, it may be stressed, is also not general, but limited and specific; for the natural right of enforcing the law of reason alone is given up the natural right of life liberty and property reserved to the individual limit the just power of the community [10].

It is interesting to note that in Locke's notion of the state of nature, man's problem was not to escape from the state of nature, but as Iroegbu puts it, it was "how to maximize the enjoyment of all the rights that nature had given him". From the perspective of Locke unlike Hobbes who advocated for absolute government, Locke proposed for a constitutional government. In Locke's state of nature, man is free, everyone is equal. Men are Lords to themselves; no one is superior. All are equals, as such, the rights to life, liberty and property, is given to everyone equally and must be respected [11, 12].

**Locke's Social Contract Theory:** Central to Locke's political philosophy is his discussion of the social contract theory. As Ekpoudom puts it, "the beauty of Locke's philosophy perhaps lies in his social contract. In Locke's words, natural rights are entitlements under natural law, which of Couse is God's law. He strongly believes that God created creatures to live happily; as such the world was not created in vain. In Locke's word:

God, having made man such a creature that is his own judgement it was not good for him to be alone, put him under strong obligation of necessity, convince and inclination to drive him into society, as well as to fitted him with understanding and language to continue and enjoy it. The first society was between man and wife, which gave beginning to that between parents and children.

It is observed from this quotidian that God intended a life of convenience, joy and bliss for Adam and Eve but because of their disobedience, they were punished and excommunicated them from the garden [13].

Appadoria analysis Locke's social contract as a succour to Hobbies social contract theory thus:

First the want of an established, settled, known law, received and allowed by common consent to be the standard of right and wrong and the common measure of decide all controversies. Secondly, the want of a known and disinterested judge, with authority to determine all differences according to the established law; thirdly, the want of power to back and support the sentence when right and to give due executive.

What is important in this quote is that in Locke's contract theory; everyone gives up to the community, the natural right of enforcing the law of reason. This is done so that there can be protection of property for the community.

**Locke on the Natural Right to Property:** In his *The second treatise of Government*, John Locke also discusses the Natural right to property. In Locke's understanding, property means a collective right to life, liberty and estates. According to Locke:

God, when he gave the world in common to all mankind commanded man also to labour and the panning of his condition required of him. God and his reason commanded him to subdue the earth – that is, improve it for the benefit of life and there in lay out something upon it that it was his own, his labour. Lives, liberty and estates I call by the general name, property.

From the above, it is clear that property in the Lockean sense, is not just limited to materialism, as far as Locke is concerned, it also includes and very importantly the fundamental and inalienable rights of human beings,

namely, right to life, freedom of movement, association, religion and so on. Man is also urged to make use of his reason given to him by God for the betterment of society.

In the state of nature, Locke believed that property was common in the sense that everyone had a right to draw subsistence from whatever nature offers. Here, he was bringing ideas from a far distant past. [4]. Locke believed that greater production would raise the standard of living throughout the community. Locke said that though the earth and all interior creatures be common to man, yet man has a property. He believes that the labours are man's own and not any other persons own. Locke sees property as "whatever, then, he removes out of the state that Nature hath provided and left in it, hath mixed his labour with it; and joined its to something that is his own and thereby makes it his property.

**Implications of Locke's Political Philosophy to Democracy in Nigeria:** Locke's political philosophy has practical relevance in Nigeria. The first is in Constitution making. One of the reasons why people enter into a social pact according to Locke is to avoid the inconveniences of the state of nature one of which is the lack of positive law to which all the individuals should make reference. It is this need for a law guiding all that is believed the whole idea of constitution making. Unfortunately, the history of constitution making in Nigeria that been dogged and dotted with controversies and compromises [5].

There has not been any constitution of Nigeria which has full involvement of all people. The 1999 constitution begins with the following preamble. "We the people of Federal Republic of Nigeria having firmed and solemnly resolved....." The truth is the 1999 constitution was decree into law by the military government. As Efemini submits: "the process leading to the emergence of the 1999 Constitution renders all claims that it is a reflection of the general will of Nigerians invalid. We the people" is vain deceptive in the context used. However, it must be noted that Locke's political philosophy is relevant to Nigeria. This is because, the right to life liberty and property as given in section 33 – 42 of the 1999 constitution were argued for by John Locke. Nigeria being a member of the United Nations, incorporated certain articles of the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* in its constitution.

Again, Locke's social theory is twofold. The first being between the citizens, while the latter is between the citizens and the sovereign. The sovereign is not above the law and is not absolute. Since the sovereign is not

above the law and is not absolute; Locke introduces the principle of law which should govern the government and the doctrines of checks and balances. This also has usefulness in Nigeria. The principle of check and balances helps to checkmate the excesses of the government whether executive, legislative or judiciary.

The relevance of Locke's political philosophy is also seen with respect to education. There is no gainsaying the fact that quality of education is a *sine qua non* for any genuine political participation. In Nigeria, the educational system has virtually collapse. When the lectures are not on strike for poor pay and unbearable conditions of service, the students will go on rampage to protest for basic amenities or against school fees increase. The net effect is that the psycho-moral upbringing of the child is greatly traumatized. For a lasting democracy, a serious attention needs to be paid to the education sector and the entire curriculum and policy rationalized in order to integrate the Nigeria student into the socio-cultural context of the body politic [6].

## CONCLUSION

In the entire history of political thought, Locke is remembered as one of the most influential and controversial theorist. Locke's profundity in which he understood the bearing of philosophy on how men have good reasons to live their lives, is greatly appreciated and commended.

I agree with Mukherjee and Ramaswamy that "No political thinker had influenced political theorizing on two different countries in two different continents as Locke did (208). Locke was the guiding father of the eighteenth – century Enlightenment period particular for philosophers like Rousseau and Voltaire. He was also acknowledged as the founding father of modern empiricism with Hume, Berkeley as its exponents.

In conclusion, just like Locke was the product at the turning point of English history, it is the submission of this paper that if Locke's political philosophy is given practical applicability in a nation like ours which is suffering from bad leadership, corruption and the like, it will go a long way to redeeming the bad image of Nigeria globally.

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