

Enlightenment Thinkers That Influenced The Declaration of Independence

Thomas Hobbes

Hobbes borrowed a concept from English contract law: an implied agreement. Hobbes asserted that the people agreed among themselves to “lay down” their natural rights of equality and freedom and give absolute power to a sovereign. The sovereign, created by the people, might be a person or a group. The sovereign would make and enforce the laws to secure a peaceful society, making life, liberty, and property possible. Hobbes called this agreement the “social contract.”

Hobbes believed that a government headed by a king was the best form that the sovereign could take. Placing all power in the hands of a king would mean more resolute and consistent exercise of political authority, Hobbes argued. Hobbes also maintained that the social contract was an agreement only among the people and not between them and their king. Once the people had given absolute power to the king, they had no right to revolt against him.

John Locke

In 1690, Locke published his *Two Treatises of Government*. He generally agreed with Hobbes about the brutality of the state of nature, which required a social contract to assure peace. But he disagreed with Hobbes on two major points.

First, Locke argued that natural rights such as life, liberty, and property existed in the state of nature and could never be taken away or even voluntarily given up by individuals. These rights were “inalienable” (impossible to surrender). Locke also disagreed with Hobbes about the social contract. For him, it was not just an agreement among the people, but between them and the sovereign (preferably a king).

According to Locke, the natural rights of individuals limited the power of the king. The king did not hold absolute power, as Hobbes had said, but acted only to enforce and protect the natural rights of the people. If a sovereign violated these rights, the social contract was broken, and the people had the right to revolt and establish a new government. Less than 100 years after Locke wrote his *Two Treatises of Government*, Thomas Jefferson used his theory in writing the Declaration of Independence.

Government, he said, was mainly necessary to promote the “public good,” that is to protect property and encourage commerce and little else. “Govern lightly,” Locke said.

Charles (Baron de) Montesquieu

Montesquieu published his greatest work, *The Spirit of the Laws*, in 1748. Unlike Hobbes and Locke, Montesquieu believed that in the state of nature individuals were so fearful that they avoided violence and war. The need for food, Montesquieu said, caused the timid humans to associate with others and seek to live in a society. “As soon as man enters into a state of society,” Montesquieu wrote, “he loses the sense of his weakness, equality ceases, and then commences the state of war.”

Montesquieu did not describe a social contract as such. But he said that the state of war among individuals and nations led to human laws and government.

Montesquieu wrote that the main purpose of government is to maintain law and order, political liberty, and the property of the individual. Montesquieu opposed the absolute monarchy of his home country and favored the English system as the best model of government.

Montesquieu somewhat misinterpreted how political power was actually exercised in England. When he wrote *The Spirit of the Laws*, power was concentrated pretty much in Parliament, the national legislature. Montesquieu thought he saw a separation and balancing of the powers of government in England.

Montesquieu concluded that the best form of government was one in which the legislative, executive, and judicial powers were separate and kept each other in check to prevent any branch from becoming too powerful. He believed that uniting these powers, as in the monarchy of Louis XIV, would lead to despotism. While Montesquieu's separation of powers theory did not accurately describe the government of England, Americans later adopted it as the foundation of the U.S. Constitution.

Jean-Jacques Rousseau

In 1762, Rousseau published his most important work on political theory, *The Social Contract*. His opening line is still striking today: "Man is born free, and everywhere he is in chains." Rousseau agreed with Locke that the individual should never be forced to give up his or her natural rights to a king.

The problem in the state of nature, Rousseau said, was to find a way to protect everyone's life, liberty, and property while each person remained free. Rousseau's solution was for people to enter into a social contract. They would give up all their rights, not to a king, but to "the whole community," all the people. He called all the people the "sovereign," a term used by Hobbes to mainly refer to a king. The people then exercised their "general will" to make laws for the "public good."

Rousseau argued that the general will of the people could not be decided by elected representatives. He believed in a direct democracy in which everyone voted to express the general will and to make the laws of the land. Rousseau had in mind a democracy on a small scale, a city-state like his native Geneva.

In Rousseau's democracy, anyone who disobeyed the general will of the people "will be forced to be free." He believed that citizens must obey the laws or be forced to do so as long as they remained a resident of the state. This is a "civil state," Rousseau says, where security, justice, liberty, and property are protected and enjoyed by all.

All political power, according to Rousseau, must reside with the people, exercising their general will. There can be no separation of powers, as Montesquieu proposed. The people, meeting together, will deliberate individually on laws and then by majority vote find the general will. Rousseau's general will was later embodied in the words "We the people . . ." at the beginning of the U.S. Constitution.