What made John Locke's 1689–1690 concept of 'sovereignty' revolutionary compared with Thomas Hobbes' 'social contract' theory? And how are England's subsequent developments assessed in this light?

The political crises of seventeenth-century England produced some of the most influential theories of sovereignty in modern political thought. Civil war, regicide, and revolution shattered confidence in divine-right monarchy and raised fundamental questions of political legitimacy and the location of sovereign authority. Out of this crisis emerged popular sovereignty: the principle that political authority originates from the people and remains legitimate through consent.[1] Within this context, Thomas Hobbes and John Locke developed sharply contrasting explanations of how political authority should be established and maintained. Adopting the historical approach advanced by Robert Ingram and Christopher Barker, this essay reviews Hobbes's *Leviathan* (1651) and Locke's *Two Treatises of Government* (1689) as primary texts shaped by the political crises from which they emerged. Whereas Hobbes used popular consent to justify absolute, irrevocable sovereignty vested in a single ruler, Locke's concept of sovereignty was revolutionary because it reconceptualised political authority as a revocable fiduciary trust grounded in popular consent, transforming sovereignty from an absolute power into a conditional and accountable relationship.

These conflicts formed part of the broader crisis of political authority that, as Ingram and Barker argue, compelled seventeenth-century political thinkers to rethink the

[1] Robert G. Ingram and Christopher Barker, *People Power*, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2022, pp. 1–3.

foundations of sovereignty and political obligation.[2] The Reformation had already fractured the unified religious authority of medieval Christendom, creating a context in which political legitimacy could no longer be taken for granted and had to be reconstructed on new foundations.[3] While Hobbes grounded sovereignty in fear and self-preservation and insulated it from popular judgement, Locke located ultimate sovereignty in the people, who retained the right to judge and resist governments that violated their trust. England's constitutional developments after 1688 can then be assessed as partial attempts to institutionalise Locke's theory of popular sovereignty while containing its more radical implications. In early modern political thought, sovereignty grounded in consent referred primarily to the source of legitimate authority rather than democratic participation in the modern sense. As Ingram and Barker argue, early modern political theory increasingly located sovereignty in the people, understanding legitimate authority as grounded in collective consent rather than inheritance or divine sanction.[4]

Once divine-right monarchy collapsed, the central problem became how to reconcile consent with political stability. Hobbes and Locke shared the assumption that sovereignty was constructed by human agreement, but they diverged sharply over whether the people retained any continuing political authority once government was established. It was Thomas Hobbes's *Leviathan* that first provided one of the earliest systematic attempts to explain how political authority could be constructed after the collapse of traditional monarchy. Writing during the English Civil Wars, Hobbes argued that the preservation of order required the creation of an undivided sovereign

[2] Ingram and Barker, *People Power*, pp. 12–18.
[3] Euan Cameron, *The European Reformation*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991, pp.106–110.
[4] Ingram and Barker, *People Power*, pp. 8–12.

authority authorised by the collective agreement of individuals seeking security. His overriding concern was preventing civil war, a condition he described as one in which human life became "solitary, poore, nasty, brutish, and short."[5]

Hobbes argued that political order required individuals to authorise a sovereign authority to govern on their behalf, marking what he called "that Mortall God, to which we owe… our peace and defence."[6] For Hobbes, the remedy was an undivided sovereign power capable of maintaining peace. Sovereign authority, he insisted, could not be divided, since "either One, or More, or All, must have the Soveraign Power… entire."[7] His argument was that objections to monarchy or an assembled government misunderstood the nature of the problem itself:

> to say there is inconvenience in putting the use of the Soveraign Power into the hand of a Man, or an Assembly of men, is to say that all Government is more inconvenient than Confusion, and Civill Warre.[8]

Even so, Hobbes's solution raised a new question: how could sovereign authority be limited without returning to civil conflict?

Hobbes addressed this problem by constructing a theory of sovereignty designed to eliminate the conditions that made civil conflict possible. In *Leviathan*, he presents the state of nature as a condition of pervasive insecurity in which equality of vulnerability generates mutual fear and competition. To escape this condition, individuals mutually covenant with one another to authorise a sovereign authority. Essentially, the covenant is made among subjects rather than between subjects and the sovereign. Because the sovereign is not a party to the agreement, there can be

---

[5] Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*, London: Andrew Crooke, 1651, pt. I, ch. XIII, p. 62.
[6] Hobbes, *Leviathan*, pt. II, ch. XVII, p. 87.
[7] Hobbes, *Leviathan*, pt. II, ch. XIX, p.94.
[8] Hobbes, *Leviathan*, pt. II, ch. XIX, p. 97.

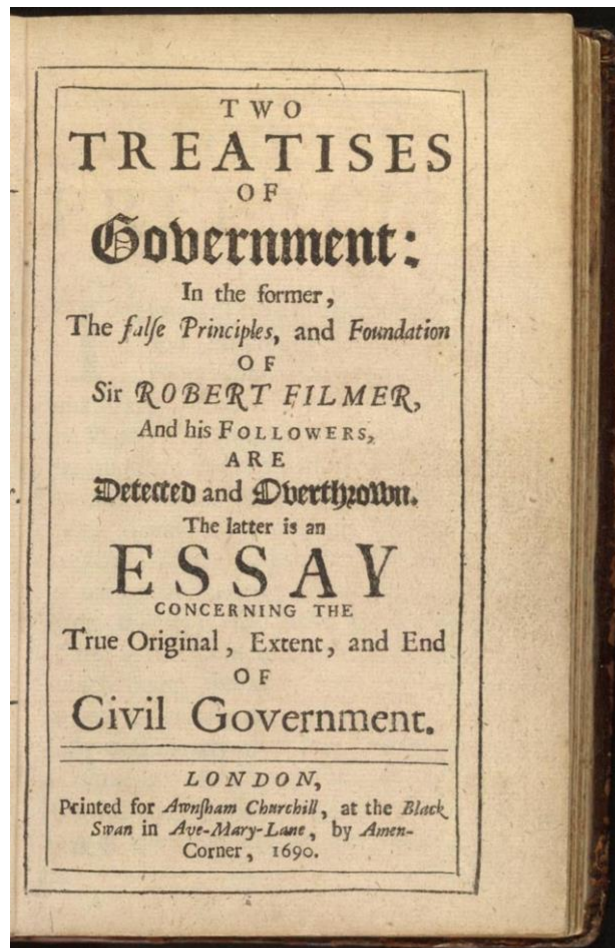
no breach of covenant on the part of the sovereign. Sovereignty must therefore remain absolute and indivisible, since divided authority would reintroduce the instability that the social contract was designed to prevent.[9] Where Hobbes feared disorder above all else, Locke feared the abuse of power. Hobbes's theory was revolutionary in rejecting divine-right monarchy and grounding sovereignty in human agreement, but it eliminated the authority of the people in any ongoing sense. This treated consent as a moment of political foundation rather than a continuing source of authority. It was precisely this structural limitation that Locke would fundamentally challenge.

Figure 1. Title page of Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan* (London, 1651). The sovereign is depicted as composed of the bodies of his subjects, symbolising Hobbes's argument that political authority derives from the collective authorisation of the people.[10]

[9] Ingram and Barker, *People Power*, pp. 8–12.
[10] Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*, London: Andrew Crooke, 1651, title page, digital image, British Library.

John Locke addressed the problem of sovereignty from a decidedly different perspective. Writing in the aftermath of the Exclusion Crisis and the Glorious Revolution, Locke rejected Hobbes's assumption that political order required absolute sovereignty.[11] In the *Two Treatises of Government*, he argued that legitimate authority derived from the consent of the governed and remained conditional upon the preservation of natural rights. Unlike Hobbes's state of nature, which was characterised by insecurity, Locke's state of nature was governed by natural law in which individuals possessed rights to life, liberty, and property prior to the formation of political society. Government was therefore created not to generate rights but to protect them.

[11] John Locke, *Two Treatises of Government*, London, Awnsham Churchill, 1690, II, §§7–75.



TWO
TREATISES
OF
Government:
In the former,
The *false Principles*, and *Foundation*
OF
Sir ROBERT FILMER,
And his FOLLOWERS,
ARE
Detected and Overthrown.
The latter is an
ESSAY
CONCERNING THE
True Original, Extent, and End
OF
Civil Government.

LONDON,
Printed for *Awnsham Churchill*, at the *Black Swan* in *Ave-Mary-Lane*, by *Amen-Corner*, 1690.

Figure 2. Title page of John Locke, *Two Treatises of Government* (London: Awnsham Churchill, 1690). The title announces Locke's intention to refute Sir Robert Filmer's defence of divine-right monarchy and to explain the "true original, extent and end of civil government"[12]

Locke argued that "the end of law is not to abolish or restrain, but to preserve and enlarge freedom."[13] Here Locke reverses the traditional association between law and constraint, presenting legal authority as the condition of liberty rather than its limitation, a conceptual shift that underpins his broader redefinition of sovereignty as accountable rather than coercive. When rulers violated this trust, particularly by attacking the property or rights of the people, they placed themselves "into a state of

[12] John Locke, *Two Treatises of Government*, London, Awnsham Churchill, 1690, title page, digital image, British Library.
[13] Locke, *Two Treatises*, II, §57.

war with the people,”[14] thereby dissolving the legitimacy of their authority. This formulation is crucial. By redefining political abuse as a “state of war,” Locke collapses the distinction between foreign conflict and domestic tyranny, thereby legitimising resistance not as rebellion but as a continuation of the natural right of self-preservation. Political power was therefore fiduciary: a trust delegated by the people for specific purposes. In Locke’s formulation, sovereignty was not an indivisible power possessed by rulers, but a conditional authority exercised on behalf of the governed.

Locke’s concept was revolutionary in three key respects. First, he redefined the purpose of sovereignty from order to the protection of natural rights.[15] Second, he preserved popular sovereignty as an ongoing principle rather than a single act of authorisation insisting that the people retained the right to judge government throughout its existence.[16] Third, he provided a moral foundation for constitutionalism. If power is a trust, then laws, parliaments, and representation are institutional expressions of sovereignty grounded in consent itself. Historians such as Ingram and Barker argue that early modern political thought increasingly grounded political legitimacy in the authority of the people rather than the will of rulers, a transformation to which Locke’s theory made a decisive contribution.[17]

The practical significance of Locke's theory is most clearly assessed through England's own constitutional developments after 1688, where his principles were

[14] Locke, *Two Treatises*, II, §222.
[15] Locke, *Two Treatises*, II, §124.
[16] Locke, *Two Treatises*, II, §149.
[17] Ingram and Barker, *People Power,* pp. 11–12.

partially institutionalised but carefully constrained. The Bill of Rights (1689) marked the first statutory limitation of royal power, declaring that:

> the pretended power of suspending of laws, or the execution of laws, by regal authority... without consent of Parliament, is illegal.[18]

This formally embedded the principle that executive authority was constitutionally subordinate to law and representative institutions. The Act of Settlement (1701) further constrained the monarchy by strengthening judicial independence, prohibiting Catholic succession, and requiring parliamentary consent for royal actions affecting the judiciary.[19] These measures echoed Locke's conception of government as a fiduciary trust derived from consent.

However, England's post-1688 settlement also revealed the limits of Lockean popular sovereignty in practice. Political participation remained restricted to property-owning males, and ‘the people’ in legislative discourse largely meant the propertied political nation rather than the population at large. The Meeting of Parliament Act 1694 (also known as the Triennial Act) required general elections every three years and annual parliamentary sessions, yet it did not extend the right to vote beyond male property owners.[20] As Mark Kishlansky observes, the Revolution settlement of 1688–89 is best understood less as a democratic transformation than as an effort to stabilise monarchy within an older constitutional framework. Members of the Convention Parliament argued not that sovereignty had transferred to the people, but that James II had violated the fundamental laws of the realm and thereby forfeited the throne. In Kishlansky's words, the settlement embodied ‘the denial of revolutionary intent and of revolutionary responsibility’, a conservative reassertion of

[18] *Bill of Rights*, 1689 (1 Will. & Mar. Sess. 2, c. 2, §. 1).
[19] *Act of Settlement*, 1701 (12 & 13 Will. 3, c. 2).
[20] *Triennial Act*, 1694 (6 & 7 Will. & Mar. c. 2).

ancient liberties rather than a novel democratic experiment.[21] England institutionalised Lockean limits on executive power while simultaneously containing the more radical implications of his theory, demonstrating that constitutionalism could coexist with oligarchic exclusion. This tension between theoretical sovereignty and practical exclusion underpinned the development of English constitutionalism after 1688, but it also raises a broader question: what might popular sovereignty look like if those constraints were removed altogether?

If England's post-1688 settlement represented a cautious and partial institutionalisation of Lockean principles, the French Revolution exposed what those same principles might become when detached from inherited constitutional restraints. Nowhere were the latent implications of Lockean sovereignty more dramatically realised than in revolutionary France after 1789. In this context, Emmanuel-Joseph Sieyès articulated a far more radical conception of popular sovereignty, declaring that the nation was the sole source of legitimate authority: 'The nation is prior to everything. It is the source of everything. Its will is always legal; indeed, it is the law itself.'[22] This claim represented a decisive transformation of Lockean thought, in which fiduciary trust gave way to an indivisible national will.

Where Locke located sovereignty in the people as a continuing source of authority, Sieyès collapsed all intermediary institutions and redefined sovereignty as the indivisible will of the nation. This argument is most clearly expressed in his well-known formulation:

1. What is the Third Estate? *Everything*.

[21] Mark Kishlansky, *A Monarchy Transformed: Britain 1603–1714*, London, Penguin Books, 1997, pp. 284–285.
[22] Emmanuel Joseph Sieyès, *Emmanuel Joseph Sieyès: The Essential Political Writings*, ed. Oliver W. Lembcke and Florian Weber, Leiden, Brill, 2014, p. 89.

2. What has it been until now in the political order? *Nothing*.
3. What does it want to be? *Something*.

This captures the exclusionary structure of the old regime while asserting the total political legitimacy of the nation.[23] He pressed the point further in asking who could deny that the Third Estate 'contain[s] within itself everything needful to constitute a complete nation.'[24] Historians such as Quentin Skinner have similarly emphasised that early modern theories of sovereignty were not static doctrines but arguments shaped by political conflict,[25] a perspective that reinforces the contrast between England's constrained settlement and France's radical transformation.

The contrast with England is instructive. The English settlement entrenched parliamentary authority but preserved monarchy and limited the practical scope of popular sovereignty. By contrast, the French Revolution sought to eliminate all intermediate powers and relocate sovereignty entirely in the nation. In this sense, France did not simply parallel England's development but exposed the more radical trajectory implicit within Lockean principles themselves. Locke's emphasis on property further reinforced an exclusionary situation, a logic reflected in the post-1688 settlement's qualifications for voting.[26] Dorinda Outram argues that Enlightenment political ideas were absorbed primarily by a narrow public sphere of social elites, observing that the institutions such as academies and clubs served to produce unity between elite groups in society, rather than reaching out to other, unprivileged social groups. Outram notes that the Enlightenment devoted as much energy to designating entire social groups, including women and peasants 'as

---

[23] Emmanuel Joseph Sieyès, *Emmanuel Joseph Sieyès: The Essential Political Writings*, ed. Oliver W. Lembcke and Florian Weber, Leiden, Brill, 2014, p. 43.
[24] Sieyès, *Essential Political Writings*, p. 46.
[25] Quentin Skinner, *The Foundations of Modern Political Thought, Volume I: The Renaissance*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1978, pp. 11–12.
[26] Locke, *Two Treatises,* II, §124.

impervious to the voice of reason' as it did to constructing a better world.[27] Ruth Graham extends this critique by showing that the French Revolution, despite its rhetoric of liberty and equality, also excluded women entirely from political membership. The Jacobin deputy Amar argued that women 'did not have the moral and physical strength for politics because nature destined them for functions within the family,' leading to the suppression of all women's clubs. Graham concludes that women 'were never an autonomous force' in the Revolution.[28]

At the same time, Hobbesian anxieties about disorder persisted among political elites. While they embraced constitutional limits on royal power, they resisted expansive popular mobilisation, fearing that genuine popular sovereignty might reintroduce the instability Hobbes had sought to eliminate. Where Locke had argued that when rulers violate the public trust 'the people shall be judge,'[29] insisting elsewhere that 'wherever law ends, tyranny begins'.[30] England's ruling classes interpreted this judgement as mediated through Parliament rather than exercised directly by the populace. The Glorious Revolution thus institutionalised a tension at the heart of English constitutionalism: legitimate authority derived from consent, but the practical mechanism of that consent remained confined to a narrow political nation.

---

[27] Dorinda Outram, *The Enlightenment*, 2nd ed., Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2005, pp. 21–24.
[28] Ruth Graham, "Loaves and Liberty: Women in the French Revolution," in *Becoming Visible: Women in European History*, ed. Renate Bridenthal and Claudia Koonz, Boston, Houghton Mifflin, 1977, pp. 248, 252.
[29] Locke, *Two Treatises*, II, §222.
[30] Locke, *Two Treatises*, II, §240.

Even so, Lockean principles did not remain confined to England. As Robert Gildea shows, the Napoleonic and post-Napoleonic era saw constitutional experiments across Europe that drew explicitly on Lockean ideas of consent and fiduciary government, though often adapted to local aristocratic interests.[31] Jonathan Sperber further argues that the revolutions of 1848 represented the moment when excluded groups attempted to claim popular sovereignty for themselves, demanding full democratic participation. He notes that the victory of revolution in the capital cities was a signal for the lower classes to resume the social conflicts on a broader scale, creating a situation in which the lower classes would have ‘a significant one’, in the process of government.[32] In England, by contrast, the post-1688 settlement had already institutionalised a narrower version of this.

Hobbes and Locke represent two contrasting solutions to the seventeenth-century crisis of political authority. Yet both sought to solve the same fundamental problem: how political order could survive the collapse of traditional authority. Where Hobbes sought stability through the concentration of power, Locke grounded legitimacy in the continuing authority of the people. Through Locke's *Two Treatises*, popular sovereignty emerged not as a call for perpetual revolution, but as a principled foundation for lawful resistance and constitutional government. Even so, reading Locke as a straightforward democrat risks anachronism. As Ingram and Barker observe, recent readings of Locke emphasise that he constrained both executive and legislature ‘not so much by popular will as by the dictates of natural law,’ finding

[31] Robert Gildea, *Barricades and Borders: Europe, 1800–1914*, 3rd ed., Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2003, pp. 35–56.
[32] Jonathan Sperber, *The European Revolutions, 1848–1851*, 2nd ed., Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2005, pp. 112, 116–120.

in Locke a ‘supra-human warrant to popular sovereignty.’ [33] Locke made sovereignty accountable, but not yet democratic.

[33] Ingram and Barker, *People Power,* p. 13.

Bibliography

Primary sources

Act of Settlement, 1701 (12 & 13 Will. 3, c. 2).

Bill of Rights, 1689 (1 Will. & Mar. Sess. 2, c. 2).

Hobbes, Thomas. *Leviathan: Or the Matter, Forme & Power of a Common-Wealth Ecclesiasticall and Civill*. London: Andrew Crooke, 1651.

Locke, John. *Two Treatises of Government: In the Former, the False Principles and Foundation of Sir Robert Filmer… Are Detected and Overthrown; The Latter Is an Essay Concerning the True Original, Extent, and End of Civil Government*. London: Awnsham Churchill, 1690.

Triennial Act, 1694 (6 & 7 Will. & Mar. c. 2).

Secondary sources

Cameron, Euan. *The European Reformation*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991.

Gildea, Robert. *Barricades and Borders: Europe, 1800–1914*. 3rd ed. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003.

Graham, Ruth. 'Loaves and Liberty: Women in the French Revolution'. In *Becoming Visible: Women in European History*, edited by Renate Bridenthal and Claudia Koonz, 236–254. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1977.

Ingram, Robert G. and Christopher Barker. *People Power: Popular Sovereignty from Machiavelli to Modernity*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2022.

Kishlansky, Mark. *A Monarchy Transformed: Britain 1603–1714*. London: Penguin, 1996.

Outram, Dorinda. *The Enlightenment*. 2nd ed. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005.

Sieyès, Emmanuel Joseph. *Emmanuel Joseph Sieyès: The Essential Political Writings*. Edited by Oliver W. Lembcke and Florian Weber. Leiden: Brill, 2014.

Skinner, Quentin. *The Foundations of Modern Political Thought, Volume I: The Renaissance*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978.

Sperber, Jonathan. *The European Revolutions, 1848–1851*. 2nd ed. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005.