Quest Journals
Journal of Research in Humanities and Social Science
Volume 10 ~ Issue 3 (2022)pp: 25-31
ISSN(Online):2321-9467
www.questjournals.org

Research Paper

Democracy and the Doctrine of Prerogative in John Locke: A Critique

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Abstract
The political philosophy of John Locke is one of the most outstanding social contract theorists in the history of political thought. His political doctrines bear his general theoretical orientation of being extensively empirical. Consequently, this paper aims at making a critical study of Locke's democratic principles and doctrine of prerogative. It is of the view that though he is justified in freeing individuals from the shackles of monarchism and the crippling hands and chains of absolutism. His patriotic demonstration of equality, freedom and human rights remains a welcome development. But the limitations and deficiencies of his political liberalism like: promotion of individualism, logical difficulties, impossibility of his contract origin, the questionable transition from the state of nature to the civil society etc cannot be left unturned. It further argues that prerogative as it appears in the Two Treatises should be seen as a natural power and, as such beyond constitutional control. It is out of the constitution because its logic denies that a good constitution is enough for democratic government.
Keywords*: Democracy, Prerogative, John Locke, Patriarchal Principle, Social Contract, Property, Civil Society.*

R*eceived 18 Feb, 2022;* ***R****evised 01 Mar, 2022;* ***A****ccepted 03 Mar, 2022 © The author(s) 2022.*
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I. Introduction

As at 1690, John Locke was interested on how to come up with the best standards for an ideal state. What led him to this doctrine was because of the political disaster he experienced in England which did not guarantee the wellbeing and liberty of the people. He therefore affirms the adoption of prerogative power in political leadership. This power of prerogative is the official right possessed by the executive to make discretion on urgent issues without consulting the people or the assembly. It is a kind of extra-legal power and authority given to the executive to display which may not be in line with the constitution but should be for the benefit of the masses. Locke endorses this extra constitutional power but maintains that it has to be used judiciously as its application must be for the common good and not for the selfish interest. The essence of allowing the executive to exercise such power is because the constitution may be silent on some issues, while some may come as a result of emergency that demands immediate actions, and in some the law makers may be slow in taking decisions. This power of prerogative is mostly not questioned because it is meant for the good of the society. The prerogative power which Locke identifies as one of the principles of social contract between the people and their leader was to facilitate the smooth running of the state. This paper makes a critical study of Locke's political liberalism exposing the negative and positive effects of the doctrine and what should be the measure for better democracy.

The Hereditary Principle and the Basis of Locke's Democracy

The political philosophy of John has its manifestation in two essays or treatises published in 1690. The first treatise was a criticism of the doctrine of hereditary power of kings. The treaties thus becomes a refutation of Sir Robert Filmer's work entitles *Patriarcha* which states that the monarchy's power was God-given and had nothing whatsoever to do with the consent of the people, a view known as the divine right of kings. Filmer argues that Adam, the first man, had been given authority over the whole earth by God, and that the people's

duty to obey their rulers was a duty to God since the rulers were there by God's will as a result of a subdivision of the world since the time of Adam. What the people wanted was beside the point. Everyone has an absolute duty to obey the Monarch and his duty was, indirectly, a duty to obey God. As a matter of fact, the king therefore makes the laws alone which proceed solely from his will. He is perfectly free from all human control, and cannot be bound by the acts of his predecessors, or even by his own acts. Besides any disobedience to the state (i.e to the king) becomes a sacrilege.

In response to this patriarchal principle, Locke argues that if it is the case of parental power, the mother's power should be equal to the father's. Thus, John Locke says:

To this purpose, I think it may not be amiss to set down what I take to be political power. That the power of a magistrate over a subject may be distinguished from that of a father over his children, a master over his servant, a husband over his wife, and a lord over his slave. All which distinct power happening sometimes together in the same man, if he be considered under these different relations, it may help us to distinguish these powers one from another, and show the difference between a ruler of a common wealth, a father of a family, and a captain of a galley.[1]

Locke further emphasizes the injustice of primogeniture, which is unavoidable if inheritance is to be the basis of political power. He therefore, maintains that heredity cannot be accepted as the basis of legitimate power, since for him, men were naturally free and equal in the state of nature. Thus, in the second treaties, he outlines his positive account of government by tracing the sources and limits of legitimate political authority.

The State of Nature and Laws of Nature

Having shown the impossibility of deriving the authority of government from the monarch, Locke in his Second Treatise, showcases his positive account of government. He starts by narrating what he calls the state of nature, which he claims to have existed before all human government. Locke describes his state as "a state of perfect freedom to order their action, and persons as they think fit within the bounds of the law of nature, without asking or depending upon the will of other men".[2] Hence the state of nature is a state of perfect freedom and equality. A state where everybody is a master of himself, nobody is depending on one another – a state of self-consciousness and individualism. Yet, according to him, "it is not a state of licence" whereby individual of that state has an uncontrollable liberty to destroy others and even himself. It is not like Thomas Hobbe's State of nature where "life was nasty, short and brutish". It is rather a state in which all powers are equal no one having more than the other. Each person is classified equally with the same intelligence and faculty even of punishing offenders against him and as such, no person may be subjected or subordinated to the others. It is a state governed by the principle of reciprocity whereby the measure given one will be the measure he ought to get. In his own words, it is "a state of equality, wherein all the power and jurisdiction is reciprocal, no one having more than another."[3] It is a state that does not concur with arbitrariness in the use of power on people's life and property. But one would ask how possible it is for one to be in such state without harming another unlike in Hobbes? However, Locke believes that in the state of nature, human beings were bound by what he calls the laws of nature, and that these prohibit harming others.

According to Locke, the laws of nature are God-given laws which any human being is capable of discovering by reflection. He maintains that the state of nature has a "law of nature to govern it, which obliges everyone; and reason, which is that law teaches all mankind, who will but consult it."[4] Therefore, the law of nature which is reason, governs the state of nature, obliging and teaching all not to harm another's life, health, liberty or possession, since all are equal and independent, and under one God sharing with one another. This is perhaps why Locke describes the state of nature as that of "men living together according to reason without a common superior on earth with authority to judge between them."[5] But, considering the problem therein, it is obvious that in the state of nature, there would be a danger that individuals would be biased in the ways they upheld the laws of nature. They would tend to promote their own interests under the guise of applying the laws of nature. This is one of the reasons why joining together and forming a government is an improvement on the natural state, since a government can set up an independent judiciary. It is otherwise known as the social contract theory in John Locke's political philosophy.

The Social Contract Theory

In giving solution to the inconveniences of the state of nature, Locke propounded what he calls the social contract to be the origin of state or political society. Locke envisages this political society as: "wherever, therefore, any number of men so unites into one society as to quit everyone his executive power of the law of nature and to resign it to the public, there and there only is a political or civil society"[6].

Hence, the principal motivation for leaving the state of nature is a need for protection of life, liberty and property. Although in the state of nature everyone is entitled to punish anyone who breaks the law of nature, inevitably, self-interest engenders partiality among those asked to judge their neighbors. In order to guarantee a peaceful life, it is necessary to move from the state of nature into an organized society. This involves giving up

some of the rights you have in the state of nature. In particular, it means they forgo their right to correction and hand them over to a common legislative power for the common good. In this way for Locke the people would preserve their lives, freedom and property.

For Locke, social contract and consent go through three stages: firstly, men must agree together to uphold one another as a community to pool their natural power so that they act together to uphold one another's right. Secondly, the members of his community must agree by the majority vote to set up legislative and other institution. Thirdly, power to property in the society must agree either personality or through their representative to whatever taxes are imposed on the people. These constitute the basis of democracy which according to John Locke is "nothing but the consent of any member of freeman capable of majority.[7]

Locke on the Meaning of Property

Locke takes the term "property" to mean a collective right to life, liberty and estates. He puts it thus; "lives, liberty and estates which I call by the general name- property"[8]. He does not take "property" to mean only the material and economic acquisition but fundamental human rights which according to him are inalienable. Locke further stresses that these rights belong to men even before the formation of state. Hence, the source of these rights is "reason" which is given by God for the purpose of human benefits. For Locke, therefore, "God who has given the world to men in common had also given them reason to make use of it to the best advantage of life and convenience"[9]. Locke still believes in God despite his rejection on the theory of divine right of kings.

Moreso, Locke also associates the right to private property with the produce of one's own labour. In his analysis of how John Locke associates labour with private property, Nwoko expatiates it thus:

Labour makes the distinction between private property and what is common. Labour takes what is common out of the hands of nature and makes it his property. Labour gives the primary title to private property. This refutes the view of all who resist private ownership because all belongs to mankind in common but man through labour must supply for his needs and therefore can acquire[10].

Therefore, for one to own a property according to Locke, one has to put extra-effort in labour in addition to what nature has provided. Locke also tries to find this right on the notion of utility when he says that: "*natural reason tells us that men, being once born, have a right to their preservation and consequently to meat and drink and such other things are nature affords for their subsistence"*[11] Yet, whether the right to property is based on utility or labour or both, it is still important to ask the question as regards the extent that one can through his labour acquire property. Locke as cited in Nwoko gives the answer when he says that it is the same law that entitles us to acquire also limits us:

As much as anyone can make use of any advantage of life before it spoils, so much he may by his labour fix a property in: whatever is beyond this, is more than his share and belongs to other[12].

Locke believes also that by natural right man is endowed to inherit property. Besides, why there should be state through social contract is for the sake of protecting property.

Checks and Balances in Civil Society

One basic thing concerning John Locke's political teaching is that there should be separation of powers in civil society. The doctrine that the legislative, executive and judicial functions of government should be kept separate is characteristics of liberalism. It is because Locke's political philosophy contains the quality of this teaching that it is dubbed liberalism. Though, the theory of separation of power was first clearly formulated by Montesquieu in his book: *The Spirit of Laws* (1984). But then, it was achieved only by the inspiration of Locke's notion of sovereignty. In who does the sovereignty resides in the state of society? Is it in the legislature or in the executive? Can one person be both in the executive and legislature? For Montesquieu, there can be no liberty if one person becomes both. For Locke if the two functions belong to one person, there will be abuse of power.

Locke gives us a different picture of the sovereign power in society from the one we find in Hobbes. Hobbe's sovereign was absolute. Locke agrees that there must be a "supreme power", but he carefully places this in the hands of legislature and consequently the majority of the people. In his own words:

There can be but one supreme power, which is the legislative, to which all the rest are and must be subordinate, yet the legislative being only a fiduciary power to act for certain ends, there remains still in the people a supreme power to remove or alter the legislative, when they find the legislative act contrary to the trust reposed in them. For all power given with trust for the attaining on end being limited by that end, trust must necessarily be forfeited, and the power devolve into the hands of those that gave it, who may place it a new where they shall think best for their safety and security.[13]

Be that as it may, Stumpf contends the fact that, "Locke emphasized the importance of the division of power chiefly to ensure that those who execute or administer the laws do not also make them."[14] For they may not include themselves in keeping the laws they make. Besides they can make the law in favour of themselves.

So, the legislative power is not absolute per se, even though it is supreme. The power given to the legislative (or the rulers) is only but a fiduciary power (power given on trust). It is based on this phenomenon that brings about checks and balances in government.

The Meaning of prerogative as Used by Locke

Traditionally, prerogative was taken to be the right of the king. Locke retains the word of his monarchist opponents, but gives it an entirely new definition. The peculiarity of his own definition escalates as he puts it thus, "is that which is called *prerogative"*[15] But does all which is called prerogative is actually so? And if it is not, what then does Locke mean by this word? Meanwhile, what Locke meant by prerogative in the first place is found on the constant flux in which all things are.

Prerogative being nothing, but a power in the hands of the prince to provide for the public good, in such cases, which depending upon unforeseen and uncertain occurrences. Certain and unalterable laws could not safety direct whatsoever shall be done manifestly for the good of the people, and the establishing the Government upon its true foundations is, and always will be just prerogative[16]

He further gives the second definition as: "This power to act according to discretion, for the public good, without the prescription of law, and sometimes even against it, is that which is called prerogative"[17]. He also defines it again in section four as: "Prerogative can be nothing, but the peoples permitting their rulers, to do several things of their own free choices, where the law was silent and sometimes too against the direct Letter of the law, for the public good and their acquiescing in it when so done"[18]. Within the chapter on prerogative, he gives the last definition thereby stating that: "Prerogative is nothing but the power of doing public good without a Rule"[19]. Finally, in the last section of the chapter on tyranny, he notes that it is "an arbitrary power in some things left in the Prince's hand to do good, not harm to the people"[20]

Among the above five definitions given by Locke, two things remain constant which we can easily say that they form the essence of prerogative. First, it is a power to act for the public good and is limited by that good. Second prerogative is not bound by (positive) law. It is a discretion above and beyond the law. It permits the prince to act in the absence of law and to act against the law.

The Need for Prerogative

Locke gives two reasons why law is not enough for political ends and as such must be supplemented with prerogative. One is that a person who is not rational enough or who is not always in being cannot be an executive. The legislative body comprises an assembly of men rather than a single legislator. Thus, he says, it is unnecessary for the legislators to forever be in session because they can pass whatever laws are needed and then dissolve and go back to live under the law they have made[21]. In addition, it will also be a burden to the people for them to sit for years[22]. The people's right may not be secured under such legislative for it will automatically become an absolute monarch[23]. It is for this reason that the legislative power must dissolve and reform as needed and that, in all well–constituted commonwealths, it is exempted from the executive power[24].

The second is that these aspects of the well constituted legislative power are the very ones that introduce inadequacies into the rule of law. In such government, there must be "a latitude left to the executive power, to do many things of choice, which the laws do not prescribe:" the legislative is not always in being and is usually too numerous for it to act with "the dispatch requisite to execution"[25].

Prerogative: A Superfluous Constitutionalism

Having gone to this length, one can quickly notify that the doctrine of prerogative in Locke is more of superfluous (a spare, a reserve and surplus) constitutionalism. Apart from this, most obvious features (that are extralegal and work for the public good) it has no limit other than the law of nature. It is different from political power. It is a natural power and its use cannot be judged on earth.

Lockean prerogative is a superfluous constitutionalism. It exists when there is a failure of constitutionalism. In effect, it might be needed, the extent of prerogative to be fixed in the constitution, leaving it as only a power to act without the law "in some thing" for instance, according to Locke, a prince has the prerogative to convoke and dissolve parliament, based on his own power in accordance with the constitution[26]. Though, the power of prerogative, as Locke describes it, is limited only by the public good, and no law can similarly restrain a right of acting without or against the law for the public good. Just because the constitution denies the prince an authority to arbitrarily act for the public good does not mean that he is forbidden from doing so. Because prerogative is necessitated by problems with the law, and because the constitution is simply one form of law, the legitimate scope of prerogative cannot be limited by the constitution.

Prerogative cannot be a form of executive power in the sense that it does not exist with the executive power under the rule of law. Even though that Locke argues that prerogative "fell into the hands" of the executive[27], it is "left to the discretion of him that has the executive power in his hands"[28]; it is "left to the executive power"[29]. But this does not, however, make prerogative an aspect of executive power any more other

than possession of the federative power to make it executive power or vice visa. The fact that the executive possesses prerogative does not mean that it is executive power. Locke is discussing powers, not the body that wields them. Prerogative is separated from executive power. Being left in the executive's hand, prerogative is only but a natural power.

Locke clearly makes prerogative into a right of nature. The executive, "having the power in his hands has by the common law of nature, a right to make use of it for the good of society"[30]. Consequently, he did not gain this right as a result of the social compact, and so could not have gotten it as result of the constitution created by that compact. A constitution is competent to regulate the political powers (i.e., the legislative, executive, and federative powers) [31] because it is the articulation of the grant of those powers. Prerogative must therefore, be a superfluous-constitution since as a right, it is pre-constitutional.

Furthermore, in this Lockean prerogative, does he actually remember the instance of pardon? There, prerogative is needed to indemnify a man whose illegal behaviour actually deserves reward. By what right did this criminal violate an express prohibition of the law? There seems no alternative to the conclusion that it was a natural right, that is, the same law of nature which justifies prerogative. Positive law cannot grant rights to violate positive law for then there would be no violation.

Moreso, the example of pardon is probative. A criminal may be pardoned which presumes that he may be effectually judged in a court of law: pardon is only for those who may be or have been found guilty. Who, however, is to pardon the executive? Which is to say, who shall be judged? If prerogative is a superfluous constitutionalism, it means there can be no judge on earth. While on the other hand, in political society, individual's exercise of natural power does not have an earthly judge, namely, the government. Now we can conjecture as why only rulers may exercises prerogative. It is not only a natural power, but is a natural power for which there is no judge on earth.

Thus, the executive's (ruler's) ability to exercises prerogative ultimately relies on his ability to do so, that is, upon the power he has in his hands. It is an exercise of private judgment regarding what the law requires. By implications, prerogative as Locke describes it stands entirely outside of the constitutional framework. It is beyond constitutional control.

The Defects of Locke's Political Theory

Locke's political philosophy can hardly be represented in a simple and straightforward exposition because of the logical difficulties, which it reveals when it is subjected to analysis. According to Sabine, "the defects of logical structure in Locke's political theory arose from the fact that he never made up his mind what is exactly was fundamental and what was derivative"[32]. The meaning of property as used by John Locke is not without some equivocation in his political philosophy. In some occasion, Locke uses it to mean goods or estates while in some, it denotes human right as in lives, liberty, etc. This inconsistency has created the problem of understanding him. Since he makes it in such a way that it is only those who own a private property that belong to Lockean contract. Based on this, Locke constitutes the exclusion of women and the poor from the right of citizenship, owing to the fact that they have no property. This exclusion so far has rendered Lockean idea of equality of all men invalid.

Secondly, Locke's promotion of individualism leaves much to be desired. If individualism should be executed in the state, definitely, it will be contrary to the propagation of common good. Since man by nature is egocentric, it seems that any government or civil society that is based on such supremacy of the individual over the community will be an invitation to anarchy. There will be no much difference from that of Hobbe's state of nature (war of all against all), and the modern state.

One other thing is the impossibility of reaching into a social contract among men, not just because it was too primitive and there is no a historical record or evidence to prove that such contract was made, but how it was possible for all men at that time contracting themselves into civil society. It is as if the individuals must have known what a government was and decided to make one. Government grows up gradually and not by any contract.

In the same vein, Locke's explanation of the transition from the state of nature to civil society is equally a complicated issue. He describes the state of nature as the original state of man where there is equality, peace, freedom and mutual love. But, if this is true, what then is the need to form a civil society? In the real sense, it appears not to be true because there would be no need forming a civil society. Although Locke argues that it is because all do not obey the law of nature that civil society is formed in order to take care of the inconveniences. But the fact still remains that human experience still shows that not even in the so-called civil society that all men obey the laws despite its democratic apparatus and political machineries of law enforcement.

Furthermore, the example of an original contract as Locke upholds is such that it cannot necessarily bind the descendant of those who initially entered into the contract. It is quite unrealistic that a son must continue from a contract made by his father. If such consent takes place there would be a violation of freedom,

which is one of the characteristics of good governance. In other words, Locke's theory about majority rule and consent deserves commendation. But it must, in other round be put against Locke that he takes it from granted that majority is always right. It is not necessarily so in real life situation.

Similarly, in his doctrine of prerogative, the necessity of prerogative was as a result of law being insufficient for political ends and calls to be supplemented with prerogative. There are, Locke says, many things "which the law can by no means provides for"[33]. This is a fundamental inadequacy in the rule of law. Its cause lies in part in the beginning of the rule of law, a beginning which strikes at the logic underlying legislative supremacy. Law making undoubtedly requires foresight. Yet legislators are not able "to foresee, and provide, by laws, for all that may be useful to the community"[34]. Locke repeats this in the next section saying, "It is impossible to foresee, and so by laws to provide for, all accidents and necessaries, that may concern the public"[35]. But how could this totally be? Can't we of course predict, and hence regulate a good number of things that is, a point not to be forgotten? After all, the reduction of all action to the mere application of rules would necessitate a near total capacity to foresee the future.

The legislative as Locke says, makes the law for the public good, and men are obligated to follow the law, surrounding their private judgment regarding the public good[36]. Now, how is it certain that some private judgment regarding the public good will not be reserved? How justified, and satisfactorily could this undertaking rule be for the common good? This is a clear indication that Locke's doctrine for prerogative allows for arbitrary, that is, lawless acts, but could be a power to make law. Besides, it is made known that only the legislative body could legislate. This, in effect, seems or rather shows that a new electoral law has been made, the old one being abandoned. This is not just a mere reform of the law of contracts, or some other aspect of common law, but the imposition of a new constitutional law.

Locke also falls a victim of moral decadence and inhuman by illustrating the act of demolishing an innocent man's house in order to prevent the spread of a fire to the entire neighbourhood. The innocent man's house is not yet on fire, but is torn down in order to save other homes also not yet on fire. It is presented as an example "wherein a strict and rigid observation of the law may do harm"[37]. A great many would suffer just because the law does not allow the prince to demolish homes whenever he thinks it necessary. Law must protect property from being taken without consent, that is, unlawfully[38], but necessity compels the unlawful taking of property. This example, however sacrificed the rights of the individual to the good by robbing Peter in order to pay Paul. Should that necessity requires harming others? And if you were to be the one, how would you feel? Does this not an additional deficiency in the rule of law, an additional reason why prerogative is needed?

Another similar case is the example of pardon. Locke provides two reasons why the ruler should have a power "to mitigate the sovereignty of the law, and pardon some offenders"[39], one much more unusual than the other. The second reason Locke gives is simple mercy, such mercy being demanded by the end of government "where it can prove no prejudice to the innocent." However, law makes no distinction of persons, but now this is a mark against it. Is this not a partial treatment to the innocent victims? What moral teaching is such act giving to the entire society? Or does it means that any illegal act should not be punished for it? After all, the ruler is not always at hand (in the court) when the judgment was passed.

However, despite all the defects in Locke's theory, it still has some merits in it that are very relevant to human development. This theory succeeded in freeing individuals from the hands of monarchism and the chains of absolutism. As such, he left for mankind an everlasting legacy for the better running or government in spite of the inadequacies that enter into the formulation of the theory. Locke's liberation reminds the government of those human purposes which the state can serve and which alone can justify its existence.

His sincerity, his profound moral conviction, his genuine belief in liberty, in human rights, and in the dignity of human nature, united with his moderation and good sense, made him the ideal spokesman of a middle-class revolution. As a force in propagating the ideas of liberal but not violent reform Locke probably stands before all other writers whatsoever. Even his more doubtful ideas, such as the separation of powers and the inevitable wisdom of majority-decisions remained a part of the democratic cree[40].

Therefore, the theory of John Locke has so far brought out the idea in which civil society rest on the consent of the rulers but of the ruled and this became an important factor in the development of modern democracy. At least he has made everyone to understand that individuals have rights that are natural and inalienable them and as well need to seek for them and defend them. For government is made for the well being of all and not for a particular set of people.

II. Conclusion

Locke's views on democratic governance and doctrine or prerogative have been examined and find his unmodified forms that cannot succeed in finding solution to the great number of problems facing the civil society. Locke's complexity and inadequacy of his democratic principles remains a vacuum that still needs to be filled. His doctrine of prerogative clearly sits uncomfortable with constitutionalism. His description of prerogative is completely outside the constitutional setting. He made it in such that prerogative is a power

granted by a component of natural law and not by the people. As such, it becomes the problem on who judges, and thus regulates the prerogative.

Locke does not provide us with an easy way to resolve this problem, and the brief exploration of this paper does not actually settle this problem too. But it will go a long way in solving the problem if prerogative should be seen as a superfluous-constitutionalism. Meaning that, if prerogative should be working within the constitutional structure, there should be a need, the extent of prerogative to be fixed in the constitution, leaving it as only a power to act without the law in some cases.

Prerogative should be regulated by the legislature, by the cabinet, or by some other political body. After all, a constitution made well is equal to any exigency. Even if it is difficult to be regulated within the institution of government, let it be overseen by an extra legal constitutional body (the spirit vigilance of the people).

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