

John Locke: Liberal Constitutionalism with Residual Republican Elements

1. Locke Against Arbitrary Power

Locke's political project is anti-absolutist. He opposes the doctrine of divine-right monarchy and arbitrary sovereignty.

His central political principle:

Legitimate government rests on consent and exists to secure rights.

This is liberal, but it contains a republican concern: **fear of domination**.

Arbitrary power — even if unused — is illegitimate.

Here Locke intersects with republicanism.

2. Freedom: Non-Interference or Non-Domination?

Locke defines political freedom as:

- Being subject only to known, established laws.
- Not being subject to the arbitrary will of another.

This resembles republican non-domination.

However, the grounding differs:

- For republicans, liberty requires civic participation and structural safeguards against dependency.
- For Locke, liberty primarily requires **limited government and protection of rights**.

Participation is secondary. Rights are primary.

3. The Political Role of Property

Property is central in Locke's political design.

Politically, property:

- Secures independence.
- Grounds political membership.
- Justifies limiting state authority.

But this shifts the republican ideal.

In classical republicanism:

- Property supports civic virtue.

In Locke:

- Property secures private autonomy.

The political community becomes a **rights-protecting framework**, not a virtue-producing republic.

4. Political Structure

Locke defends:

- Legislative supremacy (but limited).
- Separation of powers.
- Right of resistance.

This generates constitutional government — a bridge between republican institutionalism and liberal individualism.

Conclusion on Locke: He represents a transitional thinker — **a liberal who incorporates republican distrust of arbitrary rule, but relocates freedom into the sphere of individual rights.**

Adam Smith: Commercial Liberalism and the Depoliticization of Liberty

If Locke constitutionalizes liberalism, Smith socializes it.

1. Political Suspicion of State Power: Smith distrusts:

- Mercantilism
- State-sponsored monopolies
- Political collusion with economic elites

He sees concentrated power — political or economic — as corrupting. This aligns with republican anxieties about domination. But his solution differs.

2. The Market as Political Stabilizer

For Smith, commercial society:

- Softens manners.
- Reduces violence.

- Replaces military virtue with exchange relations.

Republican tradition feared commerce as corrupting civic virtue. Smith reverses this:

Commerce civilizes and stabilizes society.

This marks a decisive liberal move:

Politics is no longer the primary arena of freedom.

Market interaction becomes the dominant form of social coordination.

3. Citizenship in Commercial Society

Smith does not emphasize:

- Active civic participation
- Political virtue
- Collective self-rule

Instead, stability emerges from:

- Legal justice
- Predictable institutions
- Free exchange

Citizens become economic actors embedded in a rule-of-law system. Freedom becomes:

- Security under law
- Freedom of contract

This is liberalism in its mature political-economic form.

4. The Republican Echo in Smith

Yet Smith is not indifferent to republican concerns.

He warns:

- Extreme division of labor dulls civic capacity.
- Economic elites may capture political institutions.
- Education is necessary to prevent democratic decay.

Thus:

He accepts commercial society but fears political corruption.

He seeks balance — not civic revival.

The Deep Political Tension

Both thinkers leave unresolved a fundamental question:

If economic inequality produces dependency, and dependency produces vulnerability to domination, can liberal non-interference secure genuine freedom?

Republican theory would answer: No.

Lockean–Smithian liberalism responds:
Legal equality and institutional restraint are sufficient.

This debate continues in contemporary political theory.

Final Political Assessment

- Locke transforms republican anti-tyranny into rights-based constitutional liberalism.
- Smith transforms republican concern for corruption into institutional and market safeguards.
- Both reduce the centrality of civic virtue.
- Both prioritize stability and protection over participatory self-rule.

Their combined legacy is the modern liberal state:

- Constitutional
- Market-oriented
- Suspicious of concentrated power
- Centered on individual rights rather than collective self-mastery