



Civics Mosaic:

Comparing Political Systems

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Comparing political systems around the world

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Aim at an exact Knowledge of the Nature, End, and Means of Government.
Compare the different forms of it with each other and each of them with their
Effects on the public and private Happiness.

—John Adams, 1759

Lesson 3: What is Government and Why Have It?

Purpose of Lesson

In this lesson you will learn what the term “government” means. Although government is an important aspect of most people’s lives, many people do not take the time to carefully consider what it is and why it is important. To better understand government and its purposes, you will be introduced to the imaginative construct called “a state of nature,” which political philosophers and novelists have used to explain the necessity of government. You also will be introduced to the anti-government views of anarchists and how those views have influenced current social movements.

After completing this lesson, you will be able to:

- Analyze and evaluate justifications for the existence of government.
- Identify and describe the social and political movements that advocated life without government.

Terms to Know

anarchism	liberalism
body politic	libertarian
communitarianism	ombudsman
despotism	republican government
devolution	sovereign state
government	state of nature
human nature	utopian
kibbutzim	

What Does the Term “Government” Mean?

Government broadly conceived involves the authority to make binding decisions and ensure that they are carried out. It can be said, therefore, that some form of government exists in almost every institution. For example, in the family parents make decisions to exercise control over their children. In schools, teachers and principals exercise authority over students. Even in the workplace managers or employers make decisions and enforce rules. Wherever and whenever there is ordered rule, there is government.

Government, however, is usually understood in a more specific sense—as the formal and institutional structure where policies are made in the form of law that is binding on all members of a society. Thus, government is the means through

which rule is exercised in communities, nations, and at the international level.

The term “government” also is used in a narrower sense in some countries with parliamentary systems to denote individuals who have control of the decision-making machinery that Americans consider to be in the executive branch. For example, in Britain and in Japan leaders of the majority party are referred to as the “government” after they are elected to Parliament and then appointed by other members of Parliament to serve as the prime minister and his/her cabinet. In the British Parliament and in the Japanese Diet (Parliament), “the government” (the prime minister and the cabinet) serves only as long as it has the confidence of the legislature. Later you will learn more about this use of the term “government” in parliamentary systems. Here our concern is with understanding government—as rule exercised in larger political units such as countries.

What Would Life Be Like Without Government?

Today there are more than 200 sovereign states and their national governments in the world. In addition, there are thousands of local and state governments. Most people take the existence of government for granted, but political philosophers have long raised questions about the need for government, and some have gone about it in an interesting way. They ask: What would the world be like without government? To answer that question they imagine “a state of nature,” a situation where no government exists and no one possesses any authority to rule. Then they try to describe what life would be like if one had to live under those conditions.

Thomas Hobbes, who has been called one of the greatest of all political philosophers, lived at the time of the English Civil War (1642-1648). He worried that his country might be falling into “a state of nature.” In the hope of persuading his readers how disagreeable this would be and why government was preferable, Hobbes wrote *The Leviathan* (1651). Here, in part, is what Hobbes told his readers to expect in “a state of nature.”

In [a state of nature] there is no place for Industry; because the fruit thereof is uncertain: and consequently no Culture of the Earth, no Navigation, nor use of the commodi-

*ties that may be imported by Sea; no instruments of moving and removing of such things as require much force; no Knowledge of the face of Earth; no account of Time; no Arts, no Letters, no Society; and which is worst of all, continuall feare, and danger of violent death; and the life of man, solitary, poore, nasty, brutish and short.*¹

John Locke, another famous English philosopher of the 17th century, also imagined, as have many philosophers since, what life would be like in “a state of nature.” He differed from Hobbes, however. Hobbes thought that in a state of nature human beings would be in a state of permanent war against each other, competing for scarce resources. Individuals would be driven by their appetites and desires and they would take preemptive, violent action against any competitor.

Locke’s state of nature is more benign. Locke contended that even in a state of nature prior to any organized society human beings would be bound by laws of nature, God-given laws, which any individual can discover by reflection. These laws of nature prohibit harming others.

In Locke’s state of nature individuals are both free and equal. There is no natural hierarchy; everyone is equal before God and everyone is free. But when Locke speaks of freedom, he does not mean license or the freedom to do whatever one wants. Even in a state of nature, Locke insists, one’s freedom is limited because the God-given laws of nature prohibit people from harming one another. God created humans as equals, therefore they are not to use or abuse one another.

Locke, however, was a realist. He recognized that although the law of nature fully applies to everyone, whether or not the law is obeyed is another matter. He, therefore, comes to agree with Hobbes that some form of government is necessary. As Locke explained it:

Men, being as has been said, by nature all free, equal and independent, no one can put another out of his estate and subjected to the political power of another without his own consent, which is done by agreeing with other men, to join and unite into a community for their comfortable, safe and peaceable living.... When any number of men has so consented to

*make one community or government, they are thereby presently incorporated, and make one body politic; wherein the majority have a right to act and conclude the rest.*²

What Do You Think?

1. How would you explain “a state of nature”? Why do you think political philosophers have used that imaginative device to justify government?
2. What are the essential differences between Hobbes’s and Locke’s conceptions of a state of nature?
3. What is a “body politic” and how, according to Locke, is one formed?
4. Consult your local newspapers and monitor television newscasts and commentaries. Would any of the world’s trouble spots they describe qualify as being in a “state of nature”? Why or why not? What do you think might be done in those troubled areas to see that they “join and unite into a community for their comfortable, safe and peaceable living,” as John Locke put it.

Is Government Necessary?

Locke, Hobbes, and other political philosophers asked the question: What would life be like without government? They stimulated the thinking of others who then went on to ask: Is government really necessary? One famous response came from James Madison, the “Father of the United States Constitution.” His direct reply in *The Federalist No. 51* (1788) was conditioned by what he believed human nature to be. Madison wrote:

But what is government itself but the greatest of all reflections on human nature? If men were angels, no government would be necessary. If angels were to govern men, neither external nor internal controls on government would be necessary. In framing a government which is to be administered by men over men, the great difficulty lies in this: You must first enable the government to controul the governed; and in the next place, oblige it to controul itself.

¹ Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*, ed. by C. B. MacPherson (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1968), p. 186 (emphasis added).

² John Locke, *The Second Treatise on Civil Government* (Buffalo, NY: Prometheus Books, 1986), pp. 54-55.

Later Madison revisited his thinking about government and human nature. He clarified his thoughts in *The Federalist No. 55*.

As there is a degree of depravity in mankind which requires a certain degree of circumspection and distrust, so there are other qualities in human nature which justify a certain portion of esteem and confidence. Republican government [a government that operates through elected representatives of the people] presupposes the existence of these qualities in a higher degree than any other form. Were the pictures which have been drawn by the political jealousy of some among us the faithful likenesses of the human character, the inference would be that there is not sufficient virtue among men for self-government; and that nothing less than the chains of despotism can restrain them from destroying and devouring one another.

Two novelists also have explored the connection between human nature and the need for and viability of self-government. Both authors tell of English boys marooned on a desert island. In R. M. Ballantyne's book, *Coral Island* (1857), the boys, through courage, intelligence, and cooperation repel pirates and cope with nature to lead an idyllic life in the South Seas. In William Golding's book, *Lord of the Flies* (1954), the boys prove unable to govern themselves and fall into tribal warfare and then into despotism. When they are finally rescued, one of the boys tries to explain why they were unable to govern themselves.

I should have thought that a pack of British boys—you're all British, aren't you?—would have been able to put up a better show than that—I mean—

It was like that at first, said Ralph, before things—

He stopped.

We were together then—

The officer nodded helpfully, I know. Jolly Good Show. Like the Coral Island.

One of the great and continuing disagreements about the necessity of government and the form which government ought to take centers on opposing views of human nature. Are conflict, aggression, and struggle for dominance “natural” and inevitable among human beings? Does human nature then require strong government

that restrains human beings and enforces peace among them? Or, as many believe, is negative behavior learned? Are human beings capable of reason, compassion, and cooperative endeavors? If so, should not government be a task that people undertake for themselves?

What Do You Think?

1. Do you agree or disagree with James Madison that “government is the greatest of all reflections on human nature”? Why or why not?
2. How and why do basic assumptions about human nature affect the forms that governments take?
3. On balance, would you say that human nature is basically good and deserving of trust or basically bad and deserving of distrust? Why? What historical and contemporary evidence can you cite in support of your position?
4. How might Locke and Hobbes respond to Madison's assertion that “there is not sufficient virtue among men for self government”?

What Is Anarchism?

Although most people throughout the world believe that government is necessary, anarchists do not. They believe that social organization can be best achieved through voluntary cooperation of individuals.

Today the term “anarchy” is popularly, if inaccurately, synonymous with confusion and lawlessness. Cartoonists depict anarchists as bearded bomb-throwers who have utter disregard for life. Such images are at variance with the political philosophy of anarchism as expressed by its proponents.

The first full exposition of anarchist beliefs came from the British philosopher and novelist, William Godwin. In his *Enquiry Concerning Political Justice* (1773), Godwin said, “Man is perfectible, or in other words, susceptible of perpetual improvement.” Therefore, as individuals come to recognize that the interests that bind them are stronger than the interests that divide them, they will spontaneously come into social harmony. When disagreements do occur, people will be able to resolve them through rational debate and discussion. Thus, the coercive arm of government will be unnecessary.

Government, Godwin and his followers contended, is not a safeguard against disorder and conflict; government is the cause of disorder and conflict. Because government, in their judgment, is the tool of the powerful and propertied classes, it imposes rule from above that represses freedom, breeds resentment and promotes inequality.

Another influential anarchist writer was the Russian prince, Peter Kropotkin. He argued that were it not for the corruptions imposed by governments, humans would develop bonds of instinctive solidarity that would make government unnecessary. To prove his assertions, Kropotkin pointed to evidence of non-coerced cooperation within the animal kingdom. All animal species profit through mutual aid. Many animals, for example, cooperate in raising the young, finding food, or seeking shelter. Therefore, if human beings, who also are members of the animal kingdom, would cooperate, they too would reap benefits. He wrote:

*No more laws! No more judges! Liberty, equality and practical human sympathy are the only effective barriers we can oppose to the anti-social interests of certain among us.*³

Anarchists generally recognize that some human beings will engage in anti-social behavior. But they argue that the absence of governments does not mean that there can be no forms of social control over individual behavior. They contend that peer pressure, public opinion, fear of a bad reputation and even gossip can exert their effects on individual behavior.

How Is Anti-Government Thought Manifested Today?

Over the years two strong traditions of anti-government thought have developed and both traditions are manifested in current political movements. One tradition is the libertarian or extreme individualist tradition. Libertarians profess a strong concern for liberty, individualism, and free markets. They advocate drastic curtailment of the power of government because they believe that the main problem with government is that the more tasks it takes on, the more prone it is to violate the rights of individuals. For example, the Libertarian Party in the United States endorsed an end to mandatory taxation,

government funding of education, restrictions on immigration, and all government regulations of food and drugs. It has softened some of its positions, but it remains committed to private, free market solutions to social and cultural as well as economic problems.

A second manifestation of anti-government thought is communitarianism, which has been gaining adherents in Western Europe, Asia, and the United States. Communitarians, as the name implies, attach great importance to the community. They decry what they believe to be excessive individualism. The good of the whole society should be the primary concern rather than the self-centered interests of the individual. Life, they contend, is most efficiently and humanely organized when people voluntarily form cooperative communities bound together by common values. Communitarians favor shoring up the family and emphasizing character development.

Communitarian's belief in the public good often leads them on a quest to form the perfect society. This quest arose in Western thought in ancient tales of a once Golden Age. Greek theories of the perfect city-state and early Christians' hope for Christ's second coming also influenced utopian or communitarian movements. When Europeans colonized the New World, such hopes were buoyed. They were influenced by Sir Thomas More's most famous book *Utopia* (1516), a title that means "nowhere." In that political romance More described an imaginary community on an island off the coast of South America. In *Utopia* everything is perfect—the laws, the morals, the politics—in contrast to what is the case in existing governments. This fictional island has given us the adjective *utopian* that now is applied to any highly desirable but impractical proposal.

The anarchist rejection of centralized government and preference for direct democracy and voluntary associations is deeply rooted in American historical experience. It has been expressed in the works of Henry David Thoreau (1817-1862) and others who idealized nature and thought that a life withdrawn from the corrupting influences of modern civilization was the better alternative.

Communitarians have promoted experimental communities in which they have attempted to live out their ideals. Early communitarian societies, such as those established by the Puritans in the 1600s and by the Shakers in the 1700s had a

³ Peter Kropotkin, *Law and Authority* (1886).

religious basis. Two Europeans, Robert Owen of Scotland and Charles Fourier of France inspired 19th-century secular communities.

Owen advocated cooperative communities of between 2,000 and 3,000 people who would share in the ownership and control of the means of production. He put his ideas into practice first in the New Lanark community of Scotland. Later he migrated to the United States and founded another communitarian society at New Harmony, Indiana.

Like his contemporary, Fourier advocated social experiments of 1,500 to 1,800 people. They were to live in a “Phalanx” (a close-knit community) organized to make labor both productive and attractive to workers. The emotional needs of community residents would be met through processes of mutual support and democratic self-government. He envisioned each “Phalanx” as an extended family with which residents could identify rather than as an “anonymous” society.

A more recent example of the founding of communitarian societies is the kibbutzim or collective agricultural communities in Israel. In the wake of horrific pogroms in Russia, Jews, who were mostly young, fled their native land and established the first kibbutz in Israel in 1909. Other settlers followed not only from Russia but from many other countries as well. Although there is great diversity in the kibbutz movement, most members believe that every kibbutz must constitute an independent economic unit as well as a self-governing unit.

Communitarianism as a school of thought attracted increased attention in the 1980s and 1990s. It developed specifically as a critique of liberalism or the commitment to individualism, a belief in the supreme importance of the human

individual who is entitled to the greatest possible freedom consistent with a like freedom for fellow citizens. In contrast, communitarians emphasize that the self is embedded in the community. They liken their efforts to classical republican efforts of Aristotle, Pericles, and fellow Athenians who urged construction of a “politics of the common good.” They hope to counteract what they see as a fundamental weakness in modern societies—that individuals tend to assert their own interests and rights but fail to assume the duties and responsibilities of citizens.

Reviewing and Using the Lesson

1. What are the major beliefs of libertarians and communitarians? How are they alike and how are they different?
2. Why do you think most communitarian settlements have had limited success and why have so many failed?
3. Evaluate the communitarian argument that individuals in modern societies are concerned with keeping their own interests and rights and tend to neglect their duties and responsibilities as citizens.
4. How does the view of human nature which one holds affect one’s beliefs about the proper role of government?
5. If you were to become a political philosopher, how would you describe “a state of nature”?
6. How accurate is the metaphor of a “body politic”? Why?
7. Evaluate the argument advanced by anarchists that governments are unnecessary and that other forms of social control over individual behavior are sufficient.