

The John Locke Society

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This Society's namesake, John Locke, is both the grandfather of the American Revolution and of American conservative thought. Indeed, the American Revolution is properly understood as a profoundly conservative event. His theory of the Social Contract is the bedrock on which this country was built. It holds that all political powers ultimately derive from a society's individuals, who cede certain of their sovereign powers to government, which they may replace if that government becomes tyrannical. The scope of these voluntarily surrendered sovereign powers and the legitimate purposes of that government, however, divides modern conservatives.

Modern American conservative thought in the post World War Two era has separated into two veins. While both are firmly united in their committed opposition to all forms of collectivism, the first of these emphasize the central importance of community and tradition. What is most important, argue social conservatives, is defending those social values that preserve the cohesion that is essential for any society to flourish and long survive. Traditional moral values, connectedness with history and community, and religion are all essential for true ordered liberty. Economic freedom, while important, does not provide the entire or even the major foundation of a truly conservative society. Russell Kirk is a central exponent of this perspective, whose influence on American conservatism through works such as *The Conservative Mind* is profound. There he argues that "True conservatism, conservatism uninfected by [utilitarian] ideas, rises at the antipodes from individualism. Individualism is social atomism; conservatism is community of spirit." (p. 211) As George Nash notes in his seminal *The Conservative Intellectual Movement in America: Since 1945*, "Kirk distinguished between private property and free enterprise — which he supported — and the ideology of individualism, which he labeled 'a denial that life has any meaning except gratification of the ego' The political result of individualism, he asserted, was anarchy." (p. 161)

In contrast, the second vein emphasizes individuals and economics. What is most important, counters economic conservatives, one of the most prominent of whom is Ayn Rand, is true economic freedom. If man is not economically free, as *Atlas Shrugged* so brilliantly depicts, then no true freedom can exist. As Nash puts it, quoting Rand: "Rand's system of values held 'that man exists for his own sake, that the pursuit of his own happiness is his highest moral purpose, that he must not sacrifice himself to others, nor sacrifice others to himself.' Anything that denigrated man's rationality, total self-reliance, and freedom was deemed evil. Hence religion, collectivism, even altruism, were condemned To Rand the only economic system compatible with human freedom was unmitigated laissez-faire capitalism." (p. 156) The state's only role in a Randian world is to protect the rights of private property ownership and the freedom to enjoy the fruits of one's labor without the interference of others. Social concerns are relevant only within the context of economic liberty.

Unsure where the truth of the matter lies in this core disagreement within the very house of conservatism, the Chairman feels compelled to solicit the views of Members and guests of the John Locke Society, who are invited to employ these two champions as proxies for this fundamental divide at the Society's second *Ronald Wilson Reagan Debate Caucus*, where the Society shall dip into this longstanding controversy by debating

Resolved: This House Prefers Russell Kirk to Ayn Rand.

The Society will assemble **Thursday, March 4th** in the Weatherford Room of the Royal Oaks Country Club (7915 Greenville Avenue, Dallas). The Provostery will open at **6:00 p.m.** (finger sandwiches, select cheeses, and a cash bar are available). The Chairman will gavel the Caucus to order at precisely **7:00 p.m.** Gentlemen are reminded to adorn proper neckwear; ladies should adhere to a similar sartorial standard. Literary presentations are encouraged. Please direct questions to the Chairman at 214-871-3059.