Origins of Government

Governments almost certainly evolved gradually, and no one can give a definitive explanation of how they first came to exist. Four theories, however, help us consider their possible origins.

1. The **Evolution Theory** sees government as an extension of family relationships. Even in prehistoric times, families were organized under a system that gave parents authority over children. As more families banded together over time to form tribes, the system of parental rule evolved into tribal rule. Often the elder adults assumed the leadership role, forming a type of mini-government.

2. The **Force Theory** claims that governments were formed as a result of one group's conquest of another. The victorious group would then impose its rules on the conquered group, forcing it into submission. Supporters of this theory cite evidence from both prehistoric and modern times. For example, during World War II, Adolph Hitler forced other European countries to submit to Germany through his *blitzkrieg* ("lightning war") tactics.

3. The **Divine Right Theory** was widely accepted in most European nations from the fifteenth to eighteenth centuries. According to **divine right**, rulers inherit their power from God. Once blessed with this power, the royal family and its heirs become God's representation on Earth. Therefore, defiance of the ruler represents a sin against the church. Ancient civilizations—such as those in China, Egypt, and South America—also believed in divine right and gave godlike qualities to their leaders.

4. The **Social Contract Theory** was developed as a response to the Divine Right Theory by seventeenth- and eighteenth-century philosophers, such as John Locke, James Harrington, Thomas Hobbes, and Jean Jacques Rousseau. According to the theory of **social contract**, humans developed government and named rulers to establish order in the chaotic natural world in which they lived. By agreeing to cooperate with each other and follow a set of rules, people brought order and safety to their lives. The power to govern was a result of decisions made freely by people, not handed down by God. This theory was the inspiration for the American revolution against English rule.

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divine right—the belief that rulers derive their authority directly from God and are accountable only to Him.
social contract—the concept that the governed and those governing have obligations to each other, that the people being governed will support the government, and that the government will protect the basic rights of the people.