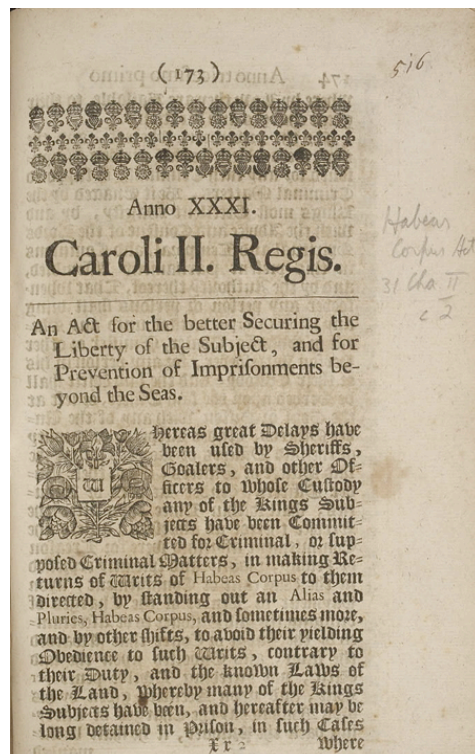


THE BEST OF THE OLL #43

"The Habeas Corpus Act" (1679)
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“Great delays have been used by sheriffs, gaolers and other officers, to whose custody any of the king's subjects have been committed, for criminal or supposed criminal matters, in making returns of writs of habeas corpus ... contrary to their duty and the known laws of the land, whereby many of the king's subjects have been ... long detained in prison, in such cases where by law they areailable, to their great charge and vexation.”



Habeas Corpus Act (1679)

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The Best of Bastiat <oll.libertyfund.org/title/2477>

[July, 2013]

Editor's Introduction

There had been previous attempts to secure the right of "habeas corpus" in British history such as the statements in Magna Carta denouncing the practice of unlawful imprisonment, and Coke's speeches in Parliament in 1628 when the Petition of Right was being debated. The Act of 1679 enshrined the principle in English law where it has remained ever since with the occasional suspension. The phrase comes from the medieval Latin legal expression which literally means "you may have the body", in other words the person being detained must be presented in court to either face charges and be tried by a court of law or be freed depending upon the determination of a judge.

One of the most famous examples of its use was the case of the slave James Somersett in 1772 whose master brought to England for a visit. While he was in England Somersett escaped and was imprisoned. Abolitionist groups sought a writ of habeas corpus which was brought before Lord Mansfield who ruled that Somersett had to be released as slavery as such did not exist in England (although it did in the colonies of the Empire).

Parliament passed the Habeas Corpus Act in 1679 as part of a campaign against King Charles II led by the Earl of Shaftesbury who was attempting to exclude Charles II's brother James from the succession to the throne of England because of his Catholic religious beliefs and the fear that he would rule in an arbitrary manner. The Habeas Corpus Act was designed to place limits on the arbitrary power of the monarch to imprison his political opponents by by-passing the courts.

The principle of Habeas Corpus is recognized in the American Constitution in Article 1, Section 9, Clause 2 which states that "The Privilege of the Writ of Habeas Corpus shall not be suspended, unless when in Cases of Rebellion or Invasion the public Safety may require it." It is also the sentiment behind the 5th and 6th Amendments (Bill of Rights).

See also the letter from Thomas Jefferson to James Madison, 31 July 1788 concerning it. <<http://oll.libertyfund.org/title/802/86707>>.

“For the prevention whereof, and the more speedy relief of all persons imprisoned for any such criminal or supposed criminal matters; (2) Be it enacted, by the king's most excellent majesty, by and with the advice and consent of the lords spiritual and temporal, and commons ... That whensoever any person or persons shall bring any habeas corpus directed unto any sheriff or sheriffs, gaoler, (etc.) ... the said writ shall be served upon the said officer ... and bring, or cause to be brought, the body of the party so committed or restrained, unto or before the lord chancellor, or lord keeper of the great seal of England (etc.) ... and shall then likewise certify the true causes of his detainer or imprisonment ...”

The Habeas Corpus Act (1679)¹

AN ACT FOR THE BETTER SECURING THE LIBERTY OF THE SUBJECT, AND FOR PREVENTION OF IMPRISONMENTS BEYOND THE SEAS, COMMONLY CALLED “THE HABEAS CORPUS ACT.”¹ [1] 31 CH. II., CH. 2, MAY, 1679.

Whereas great delays have been used by sheriffs, gaolers and other officers, to whose custody any of the king's subjects have been committed, for criminal or supposed criminal matters, in making returns of writs of habeas corpus, to them directed, by standing out on alias or pluries habeas corpus, and sometimes more, and by other shifts to avoid their yielding obedience to such writs, contrary to their duty and the known laws of the land, whereby many of the king's subjects have been, and hereafter may be, long detained in prison, in such cases where by law they areailable, to their great charge and vexation:

“great delays have been used by sheriffs, gaolers and other officers, to whose custody any of the king's subjects have been committed, for criminal or supposed criminal matters, in making returns of writs of habeas corpus, to them directed, by standing out on alias or pluries habeas corpus, and sometimes more, and by other shifts to avoid their yielding obedience to such writs, contrary to their duty and the known laws of the land, whereby many of the king's subjects

have been, and hereafter may be, long detained in prison, in such cases where by law they areailable, to their great charge and vexation”

II. For the prevention whereof, and the more speedy relief of all persons imprisoned for any such criminal or supposed criminal matters; (2) Be it enacted, by the king's most excellent majesty, by and with the advice and consent of the lords spiritual and temporal, and commons in this present parliament assembled, and by the authority thereof, That whensoever any person or persons shall bring any habeas corpus directed unto any sheriff or sheriffs, gaoler, minister, or other person whatsoever, for any person in his or their custody, and the said writ shall be served upon the said officer, or left at the gaol or prison with any of the under-officers, under-keepers, or deputy of the said officers or keepers, that the said officer or officers, his or their under-officers, under-keepers or deputies, shall within three days after the service thereof, as aforesaid (unless the commitment aforesaid were for treason or felony plainly and especially expressed in the warrant of commitment), upon payment or tender of the charges of bringing the said prisoner, to be ascertained by the judge or court that awarded the same, and endorsed upon the said writ, not exceeding 12 pence per mile, and upon security given by his own bond to pay the charges of carrying back the prisoner, if he shall be remanded by the court or judge to which he shall be brought, according to the true intent of this present act, and that he will not make any escape by the way, make return of such writ; (3) and bring, or cause to be brought, the body of the party so committed or restrained, unto or before the lord chancellor, or lord keeper of the great seal of England, for the time being, or the judges or barons of the said court, from whence the said writ shall issue, or unto and before such other person or persons before whom the said writ is made returnable, according to the command thereof; (4) and shall then likewise certify the true causes of his detainer or imprisonment, unless the commitment of the said

¹ In Francis Lieber, *On Civil Liberty and Self-Government*, 3rd revised edition, ed. Theodore D. Woolsey (Philadelphia: J.B. Lippincott & Co., 1883). APPENDIX VI.: An act for the better securing the liberty of the subject, and for prevention of imprisonments beyond the seas, commonly called “the habeas corpus act.” <<http://oll.libertyfund.org/title/1943/120098>>.

party be in any place beyond the distance of twenty miles from the place or places where such court or person is, or shall be residing; and if beyond the distance of 20 miles, and not above 100 miles, then within the space of ten days, and if beyond the distance of 100 miles, then within the space of 20 days after such delivery aforesaid, and not longer.

“For the prevention whereof, and the more speedy relief of all persons imprisoned for any such criminal or supposed criminal matters; (2) Be it enacted, by the king's most excellent majesty, by and with the advice and consent of the lords spiritual and temporal, and commons ... That whensoever any person or persons shall bring any habeas corpus directed unto any sheriff or sheriffs, gaoler, (etc.) ... the said writ shall be served upon the said officer ... and bring, or cause to be brought, the body of the party so committed or restrained, unto or before the lord chancellor, or lord keeper of the great seal of England (etc.) ... and shall then likewise certify the true causes of his detainer or imprisonment ...”

III. And to the intent that no sheriff, gaoler or other officer may pretend ignorance of the import of any such writ; (2) Be it enacted by the authority aforesaid, that all such writs shall be marked in this manner: “Per statutum, tricesimo primo Caroli secundi Regis,” and shall be signed by the person that awards the same; (3) and if any person or persons shall be or stand committed or detained as aforesaid, for any

crime, unless for felony or treason, plainly expressed in the warrant of commitment, in the vacation time and out of term it shall and may be lawful to and for the person or persons so committed or detained (other than persons convict or in execution by legal process), or any one in his or their behalf, to appeal or complain to the lord chancellor or lord keeper, or any one of his majesty's justices, either of the one bench or of the other, or the barons of the exchequer of the degree of the coif; (4) and the said lord chancellor, lord keeper, justices or barons, or any of them, upon view of the copy or copies of the warrant or warrants of commitment and detainer, or otherwise upon oath made that such copy or copies were denied to be given by such person or persons in whose custody the prisoner or prisoners is or are detained, are hereby authorized and required, upon request made in writing by such person or persons, or any on his, her, or their behalf, attested and subscribed by two witnesses who were present at the delivery of the same, to award and grant an habeas corpus, under the seal of such court whereof he shall then be one of the judges, (5) to be directed to the officer or officers in whose custody the party so committed or detained shall be, returnable immediate before the said lord chancellor or lord keeper, or such justice, baron, or any other justice or baron of the degree of the coif, of any of the said courts; (6) and upon service thereof as aforesaid, the officer or officers, his or their under-officer or under-officers, under-keeper or under-keepers, or their deputy, in whose custody the party is so committed or detained, shall within the time respectively before limited, bring such prisoner or prisoners before the said lord chancellor, or lord keeper, or such justices, barons, or one of them, before whom the said writ is made returnable, and in case of his absence, before any other of them, with the return of such writ and the true causes of the commitment or detainer; (7) and thereupon, within two days after the party shall be brought before them, the said lord chancellor or lord keeper, or such justice or baron before whom the prisoner shall be brought as aforesaid, shall discharge the said prisoner from his imprisonment, taking his or their recognizance, with one or more surety or sureties, in any sum according to their discretions, having regard to the quality of the prisoner and the nature of the offence, for his or their appearance in the court of king's bench the term following, or at the next assizes, sessions, or general gaol delivery, of or for such county,

city or place where the commitment was, or where the offence was committed, or in such other court where the said offence is properly cognizable, as the case shall require, and then shall certify the said writ with the return thereof, and the said recognizance or recognizances into the said court where such appearance is to be made; (8) unless it shall appear to the said lord chancellor, or lord keeper, or justice or justices, or baron or barons, that the party so committed is detained upon a legal process, order or warrant, out of some court that hath jurisdiction of criminal matters, or by some warrant signed and sealed with the hand and seal of any of the said justices or barons, or some justice or justices of the peace, for such matters or offences for the which by the law the prisoner is not bailable.

IV. Provided always, and be it enacted, That if any person shall have wilfully neglected, by the space of two whole terms after his imprisonment, to pray a habeas corpus for his enlargement, such person so wilfully neglecting shall not have any habeas corpus to be granted in vacation time, in pursuance of this act.

V. And be it further enacted, by the authority aforesaid, That if any officer or officers, his or their under-officer or under-officers, under-keeper or under-keepers, or deputy, shall neglect or refuse to make the returns aforesaid, or to bring the body or bodies of the prisoner or prisoners according to the command of the said writ, within the respective times aforesaid, or upon demand made by the prisoner or person in his behalf, shall refuse to deliver, or within the space of six hours after demand, shall not deliver to the person so demanding, a true copy of the warrant or warrants of commitment and detainer of such prisoner, which he and they are hereby required to deliver accordingly; all and every the head gaolers and keepers of such person, and such other person in whose custody the prisoner shall be detained, shall for the first offence forfeit to the prisoner or party grieved the sum of £100; (2) and for the second offence the sum of £200, and shall and is hereby made incapable to hold or execute his said office; (3) the said penalties to be recovered by the prisoner or party grieved, his executors and administrators, against such offender, his executors or administrators, by any action of debt, suit, bill, plaint or information, in any of the king's courts at Westminster, wherein no essoin, protection, privilege, injunction, wager of law, or stay of prosecution by "Non vult ulterius prosequi," or otherwise, shall be

admitted or allowed, or any more than one imparlance; (4) and any recovery or judgment at the suit of any party grieved, shall be a sufficient conviction for the first offence; and any after recovery or judgment at the suit of a party grieved, for any offence after the first judgment, shall be a sufficient conviction to bring the officers or person within the said penalty for the second offence.

“And be it further enacted, by the authority aforesaid, That if any officer or officers, his or their under-officer or under-officers (etc.) ... shall neglect or refuse to make the returns aforesaid, or to bring the body or bodies of the prisoner or prisoners according to the command of the said writ, within the respective times aforesaid, or upon demand made by the prisoner or person in his behalf, shall refuse to deliver, or within the space of six hours after demand, shall not deliver to the person so demanding, a true copy of the warrant or warrants of commitment and detainer of such prisoner, which he and they are hereby required to deliver accordingly; all and every the head gaolers and keepers of such person, and such other person in whose custody the prisoner shall be detained, shall for the first offence forfeit to the prisoner or party grieved the sum of £100”

VI. And for the prevention of unjust vexation by reiterated commitments for the same offence; (2) Be it enacted, by the authority aforesaid, That no person or persons, which shall be delivered or set at large upon any habeas corpus, shall at any time hereafter be again imprisoned or committed for the same offence, by any person or persons whatsoever, other than by the legal order and process of such court wherein he or they shall be bound by recognizance to appear, or other court having jurisdiction of the cause; (3) and if any other person or persons shall knowingly, contrary to this act, recommit or imprison, or knowingly procure or cause to be recommitted or imprisoned, for the same offence or pretended offence, any person or persons delivered or set at large as aforesaid, or be knowingly aiding or assisting therein, then he or they shall forfeit to the prisoner or party grieved, the sum of £500; any colorable pretence or variation in the warrant or warrants of commitment notwithstanding, to be recovered as aforesaid.

VII. Provided always, and be it further enacted, That if any person or persons shall be committed for high treason or felony, plainly and specially expressed in the warrant of commitment, upon his prayer or petition in open court, the first week of the term, or first day of the sessions of oyer and terminer or general gaol delivery, to be brought to his trial, shall not be indicted some time in the next term, sessions of oyer and terminer or general gaol delivery, after such commitment; it shall and may be lawful to and for the judges of the court of king's bench, and justices of oyer and terminer or general gaol delivery, and they are hereby required, upon motion to them made in open court the last day of the term, sessions or gaol delivery, either by the prisoner or any one in his behalf, to set at liberty the prisoner upon bail, unless it appear to the judges and justices, upon oath made, that the witnesses for the king could not be produced the same term, sessions or general gaol delivery; (2) and if any person or persons committed as aforesaid, upon his prayer or petition in open court the first week of the term or the first day of the sessions of oyer and terminer and general gaol delivery, to be brought to his trial, shall not be indicted and tried the second term, sessions of oyer and terminer or general gaol delivery, after his commitment, or upon his trial shall be acquitted, he shall be discharged from his imprisonment.

VIII. Provided always, That nothing in this act shall extend to discharge out of prison any person

charged in debt, or other action, or with process in any civil cause, but that after he shall be discharged of his imprisonment for such his criminal offence, he shall be kept in custody according to the law for such other suit.

IX. Provided always, and be it further enacted by the authority aforesaid, That if any person or persons, subjects of this realm, shall be committed to any prison, or in custody of any officer or officers whatsoever, for any criminal or supposed criminal matter, that the said person shall not be removed from the said prison and custody, into the custody of any other officer or officers; (2) unless it be by habeas corpus or some other legal writ; or where the prisoner is delivered to the constable or other inferior officer, to carry such prisoner to some common gaol; (3) or where any person is sent by order of any judge of assize, or justice of the peace, to any common workhouse or house of correction; (4) or where the prisoner is removed from one place or prison to another within the same county, in order to his or her trial or discharge in due course of law; (5) or in case of sudden fire or infection, or other necessity; (6) and if any person or persons shall, after such commitment aforesaid, make out and sign or countersign any warrant or warrants for such removal aforesaid, contrary to this act; as well he that makes or signs or countersigns such warrant or warrants, as the officer or officers that obey or execute the same, shall suffer and incur the pains and forfeitures in this act before mentioned, both for the first and second offence respectively, to be recovered in manner aforesaid by the party grieved.

X. Provided also, and be it further enacted by the authority aforesaid, That it shall and may be lawful to and for any prisoner and prisoners as aforesaid, to move and obtain his or their habeas corpus, as well out of the high court of chancery or court of exchequer as out of the courts of king's bench or common pleas, or either of them; (2) and if the said lord chancellor or lord keeper, or any judge or judges, baron or barons, for the time being, of the degree of the coif, of any of the courts aforesaid, in the vacation time, upon view of the copy or copies of the warrant or warrants of commitment or detainer, upon oath made that such copy or copies were denied as aforesaid, shall deny any writ of habeas corpus, by this act required to be granted, being moved for as aforesaid, they shall severally forfeit to the prisoner or party grieved, the sum of £500, to be recovered in manner aforesaid.

XI. And be it declared and enacted by the authority aforesaid, That an habeas corpus, according to the true intent and meaning of this act, may be directed and run into any county Palatine, the Cinque Ports, or other privileged places within the kingdom of England, dominion of Wales, or town of Berwick upon Tweed, and the islands of Jersey or Guernsey; any law or usage to the contrary notwithstanding.

XII. And for preventing illegal imprisonments in prisons beyond the seas; (2) Be it further enacted by the authority aforesaid, That no subject of this realm, that now is or hereafter shall be an inhabitant or resiant of this kingdom of England, dominion of Wales, or town of Berwick upon Tweed, shall or may be sent prisoner into Scotland, Ireland, Jersey, Guernsey, Tangier, or into parts, garrisons, islands, or places, beyond the seas, which are or at any time hereafter shall be within or without the dominions of his majesty, his heirs or successors; (3) and that every such imprisonment is hereby enacted and adjudged to be illegal; (4) and that if any of the said subjects now is or hereafter shall be so imprisoned, every such person and persons so imprisoned, shall and may for every such imprisonment maintain, by virtue of this act, an action or actions of false imprisonment, in any of his majesty's courts of record, against the person or persons by whom he or she shall be so committed, detained, imprisoned, sent prisoner or transported, contrary to the true meaning of this act, and against all or any person or persons that shall frame, contrive, write, seal or countersign any warrant or writing for such commitment, detainer, imprisonment, or transportation, or shall be advising, aiding, or assisting in the same, or any of them; (5) and the plaintiff in every such action shall have judgment to recover his treble costs, besides damages, which damages so to be given shall not be less than £500; (6) in which action no delay, stay or stop of proceeding by rule, order or command, nor no injunction, protection or privilege whatsoever, nor any other than one imparlance, shall be allowed, excepting such rule of the court wherein such action shall depend, made in open court, as shall be thought in justice necessary for special cause to be expressed in said rule; (7) and the person or persons who shall knowingly frame, contrive, write, seal or countersign any warrant for such commitment, detainer, or transportation, or shall so commit, detain, imprison, or transport any person or persons, contrary to this act, or be any ways advising, aiding or assisting

therein, being lawfully convicted thereof, shall be disabled from thenceforth to bear any office of trust or profit within the said realm of England, dominion of Wales, or town of Berwick upon Tweed, or any of the islands, territories or dominions thereunto belonging; (8) and shall incur and sustain the pains, penalties and forfeitures limited, ordained and provided in and by the statute of provision and præmunire, made in the sixteenth year of king Richard the Second; (9) and be incapable of any pardon from the king, his heirs or successors, of the said forfeitures, losses or disabilities, or any of them.

“And for preventing illegal imprisonments in prisons beyond the seas; (2) Be it further enacted by the authority aforesaid, That no subject of this realm ... shall or may be sent prisoner into Scotland, Ireland, Jersey, Guernsey, Tangier, or into parts, garrisons, islands, or places, beyond the seas ... and that every such imprisonment is hereby enacted and adjudged to be illegal; (4) and that if any of the said subjects now is or hereafter shall be so imprisoned, every such person and persons so imprisoned, shall and may for every such imprisonment maintain, by virtue of this act, an action or actions of false imprisonment ... and the plaintiff in every such action shall have judgment to recover his treble costs, besides damages, which damages so to be given shall not be less than £500”

XIII. Provided always, That nothing in this act shall extend to give benefit to any person who shall by contract in writing agree with any merchant or owner of any plantation, or other person whatsoever, to be transported to any parts beyond the seas, and receive earnest upon such agreement, although that afterwards such person shall renounce such contract.

XIV. Provided always, and be it enacted, That if any person or persons lawfully convicted of any felony, shall in open court pray to be transported beyond the seas, and the court shall think fit to leave him or them in prison for that purpose, such person or persons may be transported into any parts beyond the seas; this act, or anything herein contained, to the contrary notwithstanding

XV. Provided also, and be it enacted, That nothing herein contained shall be deemed, construed or taken to extend to the imprisonment of any person before the first day of June, one thousand six hundred and seventy-nine, or to anything advised, procured or otherwise done relating to such imprisonment; anything herein contained to the contrary notwithstanding

XVI. Provided also, That if any person or persons at any time residing in this realm, shall have committed any capital offence in Scotland or in Ireland, or in any of the islands or foreign plantations of the king, his heirs or successors, where he or she ought to be tried for such offence, such person or persons may be sent to such place, there to receive such trial in such manner as the same might have been used before the making of this act; anything herein contained to the contrary notwithstanding

XVII. Provided also, and be it enacted, That no person or persons shall be sued, impleaded, molested or troubled for any offence against this act, unless the party offending be sued or impleaded for the same within two years at the most, after such time wherein the offence shall be committed, in case the party grieved shall not be then in prison; and if he shall be in prison, then within the space of two years after the decease of the person imprisoned, or his or her delivery out of prison, which shall first happen.

XVIII. And to the intent no person may avoid his trial at the assizes or general gaol delivery, by procuring his removal before the assizes, at such time as he cannot be brought back to receive his trial there; (2) Be it enacted, that after the assizes proclaimed for that county where the prisoner is detained, no person shall

be removed from the common gaol upon any habeas corpus granted in pursuance of this act, but upon any such habeas corpus shall be brought before the judge of assize in open court, who is thereupon to do what to justice shall appertain.

XIX. Provided nevertheless, That after the assizes are ended, any person or persons detained may have his or her habeas corpus according to the direction and intention of this act.

XX. And be it also enacted by the authority aforesaid, That if any information, suit or action shall be brought or exhibited against any person or persons for any offence committed or to be committed against the form of this law, it shall be lawful for such defendants to plead the general issue, that they are not guilty or that they owe nothing, and to give such special matter in evidence to the jury that shall try the same, which matter being pleaded had been good and sufficient matter in law to have discharged the said defendant or defendants against the said information, suit or action, and the same matter shall be then as available to him or them, to all intents and purposes, as if he or they had sufficiently pleaded, set forth or alleged the same matter in bar, or discharge of such information, suit or action.

XXI. And because many times persons charged with petty treason or felony, or accessories thereunto, are committed upon suspicion only, whereupon they are bailable or not, according as the circumstances making out that suspicion are more or less weighty, which are best known to the justices of the peace that committed the persons, and have the examination before them, or to other justices of the peace in the county; (2) Be it therefore enacted, That where any person shall appear to be committed by any judge or justice of the peace, and charged as accessory before the fact to any petty treason or felony, or upon suspicion thereof, or with suspicion of petty treason or felony, which petty treason or felony shall be plainly and specially expressed in the warrant of commitment, that such person shall not be removed or bailed by virtue of this act, or in any other manner than they might have been before the making of this act.

Notes

[1.] Copied from the Statute at Large, by Danby Pickering, Esq., edit. 1763, vol. 8, p. 432.

Further Information

SOURCE

The edition used for this extract: in Francis Lieber, *On Civil Liberty and Self-Government*, 3rd revised edition, ed. Theodore D. Woolsey (Philadelphia: J.B. Lippincott & Co., 1883). APPENDIX VI.: An act for the better securing the liberty of the subject, and for prevention of imprisonments beyond the seas, commonly called “the habeas corpus act.” <<http://oll.libertyfund.org/title/1943/120098>>.

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FURTHER READING

Collection: Laws, Charters, Constitutions, Bills of Right <oll.libertyfund.org/collection/103>.

See also 'Charles II, 1679: An Act for the better securing the Liberty of the Subject and for Prevention of Imprisonments beyond the Seas.', *Statutes of the Realm: volume 5: 1628-80 (1819)*, pp. 935-938. "British History Online" <<http://www.british-history.ac.uk/report.aspx?compid=47484>>.

See also the letter from Thomas Jefferson to James Madison, 31 July 1788 concerning it. <<http://oll.libertyfund.org/title/802/86707>>.

“The distinctive principle of Western social philosophy is individualism. It aims at the creation of a sphere in which the individual is free to think, to choose, and to act without being restrained by the interference of the social apparatus of coercion and oppression, the State.”
[Ludwig von Mises, “Liberty and Property” (1958)]



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Another useful sampling of the contents of the OLL website is the collection of weekly *Quotations about Liberty and Power* which are organized by themes such as Free Trade, Money and Banking, Natural Rights, and so on. See for example, Richard Cobden's “I have a dream” speech <oll.libertyfund.org/quote/326>.

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