

Acton Quotes from ‘Lord Acton, Liberty, Conscience, and the Social Order’
Talk by Dan Hugger delivered at 2025 Acton University

“Now liberty and good government do not exclude each other; and there are excellent reasons why they should go together. Liberty is not a means to a higher political end. It is itself the highest political end. It is not for the sake of a good public administration that it is required, but for security in the pursuit of the highest objects of civil society, and of private life.”

Acton, John D. "The History of Freedom in Antiquity." In *Lord Acton: Historical and Moral Essays*, edited by Daniel J. Hugger, 21. Grand Rapids, MI: Acton Institute, 2017.

“The history of institutions is often a history of deception and illusions; for their virtue depends on the ideas that produce and on the spirit that preserves them, and the form may remain unaltered when the substance has passed away.”

Acton, John D. "The History of Freedom in Antiquity." In *Lord Acton: Historical and Moral Essays*, edited by Daniel J. Hugger, 2. Grand Rapids, MI: Acton Institute, 2017.

“No obstacle has been so constant, or so difficult to overcome, as uncertainty and confusion touching the nature of true liberty.”

Acton, John D. "The History of Freedom in Antiquity." In *Lord Acton: Historical and Moral Essays*, edited by Daniel J. Hugger, 2. Grand Rapids, MI: Acton Institute, 2017.

“By liberty I mean the assurance that every man shall be protected in doing what he believes his duty, against the influence of authority and majorities, customs and opinion.”

Acton, John D. "The History of Freedom in Antiquity." In *Lord Acton: Historical and Moral Essays*, edited by Daniel J. Hugger, 3. Grand Rapids, MI: Acton Institute, 2017.

“The Stoics could only advise the wise man to hold aloof from politics, keeping the unwritten law in his heart. But when Christ said: “Render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar’s, and unto God the things that are God’s,” those words, spoken on His last visit to the Temple, three days before His death, gave to the civil power, under the protection of conscience, a sacredness it had never enjoyed, and bounds it had never acknowledged; and they were the repudiation of absolutism and the inauguration of freedom.”

Acton, John D. "The History of Freedom in Antiquity." In *Lord Acton: Historical and Moral Essays*, edited by Daniel J. Hugger, 27. Grand Rapids, MI: Acton Institute, 2017.

“There is a wide divergence, an irreconcilable disagreement, between the political notions of the modern world and that which is essentially the system of the Catholic Church. It manifests itself particularly in their contradictory views of liberty, and of the functions of the civil power. The Catholic notion, defining liberty not as the power of doing what we like, but the right of being able to do what we ought, denies that general interests can supersede individual rights. It condemns, therefore, the theory of the ancient as well as of the modern state.”

Acton, John D. "The Roman Question." *The Rambler* II, no. V (January 1860): 146.

“Our conscience exists and acts for ourselves. It exists in each of us. It is limited by the conscience of others. It is enough for oneself, not for another. It respects the conscience of others, Therefore it tends to restrict authority and enlarge liberty. It is the law of self government.”

Acton, John D. "Add. Mss. 4901, p. 254." In *Selected Writings of Lord Acton Volume III: Essays in Religion, Politics, and Morality*, edited by J. Rufus Fears, 504. Indianapolis, IN: Liberty Fund, 1988.

“The more conscience comes to the front, the more we consider not what the state accomplishes, but what it allows to be accomplished. Not the action of the state – its powers of action, and its use of them, but the limitation and division of those powers. The Society that is beyond the state – the individual souls that are above it.”

Acton, John D. "Add. Mss. 5011, p. 235." In *Selected Writings of Lord Acton Volume III: Essays in Religion, Politics, and Morality*, edited by J. Rufus Fears, 504. Indianapolis, IN: Liberty Fund, 1988.

“Conscience: Do I decide or the community? If I, there is not authority. If they, there is no liberty. Some mediator wanted. That is the Church. Sustains alike liberty and authority.”

Acton, John D. "Add. Mss. 5626, n.n." In *Selected Writings of Lord Acton Volume III: Essays in Religion, Politics, and Morality*, edited by J. Rufus Fears, 505. Indianapolis, IN: Liberty Fund, 1988.

“The line of march will prove, on the whole, to have been from force and cruelty to consent and association, to humanity, rational persuasion, and the persistent appeal to common, simple, and evident maxims.”

Acton, John D. "Beginning of the Modern State." In *Lord Acton: Historical and Moral Essays*, edited by Daniel J. Hugger, 197. Grand Rapids, MI: Acton Institute, 2017.

“Liberty, next to religion, has been the motive of good deeds and the common pretext of crime, from the sowing of the seed at Athens, two thousand four hundred and sixty years ago, until the ripened harvest was gathered by men of our race. It is the delicate fruit of a mature civilisation; and scarcely a century has passed since nations, that knew the meaning of the term, resolved to be free.”

Acton, John D. "The History of Freedom in Antiquity." In *Lord Acton: Historical and Moral Essays*, edited by Daniel J. Hugger, 1. Grand Rapids, MI: Acton Institute, 2017.

“[T]he greater part of the political ideas of Milton, Locke, and Rousseau, may be found in the ponderous Latin of Jesuits who were subjects of the Spanish Crown, of Lessius, Molina, Mariana, and Suarez.”

Acton, John D. "Sir Erskine May's *Democracy in Europe*." In *Lord Acton: Historical and Moral Essays*, edited by Daniel J. Hugger, 78-79. Grand Rapids, MI: Acton Institute, 2017.

“There is... no ground for the pretense that in order to maintain equilibrium between production and demand, we must employ the foresight of an army of administrators and surveyors, whose duty it should be to prescribe what every producer should provide, and consequently how much each consumer should enjoy. Inhabitants of our metropolis see every morning an ample but not excessive provision made for 3 million inhabitants, and this without any previous direction or settled plan; the utmost order and regularity result from the natural economic law of supply and demand...”

Acton, John D. "Review of G. de Molinari, *Cours d'économie politique*, in the *Home and Foreign Review* 4 (January 1864): 314." In *Selected Writings of Lord Acton Volume III: Essays in Religion, Politics, and Morality*, edited by J. Rufus Fears, 579-580. Indianapolis, IN: Liberty Fund, 1988.

“Religion and political economy rule the world. That is, what men think best for them in this world and in the next.”

Acton, John D. "Add. Mss. 4870, p. 20." In *Selected Writings of Lord Acton Volume III: Essays in Religion, Politics, and Morality*, edited by J. Rufus Fears, 581. Indianapolis, IN: Liberty Fund, 1988.

“Families multiply and their possessions must increase. That is the great law of hunger. The principle of prosperity. Undercurrent of modern history especially. Increasing demand for wealth.”

Acton, John D. "Add. Mss. 4960, p. 13." In *Selected Writings of Lord Acton Volume III: Essays in Religion, Politics, and Morality*, edited by J. Rufus Fears, 574. Indianapolis, IN: Liberty Fund, 1988.

“This is the general character of the contest between the existing order and the subversive theories that deny its legitimacy. There are three principal theories of this kind, impugning the present distribution of power, of property, and of territory, and attacking respectively the aristocracy, the middle class, and the sovereignty. They are the theories of equality, communism, and nationality. Though sprung from a common origin, opposing cognate evils, and connected by many links, they did not appear simultaneously. Rousseau proclaimed the first, Baboeuf the second, Mazzini the third; and the third is the most recent in its appearance, the most attractive at the present time, and the richest in promise of future power.”

Acton, John D. "Nationality." In *Lord Acton: Historical and Moral Essays*, edited by Daniel J. Hugger, 100. Grand Rapids, MI: Acton Institute, 2017.

“This century has seen the growth of the worst enemy freedom has ever had to encounter: Socialism. Strong, because it solves a problem political economy has, until now, failed to solve: How to provide that the increase of wealth shall not be at the expense of its distribution. Truth, that what the speechless masses of poor need is not political privilege which they cannot enjoy, but comfort—without which political influence is a mockery or a snare. It has made the common movement of politics contemptible. [It] can only be realized by a tremendous despotism.”

Acton, John D. "Add. Mss. 5487, p. 47." In *Selected Writings of Lord Acton Volume III: Essays in Religion, Politics, and Morality*, edited by J. Rufus Fears, 561. Indianapolis, IN: Liberty Fund, 1988.

“[T]he domain of political economy seems destined to admit the rigorous certainty of science. Whenever that shall be attained, when the battle between Economists and Socialists is ended, the evil force which Socialism imparts to democracy will be spent.”

Acton, John D. "Sir Erskine May's *Democracy in Europe*." In *Lord Acton: Historical and Moral Essays*, edited by Daniel J. Hugger, 93. Grand Rapids, MI: Acton Institute, 2017.

“In the old European system, the rights of nationalities were neither recognised by governments nor asserted by the people. The interest of the reigning families, not those of the nations, regulated the frontiers; and the administration was conducted generally without any reference to popular desires.”

Acton, John D. "Nationality." In *Lord Acton: Historical and Moral Essays*, edited by Daniel J. Hugger, 100. Grand Rapids, MI: Acton Institute, 2017.

“Napoleon called a new power into existence by attacking nationality in Russia, by delivering it in Italy, by governing in defiance of it in Germany and Spain. The sovereigns of these countries were deposed or degraded; and a system of administration was introduced which was French in its origin, its spirit, and its instruments. The people resisted the change. The movement against it was popular and spontaneous, because the rulers were absent or helpless; and it was national, because it was directed against foreign institutions.”

Acton, John D. "Nationality." In *Lord Acton: Historical and Moral Essays*, edited by Daniel J. Hugger, 107-108. Grand Rapids, MI: Acton Institute, 2017.

“Beginning by a protest against the dominion of race over race, its mildest and least-developed form, it grew into a condemnation of every State that included different races, and finally became the complete and consistent theory, that the State and the nation must be co-extensive.”

Acton, John D. "Nationality." In *Lord Acton: Historical and Moral Essays*, edited by Daniel J. Hugger, 112. Grand Rapids, MI: Acton Institute, 2017.

“Christianity rejoices at the mixture of races, as paganism identifies itself with their differences, because truth is universal, and errors various and particular.”

Acton, John D. "Nationality." In *Lord Acton: Historical and Moral Essays*, edited by Daniel J. Hugger, 117. Grand Rapids, MI: Acton Institute, 2017.

“The difference between nationality and the State is exhibited in the nature of patriotic attachment. Our connection with the race is merely natural or physical, whilst our duties to the political nation are ethical. One is a community of affections and instincts infinitely important and powerful in savage life, but pertaining more to the animal than to the civilised man; the other is an authority governing by laws, imposing obligations, and giving a moral sanction and character to the natural relations of society. Patriotism is in political life what faith is in religion, and it stands to the domestic feelings and to home-sickness as faith to fanaticism and to superstition.”

Acton, John D. "Nationality." In *Lord Acton: Historical and Moral Essays*, edited by Daniel J. Hugger, 118. Grand Rapids, MI: Acton Institute, 2017.

“The greatest adversary of the rights of nationality is the modern theory of nationality. By making the State and the nation commensurate with each other in theory, it reduces practically to a subject condition all other nationalities that may be within the boundary. It cannot admit them to an equality with the ruling nation which constitutes the State, because the State would then cease to be national, which would be a contradiction of the principle of its existence. According, therefore, to the degree of humanity and civilisation in that dominant body which claims all the rights of the community, the inferior races are exterminated, or reduced to servitude, or outlawed, or put in a condition of dependence.”

Acton, John D. "Nationality." In *Lord Acton: Historical and Moral Essays*, edited by Daniel J. Hugger, 123. Grand Rapids, MI: Acton Institute, 2017.

“The nation is here an ideal unit founded on the race, in defiance of the modifying action of external causes, of tradition, and of existing rights. It overrules the rights and wishes of the inhabitants, absorbing their divergent interests in a fictitious unity; sacrifices their several inclinations and duties to the higher claim of nationality, and crushes all natural rights and all established liberties for the purpose of vindicating itself. Whenever a single definite object is made the supreme end of the State, be it the advantage of a class, the safety or the power of the country, the greatest happiness of the greatest number, or the support of any speculative idea, the State becomes for the time inevitably absolute. Liberty alone demands for its realisation the limitation of the public authority, for liberty is the only object which benefits all alike, and provokes no sincere opposition.”

Acton, John D. "Nationality." In *Lord Acton: Historical and Moral Essays*, edited by Daniel J. Hugger, 114-115. Grand Rapids, MI: Acton Institute, 2017.