The right to resist tyrants is one of the great resolved issues in political philosophy. For half a millennium after Aquinas this was as contentious a matter as the right to abortion is now in the United States. Yet the issue evaporated after the eighteenth century. The accountability of governments to the people and, in the extreme, a popular right of rebellion are political truisms across the world today. The Whiggish view that this marks the progress of liberty and the recession of hidebound conservatism mistakes evaluation for explanation. Besides which, it is dubious whether a secular decline in conservatism is a conspicuous feature of modernity. Resistance ceased to be contentious not because the world awakened to the correct view but because the issues in question themselves changed.¹

A key development, which has been paid more attention in historical sociology than in histories of political thought, lies in shifting norms about the use of violence in domestic politics. Inhabitants of long-pacified ‘modern’ societies assume that domestic political conflict will not commonly take a violent turn and sharply distinguish the extraordinary right of rebellion from ordinary politics. By contrast, both sides in medieval debates over the right of resistance took for granted that the principles of conditional authority and accountable government implied and legitimized violent conflict. This is evident, for example, in the defense of resistance offered by the conciliarist Jean Gerson (1363–1429). Writing at the time of the Great Schism in the Church, Gerson maintained “it is a mistake to claim that kings are free from any obligations towards their subjects”; “if they act unjustly towards their subjects, and if they continue in their evil behavior, then it is time to apply that law of nature which prescribes that we may repel force

¹ For the argument that doctrines must be understood in the context of the questions they are meant to answer, see R. G. Collingwood, An Autobiography (London: Oxford University Press, paperback ed., 1970).
with force.”\(^2\) The same assumption that accountability implied political violence underpinned the classic case for nonresistance, which was grounded on the Pauline statement in Romans XIII: “the power that is everywhere is ordained of God.” Hence “the fact that the rulers are wicked and unjust does not excuse disorder and rebellion”; “outrage is not to be resisted, but endured.”\(^3\) In the absence of peaceful, electoral mechanisms for holding rulers to account, it was realistic to suppose that the only available responses to governmental malfeasance were forcible resistance or passive endurance.

With the benefit of hindsight, it is apparent that the resistance question conflated two, now largely separate, issues: the constitutional relationship between ruler and ruled; and ‘private warfare,’ meaning the use of force without sovereign authority. The latter was a ubiquitous feature of medieval society, encompassing all manner of the use of force by private individuals from vigilante justice to dueling to political violence.\(^4\) The constitutional question of rulers’ accountability would cease to be an issue only with the achievement, in practice and in theory, of a ban on private warfare, and particularly political violence, in all but extraordinary circumstances. Only in the context of a pacified society does the principle of governmental accountability lose its fearsome aspect and become an unremarkable, uncontentious feature of normal politics.

Working out the idea of a pacified society was a principal problem of seventeenth-century social contract theory. My purpose here is to show, more specifically, that this was a shared preoccupation of Hobbesian and Lockean contract theories. Despite their opposing stands on resistance, Hobbes and Locke were in this significant respect engaged in a common intellectual project. Furthermore, theirs was a


\(^3\) The first and third quotations are from Martin Luther, “Secular Authority: To What Extent It Should Be Obeyed” (1523), in Martin Luther: *Selections from His Writings*, ed. J. Dillenberger (Garden City, NY: Doubleday/Anchor, 1961), 366, 388. The second is from Luther, “Admonition to Peace” (1524), quoted in Skinner, *Foundations*, vol. II, 19.