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Q2(b)

"Equality of estates caused equality of power, and equality of power is liberty." Comment

UPSC Civil Services Mains 2022 · PSIR GS 1 · 15 marks · Political Theory

Political Theory: meaning and approaches.

Core demand of the question

- "Equality of estates caused equality of power, and equality of power is liberty." Comment. (15 marks)

Revision summary

Harrington held that the balance of land is the balance of power, and that civic liberty needs an agrarian check on estates.

The claim is republican non-domination, not a night-watchman market.

Locke and **Nozick** defend property against patterned equality; **Rousseau** and **Marx** deepen the inequality-power link.

Indian land reform and the 44th Amendment moved in Harrington's direction.

- **Land is no longer the only estate of power:** capital, caste, and office also dominate.

Introduction

The line is **James Harrington's** in *The Commonwealth of Oceana* (1656). It states a civic-republican law: the **balance of property** sets the balance of power, and only a relatively equal agrarian order can be a free commonwealth.

Body

Harrington's claim

- In *Oceana*, empire follows the balance of land. If one man or a few hold the soil, monarchy or aristocracy follows. If the people hold it, a commonwealth follows.
- An agrarian law must keep estates from reconcentrating. Equality of estates is not identical incomes. It is a floor against oligarchy of land.
- Equality of power then means that no private fortune can buy the sword or the senate.
- Liberty is non-domination in a free state, closer to **Machiavelli's** republican liberty than to a market right to accumulate without limit.

Conversation with other theorists

- **Locke** protected property as a natural right of labour mixed with things. Harrington treats property as a political constitution that must be legally capped.
- **Rousseau** feared inequality of fortune as the death of the general will. The maxim agrees with that fear.

- **Marx** radicalised the point: class power sits in ownership of means of production, not only in landed estates.
- **Hayek** and **Robert Nozick** reverse the maxim. They treat patterned equality of holdings as itself a threat to liberty.
- **John Rawls** permits inequality only if it helps the least advantaged, which is a justice constraint on estates, not Harrington's agrarian cap.

Indian bearing

- Zamindari abolition, land-reform ceilings, and the 44th Amendment's removal of property from fundamental rights were Harringtonian in spirit: estates as power.
- The limit is that contemporary power also sits in capital, media, caste, and office, which **Dahl** and **Lukes** map beyond land.
- **Ambedkar** added that equality of land without annihilation of caste still leaves social domination.
- So the maxim is true as a warning against oligarchy. It is incomplete as a full theory of liberty in a capitalist and caste society.

Flow diagram

Equality of estates -> Equality of power
Equality of power -> Liberty as non-domination
Harrington Oceana -> Equality of estates
Oligarchy of land -> Unfreedom

Conclusion

Harrington's sentence binds liberty to a non-oligarchic property map. **Locke** and **Nozick** refuse the cap; **Rousseau**, **Marx**, and Indian land reform partly accept it. Equality of estates is a republican condition of liberty, not the whole of it.

Facts & figures

Oceana, 1656

Harrington's utopian commonwealth; the agrarian law is the central device.

Balance of property

Harrington's rule that political form follows who owns the land.

44th Amendment, 1978

Took the right to property out of Part III; **Article 300A** remains a legal right.

Nozick

Entitlement theory rejects patterned redistribution of holdings as a liberty violation.