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Q4(a)

The foundational base of western democracy has been shaped by Locke's ideas of constitutionalism, freedom and property. Elucidate

UPSC Civil Services Mains 2025 · PSIR GS 1 · 20 marks · Indian Nationalism

Indian Nationalism: Political Strategies of India's Freedom Struggle; Perspectives on Indian National Movement; Gandhi, Tagore, Nehru, Ambedkar, and the socialists.

Core demand of the question

- **State Locke's constitutionalism:** limited government, consent, law, and the right of revolution
- Link freedom as natural right and as civil liberty under known law
- Link property as labour, consent to money, and a limit on arbitrary taxation
- Show how these ideas shaped Western democracy, especially the Atlantic revolutions and later liberal constitutions

Revision summary

Locke's constitutionalism treats government as a trust created by consent to protect life, liberty, and estate under standing law.

Freedom is independence from arbitrary will, including a right of revolution when the trust is broken.

Property arises from labour and is a principal end of political society; taxation without consent violates the trust.

These ideas shaped 1688, the American founding, and liberal bills of rights, even as Macpherson and **Marx** criticised their proprietary core.

Later Western democracy widened the person who holds those rights without dropping the Lockean grammar of limited government.

Introduction

John Locke's Two Treatises of Government gave Western democracy its most durable grammar: persons are free and equal by nature; government is a trust; property and conscience are not the prince's gift. Constitutionalism, freedom, and property are not three ornaments on a liberal tree. They are one argument, and modern representative democracy grew from that argument even where it later outgrew **Locke's** exclusions.

Body

Constitutionalism

Against **Sir Robert Filmer's** patriarchal kingship, **Locke** located political power in consent. In the state of nature people have natural law, but they lack an impartial judge. They therefore form a political society and set up a legislature as supreme in the ordinary sense, yet bound by

the ends of the trust: preservation of life, liberty, and estate. Government is limited. It must rule by promulgated standing laws, not by extemporary decree. Separation of legislative and executive power follows, because the same hands should not make the law and hold the sword without check.

If the trust is betrayed - if power becomes arbitrary, or if the legislature is destroyed - the people may resume their original right. This right of revolution is the sharp edge of constitutionalism. **Jefferson** wrote it into 1776. English Whigs had already used 1688 as the practical lesson. Constitutional democracy is this idea institutionalised: periodic consent, higher law, and removable rulers.

Freedom

Lockean freedom is not the licence of **Hobbes**'s right to everything. It is freedom from another's arbitrary will, under a law that one has a part in authorising. Religious toleration, argued in the Letter Concerning Toleration, extends the same logic to conscience, even if **Locke** notoriously excluded atheists and was harsh toward Catholics in his context. Civil liberty is law that applies equally, not the absence of all constraint. **Montesquieu** and later American founders took this as the meaning of a free government.

Property and Western democracy

Property begins in the person. Labour mixed with unowned nature creates a claim, limited by spoilage and by leaving enough and as good for others. Money, by consent, allows accumulation beyond spoilage. Government exists largely to secure this property, and taxation without representation is a breach of the trust. That clause armed the American cry against Britain. It also armed a proprietary franchise in early Western democracies: those with estate were those with a stake.

C. B. Macpherson called **Locke** a possessive individualist; **Marx** saw bourgeois right. **Both critiques bite: women were not full contractors, and colonial appropriation shadows the chapter on land. Western democracy still took the architecture - rights prior to the state, limited government, consent of the taxed - and slowly widened the person.** **Rawls** remains in that family. The base is Lockean even where the social state is not.

Flow diagram

Natural rights -> Consent and trust
Consent and trust -> Limited constitutional government
Consent and trust -> Freedom under law
Consent and trust -> Property and no arbitrary tax
Limited constitutional government -> Western representative democracy

Conclusion

Locke joined constitutionalism, freedom under law, and property as a trust that rulers may not devour. Western democracy - 1688, 1776, 1789 in its liberal strain, and later bills of rights - speaks that language. The task of later democracy has been to keep the grammar while widening who counts as a free proprietor of his or her person.

Facts & figures

Two Treatises

Locke's 1689 work (dated 1690) rejects Filmer and sets consent, law, and trust as the basis of legitimate government.

Taxation and consent

The legislature may not take property without the people's consent, a clause that structured Atlantic opposition to arbitrary revenue.

1776

Jefferson's Declaration restates Lockean natural rights and the right to alter government that becomes destructive of those ends.

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