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Q2(a)

What is the Marxist and liberal approach towards the state? On what grounds the theoretical differences between them are premised? Explain

UPSC Civil Services Mains 2025 · PSIR GS 1 · 20 marks · Theories of the State

Theories of the State: Liberal, Neo-liberal, Marxist, Pluralist, Post-colonial and feminist.

Core demand of the question

- **State the liberal approach to the state:** limited power, rights, law, and often a market society
- **State the Marxist approach:** the state as class power, with later nuances from **Lenin** and **Gramsci**
- **Show the theoretical grounds of difference:** human nature, property, history, and emancipation
- Do not collapse either side into a cartoon

Revision summary

The liberal approach treats the state as limited public power justified by consent to protect rights, with law and separated offices as its form.

Locke, Montesquieu, Mill, **Rawls**, and even Hayek share that the individual has claims the state must not devour.

The Marxist approach treats the modern state as organised class power, from the Manifesto through **Lenin's** smash-and-wither thesis.

Gramsci and Poulantzas add hegemony and relative autonomy without dropping the class explanation.

The theoretical difference rests on anthropology, property, history, and the meaning of emancipation, not only on liking or disliking a particular government.

Introduction

Liberal and Marxist theories of the state begin from different pictures of the person, of property, and of history. Liberals ask how political power can be limited so that rights and a civil society may live. Marxists ask whose class power the state organises, and how that organisation can be overcome. The difference is theoretical before it is a quarrel about this or that statute.

Body

The liberal state

Classical liberalism, in **Locke**, treats the state as a trust arising from consent to protect life, liberty, and property. Law is the public measure of that trust. **Montesquieu** adds separation of powers. **Kant** adds a republican constitution and publicity. **John Stuart Mill** adds

representative government and a harm principle. Twentieth-century liberals from **Berlin** to **Rawls** and **Dworkin** keep the state as a framework of equal basic liberties, with disagreement over how far it may redistribute.

Even **Hayek** and **Nozick** still need a state for rules. The premise is that individuals have moral claims prior to politics, that power is dangerous, and that a constitutional state civilises that danger. Civil society is not a shadow of the state.

The Marxist state

Marx and **Engels** treat the modern state as a committee of the bourgeoisie, though The Eighteenth Brumaire allows relative independence of the machine. **Lenin** in The State and Revolution says the state is organised class violence: it must be smashed and replaced by a transitional dictatorship that is to wither.

Antonio Gramsci adds hegemony: in the West the state sits among trenches of civil society. **Poulantzas** later called the state a relatively autonomous condensation of class relations. The core remains: explain the state from production and class, not from a contract of equal proprietors.

Grounds of the difference

Liberalism starts from the rights-bearing individual; Marxism from social relations. For **Locke**, property limits the state; for **Marx**, the state secures bourgeois property that emancipation must transform. Liberals seek a constitutional settlement; Marxists read the state as a historical form. Liberals want freedom under law; Marxists want an end to class rule. **Habermas** occupies a middle, but the premises stay distinct.

Flow diagram

Liberal state -> Rights consent law
Liberal state -> Limited power
Marxist state -> Class power
Marxist state -> Gramsci hegemony
Liberal state -> Prior individual
Marxist state -> Social relations

Conclusion

Liberals see the state as a limited public power justified by rights, consent, and law. Marxists see it as class power, with **Gramsci** adding hegemony in civil society. The split is premised on different accounts of the person, property, history, and what counts as freedom. Dialogue is possible; fusion of the two starting points is not.

Facts & figures

Locke

The state is a trust to protect life, liberty, and property; power without law is not civil government.

Lenin

The State and Revolution argues that the bourgeois state machine must be broken, not merely staffed by socialists.

Gramsci

In the West, domination works through hegemony in civil society as well as through the coercive state apparatus.

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