

PREVIOUS YEAR QUESTION

UPSC 2020 · 15 marks

Assess the significance of right to property in political theory.

FLOW SNAPSHOT — how the answer moves

Intro routes

R1 property at the centre of liberal thought → its significance lies in how sharply thinkers disagree over what it secures

R2 one right, opposite verdicts → from **Locke's** labour-foundation to **Marx's** critique

Body flow

Locke (labour + person + liberty + consent + right to resist) → **Plato** vs **Aristotle** (conflict / corruption vs virtue) → **Smith** / **Bentham** (instrument of progress) → **Laski** (social service) / **Gandhi** (trusteeship) → **Marx** (exploitation, alienation, class) → **Rawls** / **Sen** (redistribution as justice)

Counter-view

a foundational liberal right vs a Marxist source of exploitation and inequality

Conclusion routes

R1 important for liberty and dignity, but bounded by justice and redistribution

R2 significance inseparable from fraternity, social justice, inequality

The right to property sits at the centre of liberal political thought, yet its significance lies in how sharply thinkers disagree over what it secures.

John Locke, in *Second Treatise of Government*, gave it strongest foundation: men convert common into private property by mixing their labour with it, and each holds a 'property' in his own 'person'.

Property is thus linked to labour, liberty and consent - government may not tax or seize it without the people's agreement, and rulers who destroy it forfeit their authority.

This was contested early. Plato saw private property as a source of conflict and corruption, prescribing communism for his rulers, while Aristotle treated property in limited measure as a source of virtue. Adam Smith and Jeremy Bentham later defended it as an instrument of social progress.

Modern thought narrowed the claim. Harold Laski linked property to social service and Mahatma Gandhi to trusteeship. Marx went furthest, treating it not as a natural right but as the basis of exploitation, alienation and class division. Rawls and Sen reply through redistribution as part of a just society.

Property remains important for liberty and dignity, but its significance cannot be separated from justice, fraternity and the problem of inequality.