

PREVIOUS YEAR QUESTION

UPSC 2025 · 10 marks

Explain Macpherson's view on power.

FLOW SNAPSHOT — how the answer moves

Intro routes

R1 Power located in liberalism's own foundations, not command over others → possessive individualism as starting point

R2 Individual as self-owner → freedom tied to property → limited liberal freedom, sets up the argument

Body flow

Possessive individualism (self-ownership, freedom = property, state guards property/market) → extractive power (control of others' productive capacities; legitimised by possessive individualism; capitalist-market inequality; owners command non-owners) → developmental power (higher human capacities; ethical, not descriptive; needs welfare; opposes extractive) → real democracy must centre self-development + cut extractive power → but liberal capitalist democracies let the powerful convert extractive into their own developmental power

Counter-view

Nancy Fraser → wealth inequality + social hierarchy + historical legacies shape power and development (checks Macpherson's optimism)

Conclusion routes

R1 Power redefined: from control over others → conditions for human self-development

R2 Genuine democracy = maximising developmental power, minimising extractive power

Macpherson approaches power not as simple command over others but through the foundations of liberal society itself. His starting point is possessive individualism, the idea that individuals are owners of themselves, their bodies and their capacities.

From this base he develops the idea of extractive power. It is the ability to control others' productive capacities for one's own purposes, by drawing part of that control to oneself. Possessive individualism legitimises such power. Those who own property thereby command the labour & capacities of those who do not.

Against this, Macpherson sets developmental power. It is the capacity to develop one's higher human powers - rational understanding, moral judgement, aesthetic creation and the bonds of friendship, love & religious experience. Developmental power is an ethical idea, not merely a description; it requires welfare conditions and supports creative freedom, and it stands opposed to extractive power.

For Macpherson, a genuine theory of democracy must place self-development at its centre and reduce extractive power. Yet in existing liberal capitalist democracies, those wielding extractive power convert it into enriched developmental power for themselves.

Nancy Fraser questions this, stressing how wealth inequality, social hierarchy and historical legacies shape both power and development. Macpherson thus shifts power from control over others to the conditions for human freedom.