

PREVIOUS YEAR QUESTION

UPSC 2020 · 10 marks

Comment on Liberalism as a revolutionary idea. [150 words]

FLOW SNAPSHOT — how the answer moves

Intro routes

- R1 Liberalism born in crisis of feudalism → not reform but replacement of political foundations
- R2 Liberal ideas entered history as challenge to entire inherited order — birth, status, divine right

Body flow

Feudalism + absolutism as target → **Locke**: natural rights, consent, limited government → individual replaces king as unit of politics → Glorious Revolution, American Revolution, French Revolution as proof → economic transformation: free market breaks feudal restrictions → political transformation: constitutionalism, civil rights, representation replace monarchy

Counter-view

Marx: liberalism revolutionary only in dismantling feudalism; once capitalism secured, it turned into ideology defending new privilege

Conclusion routes

- R1 Revolutionary at origin, conservative in maturity — ideas outlasted the impulse
- R2 Its lasting contribution: it made individual rights the permanent grammar of modern politics

Liberalism emerged not as a reform of the old order but as its replacement. Feudal Europe rested on birth, status and divine right - the idea that Kings ruled by God's will and individuals has obligations, not rights. Liberalism demolished this foundation and built a new one: reason, natural rights, consent and contract.

John Locke gave this challenge its sharpest expression. He argued that human beings possess natural rights to life, liberty and property and that political authority is legitimate only when it rests on the consent of the governed. The state becomes a creation of individuals, not the other way around.

Liberal ideas moved rapidly from philosophy to history. The Glorious Revolution (1688), the American Revolution (1776), & the The French Revolution (1789) all drew from this vocabulary. Economically, liberalism broke the guild & feudal restrictions that tied labour & trade, advancing free-market capitalism & what Thomas Jefferson called the smallest possible government.

Karl Marx acknowledged this revolutionary character: liberalism dismantled feudal relations & transformed production, law and politics. Yet he also identified its limit. Once capitalism was secure and the bourgeoisie consolidated power, liberalism became the ideology of a new privilege - defining property & market freedom rather than challenging domination.

Liberalism was, therefore, revolutionary in origin & conservative in maturity. Its permanent contribution was making individual rights the standard by which all political authority must be judged.