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Q4(a)

Critically examine the Formalists' and Substantivists' views on the applicability of economic laws in the study of primitive societies

UPSC Civil Services Mains 2015 · Anthropology GS 1 · 20 marks · Religion

5. Religion: Anthropological approaches to the study of religion (evolutionary, psychological and functional); monotheism and polytheism; sacred and profane; myths and rituals; forms of religion in tribal and peasant Societies (animism, animatism, fetishism, naturism and totemism); religion, magic and science distinguished; magico-religious functionaries (priest, shaman, medicine man, sorcerer and witch).

Core demand of the question

- Critically examine the Formalists' and Substantivists' views on the applicability of economic laws in the study of primitive societies
- Write about 250 words for 20 marks

Revision summary

Formalists treat maximising choice as universal, even without markets.

Substantivists, after **Polanyi**, treat reciprocity and redistribution as other economies.

Kula, Nuer cattle, and Tiv spheres block one-money substitution.

The useful settlement is calculation inside instituted process.

Jajmani and potlatch warn against importing firm theory wholesale.

Introduction

The formalist-substantivist debate asks whether scarcity, price, and maximising choice apply to non-market economies. It is a debate about the reach of economic laws, not about whether people are idle.

Body

Formalists

- **Raymond Firth**, **Robbins Burling**, and **Scott Cook** said choice under scarcity is universal.
- A Trobriand gardener still allocates labour and seed. Opportunity cost exists without rupees.
- Formal tools-optimisation, decision trees-can travel if preferences are locally named.

Substantivists

- **Karl Polanyi** said the economy is an instituted process. Reciprocity, redistribution, and market are historical forms.
- **George Dalton** and **Paul Bohannan** showed spheres of exchange: a Tiv brass rod is not a cow and not a wife-wealth good.
- **Malinowski's** kula and **Evans-Pritchard's** Nuer cattle lock prestige goods that a supermarket model would treat as substitutes.

- Applying price theory as if a bush camp were a firm misreads the institution.

Critical settlement

- Formalism is right that people calculate. It is wrong when it treats the market as the only real economy.
- Substantivism is right that institutions embed goods. It is weak if it denies all economising.
- **Sahlins** and **Gudeman** kept embeddedness and still allowed household accounting.
- Indian jajmani, potlatch, and temple redistribution are substantivist cases; labour time on a swidden plot is still a formal allocation.

Flow diagram

Primitive economy -> Formalist choice scarcity

Primitive economy -> Substantivist instituted process

Substantivist instituted process -> Polanyi reciprocity redistribution market

Formalist choice scarcity -> Firth Cook calculation

Conclusion

Economic laws of scarcity apply as a thin logic of choice. They do not apply as a thick law of price in kula, cattle, or caste service. Use formal tools inside substantivist institutions.

Facts & figures

Polanyi

The Great Transformation: the self-regulating market is historically rare and politically made.

Bohannon

Tiv spheres of exchange made conversion a moral problem, not frictionless trade.

Firth

Primitive Polynesian Economy used allocation and choice among Tikopia.

Sahlins

Stone Age Economics restated reciprocity and the domestic mode against the market model.

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