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Q1(a)

Debate between formalist and substantivist approaches

UPSC Civil Services Mains 2022 · Anthropology GS 1 · 10 marks · Economic Organization

3. Economic Organization: Meaning, scope and relevance of economic anthropology; Formalist and Substantivist debate; Principles governing production, distribution and exchange (reciprocity, redistribution and market), in communities, subsisting on hunting and gathering, fishing, swiddening, pastoralism, horticulture, and agriculture; globalization and indigenous economic systems.

Core demand of the question

- Write a note on the debate between formalist and substantivist approaches
- Keep the note to a 10-mark length of about 150 words

Revision summary

Formalists treat scarcity and choice as universal.

Substantivists, after Polanyi, treat reciprocity, redistribution, and market as historical forms.

Kula and Nuer cattle show goods locked in kinship and prestige.

Spheres of exchange refuse one money.

- **Use both tools:** calculation inside an instituted process.

Introduction

The formalist-substantivist debate is about whether market price theory can travel into non-market economies. It is a debate about method, not only about trade.

Body**The two claims**

- **Karl Polanyi** said the economy is instituted process. Reciprocity, redistribution, and market exchange are historically specific, so scarcity-maximising models do not fit the Trobriand kula or a temple granary.
- Formalists such as **Raymond Firth**, **Robbins Burling**, and **Scott Cook** answered that choice under scarcity is universal. A Trobriand gardener still allocates labour, even if he does not quote a rupee price.
- **George Dalton** and **Paul Bohannan** used African and Melanesian cases to show spheres of exchange. A cow, a brass rod, and a wife-wealth good are not one money.

Case and limit

- **Malinowski's** kula and **Evans-Pritchard's** Nuer cattle show prestige and kinship locking goods that a supermarket model would treat as substitutes.
- Later economic anthropology, from **Marshall Sahlins** to **Stephen Gudeman**, kept Polanyi's embeddedness but admitted calculation. The useful settlement is that formal tools need substantivist context.

Flow diagram

Economy -> Formalist choice

Economy -> Substantivist institution

Substantivist institution -> Polanyi reciprocity redistribution market

Formalist choice -> Firth Cook calculation

Conclusion

Formalism asks how people choose. Substantivism asks in which institution they choose. Anthropology needs both, and it must not treat the market as the only real economy.

Facts & figures

Karl Polanyi

The Great Transformation treated the self-regulating market as a historically rare, politically made institution.

Malinowski

Trobriand kula joined exchange, rank, magic, and partnership, which formal price theory cannot read as barter alone.

Bohannan

Tiv spheres of exchange showed that conversion across ranks of goods is morally charged, not frictionless substitution.

Sahlins

Stone Age Economics restated reciprocity and the domestic mode of production as substantivist alternatives to the market model.