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Q1(e)

Decline of political theory.

UPSC Civil Services Mains 2023 · PSIR GS 1 · 10 marks · Political Theory

Political Theory: meaning and approaches.

Core demand of the question

- **Comment on the following in about 150 words:** Decline of political theory. (10 marks)

Revision summary

Decline of political theory was a mid-century claim that systematic normative argument had stopped.

Laslett, Cobban, positivism, and Easton's behavioural programme were the main sources of that claim.

Easton's 1969 credo of relevance and Rawls's 1971 book reopened normative theory.

Sandel, Walzer, Berlin, Arendt, and Foucault continued theory under other names.

The thesis described a university mood, not the end of political thought in India or elsewhere.

Introduction

- **The phrase decline of political theory named a mid-twentieth-century diagnosis:** that systematic argument about the good regime had given way to history of ideas, ideology, or behavioural science. The diagnosis was later revised when Rawls and others rebuilt normative theory.

Body**What was said to decline**

- **Peter Laslett** wrote in 1956 that political philosophy was dead for the moment, because no one was doing the old systematic work.
- **Alfred Cobban** and others blamed ideology, war, and a retreat into historical scholarship.
- **David Easton** in 1951 criticised traditional political theory as unscientific and called for a behavioural science of systems.
- Logical positivism treated value statements as not empirically meaningful, which starved normative argument.
- The result, on this account, was either empty legalism or survey research without justice.

What returned

- Easton's own 1969 post-behavioural address demanded relevance, which reopened values as a public problem.
- **John Rawls's** A Theory of Justice (1971) restored contract argument at a high analytic level.
- **Berlin, Arendt, Oakeshott**, and later **Sandel** and **Walzer** showed that concepts of liberty, action, and community were still live.

- **Foucault** and post-colonial writers shifted the object of theory to power and empire rather than ending theory.
- Indian constitutional argument after **Kesavananda Bharati** (1973) continued a public theory of limits on power.

How to read "decline"

- Decline named a professional mood in Anglo-American universities, not the end of political thought in the world.
- **Ambedkar**, **Gandhi**, and **Aurobindo** were already doing political theory in another idiom while the decline thesis was written in England.
- The accurate statement is interruption and specialisation, then revival, not a completed death.

Flow diagram

Decline thesis -> Laslett Cobban
Decline thesis -> Easton behavioural
Revival -> Rawls 1971
Revival -> Sandel Walzer
Easton behavioural -> 1969 relevance

Conclusion

Decline of political theory referred to a mid-century gap between behavioural science and systematic normative argument. Easton first widened the gap and then asked for relevance. **Rawls**, communitarians, and constitutional courts show that the gap did not remain.

Facts & figures

Laslett, 1956

Wrote that political philosophy was dead for the moment, a canonical line in the decline debate.

Easton, 1951 and 1969

First attacked traditional theory as unscientific, then demanded a post-behavioural science of relevance.

Rawls, 1971

A Theory of Justice is the usual marker of the normative revival in Anglo-American theory.

Kesavananda, 1973

Indian basic-structure doctrine continued public argument about unamendable constitutional essentials.