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Q1(d)

Decline of Liberalism.

UPSC Civil Services Mains 2024 · PSIR GS 1 · 10 marks · Political Theory

Political Theory: meaning and approaches.

Core demand of the question

- **Define liberalism's core:** rights, limited state, and individual (10 marks)
- **Show what 'decline' has meant:** war, mass democracy, welfare, and illiberal challenge
- Name critics and later recoveries
- Avoid treating decline as a single date

Revision summary

Liberalism's core is equal individual rights, limited government, and a civil society distinct from the state.

Decline has been claimed in the face of world war, fascism, Stalinism, the social question, and contemporary illiberal majorities.

Laski, Schmitt, and communitarians named different failures of classical or procedural liberalism.

Rawls, constitutional basic-structure doctrine, and Habermas show a reconstruction rather than a simple death.

Decline is a recurring crisis diagnosis; the vocabulary of rights against arbitrary power remains in use.

Introduction

Liberalism is the political doctrine of equal individual rights, limited government, law, and a civil society that is not absorbed by the state. Talk of its decline has accompanied almost every crisis of the last century. The task is to say what was said to be declining, and what survived.

Body**What was said to decline**

Classical liberalism of **Locke**, **Mill**, and the night-watchman state faced mass democracy, organised labour, and two world wars. **Harold Laski** and others argued that laissez-faire could not meet unemployment and that positive freedom required a social state. Fascism and Stalinism denied the individual as the unit of right. **Schmitt** attacked liberal parliament as endless talk. After 1945, **Berlin** feared that positive liberty could crush negative liberty. In the late twentieth century, communitarians said the unencumbered self was empty. Today, populist majorities and surveillance states again test bills of rights.

- **Decline, then, has meant several things:** the retreat of market-limited government, the weakening of parliamentary civility, and the rise of regimes that reject constitutional limits.

What did not end

Rawls rebuilt liberal justice as fairness. Constitutional courts, including India's after **Kesavananda Bharati**, treated basic liberties as not wholly at the mercy of a temporary majority. The welfare state revised liberalism; it did not always abolish it. **Habermas** still ties legitimacy to public reason. The word decline is accurate as a warning about illiberal concentration of power. It is inaccurate as an obituary. Liberalism remains the language in which those concentrations are still criticised.

Flow diagram

Liberal core -> Rights and limited state
Talk of decline -> War and dictatorship
Talk of decline -> Social question
Talk of decline -> Populist majority
Liberal core -> Rawls courts public reason

Conclusion

- **The decline of liberalism names real pressures:** war, mass politics, social crisis, and illiberal rule. The core claim of rights against arbitrary power has been revised more often than it has been buried. Decline is a recurring diagnosis, not a completed historical fact.

Facts & figures

Interwar crisis

Fascist and Stalinist regimes rejected the liberal individual and parliamentary limitation of power as the political unit of right.

Rawls, 1971

A Theory of Justice restated liberalism as equal basic liberties plus fair opportunity and the difference principle.

Kesavananda, 1973

The Indian Supreme Court held that Parliament cannot destroy the Constitution's basic structure, a judicial limit on majoritarian power.