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Q2(a)

Elucidate the meanings inherent in the term "political" with appropriate illustrations.

UPSC Civil Services Mains 2024 · PSIR GS 1 · 20 marks · Political Theory

Political Theory: meaning and approaches.

Core demand of the question

- Elucidate several meanings of the term political (20 marks)
- Use illustrations from theory and from public life
- Include **Easton**, **Aristotle**, **Arendt**, and the feminist claim that the personal is political
- Keep meanings distinct rather than as one slogan

Revision summary

The political is not one object but a set of meanings used in political theory.

Easton's meaning is the authoritative allocation of values, illustrated by budgets, courts, and elections.

Aristotle and **Arendt** treat the political as public speech and action among citizens, illustrated by assemblies and satyagraha.

Marx, Schmitt, Dahl, and Gramsci treat it as organised power, conflict, decision, and hegemony.

Feminist theory and movements such as anti-racism show that the public-private boundary itself is a political question.

Introduction

- **The word political does not name one object. It names a family of meanings:** the public allocation of values, the life of the polis, the contest for power, and the drawing of a line between public and private. To elucidate those meanings with illustrations is to show why students of political theory cannot treat the term as self-evident.

Body**Authoritative allocation**

David Easton defined politics as the authoritative allocation of values for a society. A budget that funds a scheme and denies another, a court that upholds a right, and an election that authorises a cabinet are political in this sense. The illustration is ordinary government. What makes the act political is not passion but authority that binds.

The polis and public action

For **Aristotle**, the political is the life of the polis, where speech about justice is possible among citizens. **Hannah Arendt recovered action and plurality: politics is appearing before others in a public space, not the household's labour and not the craftsman's**

making. Parliament, a Gram Sabha after the 73rd Amendment, and a satyagraha meeting are illustrations. A closed family decision is, on this map, not yet political.

Power, conflict, and the state

Realists and **Marx** treat the political as organised power and conflict. **Carl Schmitt** made the friend-enemy distinction the criterion of the political. War, party cleavage, and class struggle illustrate this darker sense. **Dahl's** decisions and **Gramsci's** hegemony both belong here: politics is who prevails and whose common sense rules.

Boundary work

Feminist theory, and **Carole Pateman** in particular, showed that calling the household pre-political hid male power. The slogan that the personal is political does not mean that every feeling is a statute. It means that marriage law, unpaid care, and domestic violence are already organised by public power. India's anti-arrack movement in Andhra Pradesh illustrated that a 'private' liquor economy was a public injury to women.

Liberal theory still needs a public-private distinction so that conscience is not fully administered. The political, then, is also the activity of drawing that line: what the state may command, and what it may not.

A working set of meanings

- **One may therefore say:** the political is (i) authoritative allocation, (ii) civic public action, (iii) organised power and conflict, and (iv) the contest over the public-private boundary. **Locke's** civil government, **Rawls's** basic structure, and **Habermas's** public sphere each emphasise a different member of this set. Illustrations should be matched to the meaning in use, or debate talks past itself.

Flow diagram

Political -> Easton allocation
 Political -> Aristotle / Arendt public
 Political -> Power and conflict
 Political -> Public-private boundary
 Public-private boundary -> Feminist illustration

Conclusion

The term political means authoritative allocation, public civic action, organised power, and the drawing of the public-private line. **Easton, Aristotle, Arendt, Marx,** Schmitt, Dahl, Gramsci, and feminist theory name these senses. Clear writing states which meaning is in play and illustrates it, rather than treating political as a single undefined atmosphere.

Facts & figures

Easton

Politics as the authoritative allocation of values remains the standard behavioural definition used in systems analysis.

Arendt

The Human Condition distinguishes labour, work, and action; only action in a public realm is politics in her strict sense.

73rd Amendment

Gram Sabhas institutionalise a local public in which villagers speak on common affairs, an illustration of the civic meaning of the political.

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