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Q2(b)

Karl Popper presents a defence of the open society against its enemies. Elaborate

UPSC Civil Services Mains 2025 · PSIR GS 1 · 15 marks · Political Theory

Political Theory: meaning and approaches.

Core demand of the question

- State what Popper means by an open society
- **Name the enemies he attacks:** **historicism** and holistic engineering, with **Plato**, **Hegel**, and **Marx** as types
- **Show the defence:** **piecemeal social engineering**, criticism, and fallibilism
- Keep the answer on Popper, not a general essay on liberalism

Revision summary

Popper's open society is one in which laws and rulers can be criticised and changed without a myth of historical destiny.

- **It is the political partner of falsification:** policies are experiments, not revelations.

Historicism and holistic social engineering are the intellectual enemies, illustrated through his readings of **Plato**, **Hegel**, and **Marx**.

Piecemeal social engineering, democratic dismissal of governments, and the prevention of suffering form the defence.

- **The argument is epistemological as much as moral:** no guardian, party, or philosopher-king owns the whole of social knowledge.

Introduction

Karl Popper wrote **The Open Society and Its Enemies** in wartime, as a defence of a society that can change its laws without blood-myths of destiny. An open society is one in which institutions are criticisable, rulers can be dismissed, and no class of guardians owns the meaning of history. Its enemies are those who claim scientific or philosophical knowledge of the whole of social fate.

Body

Open and closed

Popper's open society is the political twin of his philosophy of science. In science, theories are conjectures that survive attempted falsification. In politics, policies are experiments that must be open to criticism and reversal. A closed society, by contrast, resembles a tribe bound by taboo, or a state bound by an unfalsifiable philosophy of history. The individual is absorbed into the whole. Dissent is treachery against being itself.

- **He therefore attacks historicism:** the belief that history has laws from which the future can be prophesied, and that politics should accelerate that necessity. Holistic social engineering

follows. If one knows the true form of the city, one may remake persons and institutions in a single sweep.

The enemies named

Plato, on Popper's reading, designs a closed city of guardians and noble lies. **Hegel** is charged with blessing success as the march of Spirit. **Marx** is praised for a hypothesis about capitalism, then condemned for a historicist prophecy that licensed violence and silenced criticism. They feed a politics that cannot admit error.

The defence

- **The defence is piecemeal social engineering:** reform one institution, watch, correct. Popper supported a protective state against misery; he refused total knowledge. **Negative utilitarianism** fits better than a blueprint of happiness. Freedom of criticism and the right to dismiss a government without civil war are fallibilism in institutions. **Mill** is nearby, but Popper's edge is epistemological: planners and vanguards err too. Critics say he caricatured **Plato** and **Hegel**. The defence still stands: an open society can say it was wrong.

Flow diagram

Open society -> Fallibilism and criticism
Open society -> Piecemeal reform
Enemies -> Historicism
Enemies -> Holistic engineering
Historicism -> Plato Hegel Marx as types

Conclusion

Popper defends the open society as a criticisable order of free individuals against historicist enemies who would close the future in the name of **Plato's** city, **Hegel's** Spirit, or **Marx's** necessity. Piecemeal engineering, democracy, and fallibilism are the political method of that defence. The open society is not a tribe with better manners; it is a civilisation that institutionalises the right to be mistaken.

Facts & figures

The Open Society and Its Enemies

Popper's wartime book (published 1945) opposes closed, historicist politics to a criticisable liberal order.

Historicism

The claim that history has discoverable laws that justify prophecy and total social reconstruction.

Piecemeal social engineering

Reform of particular institutions with feedback and reversal, against utopian wholesale redesign of society.

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