

Book Review

“Lijphart’s Politics of Accommodation: A Constructive Review with Criticisms Derived from the Cypriot Case”

Arend Lijphart (1975). *The Politics of Accommodation: Pluralism and Democracy in the Netherlands*. Berkeley: University of California Press. (231 Pages). 2nd revised edition, ISBN No: 0-520-02900-3 (The first edition of this book appeared in 1968)

This book covers the groundbreaking findings of Arend Lijphart, based on a case study of the Netherlands which provided suggestions for amending the pluralist theory. Lijphart, who is accepted to be the leading figure on consociationalism, developed this concept in the first edition of this book in 1968. The second edition of this book has ten chapters with an additional chapter striving to explain the changes in the political system of the Netherlands in the 60s and 70s. The author developed his arguments further in his article ‘Consociational Democracy’ which appeared in *World Politics* (1969, 21 (2): 207-225) and his book *Democracy in Plural Societies: A Comparative Exploration* (1977). His latest book *Thinking about Democracy: Power sharing and Majority Rule in Theory and Practice* (2008) involves a collection of most of his must-read writings on consociationalism. The observations in *The Politics of Accommodation: Pluralism and Democracy in the Netherlands* raises relevant questions and suggestions about the political systems of plural societies in the 21st century. Careful reader of the book may find relevant suggestions for a settlement in Cyprus. Similarities can be found between the two cases when it comes to divisions among the society and one should ask himself if a consociational solution is suitable for resolving the Cyprus Problem. Nevertheless, one should scrutinize both cases very carefully and put them into comparative perspective before jumping to conclusions.

Lijphart argues that the case of the Netherlands from 1917 until the end of the 60s stands out as an anomaly where strong cleavages did not spoil, but in fact strengthened the democratic stability of the country. The book tries to explain how this phenomenon occurred. According to

Lijphart, the main factor in having a viable democracy in a strongly divided society is the spirit of accommodation among the elites of different groups.

The first part of the book is illustrative. After presenting the main arguments of the pluralist theory in the first chapter, the division within the Dutch society is described in a clear manner in the second chapter, followed by a demonstration of the four elites that are a product of these cleavages in the third chapter. In the fourth chapter, Lijphart exemplifies the Dutch government as a viable democracy. The second part of this book is more explanatory. The author tries to explain how it is the case that such a divided country which according to theory of pluralism should have difficulties with its democratic stability, could nevertheless managed to have a stable democracy. After taking note of some relevant hypotheses and dismissing some others in the fifth chapter, Lijphart, in the sixth chapter argues that the spirit of accommodation among the elites of the four blocs is the most valid independent variable. After looking at certain conventions in the seventh chapter which helped the practice of the politics of accommodation in the Dutch case, the argument in the eighth chapter concerns the deferential political culture of the Dutch people which eased the practice of this elitist politics of accommodation that does not involve the people in the decision-making process as much as some other democratic systems. As a result of his findings, Lijphart discusses how the pluralist theory should be updated in the ninth chapter. Finally in the tenth chapter, the author presents us the change in the Dutch society in the 1960's and 1970's and explains why the politics of accommodation has come to an end.

A major problem with Lijphart's argument is that he defines the Netherlands as a viable democracy by making assumptions that pose danger to validity of his research. Although there cannot be much argument that the political system of the Netherlands was pretty stable, one can question the quality of democracy of this system. Lijphart's definition of democracy is so simplistic and minimalist: "Democracy means simply a system of government in which the people have the opportunity to select their own leaders" (71). This definition may take into consideration aspects of contestation but does not say anything about participation. In reality, such a system based on secrecy and exclusion of the people from politics suffers from democratic quality. Thus, one question may be posed about the compatibility of consociational regimes with democracy.

Lijphart is not ignorant of the consequences of his arguments but his flawed definition of democracy results in his erred analysis that leads to his conclusive remarks that “it is impossible to argue that Holland deviates much from the democratic ideal. Dutch democracy has universal suffrage, majority rule, and justice for all” (180). The author asserts that:

The criticisms are the arguments of democratic perfectionists who fail to perceive that no democracy can survive without political stability, and that stability in a deeply divided society can only be achieved at the expense of deviating to some extent from the ideal democratic norm (179).

This kind of view suggests that there is always a tradeoff between political stability and democracy in deeply divided societies and the former is more important than the latter.

On another note, we see that the situation does not look so bright for some other countries with strong cleavages. Based on his case study findings, Lijphart endeavours to amend the pluralist theory. The author claims that the Dutch case does not eliminate the validity of the pluralist theory completely but obliges us to revise it along the lines of the findings in this book (15). The third proposition still makes sense when it is positively stated. Cross-cutting cleavages are agreeable with stable and effective democracy. However, negative formulation of this proposition may cause invalid conclusions. It was in fact the division and mutually reinforcing cleavages that caused the creation of the politics of accommodation in the Netherlands (182-184). In such cases, keeping contacts at the minimum level between the people of different groups but at the same time maximizing cooperation at the elite level can become a substitute for the positive effects of crosscutting cleavages in divided societies (184). Nevertheless, such a generalization has dubious validity if one looks at the Cypriot case. In Cyprus, the division is not shaped by religious and class cleavages, but, separate ethnic, linguistic, and religious cleavages of two different groups. This makes the division far more serious than the Dutch case. Moreover, it may be the case that the division between Orthodox Christians and Muslims can be more problematic than the division between Catholics and Protestants. Therefore, maybe the Netherlands was not as divided as Cyprus is right now, and the amendments to the pluralist theory may not be relevant in case of such a deep division.

Furthermore, we know that the more the number of groups are in deeply divided societies, the better it is for maintaining a viable

democracy. In Cyprus, there are two blocs instead of four as was the case in the Netherlands, which creates serious difficulties for practicing politics of accommodation. Also, Lijphart himself takes note of the importance of the numbers and power of the blocs. He argues that no single bloc should have a dominant position *vis a vis* the other blocs (188-189). In the Cypriot case, one group has dominance over another if one had to simply look at the populations. Moreover, there is no common nationalism among the Cypriots but separate nationalisms built upon concurrence with the other group. The importance of nationalism maybe more than Lijphart thinks. Even though he gives some credit to Dutch nationalism for the survival of the state, his main argument revolves around elite consensus and the author states that:

The political consensus does not have to be comprehensive and strong. It must include, as a minimum, the commitment to maintain the system, reinforced by habits of prudence and deference, but it does not have to include the traditional democratic civic virtues (192).

Nevertheless, it may be the case that the Dutch system might not have been preserved if there had not been strong nationalism throughout the blocs which remedied for their differences.

This short analysis which relied on the Cypriot case demonstrates why one should test the arguments that Lijphart derives from his findings in comparative perspective, in order to have a strong theory. Research is needed to dig into the political systems of other countries with strong cleavages so as to test the conclusions of this book. Researchers should be able to understand why there are differentiations between countries with deep divisions, when it comes to their ability to maintain viable democratic systems. Even though the Netherlands is presented as an anomaly by Lijphart which may offer some suggestions to consider revising the pluralist theory, comparative research designs can tell us much more about the big picture. *Democracy in Plural Societies: A Comparative Exploration* which appeared in 1977 is a proof that Lijphart was not ignorant of this criticism.

A final criticism of Lijphart's work can be made by focusing on his reliance on elite consensus for the stability of the political system. What happens if one generation of elites is replaced by another one and the new ones do not have the spirit of accommodation? Can we really say that a political system based on elite consensus is a promisingly stable system? Perhaps the Dutch case was luckily peculiar where politics of

accommodation rambled on for around 50 years. Even in this case, one can argue that 50 years is not a long time if the matter of concern is the continuation of a certain form of political system.

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