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Book Review: *Consociationalism and Power-Sharing in Europe. Arend Lijphart's Theory of Political Accommodation*, by Michaelina Jakala, Durukan Kuzu, and Matt Qvortrup (eds.), Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018, 209 pp.

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This edited volume consists of nine chapters by eleven authors, examining consociationalism as a theory and model for power-sharing in divided societies as developed by Arend Lijphart.¹ The book aims to provide a critical discussion of various theoretical aspects of consociationalism, as well as its application to specific cases, including the 'classic' case of Northern Ireland, which is the most common case discussed in several chapters, as well as case studies of Brussels, Cyprus and Switzerland. This compilation of articles adds up to a highly diverse and multi-faceted book, which provides the informed reader with some well-argued critiques of consociationalism from different disciplinary backgrounds.

The book begins with an article by Arend Lijphart himself looking back at the development of consociationalism, first as a typology of power-sharing arrangements across a number of states, then as a theory allowing the analysis of how sustainable and successful power-sharing arrangements are (in his 1977 book *Democracy in Plural Societies*²) and finally as an ideal model for power-sharing in societies with ethnic, linguistic, or religious cleavages (in

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Democracy in Plural Societies as well as *Patterns of Democracy and Power-Sharing in South Africa*³). He explains how the empirical cases used for theory building have shifted over time, due to changes in the empirical factors applied in the analysis, as well as changing realities in the respective countries (between *Democracies* and the different editions of *Patterns of Democracy*⁴).

The first chapter is followed by an analysis of the role of political culture in the sustainability of consociational power-sharing arrangements by Doorenspleet and Maleki. They argue that despite its inclusion in early works of Lijphart, it does not receive sufficient attention in the analysis and design of power-sharing arrangements. They begin their analysis by re-assessing Lijphart's categorisation⁵ of divided societies and providing an alternative basis for assessment, leading to a different categorisation of societies. In a next step, the authors analyse the correlation between both systems of categorisation of divided societies with Lijphart's types of democracies (majoritarian vs. consensus) and between both category systems and a typology of political culture (competitive vs. consensual). Doorenspleet and Maleki conclude from their analysis that the statistical link is strongest between political culture and type of democracy among the analysed factors, while their proposed typology of divided societies has only a weak and statistically insignificant relationship with the democratic system. Lijphart's own typology of divided societies has a slightly stronger correlation, however, Doorenspleet and Maleki criticise it as being inaccurate. This discrepancy suggests that Lijphart's basis for categorisation of societies as divided or not might be flawed and may therefore require reconsideration.

Chapter three asks whether consociationalism can help to overcome the dividing factors in a society and create a genuine shared identity. Jarrett argues that while consociationalism is successful as a conflict management tool, its capabilities of creating an integrated society with mutual understanding and a genuinely shared identity are limited. This analysis is based on case studies from Northern Ireland and Brussels, in both of which cross-communal political parties continue to receive low votes and, while a regional identity understood as an alternative to the conflicting ones (Irish/Nationalist vs. British/Unionist in Northern Ireland, and Flemish vs. Francophone in Brussels) exists in both cases, the extent to which it cuts across the divides and functions as a genuinely shared identity is unclear. Jarrett concludes therefore that consociationalism is severely limited in its ability to create a shared identity in divided societies and that other factors and societal developments play a more important role in this aspect. This conclusion is in line with the view of several other authors in this book, pointing to the role of context and actors' interests in the success and sustainability of consociational settings.

Dixon reflects on the theoretical shortcomings and definitional flexibility of consociationalism and the lessons to be learnt from ‘real’ politics for consociational models in chapter four. In this highly critical chapter he argues that the definition of consociationalism has changed substantially and repeatedly over the years, including and excluding various cases over time, most prominently Northern Ireland. This stretching and redefining has caused the concept to become almost all-encompassing and watered down to the degree of being applicable to all kinds of power-sharing arrangements. Furthermore, due to its primordialist⁶ analysis of ethnic conflict (and identity), its segregationist solutions, and elitist perspective on democracy, consociationalism antagonises conflict situations rather than alleviating them and thus opposes reconciliation and integration between the conflicting segments of society. Finally, Dixon argues that the Good Friday Agreement (GFA) is not consociational, based on a factor analysis of consociationalism and the GFA. He concludes that the GFA came about due to the political will and negotiating skills of the actors involved and does not have the consociational character that is claimed by several academics, most notably by Lijphart and McGarry and O’Leary.⁷

The above complete dismissal of consociationalism is an outlier in this otherwise critical but constructive book and seems to be based on the idea that one theory or model alone can be a ‘one-stop-shop’ to solve the issues of divided societies and provide them with stable democracy. However, as the next chapter and several others in this book demonstrate, institutional settings as proposed by consociationalism, can only be but one aspect of a successful peace-building and democratisation process and therefore need to be analysed in context.

In chapter five White makes a case-in-point by asking why consociational power-sharing agreements fail in some cases, while they succeed and persist in others, based on an in-depth analysis of the Northern Irish case and the Good Friday Agreement. He argues that how the conflicting parties perceive the arrangement with regards to their own interests is the main influencing factor in this respect. Accordingly, he predicts that once the groups in question stop believing that consociational power-sharing is in their interest, it will collapse. This perception in turn will be influenced by cultural and societal developments as well as the political will of the participating actors and is often also subject to the influence of external forces involved in the peace process, such as the Irish and British governments, the USA and the EU in the case of Northern Ireland. White thus reminds the reader that consociationalism is ‘only’ an institutional arrangement and thus inherently dependent on the context in which it is implemented. This chapter might be read as a criticism of those scholars making absolute claims

about the impact and potential of consociationalism, without considering the role of contextual factors.

Chapter six focuses on the role of consociational institutions in government communication in Northern Ireland. Rice and Somerville analyse interviews with journalists, Government Information Officers, and Ministerial Special Advisors to discern how government communication works in stable, post-conflict, consociational settings. They argue that consociational institutions at the very least do not facilitate, and potentially even hinder, government communication, if the communication officers of the government and those of the ministries represent conflicting interests as is the case in Northern Ireland. Since the government is based on a mandatory coalition, with ministries held by different parties, the respective communication strategies and aims differ between the government and the ministries. The journalists reporting on government activities have to navigate this terrain and find it difficult at times to gain impartial information and critical voices, also due to the lack of an opposition. This leads to a situation in which government communication lacks transparency and tends to be poorly coordinated, with the political parties involved using the ministerial communication channels for divisive politics, and journalists who might feel like they have to take on the role of oppositional voice in the public discourse. Rice and Somerville conclude by warning that this communication landscape is inadequate to create or sustain democratic stability and that it might be time for more transparent government communication in Northern Ireland. This chapter adds a new perspective to the analysis of consociationalism and points out that political and societal developments over time might make a change in (consociational) institutional settings necessary to advance democracy in stable post-conflict societies.

In chapter seven Blick analyses the impact of the Brexit referendum on ideas of consociationalism for the re-design of the constitutions of Scotland and Wales. By comparing speeches and governmental papers from Scotland, Wales, and the UK, he argues that both the devolved governments – albeit to different degrees – are expecting some elements of consociationalism to be part of the post-Brexit relation between them and the UK government with regards to those policy fields that are under EU control at the time of writing and related to powers devolved to the respective governments. The UK government, however, does not seem to agree with these ideas but rather favours a more unitary approach in which the EU controlled policy-issues would become the responsibility of the UK government. Blick concludes that the different approaches to devolution post-Brexit are in part due to the different outcomes of the Brexit vote in the three polities compared; while the UK overall and the

majority in Wales voted to leave the EU, the majority in Scotland voted to remain. While this chapter is undoubtedly interesting, the link to consociationalism as a theory or approach to conflict management is rather weak, as the author himself refers to federalism rather than consociationalism in the conclusion and only mentions consociationalism in passing throughout the chapter.

Chapter eight contains a detailed account of the use of consociational terminology and narratives in the context of the Cypriot peace process. Loizides points out that while consociationalism is a theory of some authority that provides valuable points of understanding and insight for the management of conflict-ridden and divided societies, the context of the case in question is essential for the success of the peace process. In detailing the historical developments of the various peace-making efforts in Cyprus, including the role of mediators and external actors, Loizides makes clear that the success of consociational settings as approaches to conflict resolution is always subject to the process by which they were brought about, specifically the support through local elites as well as constituencies.

Constituency support in consociational settings is also discussed in the final chapter of the book, in which Qvortrup analyses the role of direct democracy through referenda in consociational settings, focusing on the case of Switzerland as an example. While consociationalism as a model is based on government by elite cartels, Qvortrup argues that referenda have not only been used successfully to legitimise consociational agreements in various countries, but in the Swiss case, also to bring issues to the political agenda that would otherwise not have been dealt with, establish civil society actors as valuable partners for political parties and institutions, and to make use of minority veto arrangements. The use of referenda is heavily regulated in Switzerland and, especially with regards to its use as a minority veto, the majorities needed in various levels of government and other regulations determine how referenda can be used. Qvortrup concludes that despite seeming like a paradox at first, consociationalism and direct democracy do not necessarily exclude each other but on the contrary, might work together to increase the stability and sustainability of democracy.

In general the book provides interesting and informative discussions of various aspects of consociationalism both in specific cases, as well as on broader levels. The authors engage to varying degrees in constructive criticism, raising important issues regarding consociationalism, such as the importance of the context and culture in which consociational settings are negotiated and implemented, which will shape their final appearance and potential for success in important ways. Societal and political developments over time also play an important role for the

continuing success of consociational democracies and thus require scholarly attention, as they might challenge the original consociational settings, making them obsolete or requiring them to change drastically. As an institutional setting and respective theory, consociationalism is inherently limited in its capacity to bring about and understand certain societal changes, and thus needs to be analysed and understood in relation with other theories and strategies, e.g. for societal integration or government communication. The issues raised in the chapters of this book might inspire scholars of consociationalism to engage with their subject in a more embedded way and provide students with a wide range of perspectives on consociationalism, allowing them to develop a critical outlook on this influential theory.

Notes

¹ Lijphart points out in his chapter that, while often being referred to as the father of consociationalism, others before him worked on proportional power sharing models, most notably Gerhard Lehbruch (*Proporzdemokratie*, 1967) and Sir Arthur Lewis (*Politics in West Africa*, 1965). Other authors have since had significant impact on debates around consociationalism and power-sharing.

² Arend Lijphart, *Democracy in Plural Societies: A Comparative Exploration* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1977).

³ Arend Lijphart, *Patterns of Democracy: Government Forms and Performance in Thirty-Six Countries* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1999); Arend Lijphart, *Power-Sharing in South Africa* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985).

⁴ Arend Lijphart, *Democracies: Patterns of Majoritarian and Consensus Government in Twenty-One Countries* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1984); Arend Lijphart, *Patterns of Democracy: Government Forms and Performance in Thirty-Six Countries* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2012)

⁵ Used in both editions of *Patterns of Democracy*.

⁶ Dixon defines primordialism as an understanding of “‘ethnic identities’ as biological and deeply rooted in human nature” (p. 57). It has been described elsewhere as a school of thought in nationalism and ethnicity studies, in which ethnic or national identity is based on an essential continuity in group characteristics traced back to ancient times and typically tied to a specific territory (John Coakley, ‘*Primordialism’ in Nationalism Studies: Theory or Ideology?* In *Nations and Nationalism* 24(2), 2017, pp. 327-347).

⁷ McGarry and O’Leary are among those authors who have been working on consociationalism extensively, especially with regards to Northern Ireland. See e.g. John McGarry and Brendan O’Leary, *Explaining Northern Ireland* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1995); John McGarry and Brendan O’Leary, *Consociational Engagements* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004).

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