SOUTH AFRICA: A CONSOCIATIONAL PATH TO PEACE?

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The Promise of Consociationalism

Consociationalism, developed from Arend Lijphart's study of the Netherlands in *The Politics of Accommodation* (1968), advances a system of consensual multi-ethnic power-sharing as opposed to majority rule. The basic argument is that a plural (deeply divided) society can become stable and democratic through elite accommodation and co-operation (grand coalition). The autonomy of deeply divided groups is institutionally guaranteed (segmental autonomy) and there is strong respect for principles of proportionality (in elections, allocating civil service appointments, and granting government subsidies) as well as mutual veto rights (Lijphart, 1968; 1977).

As an empirical model it is seen to explain democratic political stability in Austria, Belgium, Holland and Switzerland. Whilst, as a normative model, its chances of success in plural societies are related to a constellation of nine favourable conditions. These being: small population size, no majority segment, segments of equal size, overarching loyalties, small number of segments, geographic concentration of segments, socio-economic equality, traditions of accommodation and lack of external threats (Lijphart, 1977:53-103).

Since its initial formulation in the late-1960s consociationalism has led to a highly influential school of studies and consociational engineering has been marketed, particularly by Lijphart, as a genuinely attractive option to address the seemingly intractable ethnic divisions of South Africa. Mainly, it is argued, because unlike the 'British' Westminster model of majoritarian democracy, consociationalism does not result in the permanent exclusion of minority interests from government (Lijphart, 1985). And, in fact, since the unbanning of the African National Congress (ANC) and release of Nelson Mandela in February 1990 the National Party (NP) has embarked on a process of negotiating a new constitutional framework with consociational features which will assure defence of minority rights (Taylor, 1990).

Is, however, consociationalism a genuine option? Is it realizable? Will it guarantee peace and stability? To consociationalists it is, in fact, the only realistic way forward for such plural societies. As Lijphart asserts, 'the realistic choice is not between the British normative model of democracy and the consociational

model, but between consociational democracy and no democracy at all'
(1977:238). It is argued that in the case of South Africa some form of partition
may be the only solution if consociationalism fails (Lijphart, 1985:46).

The consociational position has been resolutely defended and Lijphart argues
that critics have failed to invalidate his arguments (1985:83-117). At least one
critic concurs: David Laitin notes that 'much of the criticism levelled at con-
sociation has been successfully handled by Lijphart' (1987:264). This, however,
reflects more the inadequacy of existing criticisms rather than the strength of
consociationalism. For, there are two key respects in which Lijphart's work can
be found to be seriously wanting - over the understanding of ethnicity and
endorsement of the mainstream social scientific method. These are considered
in turn.

The Meaning of Ethnicity

Whilst consociationalism has often been subjected to debate at the level of its
internal logic, little attention has been directed to fully and seriously questioning
implicit assumptions about ethnicity. At this level, consociationalism is
problematic in that it fails to address complex social dynamics and cannot
adequately explain how and why deeply divided societies, like South Africa,
should be understood in terms of ethnicity.

Lijphart's arguments are tied to plural society theory in which, reflecting the
prevailing academic consensus of the late-colonial period, the key underlying
source of conflict in societies marked by social and cultural pluralism, is taken
to lie in deep primordial forces of ethnic identity.[1] The primordial perspective
holds that: 'Before an individual becomes a member of a society or nation,
modernizing or otherwise, he or she already has a sense of common origins, of
cultural or physical sameness, or of simple affinity - of "our kind"' (Greenberg,
1980:14). It is because ethnic differences are thus taken to reflect inherent and
universal divisions within the human species that they are seen as 'inevitable
determinants of social organization' (Miles, 1989:87).

This, Lijphart accepts. He argues that ethnicity is not simply related to material
factors and must be seen in terms of 'primordial' group loyalties which 'have
extremely deep and strong roots' (1977:227). Ethnicity is taken as an immediate
factor with a tenacity and an irreversibility in divided societies. Any efforts to
eradicate ethnic loyalties are seen to be 'quite unlikely to succeed' and counter-
productive (1977:24). It is important to recognize that Lijphart's work neces-
sitates an uncritical acceptance of the primacy and permanency of ethnicity. If it
is not really so intractable as all that, then the rationale for consociationalism
rapidly evaporates. As a method for systematic accommodation con-
sociationalism rests on accepting ethnic divisions as discrete basic building

blocks (1977:45).

Lijphart's attempt to offer theoretical content to notions of ethnicity does, however, fall short. The central problem is that rather than sociologically account for the presumed force of ethnicity it is taken as a given and cultural differences are reified as immutable; the terms 'plural society' and 'primordialism' are used as if they were explanation enough and serve as theoretical vanishing points. Subjective (psychological and emotional) dimensions of ethnicity are not probed; there is, for example, no attempt to focus on cognitive aspects of prejudice and social psychological processes of ethnic categorization. This is poor social science and represents a major failing. If, as Lijphart maintains, ethnicity is an independent causal factor, the specific causal dynamics involved have to be shown in detail. Just how do presumed ethnic differences act as the major obstacle to change in deeply divided societies? How is a 'plural society' different from a non-plural society?² Furthermore, abandoning any semblance of serious comparative study, failing to probe social processes at work and de-emphasizing the importance of nationalism, ethnicity is merely assumed to essentially refer to the same phenomenon in the different settings selected for study.³ But can ethnicity really be taken to have the same meaning in South Africa as in Holland and Austria?

The argument that ethnicity has an independent causal significance, with its own effects and determinate relationships, is not sustained. In truth, contentions about ethnic categories as discrete entities with exclusive characteristics have no solid basis. There is no social scientific validity to statements about natural divisions within the human species. This is clear when it is recognized that ethnic categorization is a comparatively recent phenomenon. There is no immanent reality to such categories as Zulu, Xhosa and Afrikaner. It is not surprising that Lijphart, accepting ethnic blocs as monolithic, also ignores the nature of intra-group conflicts and their regional variations.⁴ Lijphart's emphasis on the ex-clusiveness of ethnic identity leads to some shaky conclusions, especially in his view that in South Africa, under conditions of open electoral competition, there would be no majority segment because 'ethnic groups are by far the strongest candidates for acting as segments' (1985:121). This fails to recognize that most Africans have not internalized ethnic labels and that the African National Congress is inclusive and promotes a non-racial patriotism (Mayer, 1975; Adam, 1990).

In fact, Lijphart's stress on the 'given' nature of ethnicity is belied by his argument that, because 'group identification and loyalty are not a zero-sum game', consociationalism can work to defuse ethnic divisions (1975:86). Thus, as Luigi Graziano has written: 'One is led... to the paradoxical conclusion that in consociational democracy, integration is premised on the permanent division

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of society into mutually exclusive blocs' (1980:351). Throughout Lijphart's work this stark contradiction is left to stand; there being no attempt to recognize the limits of this reading and seriously assess competing interpretations of ethnicity - to explicitly analyze the situational and malleable nature of ethnicity or to address the debate concerning primordial needs and instrumental dimensions of ethnic identity.[5]

Lijphart's failure to address such issues is a direct result of accepting primordial notions of ethnic identity as *the* cause of conflict. For, by emphasizing subjective factors, consociationalism locates 'explanation' outside the ambit of social structural forces.[6] Little room is given to the role of underlying material conditions, issues pertinent to class analysis and patterns of state control.[7] Lijphart does not focus on the legacy of colonial relationships, consider patterns of ownership of land and capital or ask who benefits from political systems so strongly marked by ethnic divisions. The extent to which ethnic divisions parallel wide socio-economic inequalities - notably pertaining to income differentials, the poverty line, and unemployment rates - in South Africa are played down. There are few references to widely documented patterns of discrimination.[8] To the extent that such issues are discussed, Lijphart's rejection of materially-based explanations is poorly argued. It is based on a crude empiricist representation of Marxist approaches in which appeals to the 'fact' that economic differences are secondary to questions of ethnic loyalties are seen as being sufficient counterweight.

The deeper reason as to why Lijphart's position is so underdeveloped is not, however, hard to fathom. It is simply that ethnic difference is not a primordial quality. Ethnicity is not innate, it is not essentially 'given'. Rather, ethnicity is socially constructed, it is an abstraction, a fluid ideological notion that does not exist outside of the mind (Sharp, 1989a). And as such it has been deliberately fostered by ruling interests to support certain social formations and consolidate control.

That ethnicity is better understood as a social construction, historically based in particular economic and political policies which have sought to constitute ethnic difference, is evident from any critically informed analysis of South African society. For, the National Party has endeavoured, through apartheid, to construct a nation of ethnic minorities. Apartheid, drawing on organic notions of 'national' communities derived from German Romanticism, created a view that South Africa is a multi-national country comprised of discrete ethnic groups, such as Zulus and Xhosas (Sharp, 1989b; Sparks, 1990:147-182). These ethnic identities have been implanted and constantly reinforced through the 'homeland' system to serve political ends; the denial of political rights to Africans; and the perpetuation of a cheap labour system.

From this perspective, the agenda for the social scientist is simple; instead of grounding explanations through recourse to the 'fact' of ethnic identity that 'cannot be wished away' (Lijphart, 1989:22-23), the starting point for analysis should be to ask how ethnicity has arisen, is sustained, and can be changed. Such 'facts' are not 'givens' that can be divorced from their material context but socially constructed under specific historical conditions.

Failing to perceive this, consociationalism's reading of ethnicity does not provide a valid social theoretical basis for understanding deeply-divided societies. When it comes down to it, Lijphart's position lacks explanatory power and can be interpreted as merely resting on employing a formal framework of accommodation with a crude mechanical logic. As Brian Barry puts it, 'Have proportional representation and a grand coalition and you'll become Swiss or Dutch' (1975:395). In this light, to spend time promoting consociationalism as an option for South Africa is not very profitable; there are no solid grounds for believing that it can lead to lasting peace. In fact, to accept and propagate consociationalism is dangerous.

Consociationalism misleadingly denies a common humanity and rejects the view that: 'Political solutions which remove the factors that evoke ethnic identification may produce greater stability than those which explicitly build upon and reinforce such identification' (Kasfir, 1986:14). Instead of attempting to abolish or weaken divisions, ethnic polarization into communal blocs is encouraged, institutionally entrenched and legitimated (Lijphart, 1985:106-107). The reason segmental autonomy is promoted is to limit the potential of inter-ethnic contact which is seen to invariably erupt into hostility (Lijphart, 1977:88). This is a disturbing position; not only, as Heribert Adam and Kogila Moodley recognize, does this erode 'the middle ground of compromising reformists... on both ends of the spectrum' (1986:206), but it articulates with the language of apartheid. Most ominously, what Lijphart has done, without offering any definite proof, is to accept a basic tenet of apartheid - that ethnic contact leads to friction and therefore segregation must be pursued.[9] It is not perhaps surprising then to find Lijphart making statements that appear to offer a defence of National Party policy: 'Ethnic differences are an unalterable fact, and what the government's widely despised policies have succeeded in doing is not to manufacture them artificially but to counteract and soften them artificially' (1989:14).

To take ethnicity, as consociationalism does, as a 'fact' of human existence is to reflect only the entrenchment and reproduction of dominant models of political reality, it fails to see how it has been socially constructed and represents only one among many ideological forms of representation. Until a higher level of theoretical analysis is developed which moves beyond simply attributing

ethnicity with a latent logic and shows how specific forms of ethnic conscious-
ness are socially constructed in relation to material conditions (and that can
connect with practice), the search for peace is likely to remain elusive. On these
grounds alone there is a convincing case for rejecting Lijphart's work. In any
event, further objections can be advanced; for, a basic and even more fundamen-
tal problem is Lijphart's firm endorsement of the mainstream scientific view of
politics.

Consociationalism as Pseudo-Science

To Lijphart the comparative method, along with the experimental, statistical
and case-study methods, is 'one of the basic scientific methods' and the task is
one 'of establishing empirical relationships among variables' (1971; 1985:88).
Thus, Lijphart clearly equates science with empiricism; where, reflecting the
canons of behaviouralism, theory is taken as synonymous with making well-
founded empirical generalizations.[10]

The problem, however, is that science cannot be generated from empiricist
techniques; primarily because instances of all logically possible combinations
of conditions are not available in the study of societies and cause-effect sequen-
ces cannot be recreated experimentally. Moreover, such techniques fail to grasp
deeper meanings inherent in the 'facts'; the world of appearances does not
constitute an adequate basis for social scientific analysis.[11]

It is not hard to see that Lijphart presents consociationalism as an empirical
theory of comparative politics which does not employ a case-orientated approach
that is sensitive to all the interdependent dimensions of human life and the fact
that cases have specific histories and identities. Rather, Lijphart uses a mechani-
cal process of searching for empirical patterns that are taken to have cross-socie-
tal commonality. The model of consociationalism and its preconditions are
arrived at by inferring causal connections through empirical association on the
basis of the single and widely contested case of the Netherlands (1917-1967).
Only then, with reference to other presumed Western European consociations
and relying more on teasing out the consequences of definition, does the model
gain wider currency and the conditions assume empirical generalization. Switch-
ing from a descriptive to a normative mode, the nine conditions are then, through
a case-by-case approach, related to the study of how consociationalism may fare
in plural societies such as South Africa.

Obviously, from a social scientific point of view, the central task for con-
sociationalism revolves around trying to actually establish valid causal relation-
ships. Lijphart's way forward is quite simple. It is tied to the view that 'virtually
all social scientific knowledge is *probabilistic* in nature' (Lijphart, 1985:115,
italics added). Thus support for consociationalism must be expressed not in terms
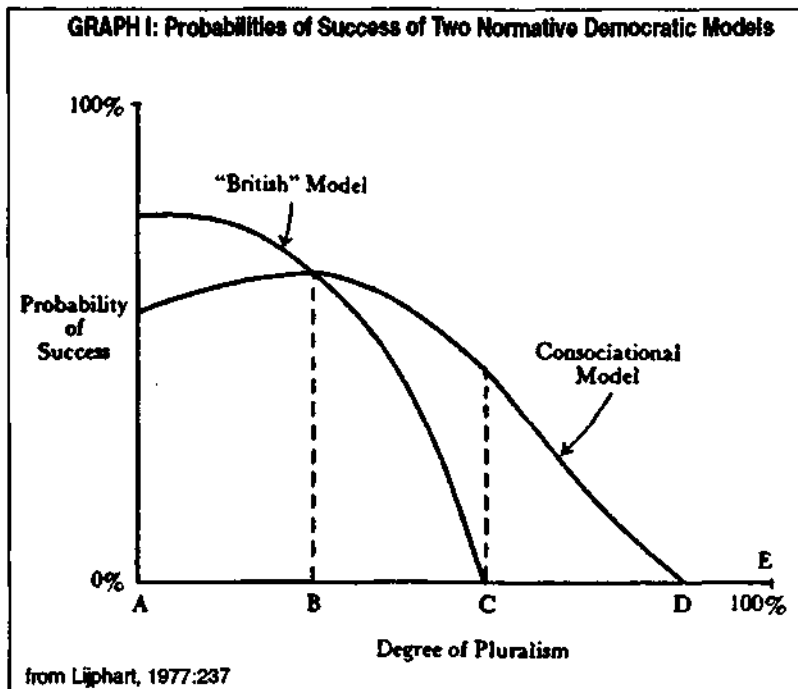
of necessity but of probabilities and chance. Throughout his many writings Lijphart tallks of 'perfectly valid *probabilistic* propositions' and '*probable* causal relationships'. Generally, 'consociational democracy has a good *chance* to succeed in a plural society and certainly a much better *chance* than majoritarian democracy' (1985:89, italics added). The nine favourable conditions used to specify the circumstances in which consociationalism can be established and maintained are treated in terms of probabilities. In *Power-Sharing in South Africa* the conditions are linked to a five-point scale for six countries, giving an apparent quantitative basis to determine probabilities (1985:120, table 5.1).

Lijphart's work cannot, however, be assessed in terms of probability. This is because Lijphart fails to appreciate that a relative frequency can only be expressed in terms of probability if the number of cases taken into account is infinite and that a probability is a calculation not based on observable facts. Lijphart's probabilities could only be specified by presupposing laws that go beyond the finite data available. And anyhow probabilities cannot be used to actually explain a particular case.[12] In short, Lijphart's talk of probabilities is non-scientific and therefore meaningless.

Not surprisingly, Lijphart's key variables are not fully operationalized and probabilities are nowhere quantified. This is best shown in Lijphart's graph for 'Probabilities of Success of Two Normative Democratic Models' from *Democracy in Plural Societies* (1977). Here (see Graph I), there is no attempt to discuss how the axis of 'Probability of Success' could be measured. Thus, how are points A, B, C and D to be determined? At what point, for example, does democracy become impossible? These issues are not substantially refined in Lijphart's later works.

Labelling the conditions as 'probabilistic' which are only 'probably' true, dictates that they can never be verified or falsified by observation. Caught in this limbo, open to everything and nothing, it is not surprising that Lijphart's conditions float around as being neither necessary nor sufficient; that scores assigned to the conditions do not actually alter recommendations (Laitin, 1987:265); and that Lijphart is reduced to offering basic Machiavellian maxims, placing an emphasis on how voluntaristic factors of leadership and elite prudence can make the difference (1985:127).

It is evident that the aura of scientific objectivity that surrounds Lijphart's work cannot be upheld; it is unable to offer an adequate level of coherency and fails to deliver valid social scientific knowledge. In sum, consociationalism can be reduced to a skilful combination of pseudo-scientific techniques to elaborate what are a weakly drawn series of empirical generalizations tied to aprioristic normative notions. For, stripped of its social scientific pretensions, consociationalism represents a controversial value position that reflects deep

GRAPH I: Probabilities of Success of Two Normative Democratic Models

Probability of Success — 100% to 0%

"British" Model

Consociational Model

Degree of Pluralism — A, B, C, D, 100%, E

from Lijphart, 1977:237

ideological biases. In truth, even use of the term 'democracy' commends certain politically conservative values.[13]

The problem with most discussions of Lijphart's work is that they have been internal critiques that have focused on highlighting weak points and unresolved issues within consociational theory and have not challenged the empiricist method itself.[14] The point has to be made that the mainstream scientific view of politics falls short in providing real knowledge. Empirical generalizations, such as those offered by Lijphart, cannot be taken as self-warranting for they fail to provide adequate explanation or prediction. MCP van Schendelen, for example, is right to argue that 'The present consociational view has serious shortcomings in the areas of consistent theoretical thinking, logical relationships, meaningful conceptualizations, valid measurements, longitudinal data-sets, and inter-subjective knowledge', but wrong to suggest that 'fresh empirical research' is needed to verify assumptions of consociational theory (1983:26). This is to miss the point that arguments for consociationalism cannot be empirically proven. The way forward must rest not on seeking modification to consociationalism but its outright rejection.

An Alternative Perspective

Thus, not only do consociational options overplay ethnicity by attributing to it a specificity and thereby legitimating it but they are advanced on an inadequate conception of the social sciences. These problems are inter-linked and together reflect a far from adequate level of theoretical conceptualization.

What is required is a new approach with a higher level of theoretical sophistication. One that through being empirical, interpretative, and critical escapes the confines of primordialism and simple empiricism.[15] One in which ethnicity is related to underlying material conditions and where the central issue is not seen as trying to accommodate division but of being concerned to break it down and demystify ethnic lines of division. Such a perspective must emphasize the enlightenment function of social research rather than claims for mainstream scientific status. Furthermore, in providing a critical edge to enable the deconstruction of ethnicity it is necessary to recognize the social psychological process of ethnic categorization and understand how cognitive processes may prevent people from becoming aware of their own biases.

As Lijphart's work represents poor social science, he presents a false choice: in South Africa it is not a question of having either the 'British' (Westminster) model or the consociational model of democracy. The path to peace rests more on developing a new theoretical perspective and connecting it to the development of an alternative model of democracy tied to precepts of direct participatory democracy and democratic socialism (Pateman, 1970; Held, 1987). Issues of socio-economic equality and wealth redistribution must be addressed and new democratic structures and policies that stress people's commonality developed. In particular, there is a need to advance strategies of empowerment that enable people to achieve a critical distance from the dominant forms of socialization and institutional control - to thereby challenge and overturn the reading of ethnicity fed by the ideology and practice of apartheid.

NOTES
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1. On the initial development of plural society theory, see Furnivall (1939) and Smith (1965).
2. For a detailed critique that shows how consociationalism has, in fact, been randomly applied, see Halpern (1986).
3. The belief that ethnicity means the same thing in different settings is widely held. See, for example, Rothschild (1981) and Horowitz (1985).
4. The Afrikaans-speaking community is not, for example, the homogeneous bloc it is often assumed to be (O'Meara, 1983).
5. See Bates (1983), Kasfir (1986) and Young (1986).
6. In this regard, see the critique of 'social and cultural pluralism' by Johnstone (1976).
7. In these respects, Lijphart's study of the Netherlands in The Politics of Accommodation (1968) has been contested by Kieve (1981).
8. See, for example, the annual Race Relations Survey published by the South African Institute of Race Relations (Johannesburg).
9. Pappalardo (1981:383) has challenged Lijphart's reading that social contact sharpens conflict.

10. For a full discussion of behaviouralism, see Ricci (1984:144-49).
11. On the limits of empiricist techniques, see MacIntyre (1971), Willer and Willer (1973),
    Bernstein (1976) and Ragin (1989).
12. On the pitfalls of probability in empiricism, see Hernandez-Cela (1973).
13. More generally, on the illusionary nature of claims to objectivity, see Horkheimer (1972). On
    the problems of establishing a value-neutral notion of democracy, see Skinner (1973).
14. As in the contributions of Daalder (1974), Pappalardo (1981) and Steiner (1981).
15. On the need for such a restructuring of social and political theory, see Bernstein (1976).

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