# *Theory Talks*

*Presents*

## THEORY TALK #8

# AREND LIJPHART ON SHARING POWER IN AFRICA AND THE FUTURE OF DEMOCRACY

Theory Talks

is an interactive forum for discussion on actual International Relations-related topics for both students and specialists. Theory Talks frequently invites cutting-edge specialists in the field to open a debate, discuss current issues or elucidate a theory.

**Citation**: Schouten, P (2008) 'Theory Talk #8: Arend Lijphart on Sharing Power in Africa and the Future of Democracy', *Theory Talks*, http://www.theory-talks.org/2008/05/theory-talk-8.html (26-05-2008)

# AREND LIJPHART ON SHARING POWER IN AFRICA AND THE FUTURE OF DEMOCRACY

**Arend Lijphart is best known for his theory of 'consociational' or 'power sharing' democracy, which enables the peaceful governance of deeply divided societies. While his power sharing model has been widely criticized, it is also being adopted in countries as diverse as the Netherlands, India, Austria, South Africa, and Malaysia. In this *Talk*, Lijphart explains why, in the relationship between country size and democracy, 'size doesn't matter', how democracy seems to change since the end of the Cold War and discusses the conditions for democracy in Africa.**

**What is, according to you, the biggest challenge / principal debate in current IR? What is your position or answer to this challenge / in this debate?**

For me, that is a difficult question, not only because I'm retired, but also because I consider myself to be a straightforward empiricist, so theoretical debates don't really have implications for my work. In any case, I certainly don't belong to the rational choice school, nor would I be able to concretely position myself in any purely theoretical debate. I do think you should think things through theoretically before starting to work, but in the end, for me, sound academic work is mainly about sound empirical testing. I have been quicker then most scholars to assert that if you find a correlation between factor A and factor B, and if factor B is a favorable outcome, then you have found something that has policy implications: you like B? Try to introduce A in order to get B! I, for example, spoke about how to raise voter turnout in my presidential address to the American Political Science Association. If you find a way to raise the rate of voter turnout, and if you also like a higher turnout, then you have an obvious policy implication! I don't understand why social scientists are often reluctant to draw policy implications from there work. I have been influenced by Marxist reading, but my goal has always been to realize the favorable B, so I guess I could call my self eclectic.

**How did you arrive at where you currently are in IR?**

Well, for me, my personal history has fundamentally influenced my intellectual work. I was born in Apeldoorn, the Netherlands, in 1936, and I was raised in small town nearby, called Heerde. Ten years after the war, in 1955, I wanted to go 'out there', see something of the world. Since I was too young to enlist in the army, went to college in the US. I was planning to just go there for one year. But one year became two; and after the second, a bachelor degree was just one year more. I gradually became interested in political science, and since that was a study area in the

States since the late 19th century, and in Holland just after the Second World War, quality was simply far better in the States. I guess my interest in both 'politics' and the 'international' came from my family: my father was a small town politician, so we talked about politics a lot, and my mother had lived in Surinam, Germany, Indonesia and Switzerland before moving to Holland, which is why I got interested in *international* politics.

Also, I have to admit that living in occupied Holland throughout the Second World War affected my outlook on things. In 1956, for example, I was College in the States, and I noticed how my fellow students reacted differently to events like the Suez Crisis and the Hungarian Crisis. While my America friends wondered about being drafted, getting send overseas or getting caught up in a third World War which they would win, I imagined the horrors of living in an occupied country during the Cold War – be it under communists or Americans.

I basically started studying the Dutch political system, and in that process I found out that there are a lot more societies with political divisions, like Lebanon and in various societies in Africa. We're talking about 1968 here, a very turbulent time, with decolonization in the 'South' and discussion and sometimes even revolution in the 'North'. I lived through those turbulent days in the heart of it all, so to speak, for I was teaching at the University of California, Berkeley at that time. While politically the department were I worked was very much divided, intellectually, I was not really affected by what happened; that year, I published my first book and introduced my concept of 'consociationalism' or power-sharing theory in the first issue of *Comparative Political Studies*. That theory of mine holds that these fundamentally divided societies can actually be governed democratically, if there is a sort of overarching, cooperating elite.

While I first applied it just to the Netherlands, I later found a method to apply it to divided societies more generally. And the most divided society I could find at that time – that was constantly in the news for it – was South Africa. From 1971 on, I went there several times to talk to politicians, civil servants and academics; I became part of the Buthelezi Commission, which recommended applying a consociational model of democracy. By the early eighties they had finally adopted the idea of power sharing at a national level, although what they implemented in the end was just a tiny step towards my model, because most colored voters were not admitted to the political system yet. By thus excluding 72% of the population, they of course made a fundamental error – which is basically why I wrote the book *Power Sharing in South Africa* in 1985: just to point out the flaws and to lay out my ideas. Luckily, in 1994, they adopted basically all of my recommendations.

**What would a student need to become a specialist in IR?**

Yet again, I am, as they say, 'out of circulation' in the academic world; but I would still say that one needs to study a lot, and if possible, in a place that has an 'international' outlook on things. I would say that studying in the States – although things seem to change very fast – is still the best option. The pressure they put on graduate students is very high, but rewarding in the end.

**There seems to be a worldwide tendency towards economic integration pared with shrinking the state's control over the economy. How do you see the future of the consensus state?**

There are a lot of people worried about what they see as the 'definitive' influence of tendencies such as privatization and globalization. I am, in a way, optimistic, in the sense that I have a feeling that while now the swing of the pendulum may go one way, there will surely be a reverse movement in the other direction, at least concerning political systems. I don't fear that government will become more majoritarian and less consensus in a definitive kind of way, just because it is possible to change a political system.

**Where does 'power-sharing democracy' come from?**

First of all, it is a Dutch export product. For me, it started in the Netherlands in 1917, with what is called the 'pacification' – the leaders of the various social groups coming together to reform the Dutch political system in order to avoid that increasingly rising tensions turn into something more problematic and maybe even violent. Then there's another view, defended by Hans Daalder who says the system started much earlier, when in the seventeenth century the Dutch Provinces joined together in a decentralized system, and engaged in a long history of a culture of compromise that would become national politics later on.

With regard to power sharing being a Dutch export product, I often heard the criticism – especially in Africa – that I'm trying to implement a European model in Africa, which is not true anymore: it is, for a long time already, also the political model of India, Malaysia and Lebanon.

**You've defended convincingly that consensus democracies (such as the Netherlands) are 'kinder' states. There is however a common sense assumption, based on the work of, amongst others, Rousseau, that this kind of democracy is only possible in small states – bigger countries tend to be less (consensus) democratic.**

Here we face two common sense assumptions: one, that the Netherlands is a small country; and two, that consensus democracy only works in small countries.

Concerning the first assumption: Holland is not such a small country! We have about the same population size as Australia, and a very strong economy. Yes, Australia is a lot bigger in geographical terms, but I think that theoretically, that does not matter for the democratic functioning of a political system. What does matter, so I assert in my book *Patterns of democracy*, is that as countries get bigger, they tend to be more decentralized, but yet again, you can have a very democratically decentralized system.

That relates to the second issue: there are a lot of countries that share some aspects of a consensus democracy which are not small at all, such as India and Japan. That doesn't mean I think Rousseau wasn't right, I just think that he refers to another scale when comparing the political systems of 'small' and 'big' countries. When referring to small, he was talking about communities something the size of a small canton in Switzerland, where you can apply direct democracy: have town meetings…

I do think Rousseau was right, though, in the sense that as soon as the unit becomes larger, representation becomes necessary and increasingly indirect. That raises the question of what *kind* of representation works the best. Representation is quite paradoxical in one sense: it is necessary for democracy, but the more indirect it is, the less democratic you could label a system.

**Sub-Sahara Africa is inserted into globalization in a particular(ly dramatic) way, where the 'consensus democracy' (power-sharing) model does not seem to be implementable easily, because the state is not properly instituted in civil society, thus giving rise to (ethnically motivated) tensions. What would be needed to make democracy work in Sub-Sahara Africa? And is democracy a first step or an effect of development?**

That's a very old question, first formulated by Lipset in his book *Political Man* (1960). He shows that there is a very strong empirical correlation between democracy and stages of economical development, and I am quite sure that that correlation still exists. I think democracy and economical development are mutually supportive; an effective democracy will support economical development, and vice versa, although it is not something that works in one direction: you have to have both, which makes it a constitutive relationship and thus problematic to predict.

More specific for the case of Africa, I have to admit that a lot of my ideas on Africa come from Sir Arthur Lewis, whom I respect – and cite – a lot. He was a very interesting man: a black scholar from the Caribbean, an outstanding economic who won one of the first Nobel Prizes in that field, and who was economic advisor to, amongst others, the governments of Ghana and Nigeria. What he advised them, and which he repeats in his book *Politics in West Africa* (1965), is that the argument that in order to have economic development, you need to have a *non*-democratic government, was a sham. He argued as one of the first, that exactly because those countries were plural, divided and decentralized, you need a deep democracy. I credit him to be the first consociational scholar.

**Why do some countries adopt a consociational model and others don't?**

I basically formulated that in my book *Democracy in Plural Society*, which has been widely discussed and criticized. Luckily, I think it to be better to be criticized than to be ignored. One of the criticisms was that I did not list the conditions under which the adoption and retention of a consociational democracy occurs. I think that was right, so I responded with a list of conditions. I finally formulated nine conditions under which it would be favorable for a country to adopt a power sharing democracy, like for example: is there an ethnic majority, then they will prefer a majority rule. A culture of compromise is another. The rest I formulate in my '96 article on India published in the American Political Science Review.

**Do you see any global pattern of change in the way democracy is implemented in the state?**

Actually, since the end of the Cold War, I have observed that a lot of countries have changed their electoral systems. I don't know if there is a connection with the end of the Cold War; that remains to see. One of the most outstanding examples is New Zealand, which in 1996 went from a British-style system to a more proportional representation, inspired on the German model, which has fundamentally changed the nature of New Zealand politics – they have a multi-party system now, coalition cabinets or sometimes a minority cabinet… In terms of its political system, it starts looking a lot more like Northern European countries like Austria, Belgium, the

Netherlands and Germany, while the tendency of the 'shrinking state' would dictate a change the other way around. And there have been more countries that changed, apart from, of course, the ones that were in the sphere of Soviet influence. And that is peculiar, because of something called 'institutional conservatism': institutions tend to become stable and difficult to change. But the examples of New Zealand and other countries show that change is possible and never definitive.

**Looking forward to the coming elections, I'm curious about the book you're working on, comparing American democracy to that of 28 other countries. How is American democracy different?**

The book will compare the States to 28 other countries that have been a democracy at least since the start of the nineteenth century and have a population exceeding five million, and the American system differs in almost all aspects. I'll give you a few: the States is almost unique in being a fully presidential system; it is completely unique in being a 'clean', exclusive, two-party system; also the primaries, that is, the way to nominate candidates for the presidency office, run by the state and not the parties themselves, is something idiosyncratic. In all other countries, those are managed by the parties themselves, if they have competition. In the States, it's huge. Another example, I'm currently filling out my ballot for the coming state elections here in California, the second this year, and there's one more coming up. I'm voting for about 25 propositions. That's not just more than in any referendum of any other country, it is *way* more. People are generally not aware of these fundamental differences.

**Last Question. There's some debate going on about global governance, and even a world state. What are your thoughts on that debate?**

I would most certainly be in favor of a world state, because I prefer Grotius' world in which there are governing norms to the anarchy of Hobbes which is – still – popular in the United States. I've had the privilege to work with Karl Deutch, together with Ernst Haas one of the big integration theorists of the fifties and sixties, who picked up on Grotius to argue that our world is not completely anarchical. Furthermore, he argues that is might even be better not to have a world government, but some kind of decentralized governance, because we would still pick fights about who gets to manage that super-powerful central government. My point of view would be: if we have a world government, it would have to be a power sharing one.

**Arend Lijphart is Research Professor Emeritus of Political Science at the University of California, San Diego, and specialized in comparative politics, and his current research is focused on the comparative study of democratic institutions. He is the author or editor of more than a dozen books, including *Democracy in Plural Societies: A Comparative Exploration* (1977), *Power-Sharing in South Africa* (1985), E*lectoral Laws and Their Political Consequences* (1986), *Parliamentary versus Presidential Government* (1992), *Electoral Systems and Party Systems: A Study of Twenty-Seven Democracies* (1994), and *Patterns of Democracy: Government Forms and Performance in Thirty-Six Countries* (1999). Lijphart has received numerous awards throughout his prestigious career in recognition of his groundbreaking research. In 1989, he was elected to the National**

**Academy of Arts and Sciences and from 1995-96 served as President of the American Political Science Association.**

*Related links*

- Lijphart's Faculty Profile at UCSD
- Visit the Lijphart Elections Archive, a static research collection of district level election results for approximately 350 national legislative elections in 26 countries that was maintained through 2003, here
- Read a summary of Lijphart's mayor works here