Politics in Deeply Divided Societies
POLITICS IN DEEPLY DIVIDED SOCIETIES

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There are social and political divisions in all societies. But deeply divided societies are a special category of cases, in which a fault line that runs through the society causes political polarisation and establishes a force field. This divide makes establishing and sustaining democratic rule a huge challenge. The nature of such societies and the manner in which their political problems have been addressed form the subject of this book. My approach is thematic but it is linked to consideration of individual polities throughout. However, the relevance of the analysis is by no means confined to just the cases discussed in the book. This is an important consideration in the context of the political changes transforming the Middle East and North Africa, from which fresh examples of deeply divided societies seem likely to emerge.

This book has had a long gestation. I have been lecturing on the subject of the politics of deeply divided societies for most of my academic career. Initially it was as a theme in a larger Comparative Politics course, but from 1992 a module just focusing on deeply divided societies was established and has been taught at Queen’s University of Belfast ever since. I owe a huge debt of gratitude to the students who have taken the module. Their critical engagement with what they were taught stimulated my own thinking. It helped that nearly all of them had expertise aplenty on the subject, simply by reason of having grown up in Northern Ireland. Another debt is owed to the numerous colleagues who have shared in the teaching of the course over the years. They include Neo Loizides, Roberto Belloni, Karin Fierke, Paul Mitchell, Amalendu Misra, Ephraim Nimni, Stefan Andreasson, and Peter McLoughlin. But a special mention must be made of Beverley Milton-Edwards. She and I previously put together a book
manuscript that was intended to be a textbook for the module. This ultimately came to nothing, as each of us pursued other projects, but some of the material I contributed to that effort has proved useful as a source for this book.

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INTRODUCTION

Deeply divided societies are plainly not a new phenomenon. The divisions that Shakespeare imagined in the Verona in which he set his play were based on the realities of the factionalism to be found in many a polity in medieval Europe. Indeed, Shakespeare drew on stories that were rooted in the existence of a violent political rivalry between two families that had been fought out across Lombardy. The cleavage Shakespeare described was a vertical one. Thus the Montague and the Capulet families were equal in status, as Shakespeare’s opening lines make clear. But the divisions that mark deeply divided societies can also commonly be horizontal, pitting members of a subordinate community against a dominant one. And there is, similarly, no shortage of historical precedent for societies with horizontal divisions. Further, any number of examples might be given of societies where such divisions have led to conflict, going back to the great slave revolts that took place in the ancient world. Both types of deeply divided societies will be examined in this book. However, for the most part, the emphasis will be on the examination of contemporary societies, and not on how the concept of deeply divided societies might be applied in different historical contexts.

This is in part a choice made because the existing literature on deeply divided societies is about contemporary cases. In particular, the
identification of deeply divided societies as presenting a special challenge to the establishment of democratic governance is comparatively new, especially insofar as the assumptions, both of the superiority of democracy over other forms of government and of its near universal feasibility, are themselves relatively recent. That is reflected in the fact that most examples of the use of the term ‘deeply divided societies’ in the titles of books or journal articles date from the last 40 years. Indeed, the added impetus given to the concept by the rash of ethnic conflicts that followed the end of the Cold War means that many of these works were published after 1990 (e.g. Harel-Shalev 2010; Kumar 2009; O’Flynn 2006; Al-Haj 2004). However, too much should not be made of the use of the term as a label. The problems that deeply divided societies give rise to have been a subject of debate in politics since the beginnings of political analysis, under a variety of different rubrics. Thus, in the 1920s the focus tended to be put specifically on the question of minorities in the new states of Central and Eastern Europe, but consideration of the problem of minorities raised similar sorts of issues.

At the same time, few of the books or articles that included the term ‘deeply divided societies’ in their titles dwelt extensively on what did or did not constitute a deeply divided society. In part that was because, with general recognition of the concept as a description for a number of conflict-ridden societies – such as apartheid South Africa, Northern Ireland during the troubles and Israel/Palestine, to give the most frequently used cases – authors conducting comparative studies of these or other similar cases did not feel the need to justify use of the term. Thus, as will be discussed below, it was writers who used the term before it came into general usage who tended to be more rigorous in how they defined the concept. This is one reason why it is worthwhile to consider the circumstances in which the term entered the general discourse of political analysis.

Classifying Democracies

A major preoccupation of political scientists in the 1950s and 1960s was the political stability of democracies, by which they meant polities in which there were regular competitive elections, generally on the basis of universal adult suffrage, and civil liberties were observed. In short, they did not include so-called people’s democracies, or forms of government that used the term ‘democratic’ but did not meet the criteria of Western democracies – or, as they were sometimes also called, liberal democracies. The issue of what factors facilitated the stability of democracy mattered because of anxieties about the survival of democracy in a number of major
Western states, including France and Italy. These anxieties were compounded by the fact that experience of the catastrophic consequences of the failure of democracy remained fresh in people's minds. The main example in this context was the failure of the Weimar Republic and its replacement by the Nazi regime in Germany. These concerns now appear very dated and the shadow cast by the Weimar experience has long passed over.

 Nonetheless, from the perspective of the immediate post-war decades, the success and durability of democracy in the United States and Britain stood in marked contrast to the experience of much of the rest of the world. The fact that, at the time, other examples of successful democracy included Canada, Australia and New Zealand simply reinforced assumptions about the superiority of the Anglo-American model. In this context, two-party systems tended to be regarded as more conducive to political stability than multi-party ones. Much of the discussion of factors favourable to the operation of liberal democracy focused on the paradox at the heart of liberal democracy: the fact that political competition was central to the effective functioning of the system, but that intense political contestation plainly represented a threat to the system. In particular, there was always the danger that the rules of the game themselves might become disputed in a democracy, leading to challenges to the legitimacy of the system and to a disinclination on the part of the losers in elections, for example, to accept the outcome of the political process. This point was central to Seymour Martin Lipset’s analysis of the factors favourable to the maintenance of political stability in democracies in his seminal work *Political Man*, first published in 1959. Lipset asserted:

> Inherent in all democratic systems is the constant threat that the group conflicts which are democracy’s life-blood may solidify to the point where they threaten to disintegrate the society. Hence conditions which serve to moderate the intensity of partisan battle are among the key requisites of democratic government. (Lipset 1983: 70–1)

These considerations led to a focus on the beneficial effects of factors that tended to reduce the intensity of political conflict in a democracy and to forge political consensus. Homogeneous societies were considered to be less susceptible to extremism. But, insofar as all societies contained divisions of some kind, it was considered important that these divisions should not be mutually reinforcing. Consequently, the existence of cross-cutting cleavages was seen as conducive to moderation, and hence to stability. An influential article by Gabriel Almond put forward a four-fold classification of political systems as follows:
Almond argued that, while his scheme did not encompass all existing political systems in existence at the time, it came close to doing so (p. 393).

For Almond, the key characteristic of the Anglo-American political system was ‘a homogeneous, secular political culture’ (p. 398). His other criterion was the system’s ‘highly differentiated’ role structure. By contrast, characteristic of continental European political systems was the fragmentation of their political culture, which gave rise to a role structure in which ‘the roles are embedded in the subcultures and tend to constitute separate subsystems of roles’. Almond argued that this was a product of ‘an uneven pattern of development’, with the consequence that there was ‘in all the examples of this type of system a surviving political sub-culture’. When this occurred in combination with the existence of a communist sub-culture, the danger of immobilism in the political system existed that Almond saw as creating a threat of ‘Caesaristic’ breakthroughs with the potential to facilitate the emergence of totalitarianism. The potential for totalitarianism also existed in the category of pre-industrial countries, which, Almond argued, possessed mixed political cultures. Though the purpose of Almond’s article was the categorisation of political systems, implicit in its analysis was the idea that conditions for the creation of stable democracies existed in relatively few societies.

The influence of Almond’s article is evident from the fact that, 12 years later, the Dutch political scientist Arend Lijphart employed Almond’s classification – and its further elaboration in a book Almond co-authored with G. Bingham Powell in 1966 – as the point of departure for his article on ‘Typologies of democratic systems’ (Lijphart 1968). What attracted Lijphart to Almond’s approach was that Almond highlighted the existence of more than one form of liberal democracy, whereas most of the other current typologies of political systems of the time did not delve into the different forms that democracy might take. Lijphart did not challenge directly the empirical evidence that underscored Almond’s analysis that the Anglo-American political system was associated with political stability, the continental European with unstable and weak government. But he highlighted the major problem for these correlations of deviant cases. In this context he focused on the cases that, as Almond had asserted in his
1956 article, combined features of both the Anglo-American and the continental European systems. Lijphart noted:

All of these countries, with the exception of Austria, have multiparty systems, but they are nevertheless stable democracies. Moreover, the Benelux countries, Switzerland, and Austria have the kind of subcultural cleavage and interpenetration of parties, interest groups, media of communication, characteristic of the unstable Continental European type, but they have considerable stability; in fact, Switzerland and the Netherlands are usually counted among the most stable of the world’s democracies. (Lijphart 1968: 14)

So many deviant cases, Lijphart argued, threw doubt on hypotheses that linked multi-partyism and fragmented political cultures with instability. And he underlined the strength of the sub-cultures in the cases of the Low Countries and Austria, pointing to ‘the Catholic, Socialist, and Liberal familles spirituelles of Belgium and Luxembourg, the Catholic, Calvinist, Socialist, and Liberal zuilen of the Netherlands, and the Catholic, Socialist and Liberal-National Lager of Austria’ (p. 17). He went on:

In fact, these countries have an even more thoroughly fragmented political culture than France, Italy, and Weimar Germany, with a solid network of interpenetrating groups and media of communication within each subculture and with even less flexibility and overlapping of membership between different subcultures. One would, therefore, expect even more immobilism and instability than in the Continental European systems, but one finds just the opposite. (Ibid.).

The answer to the puzzle of these countries’ record of political stability, according to Lijphart, was to be found in a combination of political leadership and institutional design. He acknowledged that, in extreme cases of fragmentation in which the population was divided into two camps with very little overlapping membership, politics tended to resemble the exchanges that might take place between two rival states, and that in these circumstances breakdown of relations and instability were not just possible but probable. However, he argued that conflict was by no means inevitable, since the leaders of the rival camps could act to counter the effect of fragmentation, especially if they were conscious of the likely consequences of their failure to do so. In this context, he gave a brief account of Austria’s political development since the end of the First World War, in order to underscore his argument over the significance of political leadership. He pointed out that after the First World War there was an attempt to establish a grand coalition between the Catholic and the socialist Lager. However,
it failed, and the ultimate consequence was a civil war, followed by dictatorship. After the Second World War, a grand coalition was set up and ruled Austria until 1966, providing the country with the stability it had lacked between the wars.

Consociational Democracy

Lijphart identified a grand coalition, which ensured the representation in government of all of a country’s major cleavages, as one in a number of aspects of institutional design that made it possible for a society with a fragmented political culture to achieve political stability, contrary to the assumptions then current among political scientists about necessary conditions for the long-term durability of democracy. Lijphart dubbed the systems operating in the four countries of the Netherlands, Belgium, Switzerland and Austria ‘consociational democracy’. While he did not invent the term ‘consociational’, which had a long lineage, his conception of consociational democracy has become extremely influential, shaping the design of political settlements around the world, from the former Yugoslavia to Iraq and Afghanistan. The concept has proven very influential within the literature on deeply divided societies. However, it should be made clear that, in providing an account of how some of the smaller countries had achieved political stability, Lijphart was not seeking to address the problems of deeply divided societies as such.

Following Almond, Lijphart categorised democracies as having a homogeneous or a fragmented political culture. However, he considered these to be ideal types and argued that, in an empirical context,

it is advisable to think of the criteria defining the types (categories) in terms of continua rather than dichotomies. There are no examples of either completely homogeneous or completely fragmented systems; all actual democracies fall somewhere in between these two extremes. Similarly, there are no examples of either pure grand coalition government or pure democratic competition without any consociational features; in practice, this is a matter of degree. (Lijphart 1968: 35)

In later writings Lijphart replaced the term ‘fragmented systems’ with ‘plural societies’. In particular, in his 1977 book Democracy in Plural Societies, he defined a plural society as one divided by ‘segmental cleavages’, which might be ‘of a religious, ideological, linguistic, regional, cultural, racial or ethnic nature’. Further, a characteristic of these societies was that ‘political parties, interest groups, media of communication,
schools, and voluntary associations tend to be organized along the lines of segmental cleavages’ (Lijphart 1977: 3–4).

But, while it would certainly be reasonable to argue that deeply divided societies fall within the scope of plural societies as defined by Lijphart, it is evident that his notion of a plural society encompasses a much broader range of cases than might easily be fitted under the heading of a deeply divided society. This is not surprising in the light of the importance of the case of the Netherlands in the development of Lijphart’s ideas. In the same year in which his article on types of democratic systems came out, Lijphart’s study of the Netherlands, *The Politics of Accommodation*, was published (Lijphart 1975). A large part of Lijphart’s purpose in developing the concept of consociational democracy was to provide the basis for explaining how a society such as the Dutch had achieved its long record of internal peace and stability in spite of its social divisions. And it should be emphasised that another of the cases that Lijphart used as the basis for the formulation of his concept of consociational democracy also had a record of longstanding political stability and social peace: Switzerland. But he also intended that consociational democracy should be seen as a model for societies that had experienced violent conflict as a result of their divisions. Lijphart saw the adoption of consociational devices as offering such societies the prospect of achieving a measure of political stability and social peace despite their divisions and despite a previous history of violent conflict centred on these divisions.

**Conflict Regulation**

This theme was taken up by a contemporary scholar of comparative politics whom Lijphart (following Daalder) described as belonging to an ‘incipient school’ of consociational analysis: Eric Nordlinger (Lijphart 1977: xi). Nordlinger’s book, *Conflict Regulation in Divided Societies*, was published in 1972. Despite the absence of the word ‘deeply’ in the title, Nordlinger established at the outset that the subject of his book was not the management of conflict in divided societies in general, but, much more specifically, ‘conflict regulation in deeply divided societies featuring open regimes’. And he elaborated the point as follows: ‘In studying conflict regulation in deeply divided societies featuring democratic or, more broadly, open regimes, we are searching for factors that account for the stability of such regimes under conditions of severe stress’ (Nordlinger 1972: 2).

All societies, Nordlinger noted, contained class and communal divisions; but the salience that individuals tended to attach to such differences
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varied considerably and was inconsistent. However, in circumstances where shared understandings of these attachments prevailed and overriding importance was consistently attached to them, there was a strong potential for such social differences to give rise to segmental divisions or segments. And where such segments had a high degree of political salience, the basis existed for them to become conflict groups and to spawn conflict organisations resulting in political conflict. However, Nordlinger stressed that his interest did not extend to such political conflict in general, but only to cases where the outcome of such conflict was ‘intense or severe’. In this way Nordlinger sought to narrow the focus of his study to cases he usefully dubbed ‘deeply divided societies’.

The term rapidly became established in the field of comparative politics and then spread to other disciplines. As the term became embedded in scholarly discourse, the purposes for which it was used changed, with its adoption by authors whose area of study had little or nothing to do with Nordlinger’s particular interest in conflict regulation. Indeed, even in the 1970s the utility of the term for societies that lay outside the realm of the open regimes Nordlinger confined himself to was recognised. A significant contribution in this context was an article in *World Politics* by Ian Lustick entitled ‘Stability in deeply divided societies: Consociationalism versus control’ (Lustick 1979). Lustick argued that limiting the discussion of how political stability was maintained in deeply divided societies to democratic or open regimes was unnecessarily restrictive and led to a narrow focus on the use of a number of consociational devices to facilitate political accommodation between the elites of the segments or among them (if the society had more than two segments). Lustick was interested in the various means by which dominant communities maintained their position of control in horizontally deeply divided societies, and he argued that more was involved in their exercise of control over the society than simply coercion and repression.

Lustick acknowledged the role that Nordlinger had played in establishing the currency of the term ‘deeply divided societies’, but his own definition of it was by no means identical to that of Nordlinger and is worth quoting. Lustick stated that he considered a society to be deeply divided

if ascriptive ties generate an antagonistic segmentation of society, based on terminal identities with high political salience, sustained over a substantial period and a wide variety of issues. As a minimum condition, boundaries between rival groups must be sharp enough so that membership is clear and, with few exceptions, unchangeable (Lustick 1979: 325).

The largely involuntary nature of membership of a segment is a theme that recurs in much of the literature on deeply divided societies, indeed to the
extent that it might be considered a characteristic feature of such societies. More generally, the issue of the definition and nature of deeply divided societies is a sufficiently important one to require examination in a separate chapter.

Organisation of the Book

The purpose of this introduction was two-fold: firstly, to set out how and why the term ‘deeply divided societies’ entered scholarly discourse on politics; and, secondly, to explain the organisation of the rest of the book. The first issue was addressed above. It is now appropriate to address the second. Chapter 2 seeks to clarify the characteristics of deeply divided societies. It starts by setting out as comprehensively as possible the various ways in which a society may be divided. It should be noted that not all possible sources of division are likely to lead to long entrenched or intensive political conflict. Next, consideration needs to be given to the question of what distinguishes ‘deeply divided’ societies from the generality of societies, all of which contain divisions of one kind or another. In this context, it should be noted that Donald Horowitz has used the term ‘severely divided’ society to describe the case of Northern Ireland as a way of underlining the intensity of the province’s sectarian divisions and their pervasive nature (Horowitz 2001: 104–5). However, Horowitz’s term has not come into general usage. Indeed it has not even displaced the widespread use of the term ‘deeply divided’ to describe the case of Northern Ireland.

A term that is commonly, if mistakenly, used as an alternative to ‘deeply divided society’ is ‘ethnically divided society’. The obvious objection is that it only describes one type of deeply divided society. But, while using the term ‘ethnic’ limits the range of cases to be considered by specifying the nature of the division, it raises issues somewhat similar to those suggested by the concept of a deeply divided society. In particular, it begs the question of what distinguishes an ethnically divided society from one that is merely multi-ethnic in terms of the composition of its population. However, it should be conceded in this context that there are some writers who treat ethnicity as so fundamental to political life that they question the long-term viability and stability of practically all multi-ethnic societies. Their approach may be contrasted to that of Marxists, who tend to attribute a similar measure of overriding importance to divisions based upon class.

Though there are a few exceptions even on this point, most writers who use the term ‘deeply divided societies’ restrict its use to cases in which the divisions in question have given rise to violent conflict, or at the very least to the threat of violent conflict. In short, in the language used by Nordlinger