What is So Deep About 'Deeply-Divided Societies'?

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Lebanon is a deeply divided society. Or so is the claim that circulates in many academic books and textbooks, research articles, journalistic accounts, and policy circles. Such claim has also been made about several other countries such as Iraq, Cyprus, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Kenya, Myanmar, Nepal, Nigeria, Sri Lanka, Northern Ireland, and more recently Syria. But what does it really mean to classify some societies as 'deeply divided' and what are the implications of such categorization? Are 'deep divisions' always vertical and mainly ethnic or sectarian? Do we know of any 'shallowly' divided societies?

I ask these questions as a sociologist who is trained to be wary of broad paradigms that attempt to make grand claims about society at large. Sweeping generalizations and inaccurate categorizations are said to have no place in academia; yet, it is specifically from within academic circles that the 'deeply-divided societies' paradigm emerged. Whether the product of lazy scholarship or not-so innocent policy-oriented research, this paradigm has flourished and has had tremendous implications in terms of policy making and constitution writing in many – typically post-war developing - countries around the world. So where does it come from and why was it adopted?

Where does the 'Deeply Divided Societies" Paradigm come from?

In the aftermath of the Second World War, a new world order emerged dominated by the politics of identity, and the rise of conflicts and wars that were often labelled and understood as "ethnic", "communal", or "sectarian". During that time, political scientists in the West were preoccupied with the question of democracy and stability, and the applicability of the Western/liberal type of democracy in post-war societies. It is from within those academic debates that the 'deeply-divided societies' paradigm emerged to describe post-war countries with salient vertical (identity-based) cleavages that are perceived to threaten stability and peace. These debates quickly made their way to the highest policy circles to shape constitutions and policy prescriptions in many countries around the world. It became widespread to argue that

'deeply-divided societies' pose a challenge to democracy and thus require special types of arrangements. Therefore, theories of consociationalism, identity-based power-sharing, partition or secession have all flourished to propose possible solutions for democratic governance in so-called 'deeply divided societies'.

However, it is interesting to note that while these debates amongst political scientists ended up classifying *societies per se* as either 'homogeneous' or 'deeply-divided', it initially started as a discussion around the different types of political *systems* not *societies.* The famous Dutch political scientist Arend Lijphart (1968) built on the work of Gabriel Almond (1956) to distinguish between what he called "homogeneous" or "fragmented" systems. However, Lijphart (1977) quickly replaced the term "fragmented systems" with "plural societies" in his later writings, and scholars such as Nordlinger (1972) and Lustick (1979) started engaging with this rising debate by using the term 'deeply-divided societies'. These debates have set the agenda for a policy-oriented discussion on consociationalism and power-sharing that is still burgeoning in the field of comparative politics today. Thus, while the initial research agenda started off by examining different systems of governance, it quickly drifted away to classify societies at large, assuming that political systems are necessarily a reflection of social divisions and compositions: a 'deeply flawed' assumption that has marked this literature, as well as many conflict resolution prescriptions, for several decades.

A 'Deeply Flawed' Paradigm

While the 'deeply-divided societies' paradigm has gained much currency in the past 50 years, the pillars on which it is built remain highly questionable. The paradigm is based on three main assumptions: 1- 'deeply-divided societies' are societies in which vertical divisions are more salient than all other types of social divisions, 2- these vertical divisions are deep and enduring, thus 3- those societies are more prone to violence. Such a reading of social dynamics leads to the conclusion that so-called 'deeply-divided societies' are 'exceptional', and thus require special types of governance in order to maintain peace and stability. But are these assumptions solid enough to build a policy-oriented paradigm? The short answer is no.

The argument that vertical, especially ethnic or sectarian, divisions are the main framework to understand certain societies is at the core of this paradigm. The 'deeply-divided societies' paradigm views society as a mosaic of sects or ethnic groups that are internally homogenous and cohesive. Moreover, it considers that these divisions are enduring and deep enough to be the catalyst of violence and wars. Thus it understands conflict in those societies as being one between 'sects' or ethnic 'groups'. This is clear in the application of this paradigm in countries like Lebanon or Iraq where conflict is read as one between the "Christians" and the "Muslims" or the "Sunni" and the "Shia" (and the "Kurds" in Iraq, although they are also Sunni in their majority). In those cases, power-sharing agreements have been put in place in order to maintain peace and stability between the various 'segments' of society. However, what about intra-sectarian divisions and conflicts? How do we make sense of the political, regional, and class-based divisions within sects? And how do we understand and accommodate for changes and shifts in the salience of sectarian cleavages and boundaries? For example, while the main salient sectarian division in Lebanon was read as being one between the "Christians" and the "Muslims', more recently this has shifted to become perceived as one between the "Sunni" and the "Shia". Such shifts are not in line with the assumption that sectarian vertical divisions in Lebanon are deep enough to be enduring and constantly politically salient. Moreover, the main Christian-based political parties in Lebanon today are divided along political lines between what is known to be the "March 8th" and the "March 14th" camps. So what does it mean to speak of conflict in Lebanon in terms of sects *per se* when the actual players are sectarian political parties, and the main determinant of sectarian polarization is related to political coalitions and alignments? Moreover, are such divisions a feature of a 'deeply-divided society' or that of 'deeply-polarized politics'? And is political polarization necessarily exceptional or requiring of any type of special policy arrangement for democracy to prevail?

One of the major flaws of the 'deeply-divided societies' paradigm is that it analyzes social and political conflict using the wrong categories. Considering that there are some societies where vertical sectarian or ethnic divides are the main (or only) way to read conflict is shortsighted. Conflict in all societies is complex and can only be understood as an intersection of various divisions and polarizations. Therefore, the very labelling of conflict as 'sectarian' or 'ethnic' is

too reductionist in most cases. Moreover, at a time when mass mobilizations and uprisings around the Arab world – from Beirut and Basra to Algiers and Khartoum – are clearly raising socio-economic and democratic political demands, the heavy focus on identity politics and ethnic/sectarian divisions to understand and classify social dynamics seems absurd. Are class divisions in those societies not deep enough to qualify as a classifying feature? Are divisions between secular or democratic forces opposed to autocratic or sectarian regimes also not worthy of being read as a deep division? The gap between social realities on the ground in the Arab world and the political categories adopted within the 'deeply-divided societies' paradigm make for the absurdity of this framework and its policy prescriptions.

Moreover, the colonial 'divide and rule' aspects of the application of this paradigm in the Arab region, especially in Iraq after 2003, are hard to miss. The Iraqi constitution of 2005 was written under the US-led Coalition Provisional Authority based on a pure identity-based reading of conflict (albeit adopting a liberal consociational approach). This constitution had some U.S and U.K- based political scientists involved in its crafting as advisers. But if the concern of those scientists is one of grappling with salient social divisions and coming up with policy prescriptions, why have they overlooked horizontal class divisions? Research on ethnic conflict shows that countries with welfare systems have much lower likelihoods of ethnic violence (Hein, 1997; Østby, 2008; Taydas & Peksen, 2012). So why are such research findings downplayed in policy-oriented recommendations? Moreover, it is also established that ethnic or sectarian violence is often led and instigated by elites through their political parties and organizations (Brubaker, 2004; Chandra, 2012; Fearon, 2006; Wimmer, 2013). So, why aren't policy prescriptions in post-war countries geared towards banning sectarian or ethnic parties and their leaders from political life? Finally, if the concern is really to be 'realistic' (as many proponent of the paradigm like to say) and address 'deep' vertical social divisions, why haven't we expanded the 'deeply-divided societies' paradigm to also include many Western societies such as the U.S. for example? If societies with salient vertical divisions require a special system of rule that manages social conflict and guarantees representation at the political level, shouldn't the U.S feature in the literature on 'deeply-divided societies'? Or are racial divisions not deep enough to require a special form of democracy? The selectiveness in the classification and application of

the ‘deeply-divided societies’ paradigm sheds light on the dangerous convergence between scholarly work and political interests of hegemonic, imperial and colonial forces whether at the local, regional or international level.

From “Deeply Divided Societies” to “Deeply Divisive Politics”: Towards Accurate Descriptions

The major problem with the ‘deeply-divided societies’ paradigm is that it claims to base its ‘pragmatic’ policy prescriptions on a ‘realistic’ reading of social divisions. However, it seems that neither is the diagnosis of social conflict accurate or realistic, nor are the solutions proposed necessarily pragmatic or successful. In fact, sociological research that studies social dynamics and social divisions have rarely influenced the policy prescriptions of scholars within this paradigm. The logic of the analyses that drive this paradigm remains based on a fixed a-sociological idea that some societies have deep divisions between identity-based groups that threaten democracy. It fails to acknowledge that the social salience of a cleavage is separate from its political salience, and that the link between those two levels is not a direct or necessary one. The fact that people are religiously or ethnically diverse does not have to form the ground for them to fight violently. In fact, it is well established that wars and violent conflicts are not the outcomes of random social explosions along identity lines, but are rather the product of political decisions and mobilizations by parties and elites. So why do we keep talking about wars in Syria, Lebanon, Iraq, Yemen and many other places in the region as wars between sects when we all know that these are wars between political parties/forces over power and resources? This is surely not to say that these wars have no social implications in sectarian terms, but dealing with the sectarianized outcomes of these conflicts as the starting point for policy prescription is an absurd reversed logic that blurs causes and consequences, and that ends up reinforcing (and sometimes further institutionalizing) the social and political divides.

Moreover, the ‘deeply-divided societies’ paradigm also fails to acknowledge that the exceptionality with which these societies are approached as being more prone to violence is clearly unsubstantiated. In fact, most studies show that the determinants of the onset of ‘ethnic’ or ‘sectarian’ civil wars are not different or distinct when compared to the determinants of the

onset of civil wars in general (Collier and Hoeffler 2004; Fearon and Laitin 2003). In addition, the very fact that societies coded as 'deeply-divided' such as Lebanon or Iraq have witnessed long historical periods without civil wars or communal-based violence, speaks not to the success of consociational systems but rather to its failure to acknowledge that political organizations, not social groups, are the basis of violent conflict. Therefore, acknowledging that sectarian violence or war is the product of active political instigation debunks the myth of social divisions being the cause for violence. This logic also puts in question another widespread buzzword that goes hand-in-hand with the 'deeply-divided societies' paradigm: co-existence. Examples of non-violence in the history of sectarian or ethnically diverse societies are not the product of 'co-existence' – an active effort at living together – but rather the product of simple 'existence' in times when salient political divisions were shaped around other cleavages such as nationalism, left-right political divisions, or class. This tension between understanding violent conflict as the outcome of social divisions rather than the product of the politicization of these divisions and its manipulation for political ends, forms a major pitfall in this paradigm.

Finally, the over-emphasis on one type of divisions in society (namely ethnic or sectarian) and the downplaying of other very important determinant of social conflict and democracy such as class divisions highlight a shortcoming in the social diagnosis on which this paradigm is based. If the existence of diverse identities in society is considered a threat to democracy, isn't the existence of deep social inequalities and disparities also a threat to democracy? After all – to borrow from Nancy Fraser (1995) – is democracy only about representation or is it also, and mainly, about redistribution?

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