***The inadequate study of social choice theory and its world-wide consequences.***

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**Introduction**

**Zimbabwe**

Zimbabwe has just re-elected an 87-year-old: President Mugabe. The opposition has alleged malpractice in the registration of voters and other aspects of the administration of the election; many observers also consider the process to have been somewhat suspect. Few, however, have complained of the following:

+ that the electoral system was first-past-the-post;

+ that someone can remain in power, even after 33 years!

+ that Zimbabwean governance is a form of majority rule.

Thus, just one man is in charge. It is, in effect, an elected dictatorship.

**Egypt**

Another contemporary problem relates to Egypt. On 19th March, 2011, the revolution, which had been so united in Tahrir Square, divided into two. Why? Because they held a yes-or-no, majority vote referendum: it was on the constitution, you remember, and the Muslims voted ‘yes’, the Coptics ‘no’. The divisions since then have only got worse. Here too, few if any commentators question the use of the two-option majority vote.

**The Question**

Its use is ubiquitous, but it is actually the most inaccurate measure of collective opinion ever invented. Electoral systems may be, and often are, discussed. But decision-making, no. At least in the West, it seems, in business, in the community, and in politics, pretty well everything has to be resolved by (simple or weighted) majority vote. The question I wish to pose to-day, then, asks why this is so? The answer, my thesis, is that the study of social choice theory is hopelessly inadequate, almost everywhere.

**Decision-Making**

There are, of course, lots of decision-making voting mechanisms. Decisions can be taken verbally, but such procedures can be protracted and, of course, such debates must be limited to a small number of participants. Or decisions can be effected by a voting procedure: anything from the two-option majority vote to the multi-option Borda and Condorcet methodologies. Any study of social choice theory should involve a discussion of some if not all of these. Alas, at least in my own town, country and continent, the subject is seldom if ever mentioned: in schools hardly if at all; in universities, only in a few disciplines; in the media, rarely if ever; and in politics, not if the politicians can help it. The reasons why the latter like majority voting is obvious: it allows them to choose the option, i.e., to control the agenda. For this reason, majority voting has often been used by dictators… including Robert Mugabe.

**Consequences**

The consequences have been horrific. In Russia, well, suffice to say the very word majoritarianism translates as ‘bolshevism’. Actually, to save embarrassment, they have now invented a new word, ‘majoritarnost’.

In the Balkans, I quote from Sarajevo’s legendary newspaper, *Oslobodjenje*: “All the wars in the former Yugoslavia started with a [majority vote] referendum,” (7.2.1999).

The lessons remain unlearnt: the West has now exported the principle of self-determination by majority vote – in a word, balkanisation – to Sudan and Africa. Little could be more foolish. So let us examine the theory.

**A Profile**

In the following example of a voters’ profile, it can be seen that the outcome depends, not so much upon the voters’ preferences, but upon the choice of system used.

Seven voters cast their preferences on four options. If a plurality vote is used, only the 1st preferences are counted: and so option ***A*** wins. In two round voting, the two-leading contenders from round one enter a second round, ***A*** and ***D***, and here ***D*** wins by 4 to 3. A third procedure, av, the alternative vote, a series of plurality votes, is also very capricious, and in this example, ***B*** is the winner. While in Borda and Condorcet counts, the outcome is ***C***. So the answer can be anything at all. Yet every answer is deemed ‘democratic’. Something is wrong and, or so I would argue, it is the absence of social choice studies. So now let me talk of a more inclusive polity.

**A More Inclusive Polity**

A democratic decision-making process should allow all of those concerned, that or all of their elected representatives, to participate, not only in the final vote, but also in the choice of options upon which that final vote is to be based. Accordingly, everything must be refereed: a chairperson controls the debate, deciding who speaks and for how long; and a team of (usually) three consensors edits and maintains a display of all the options currently ‘on the table’. Participants may ask questions, seek clarifications, propose composites, suggest deletions, or whatever; and only a deletion must be subject to unanimity. If at the end of the debate there is only one option, this may be considered to be the collective opinion. If, as is more likely in most forums, a number of options remain, then the (short) list of about four, five or six options becomes the draft ballot paper; next, all concerned are asked to confirm that their particular option is included, either verbatim or in composite; and when that is done, they move to a preference vote, a Modified Borda Count, (MBC).

**The MBC**

The rules are as follows:

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| In a ballot on five options/candidates:  he who casts only one preference gives his favourite just 1 point;  she who casts 2 preferences gives her favourite 2 points (and her 2nd preference 1 point);  he who casts 3 preferences gives his favourite 3 points (his 2nd preference 2 points and his 3rd 1 point);  etc., so  she who casts all 5 preferences gives her favourite 5 points (her 2nd preference 4 points, and so on). |

The voter is thus encouraged to participate, and to the full. At the same time, the protagonists know that success depends on their option getting lots of high preferences, a few middle ones perhaps, and very few low ones. It is thus worth their while to talk to the erstwhile opponents, to try and persuade them that their option is worth, not a 5th preference, but at least a 4th if not a 3rd or a 2nd.

In a nutshell, the MBC encourages dialogue – or rather, ‘polylogue’ – and is, therefore, much more democratic. More importantly than this, however, is the simple fact that the MBC is more accurate.

**Conclusion**

The need, then, for the political socialisation of decision-making procedures cannot be over-emphasised, partly because of that which it might help to prevent – division and violence in places such as Zimbabwe and Egypt; but also because of what it might facilitate: better co-operation in all fields in society; better business agreements in commerce; and better international treaties on problems like global warming.

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