

ROBERT DAHL AND THE ROAD TO POLYARCHY

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Robert A. Dahl was born in 1915, graduated from the University of Washington and wrote his doctoral dissertation at Yale University; its title, *Socialist Programs and Democratic Politics: An Analysis*, opened his research agenda. As he later recalled: “I began it a few weeks after the signing of the Nazi-Soviet Pact in Moscow... I turned to the final chapters during the invasion of Norway, completed them with the defeat and occupation of the Netherlands and Belgium, and was awarded my doctorate at a ceremony that occurred about midway between the British retreat from Dunkerque and the fall of France. During the time I was writing, it was impossible to predict, except on blind faith, whether democracies would survive...”¹ His early publications seem to reflect, in his words, “a continuing and contentious confrontation of three different theoretical visions that are concisely designated in the title of Joseph Schumpeter’s *Capitalism, Socialism, and Democracy*... My sympathies lie most strongly with the last, to which each of the others seem to me to pose serious and still unsolved problems.”²

Robert A. Dahl took part in many important debates in post-war American political science. He joined the quest for a behavioral, scientific approach and was accused of tacitly endorsing the *status quo*, by tacitly implying that the American system was democratic and refraining from any critical approach. Later, when the normative dimension gained prominence in his writings, he came under attack from another angle, for his proposals to reform that very system.

There is, however, a powerful continuity in his vision of democracy, with its core concepts of power, pluralism, polyarchy, and the democratic process. The concept of power, while still not defined in its most straightforward form, is present in his first major work, *A Preface to Democratic Theory* (1956). There, he rejected the prevalent, constitutionalist approach to democracy, such as that of Madison, arguing that its scope was inadequate because it did not cover the entire activity within the political system. A much more pervasive concept was required in order to build a valid empirical theory, and Dahl sought this in power.³ The celebrated formal definition of power came one year later: “A has power over B to the extent that he can get B to do something that B would not otherwise do.”⁴ He defined three related concepts of autonomy and control and went on to support a gradualist view, against theorists that saw power as “either present or absent”:⁵

If, like power, control is all or nothing, then political autonomy must be all or nothing. If Alpha exercises any control over Beta, then Beta can have no autonomy at all... If we had at hand a widely applicable means of measuring power, it is hard to imagine... anything more arbitrary as the theoretical assumption that power allows only two possibilities... In this view, the world offers us only three possibilities for social existence: dominate, be dominated or withdraw into total isolation... By

¹ Robert A. Dahl, Introduction to *Democracy, Liberty, and Equality*, Oslo, Norwegian University Press, 1986, p. 22.

² Ibid., p. 7.

³ Leonard Tivey, “Robert Dahl and the American Pluralism”, in Leonard Tivey, Anthony Wright, eds., *Political Thought since 1945: Philosophy, Science, Ideology*, Aldershot, Edward Elgar, 1992, p. 96.

⁴ See *ibid.*

⁵ Dahl, *Dilemmas of Pluralist Democracy*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 1982, p. 22.

definition, we are forever denied the very possibility of mutual controls, which appear to offer the main hope for humane systems of authority."⁶

Dahl continues by arguing that power must be understood in relation to specific issues: "If Alpha controls Beta with respect to x and Gamma with respect to y , is x as important as y ?" This line of inquiry led him to a long term concern for organizations that are procedurally democratic, i.e. the decision-making process inside them is democratic, with respect to a certain issue (agenda), laying the ground for his conception of democracy at the workplace or in other organizations.

In his community study *Who Governs? Democracy and Power in an American City*, Dahl described the actual operation of the American political system, claiming that the operation of the local government in the typical American city of New Haven discarded the "power-elite" theory and supported that of polyarchy:

The real issue has not turned out to be whether a majority, much less "the" majority, will act in a tyrannical way through democratic procedures to impose its will on a (or the) minority. Instead, the most relevant question is the extent to which various minorities in society will frustrate the ambitions of one another with the passive acquiescence or indifference of a majority of adults or voters.⁷

Dahl's response to those who feared the tyranny of the majority was that polyarchy - understood as a system in which leaders compete for electoral support - fosters competition between elites.⁸ Social pluralism, rather than constitutional checks and balances, prevents the emergence of a despotic government and maintains the democratic process.

The concept of "pluralism" implies a focus on individuals whose preferences (motives, grievances, tastes) and values (accepted norms, personal commitments, beliefs and perceptions) "are the irreducible unit to which other levels of analysis must ultimately be referred."⁹ Indeed, pluralism has been a primarily American current, and Dahl believed the fundamental axiom in the theory and practice of American pluralism was that "instead of a single center of sovereign power there must be multiple centers of power, none of which is or can be wholly sovereign. Although the only legitimate sovereign is the people... even the people ought never to be an absolute sovereign."¹⁰

Polyarchy helps one distinguish between democracy as an ideal and "a type of regime that is historically unique."¹¹ The history of the term apparently goes back to Althusius or even further away in time.¹² Hegel used it to express the division of powers among lords, in a feudal system¹³ and, as Dahl acknowledges, the term appeared in the *Oxford English Dictionary* (1909)

⁶ Ibid., 22-23.

⁷ Dahl, *A Preface to Democratic Theory*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1956, p. 153.

⁸ David Held, *Models of Democracy*, Polity Press, Cambridge, 1987, 193.

⁹ Robert R. Alford, Roger Friedland, *Powers of Theory: Capitalism, the State, and Democracy*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1985, p. 35.

¹⁰ See Tivey, p. 98.

¹¹ Dahl, *Dilemmas of Pluralist Democracy*, 10.

¹² Dahl, "Pluralist Democracy in the USA", in *Democracy, Liberty, Equality*, p. 281fn5.

¹³ James W. Ceaser, *Liberal Democracy and Political Science*, Baltimore, Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992, p. 212fn7.

and was used by Ernest Barker in 1913.¹⁴ Dahl and Lindblom revived it in their book *Politics, Economics, and Welfare*¹⁵, defining it as a set of socio-political processes by which non-leaders exercise a relatively high degree of control over leaders, that is, an operational equivalent of democracy.

Dahl acknowledges several meanings of polyarchy, in his work: a type of regime; a set of institutions seen as a product of democratizing nation-states; a set of institutions approximating the democratic process; a system of political control by competition; a system of rights.¹⁶ He argues that these interpretations are complementary, rather than contradictory, as they “emphasize different aspects or consequences of the institutions that serve to distinguish polyarchal from non-polyarchal regimes.”¹⁷

The fourth interpretation - a system of political control by competition - is basically the original meaning given in *Politics, Economics, and Welfare*. It was obviously close to the Schumpeterian, “elitist” approach to democracy, stressing competition among elites along a passive and uninformed demos – a view Dahl gradually abandoned, as political participation came to play a greater part in his democratic theory.

Dahl argues that the distinctiveness of polyarchy as a regime arises from its two characteristics: “high tolerance for oppositions..., and the relatively widespread opportunities for participating in influencing the conduct of government, including removal of incumbent governing officials by peaceful means.”¹⁸ Comparing the operational definitions provided by Dahl in successive works (*A Preface to Democratic Theory, Polyarchy, Dilemmas of Pluralist Democracy*), one would certainly notice a growing concern for political participation.¹⁹ Later on, in *Democracy and Its Critics*, Dahl puts forward a coherent theory of the democratic process and of its relation with the institutions of polyarchy.

At this point, Dahl had to rely on certain philosophical assumptions, such as the Strong Principle of Equality:

All members are sufficiently well qualified, taken all around, to participate in the making of collective decisions binding on the association that significantly affects this good or interests. In any case, none are so definitely better qualified than the others that they should be entrusted with making the collective and binding decisions.²⁰

¹⁴ Dahl, “Pluralist Democracy in the USA”, in *Democracy, Liberty and Equality*, pp. 280-281fn4.

¹⁵ Robert A. Dahl, Charles E. Lindblom, *Politics, Economics, and Welfare*, Harper, New York, 1953.

¹⁶ Dahl, “Polyarchy, Pluralism, and Scale”, in *Democracy, Liberty, Equality*, pp. 230-232.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 233.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 230.

¹⁹ (1) Control over government decisions about policy is constitutionally vested in elected officials. (2) Elected officials are chosen in frequent and fairly conducted elections in which coercion is comparatively uncommon. (3) Practically all adults have the right to vote in the election of officials. (4) Practically all adults have the right to run for elective offices in the government, though age limits may be higher for holding office than for the suffrage. (5) Citizens have a right to express themselves without the danger of severe punishment on political matters broadly defined, including criticism of officials, the government, the regime, the socioeconomic order, and the prevailing ideology. (6) Citizens have a right to seek out alternative sources of information. Moreover, alternative sources of information exist and are protected by law. (7) To achieve their various rights, including those listed above, citizens also have a right to form relatively independent associations or organizations, including independent political parties and interest. Dahl, *Dilemmas of Pluralist Democracy*, pp. 10-11.

²⁰ Dahl, *Democracy and Its Critics*, New Haven, Yale University Press, p. 98.

This principle calls for democratic rule in an association (e.g., a state), making it the only legitimate form of government. It is directly translated in the criteria for a democratic process: effective participation,²¹ voting equality at the decisive stage,²² enlightened understanding,²³ control of the agenda²⁴ and inclusion.²⁵ These criteria approximate a fully democratic process and cannot be integrally fulfilled by any given association; nevertheless, they set the stage for evaluating actual political processes. Polyarchy is defined as a political order featuring a particular constellation of institutions: elected officials; free and fair elections; right to run for office; freedom of expression; alternative information; and, associational autonomy. The connections between institutions and process offer a stronger base for evaluating the degree in which institutions support the five normative criteria.

Dahl writes:

It is important to understand that these statements characterize actual and not nominal rights, institutions, and processes. In fact, the countries of the world may be assigned approximate rankings according to the extent to which each of the institutions is present in a realistic sense.²⁶

While the operation of the institutions of polyarchy cannot match the ideal of a fully democratic process, it can certainly challenge it. Some limitation of the range of issues submitted to the democratic process is judged inevitable and necessary, in any society, but the scope of such a limitation has generally been open to debates. Dahl himself explored these areas during the 1970s, in his quest for “procedural democracy”.²⁷ The latter should be understood as an ideal type connected in a tenuous way to the “really existing” liberal democratic regimes that grew in the modern Western world. In the case of the United States, certain historic commitments that persist in the American political culture and are reflected by the institutional system, hinder the achievement of procedural democracy. Among them, Dahl includes corporate capitalism, the welfare state, and the role of the United States as a world power. He thinks that, in order to

²¹ Throughout the process of making binding decisions, citizens ought to have an adequate opportunity, and an equal opportunity, for expressing their preferences as to the final outcome. They must have adequate and equal opportunities for placing questions on the agenda and for expressing reasons for endorsing one outcome rather than another. Ibid., p. 109.

²² Throughout the process of making the binding decisions, citizens ought to have an adequate opportunity, and an equal opportunity, for expressing their preferences as to the final outcome. They must have adequate and equal opportunities for placing questions on the agenda and for expressing reasons for endorsing one outcome rather than another. Ibid.

²³ Each citizen ought to have adequate and equal opportunities for discovering and validating (within the time permitted by the need for a decision) the choice on the matter to be decided that would best serve the citizen's interests. Ibid., p. 112.

²⁴ The demos must have the exclusive opportunity to decide how matters are to be placed on the agenda of matters that are to be decided by means of democratic control. Ibid., p. 113.

²⁵ The demos must include all adult members of the association except transients and persons proved to be mentally defective. Ibid., p. 129.

²⁶ Ibid., pp. 130-131.

²⁷ “On Removing Certain Impediments to Democracy in the United States” (1977), “Procedural Democracy” (1979), both included in Dahl, *Democracy, Liberty, and Equality*.

remove these impediments, one should interpret the parallel commitment to democracy and a liberal political order, as a commitment to procedural democracy and imagine a strategy of change that would reduce these obstacles, at any rate “up to some limit at which the trade-offs in other values become excessive.”²⁸ Nevertheless, there is a conflict between the two founding principles, themselves:

[The] criteria [of procedural democracy] imply the existence of a body of primary rights. . . necessary, though not sufficient, if a people is to govern itself...[It] must include most, though not all, of the rights and liberties the Supreme Court has held to be protected by the Constitution. As long as the primary rights necessary to procedural democracy exist, than all the political rights exist that are necessary if a people is to govern itself. . . .Any broader definition that includes rights inconsistent with these primary rights might not be acceptable to us. For to claim a right inconsistent with the primary rights necessary to procedural democracy is to deny the validity of procedural democracy and thus the capacity and right of a people to govern itself. If doctrine and practice were to treat these primary rights as inalienable, then all claims to rights inconsistent with these primary rights would be subject to final determination by the ordinary processes of collective decision making... by voters, representatives, and legislators.²⁹

A second relevant issue is Dahl's rethinking of the commitment to corporate capitalism: “If we abandon the absurdities in extending Locke on private property to ownership or control of the modern business corporation, then the rights of owners must be seen as secondary in relation to the primary rights that are necessary to self-government.”³⁰

As expected, Dahl's perspective raised criticism. For instance, Ceaser believes that his call for constitutional reform is a “direct invitation to overturn the existing liberal democratic regime... and to institute a new arrangement of government and society.”³¹ He criticizes Dahl for his “abstract theorizing about political life, in which changing regimes is treated in much the same way as one would treat a policy question.”³² He also rejects Dahl's treatment of the fundamental rights and defends the barriers to majority rule devised in the American Constitution. In his view, there is a contradiction between Dahl's faith in majority rule and his criterion of enlightened understanding: “instead of relying... on institutions of government to assist in dealing with the effects of something less than full enlightenment, Dahl puts his faith almost exclusively in an ambitious program of adult education.”³³

Dahl's theory of polyarchy was not restricted to the study of the United States or of the Western world. It was part of a drive to investigate democracy as a universal phenomenon, put forward by the developmental school. Political development is usually seen as a part of a wider evolutionary paradigm that dominated the study of political transformation in the first two decades after World War II. Development theory gave priority to the transformations in Third World societies, following their integration in the international system. It included, according to Badie, three broad approaches based on the assumption that the democratic model is a natural goal for developing societies.³⁴ The first one, associated with theorists such as Lipset, links economic and political development, finding a correlation between economic underdevelopment

²⁸ “On Removing Certain Impediments to Democracy in the United States”, in *Democracy, Liberty, and Equality*, p.144.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 145.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 146.

³¹ Ceaser, *Liberal Democracy and Political Science*, p. 140.

³² *Ibid.*

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 145.

³⁴ B. Badie, “Formes et transformations des communautés politiques”, in Madeleine Grawitz, Jean Leca, *Traité de science politique*, vol.1, Paris, PUF, 1985, p. 613.

and authoritarianism. The second, illustrated by Almond, investigates political development from a functionalist perspective. Finally, a third one investigates crises and their resolution: its main proponent was Pye, though it has influenced other scholars, such as Rustow.³⁵

Badie places Dahl in the first category:

Dahl has undertaken to show that the chances for a political regime to accede to polyarchy closely depend on the growth of its GIP per capita. . . . This demonstration relies on the theory of polyarchy. . . . a theory that remains, in its argument, fundamentally developmental: the progressive division of social labor gives birth to a growing number of groups, ever more balanced in terms of weight and influence, whose most rational strategy consists in compromising, rather than seeking to dominate one another.³⁶

On the other hand, Rustow himself provides a classification, identifying three main approaches to the study of democratic regimes. The first, illustrated primarily by Lipset, correlated democratic development with economic and social indicators. A second approach, illustrated by Almond, gives priority to public consensus as the foundation of a democratic system. The third one would include a wider array of theories acknowledging the role of political and social structures and approaching the operation of the democratic system in terms of conflict and reconciliation. Dahl's insight into the competitive nature of the political process, developed in *Who Governs?*, would place him within the "conflict-reconciliation" approach, shared by Rustow himself; on the other hand, *A Preface to a Democratic Theory* offered a mixed view, stressing both cooperation and conflict as the logic of democracy. Rustow is critical of such approaches: hypotheses such as those about consensus and conflict "are contradictory unless carefully restricted and reconciled. Precisely such a synthesis has been the import of a large body of writing".³⁷

Moreover, he even quotes Rustow's article (in which the latter develops a sharp critique against the socioeconomic explanation), claiming that he and Rustow made "similar critique[s]"³⁸ of the linkage. Acknowledging that quantitative studies support the thesis of a significant association between the socio-economic and political development³⁹, he admits however that the relation is not linear and that a considerable number of deviant cases exist: "the association is weak, ... the conclusion ignores a number of deviant cases, and ... the relationship of one to the other is unexplained". Instead, he develops a more complex hypothesis, using the intermediate concept of a "pluralistic social order", which is understood to require a relatively high level of socio-economic development.

In *Polyarchy*, Dahl tries to answer the following question: "Given a regime in which the opponents of the government cannot openly and legally organize into political parties in order to oppose the government in free and fair elections, what conditions favor or impede a transformation into a regime in which they can?"⁴⁰ The assumption that "a key characteristic of a democracy is the continuing responsiveness of the government to the preferences of its citizens, considered as political equals"⁴¹, leads him to the three main opportunities citizens should enjoy in a democracy: to formulate preferences; to signify these preferences to their fellow citizens and

³⁵ Ibid., pp. 614-615.

³⁶ Ibid., p. 613.

³⁷ Dankwart A. Rustow, "Transitions to Democracy: Toward a Dynamic Model", in Geoffrey Pridham, ed., *Transitions to Democracy*, Dartmouth, Aldershot, 1995, p. 59-61.

³⁸ Dahl, *Polyarchy: Participation and Opposition*, New Haven, Yale University Press, p. 71fn9.

³⁹ Ibid., p. 63.

⁴⁰ Ibid., p. 1.

⁴¹ Ibid., p. 2.

the government by individual and collective action; to have their preferences weighed equally in the conduct of the government, that is, weighed with no discrimination because of the content or source of the preference.

These principles are linked to a set of eight institutional arrangements: freedom to form and join organizations; freedom of expression; right to vote; right of political leaders to compete for support; alternative sources of information; eligibility for public office; free and fair elections; institutions for making government policies depend on votes and other expressions of preference. A regime that satisfies these criteria scores high on both dimensions of the democratization process: liberalization (public contestation) and inclusiveness (political participation). With the help of this two-dimensional model, Dahl creates a typology of political regimes (closed hegemony, inclusive hegemony, competitive oligarchy, polyarchy) and goes on to conceptualize the democratization process and the conditions that make it possible.

Dahl advances a set of three statements regarding the likelihood of democratic change in a non-polyarchy:

The likelihood that a government will tolerate an opposition increases as the expected costs of toleration decrease. ... The likelihood that a government will tolerate an opposition increases as the expected costs of suppression increase. ... The more the costs of suppression exceed the costs of toleration, the greater the chance for a competitive regime.⁴²

Consequently, he reformulates the question: “What circumstances significantly increase the mutual security of governments and oppositions and thereby increase the chances of public contestation and polyarchy?”⁴³

Dahl undertakes to explore a set of conditions, treated as independent variables, that affect the chances of a successful democratization.⁴⁴ He concludes that an evolutionary process which “transforms previously legitimate hegemonic forms and structures into the forms and structures suitable for political competition and thus produces no lasting cleavages or widespread doubts about the legitimacy of the new regime”⁴⁵ is highly conducive to polyarchy. The search for a system of mutual security between government and opposition can reduce the length and improve the auspices of the transformation. In terms of the concentration or dispersion of the socio-economic order, the prospects for polyarchy seem to be influenced not by the form of ownership itself, but rather by the degree of centralization. Dahl argues that decentralization favors a pluralistic social order, which, in turn, fosters competition and polyarchy. The degree of socioeconomic development has been approached earlier in this essay, while the other dimensions need not be elaborated here. The result of Dahl’s assessment of the conditions that are conducive to polyarchy was, by all standards, impressive, in terms of influence in the field of democratization theory.

There is always a danger that the institutions of polyarchy, once established, are eroded by certain unavoidable features of the political process, in a liberal democracy. Dahl saw a certain degradation in the West, especially in the United States, illustrated by the popular unrests of the late 1960s and early 1970s. He discussed the implications of such institutional and societal

⁴² Ibid., p. 15.

⁴³ Ibid., p. 16.

⁴⁴ The variables are the following: historical sequences of regime transformation, concentration in the socioeconomic order, level of socioeconomic development, degree of inequalities in society, degree of sub-cultural cleavages, foreign control, and beliefs of political activists.

⁴⁵ Ibid, 46.

developments in *Dilemmas of Pluralist Democracy*, concluding that the main challenge to the institutions of polyarchy was raised by organizational pluralism.

Dahl acknowledged the need for relatively autonomous organizations in a large scale democracy, as they would oppose any drive for hegemonic rule. However, since the 1970s, he became more and more concerned about their potential negative influence on the democratic process: stabilizing inequalities; deforming the civic consciousness; distortion of the public agenda; and, alienating the final control of the demos over the agenda.

Political equality - the core of Dahl's normative argument for democracy - is at stake. He notices that organizations do not just interfere in the competition for resources: as a matter of fact, "organization itself is a resource."⁴⁶ The trend toward corporatism hinders redistributive policies, impeding the realization of a fair economic order. Another point in which organizational pluralism challenges the democratic process relates to civic consciousness:

Organizations... are not merely relay stations that receive signals from their members about their interests. Organizations amplify the signals and generate new ones. Often, they sharpen particularistic demands at the expense of the broader needs and short-run trends against long-run needs.⁴⁷

Civic consciousness is affected by the cleavage between individual and collective interests. Public agenda is distorted due to the use of superior resources in the political struggle, in order to promote organizational interests. The final control of the demos over the agenda is undermined when private organizations wrongfully acquire public functions.⁴⁸

Dahl does not seek radical solutions, since he believes that such issues are inherent to polyarchy. We just have to be aware of the inescapable dilemmas of pluralist democracies:

To what extent are [these] defects... characteristic of democratic pluralism as such, and to what extent are they peculiar to different countries? ... To what extent are [they] a result of the fact that polyarchy is an incomplete realization of democratic ideals? ... To what extent are [they] a consequence of the fact that polyarchy exists only in countries with privately owned, market-oriented economies? ... To what extent are [they] the result of a civic consciousness that stresses egoism rather than altruism or benevolence?⁴⁹

These issues do not admit easy answers, let alone ready-made solutions. Nevertheless, democratic practice and democratic theory can show us various less-than-perfect, though still valuable, ways to approach them. Robert Dahl's democratic theory is, in itself, a source of inspiration.

⁴⁶ Dahl, *Dilemmas of Pluralist Democracy*, p. 40.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 44.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 45-47.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 53-54.

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