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Book Review: Bruce Bueno de Mesquita, Alastair Smith, *The Dictator's Handbook*, Polirom, Iași, 2012 (2010), 347 pages.

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Each time there is a crisis, a major discontent about politics or economics, criticism about the moral quality of our leaders flourishes. Their ethics is questioned, their judgment is deeply contested, citizens are protesting and the distrust of authority in all forms is on the rise. Inside academia, optimistic conceptions about the current and the future state of affairs see their fortunes diminishing, a phenomenon which one can witness, for example, in the replacement of the debate about the empire of the United States and unipolarity with the ever returning story of American decline.

Such is the case with the book reviewed here, *The Dictator's Handbook*, by Bruce Bueno de Mesquita and Alastair Smith, published in 2010, and translated into Romanian at Polirom, in 2012. Two scholars of international political relations extended their realist-inspired explanation of world politics to politics in general, available now in a very accessible easy to read book, with vivid examples and the results are not surprising. Thus, the key to understanding politics, the authors say, is to view the politicians as self-interested individuals who act in order to gain, maintain and increase their power, money being one of the most important means they use.

They claim universality; and that their theory of “selectorate” can explain anything, from politics of small cities, to the much criticized Wall Street bonuses, Vladimir Putin, aid policy or relief efforts. And of course, since they deny any significant role to morality and claim loyalty to hard facts, the controversial image of Niccolò Machiavelli's *Prince* comes easy into our minds. De Mesquita and Smith claim that all their predecessors were wrong, either because they were too much preoccupied by the events of their time, or because they ascribed too much value to norms and rules.

So, how does the interested behavior of politicians, a trivial idea in itself, translates into political outcomes? The main two variables are the size and structure of groups which sustain the leaders, and whether politicians act smart or not. Thus, we can speak of essentials, insiders and interchangeable individuals; the first being the people without whom leadership would be impossible (“the winning coalition”); the second, the group which selects the leaders, (the real selectorate), and the rest, all people who have at least some influence over politics.

Now, the larger those groups are, the better the result for everyone; the smaller they are, the easier it is for politicians to rule for a long time, but with worse consequences for the rest of us, in sharp contrast with public goods theory in Mancur Olson's vein. These relationships are supposed to hold in any political regime, religious or economic organization, or issue area. A smart leader should follow some general rules, and his destiny will be great, as another reminder of Machiavelli.

Those rules are pretty common sense, considering the premises. A wise leader should keep the winning coalition as small as possible, but should act so as to have a big number of interchangeable, to maintain the control over the resources, to pay the supporters, but only as much as it is necessary to have their loyalty assured, and should avoid taking their money to further the public good. Morality, common good, or values have no place in this framework.

How does it work in practice? In a company, according to de Mesquita and Smith, we have small and medium shareholders, who are the interchangeables, big owners – the essentials and executives or other people with influence, the insiders. So, for example, the executives will tend to take decisions which will further their private interest, not the welfare of shareholders, as in case of the scandal surrounding Wall Street executives after the 2007-2008 financial crisis, or the HP management, where an efficient decision-maker was deposed, even if he helped improving the financial situation of the company.

Aid policy is another issue area approached by de Mesquita and Smith. Politicians use transfers not for humanitarian reasons, but to bribe decision-makers in other countries and even if they do have motives related to the public interest, the results are dismal, since local leaders use the funds to gain or maintain political influence. For example, Liberia's president, Samuel Doe received assistance from the United States, which allowed him to pay for support, and in return, he supported anti-Soviet policies during the Cold War.

This type of policy is easier to use towards dictatorship together with other forms of policies in which the size of the winning coalition and essentials is small. The authors maintain that because private gains are greater in authoritarian regimes than, for example, in democracies, where the size of support groups is bigger, which forces the decision-maker to apply public policies destined to further general welfare. This equally means that democracies tend to rely on dictatorships, because they are easy to corrupt, but also that aid policy slows down the political and economic reforms.

Why is that? According to de Mesquita and Smith, the lack of financial resources forces closed regimes to reform, which can open the way for a democratization of the political life. On the other hand, a democracy is more efficient in warfare, provides more welfare than other regimes and takes into consideration something resembling the public interest, all of these factors making open regimes more difficult to deal with.

So democracies are supposed to prefer authoritarian states, because it is cheaper to influence them. But then, why do some scholars and public intellectuals maintain that democracies tend to not fight each other? De Mesquita and Smith argue that the key to understanding this phenomenon does not reside in values or international power distribution, but is a form of deterrence: democracies tend to mobilize themselves better on the long run, have more efficient institutions, including armies, or be wealthier.

The Dictator's Handbook comes with a parsimonious argument, lively examples, a broad range of issues, from governing cities, to financial markets, aid policy, or international relations. Bueno de Mesquita and Alastair Smith make a striking point, by saying that morality and norms are not the leading causes in politics, either in a humanitarian version, or in a public interest sense, and the book even has a website.

Now, there are some issues with the argument. The authors try to say too much and too little at the same time. Their vision is reductionist as it tries to explain anything by perception of power and interest, a type of theory which is not easily reconcilable with the understanding of ideologies, totalitarian regimes, or wars inspired by doctrines, except by considering them as follies. However, even irrationality requires some explanation.

At the same time, in a concrete event, the self-interest (which by itself is vague; since they do not specify clearly if by this they mean an absolute or relative conception) and size of groups are not enough. The context must be taken from other theories, of institutionalization, international systems, cognitive psychology, etc.; when a mayor wants to increase his power - an example from the book, we need to know more than the fact that politicians are greedy and that they have to control their supporters: political structures, revenues, status and so on since, if the environment variables change, so do the result. By analogy, they state that force influences movement, but they do not say that force equals mass times acceleration.

We need to know also why the size and structure of groups change, since, even if the previous critiques are rejected, the outcome depends on the number of essentials, insiders and interchangeable, according to the authors. The paradox is that Bueno de Mesquita and Alastair Smith want to exclude norms, regimes or values as causes, but half of the explanations provided come from differences between dictatorships and democracies, which influence the size and structure of support groups. Put it otherwise, is unclear which is the cause and which is the effect. Those difficulties considered, the book has merits, by taking individuals into account, by warning us to keep an eye on our leaders and to never neglect checking the promises of politicians according to their actions and interests.

