

Interview with Russell Hardin*

by Cristina Buarque** and Fernando Lattman-Weltman***

* Russell Hardin

is Professor at the Political Science Department at New York University (NYU). Before his definitive move to New York in 1993 – after accepting an invitation to restructure the Politics department – he lectured at the Universities of Chicago, Maryland, Virginia and Stanford. He served as editor of the prestigious journal *Ethics*. As a student he pursued studies in Physics and especially Mathematics, fields from which he drew upon to make key contributions to Political Science that stand out for their elegance and humor in tackling some of the most intriguing logical paradoxes of contemporary political behavior. Among his works are: *Indeterminacy and Society*, *Trust and Trustworthiness*, *Liberalism*, *Constitutionalism and Democracy*, and *Collective Action*. One of his most interesting contributions refers to the role of acquiescence and ordinary processes of coordination for the everyday functioning of modern democratic life.

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We met Russell Hardin in January 2012 at a political philosophy course for graduate students at the NYU Political Science Department. His inquisitive style is so straight to the point it provides a few jolts as he cruises through classical thinkers such as John Locke and Staurt Mill and contemporary Americans such as Stimson, Berle and Means. From each one he extracted subsidies to formulate an original reflection of his own.

Still under the strong impressions left by his lectures we had the idea of proposing an interview that would sum up the most important fact and topics of his intellectual biography. Hardin received us with his customary amicability on a spring afternoon in 2002 at one of NYU's Washington Square buildings.

As a starting point we asked Hardin to recall his academic transition from Mathematics to Politics, which would years later bring him to his current full-time position at NYU. His disquisition is interspersed with commentary on authors and subjects that drove him intellectually, either due to affinity or antagonistic perceptions. Among those he made praiseful allusions to, he lingered longer on Mancur Olson, who deserves all credit for bringing into Political Science, Sociology and Social Psychology the discussion on collective action thereby expanding the boundaries of these disciplines. Among the repertoire of intellectual differences Hardin inveighs against contractualism, deemed by him a poor metaphor incapable of effectively describing political life since the everyday workings of life under governments is not grounded on moral assumptions regarding contracts. In the true dynamics of public life, what counts are instances of acquiescence that are to be distinguished from consent due to its passive form.

Returning to the subject of collective action, we inquired into the possible interferences of culture and morality in the motivational repertoire of individuals. Next, we discussed the relationship between politics and knowledge and, finally, his expectations regarding democracy in the United States. As the interview was conducted in the heat of the presidential race Hardin decries candidate Mitt Romney's campaign tactics and laments the excessively drawn out electoral process in the United States, among other formal aspects that undermine the democratic principle. He offers then some closing remarks in the US constitution and ventures a comparison with other charters.

Cristina Buarque

Professor Hardin, Thank you so much for this opportunity.

Russell Hardin

I's a treat

Cristina Buarque

We do appreciate it. Well, to start with, we would like you to talk a little bit about your academic biography. We know that you have your PhD in Social Science from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) but you also have two bachelor degrees in Mathematics and Physics?

Russell Hardin

Actually there were three.

Cristina Buarque

Three! Really?!

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Russell Hardin

Two math, one physics.

Cristina Buarque

Oh... ok

Russell Hardin

But the time in Oxford was a separate degree

Cristina Buarque

Ok, could you comment on this transition to political studies?

Russell Hardin

Sure. The thing that was really important at that time was the Vietnam War, and it was disastrous, of course, in American universities. And I thought I was doing the wrong thing, studying math and physics at that time. And in fact I worked on programs at Texas Instruments, which was one of the outstanding electronics companies that worked for the Defense Department, and I didn't like that. So, I left Physics. Mathematics I continued a little bit because the math I did was called "topological set theory". And that's a really beautiful part of mathematics, the most beautiful part of mathematics there is. Lots of great things come out of that. And so that's what I did for a little while and then I shifted all the way into Political Science.

And at first I thought that there would be no use for all that background in Political Science. But in fact, immediately I was in a course that did Game Theory, and Game Theory could be conceived as a kind of minor topological set theory, so it really was trivially easy for me. It was a lot easier than math. And I did a lot out of that and enjoyed it very much. And then I wound up doing just that instead of going back to math or physics.

Fernando Lattman-Weltman

And your first writings on Political Studies in the 70s are mainly concerned with collective action issues. The book of Olson's was just published recently. How do you evaluate, nowadays, almost 50 years later, the potential limits of this theory to produce explanations?

Russell Hardin

I am currently my book "Collective Action", bringing it up to date in various ways. But also to add another account of collective action, which is the coordination of people on a particular goal instead of acting together in the sense in which "If you act, I'll act". So, it's like an exchange. And my view now is that coordination is far more important than exchange. The revised book will focus mostly on that and then take up Olson's argument for the logic of collective action. It was very clever of him to give his book that title because at that time there was literature on the issues of collective action. It was usually referred to as "the free rider problem". It was about the fact that you would take advantage of what other people were doing. Cooperating with each other without yourself contributing to it. But his focus on the logic of collective action made it now a

part of the larger Social Sciences. Political Scientists, Sociologists, Social Psychologists, and even a few Philosophers (not very many), took up Game Theory. And before they just wouldn't have done that. But it would have been in Economics Departments that you would have done the free rider problem. So Olson did a great service, not only with the book that he wrote, but also with the influence he had on what we did out there. And I think he was probably one of those people who (because he actually had two lives, the political science kind of stuff and the free rider kind of stuff) never got the Nobel Prize, but he could have. One can imagine he would have, under different circumstances.

But he was very influential and I love that book. I had a course at the University of Texas that was a graduate seminar in which each week – there were only six of us – each week, each of us would take one of a set of about twelve or fifteen books. The next session, we would all be arguing from the book that we read to whatever the problem was at issue that time and of course. So, before each time the teacher would say “here is what this book is about” to give you a clue whether you wanted to read it. And he outlined very quickly *Collective Action*, and I said “oh that’s just a prisoner’s dilemma”. And he said “it is not, it has nothing to do with it” and he got really angry. But it was a prisoner’s dilemma. And it was very interesting to see just how easy it was for some people, economists and mathematicians, and how hard it was for others like sociologists and especially philosophers, except for a specialized person like David Lewis. But the vast majority of philosophers who do any of this stuff don’t use the logic of collective action arguments.

Fernando Lattman-Weltman

Why is it so difficult for sociologists and political scientists from that tradition to deal with this kind of literature in your opinion?

Russell Hardin

That’s actually a very good question. I thought about it many times, and also wondered why it should be so difficult. I think it is probably true that a lot of those people are just not at all focused on those issues, and they become genuinely intimidated by them. I was in a great seminar here for many years, in the Law School, that had two leaders. Say you’re presenting a paper this week – one of them would present it for you and the other would criticize that person and you would finally get to speak and criticize both of them. One time they had a session with somebody – Edna Ullmann-Margalit -- who was, in fact, not a strong game theorist at all. She did a little bit of descriptive game theory, one could call it. And the two leaders of that session said they would sit this one out, and they moved away from the center table and sat in chairs outside the central group. And these were world class intellects! These are really brilliant people, and yet they couldn’t understand the simplest game theory! I was astonished. I didn’t know what to say! And she probably really didn’t know what to say, but she did a really nice job at presenting something to anybody who was more or less open-minded and willing to push logic a little bit. She wrote a very clever book on norms.

Cristina Buarque

In an article published in the 90s named “Contractarianism: Wistful Thinking”, you have referred to contractarianism as a poor metaphor. Could you comment on that?

Russell Hardin

Yes, in fact that’s very important. It’s very clever of you to pick up that piece. It was published in a journal on Constitutionalism that had been created maybe 5 years

before that. And it was mostly economists writing on stuff and almost everybody who contributed to (the journal) said they were doing Contractarian Theory. I said they couldn't be doing contractarian theory because in a contract part of what goes on is that I morally expect you to do your share, to live up to your deal in the contract. That can't be what's going on in large societies. You're not being morally obligated to do what you and your government says or whatever. You just are obligated in very strong ways so I think that's a bad metaphor calling it Contractarianism. Something like Conventionalism would be descriptively more accurate than Contractarianism. It's not going to go away because that's the standard way that philosophers see these issues. So most of what they write on Constitutions turns out not to be relevant. If my view is right, and lots of other people share that view, then it's all about conventions and coordination and so on.

Fernando Lattman-Weltman

But why, for instance, the so-called contractarians could not escape the use of the metaphor at that time?

Russell Hardin

They simply were convinced that that was the way to go and I think they were wrong. But it really undercut what they could contribute to the debate and that was too bad. They were actually very smart, many of them, but doing something that was beside the point. It just wasn't about the issue that we're looking at. That's actually a tough question. Part of the problem is they probably had never had a mathematics course. You could get a degree from Harvard, for example, without ever doing a single course in Mathematics. Not even Introductory Calculus and certainly not Number Theory or Topological Set Theory or any of those things. At the University of Texas or the University of Arizona you could not get away without doing a math course. You have to take one as part of the requirement of most Liberal Arts degrees or Social Science degrees. But you wouldn't take a lot and you wouldn't be very good even then from the bit of coursework that you had. But you would be a lot better than the people who had gone to Harvard and never did any of that.

I had a student at the University of Maryland who had graduated from Harvard and it was a lot of work for him to catch up to the level of the students from the University of Maryland, which is a very weak institution compared to Harvard. And yet those students had a hard time becoming competent and at ease with Game Theory or any of this stuff. They could do Statistics. So if you go to a Political Science department there will be probably a fourth of the graduate students doing Statistical Analysis, but that's really mechanical and it doesn't take a lot of thought. And so that got in the way of what they could do or what they could explain. That they couldn't use something other than the contract metaphor.

One of my books was reviewed by a lawyer and the review had two columns. The first column presented my argument for constitutionalism as, in fact, a coordination or acquiescence device. And so this first part of the review laid out what the argument was. Then the second part, that whole column, said that we know that's wrong, it is a contract! It's just not conceivable to carry on real academic discourse that way, but we do.

Fernando Lattman-Weltman

So, would you like to comment a little bit about your experience on editing the Ethics Journal?

Russell Hardin

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It was one of the oldest journals in philosophy in the world, and the oldest by far on Ethics or any that specialized in that. It had been created in about 1890 by the Ethical Culture Society as their journal, and then it passed on to a University Press for a decade or two. Then it passed on to the University of Chicago and a colleague of mine, Brian Barry, was asked if it was worth saving that journal because it had deteriorated very badly. The quality of the stuff was not good at all. It had one person as the editor who did everything and it was killing him. He had file drawers full of papers on which he had not yet made decisions and so Brian agreed to do it. And he asked me if I would be an Associate Editor.

The first three years it was basically just writing very brief rejections of most of those papers and then sending the others out for review. In philosophy at that time, we may have been the only journal that had blind reviewing. So we would send it to you and you wouldn't know who wrote it, and you would comment on it and send it back to us. And we would send it then to the author, and the author wouldn't know who had commented.

Cristina Buarque

I'm sorry, when was it?

Russell Hardin

It was 1979 that we started editing the journal and took it over. And we edited it for a long time. Brian for only three years but then I did it for a decade after that. It was a wonderful thing to do. A journal such as Ethics is at the very center of Legal, Moral, and Political Philosophy. While editing that you know where the discipline is on all of these things because you see the work at this early stage before it's published. So you know where the discipline is when it's bad and you know where it's good because you see it all. And you have to decide all. So I really enjoyed it, in that respect. In fact, I learned a tremendous lot about not necessarily the resolutions of issues in ethics or contemporary political philosophy or whatever, but rather in what the people out there are doing and thinking about those things. It was really great but very time-consuming.

Fernando Lattman-Weltman

Isn't it a little bit ironic that a political scientist would edit a journal on Ethics?

Russell Hardin

Except that the subtitle of the journal was an "International Journal for the Study of Politics, Philosophy, Economics and Law". And so it basically was this interdisciplinary journal, the only one like that at the time. And that was really distinctive. You could imagine, if you did a little bit of Game Theory and a little bit of Sociology and a little bit of Social Psychology, in a paper that was mainly a philosophical discussion, that we would consider it and perhaps publish it. And not say "you have to get rid of all that stuff", the way many other journals would do.

Cristina Buarque

And, still talking a little bit about your professional biography, when did you start teaching at NYU?

Russell Hardin

I think 93 or thereabouts.

Cristina Buarque

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And how was your way to NYU?

Russell Hardin

I had taught for 13 years at the University of Chicago. I had taught briefly before that at Maryland and at Columbia.

When I went to the University of Chicago, I was there for a long time. I really loved that. It was a great place. It was the ideal academic institution in that nobody would let you get away with anything. If you made an argument and it wasn't good, somebody was going to point that out. So, it was a great place to be. And I learned more from that than I learned from my own reading or education in any way.

And then after that I went to Stanford briefly. I was jointly at Stanford and Chicago for a while. I then came to NYU and was joint in Stanford and NYU for a while. Then I resigned from Stanford, finally.

Fernando Lattman-Weltman

And how you came here to NYU?

Russell Hardin

I was invited to come by somebody who was asked by a search committee to find somebody to be Chair of Politics here. Because the department had really fallen on hard times, it was a terrible department. The National Research Council ranks departments in Universities and they rank first the Top 60 Universities. If your department is in the Top 60, it gets ranked. If it's not in the top 60, you don't. We were 60th. The department here was 60th.

Fernando Lattman-Weltman

In 1993?

Russell Hardin

No, a years before that, when that study was done. But probably still in 1993. And so I was asked to come and talk with teachers with professor, deans, and so on. And I said "oh no, there is no need to do that. I don't think I would move. I am really happy at Chicago". The guy who was calling me was Farhad Kazemi, who is really a wonderful man. That year I was in a research fellowship in New York at the Russell Sage Foundation, so Farhad said "it's only a subway ride!". So I agreed, and I wound up actually liking the idea.

Cristina Buarque

And do you think that your intellectual profile fits well in the department?

Russell Hardin

Well, the department was hardly anything. There were several people who were really good. But only several and there should have been 25 who were really good. There might have been five. Anybody who came in with a mandate to hire new people and to make it a strong department would have found it very congenial. I would be the one hiring the people and I would definitely like them. But it was an unusual event because NYU had historically been a fairly strong place, in Political Science as well. But in 1993, it was no

longer. If you were looking at it from the inside it looked very sad. You would want to do something about that to make it better.

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Fernando Lattman-Weltman

Ok. And how was the task of getting the department on a new track? Was it just a problem of people?

Russell Hardin

Yes, it was. We had to recruit a lot of people. So, my first year I recruited six people and the Dean said that was too many. But he let me do it anyway. And he let me do the same the next year. And then after that, it was just a different place. It was going to get better and better as time passed. That was not an unusual kind of thing to do. It gets done in all kinds of departments that fall on hard times and need to be resuscitated. The NYU department at one time had been fairly strong in Comparative Politics. There were recognizable names doing Comparative Politics but not much else.

Fernando Lattman-Weltman

And it was a particular field that you were worried about? Would you just hire based on their curriculum, etc?

Russell Hardin

Yes, I thought we should be hiring people who were analytically very sharp and who could handle all that stuff. But other than that, nothing really mattered.

Cristina Buarque

Ok. What do you consider to be the relevance of acquiescence in contemporary democracy? And in what aspect does your theory on acquiescence differ from Classical Sociological theories of political behavior?

Russell Hardin

Very good. Yes, I think that in fact acquiescence is the main story. So if you look at what's happening in an election year, 40% percent of the people are not going to vote. They're acquiescent. Whatever happens in the voting by the rest of us governs them, and they don't fight it. They don't do anything to change that, they just live with it.

At the time the US Constitution was written there were all these wonderful newspaper columns written by people with funny names that they gave themselves, like Brutus and so on. They talked about what it takes for a Constitution to work and James Madison and Brutus both said it takes acquiescence. You elect the government and then you get out of the way and let them do it, and that's not wrong, basically. Where you elect a government and then there's still a lot of turmoil and disagreement with it that generally means that in actual fact you don't get good programs adopted by the government. So acquiescence is really the main story. And it's a story that is very difficult to measure and to show and so forth.

Some of the readings that we had in that course, from James Stimson (in Tides of Consent) and others, are just about the acquiescence and why it works. I think when you and I walk out there, we acquiesce in a lot of things over the course of just a few minutes walking along the sidewalk. We acquiesce in certainly letting the cars have right of way where they do, because we are not going to fight with a car. Lots of other things are like that in

life. Charles Lindblom, or Ed Linblom as he calls himself, wrote a book in which the main little story to tell where he is going to go with the book was “What happens when you walk down 5th avenue in New York”. What happens is: you watch all these people going all kinds of ways. You think they’re going to run into each other and they never do. They make normal progress through this mess and somehow come out at the other end. I think that’s a correct and good insight, although it hasn’t been picked up very much. Very few people have written on that. It’s hard to do data analysis on it, and so it’s really hard to prove the point. Lindblom was ahead of his time.

Cristina Buarque

Could you maybe explore a little bit the distinction between acquiescence and consent?

Russell Hardin

Yes, consent, I think, is an active thing. I consent to the sale of this house or this car or whatever and I sign my name showing that I did consent. I don’t have to consent to the running of the government by the winning party in the election. It’s going to do it whether I consent or not. So consent is in fact a very active term whereas these other things, acquiescence and so forth are passive terms.

You probably remember from Berle and Means (*The Modern Corporation and Private Property*) that they’re really concerned with the difference between active and passive ownership. Active ownership is what it used to be like; you have it, you can do what you want to with it. Now it’s almost entirely passive ownership. You don’t even know how many shares of any stocks there are. You don’t know what the company is doing or anything. You just get a check now and then from the company. Or if you’re having them re-invest your earnings, you don’t even get a check. You just get a little note saying they re-invested a certain amount of money and so this passive. This story is overwhelmingly the bulk of the story in Economics. I think it’s also the bulk of the story in Politics. Perhaps not as readily shown, because there’s nothing vaguely like money and the vast quantities of money that are exchanging hands in the economic world.

Fernando Lattman-Weltman

Do you think this Madisonian conception of acquiescence would be popular today, even among political scientists?

Russell Hardin

Nope.

Fernando Lattman-Weltman

Why is participation so cherished?

Russell Hardin

Hmm, two different issues.

One is what’s going on with the States trying to make it harder to vote. They’re making it harder to vote for particular groups in the society: blacks, students, and elderly people. On anybody’s account that has to be wrong. Democratically that’s a bad thing to do. They should have it be easier to vote, not harder to vote.

But then at the same time, there are a lot of people who just don’t vote. And there’s nothing to do about them. I think the people who want to go out and convince them to

vote are basically wrong. That's not a good thing to do. If they're getting educated about all this stuff, then they will vote. But if they're not being educated, then telling them to vote is a very strange thing to do. But it is done, a little bit. But in Brazil, and many countries, the turnout is much higher than it is in the US.

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Fernando Lattman-Weltman

Yes, but it's falling?

Russell Hardin

Yes, it's falling, everywhere it's falling

Fernando Lattman-Weltman

It's almost compulsory...

Russell Hardin

Yes. How much is the fine if you don't vote?

Fernando Lattman-Weltman

Two or three dollars.

Russell Hardin

How much?

Cristina Buarque

Three dollars. Two or three dollars.

Russell Hardin

And does that go in your personal record somehow? That you didn't vote that year?

Cristina Buarque

Yes

Russell Hardin

What happens in the US is somebody is running for office and somebody goes back and finds out whether they voted in recent elections. And if they didn't, they're going to have a hard time getting elected. It shows they're not really serious, they didn't care that much. I don't know if it's an accurate measure of being not serious, but it's at least a partial measure of that. So it's a disaster for you and your political career if you don't vote.

Cristina Buarque

Ok, well, in the book we read, in the course, you have presented Liberalism, Constitutionalism, and Democracy as mutual advantage theories...

Russell Hardin

Yes.

Cristina Buarque

What role do you consider that History, Culture and Morality play or do not play on these theories?

Russell Hardin

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Ok. First, the role I have, or the roles I have are not systematic. So you could look to one place and see something different from what you would see in another place, with what looks like virtually identical cases in relevant respects. So they are not systematic, and in fact some places are just much better at this stuff. So if you had come to New York in the sixties and watched what happened on polling day, it was a fairly high turnout. More than for the United States. If you went to Philadelphia or Iowa City you would see nearly 100% turnout. So part of that was that you and I sort of push each other to go vote and if you don't, you know that I'll remember that and that's not so good. So we all go vote. We all get pushed into voting in a place like Philadelphia or a place like Iowa city. A major part of the difference between New York, where the turnout is down close to the national average, is that it's harder to vote in New York. In fact, I was here at the Russell Sage Foundation the year that Bill Clinton was elected president. At the Foundation lunch I asked whether anybody had gone to their polling place to discover that it was closed and moved to some other location. And three people, there are only about thirty people at the lunch, had had that experience. Two of them thought they would probably be able to go vote that evening when they got off work and one of them said she was not going to do it. That it was too much trouble if they're going to do that. It didn't make any difference at all because it's New York and the democrats are going to win overwhelmingly, like two to one. So, they don't win everywhere. So, they don't win on the Upper East side or Staten Island or parts of the Village and so forth, but they win for the whole city very clearly. So trying to get somebody to vote in New York doesn't make a lot of sense. It's going to be good enough. Except that you might think that's a good opportunity for learning and becoming committed to politics in a good way.

Fernando Lattman-Weltman

So you think these variables, like the historical, the cultural and the moral, can play a dependent role?

Russell Hardin

Yes, there are real roles they have to play in some cases. Morality, actually, would be important if it was contractual. So I would've agreed with you that we're going to do this thing. Now I have a moral burden to do this thing we agreed. If it's not in fact contractual, if contract is not the correct model, then morality has a much smaller role to play.

My mother was one of those people who thought that it was just wrong not to vote. She saw it as a moral issue and it probably was for her. She never failed to vote, right down to the end of her life. She voted every time she had a chance. And there are a lot of people like that out there for whom it is a moral obligation to yourself, your family, your community, and so forth to go vote, independently of how others are going to vote. So I'd say you ought to vote even though I know you would vote in a way different from the way I would. I would support your voting even though your vote would run against my interest. If you find people with those views then you'd think it's a very strong moral view. It may come from standard institutions from which we get our morality. The church and other things like playing sports, where you get used to being completely fair. If you lose you lose, if you win you win. You do it the same way both times.

Fernando Lattman-Weltman

So, why do people vote without grounds to do it?

Russell Hardin

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That's a very good question.

There is a sociologist, social psychologist, here named Haidt, His work has been about that for several years. He just published a book about how you and I may conflict very strongly with each other but nevertheless be able to cooperate and so forth. His research is different from other research on this. I think he probably has a correct little piece of it but so do a lot of these other people. So the explanation for you might be different from the explanation for me. So that you, in fact, are willing to commit a lot of effort to voting even though you know it doesn't make a difference is something that wouldn't be true for me. You might, in fact, criticize me for being "not moral" because I don't vote. I'd come back and say it doesn't make any difference, that what persuades you probably shouldn't persuade me, but it does. And I guess we're eventually going to learn a lot more about that. What is exactly the structure of the incentive that gets you to actively go vote on a particular day? One of the answers to that is that the cost of doing it is really small.

I lived in both Philadelphia and Chicago- three years in Philadelphia and more than a decade in Chicago. In both places the (voter) turnout was really high. In Philadelphia it was over 90%- around 93%. And that's because on my way home, and the same would be true for people all over the city, I would walk past the polling booth for my neighborhood. And if I didn't act and go in and vote, they have a complete record of who is in the group and who has or has not voted. They come knock on your door and say that you should come and vote and you say, "Ok, I'll be there in a few minutes" and if you're not, they come and knock on your door again! You cannot eat dinner in peace until you go vote and get it over with.

Cristina Buarque

So, would you say there is a moral sanction for those who don't vote?

Russell Hardin

There is probably for some people and probably for others it's just a nuisance. "I'm gonna have to do this" or "I don't get the dinner while it's still hot", and it's really interesting.

This wonderful colleague I had at the University of Pennsylvania, where I taught for the first few years, Ed Banfield said that it's really difficult to convince some people that it's not in their interest to vote. It won't make their lives any better at all if they vote. It doesn't matter what happens with their vote, and people would get really angry at him. And he would smile, just watch all this anger coming out. I would sort of agree with him. I think it's probably a good thing for the community of which you are a part, that you do and I do go in and vote. The fact that we don't necessarily elect somebody- we lose- is not the only thing that matters.

Fernando Lattman-Weltman

And how can we explain phenomena like Stimson's American conflicted conservatives?

Russell Hardin

Yes, that's interesting. I think that the story is mostly ignorance and just how hard it is to know better what's going on. So, when Stimson interviews these people, they immediately identify as conservatives. And that seems to be, in their view, a kind of honorable title, whereas liberal is not; why that happens we don't know. And then after

that they're asked what they think about Social Security, Medicare and all these things, and they take the liberal position on all those programs. So they're liberal in action and in self-image they're conservative. That is really strange, I think. Education has been disastrously poor if they could come out knowing no more than that about themselves. But there's a reason for that: it is really hard to become well-educated on these things. So that people don't (have proper education) is not such a surprise, and probably not a bad thing, it's just the way it is.

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Cristina Buarque

Could you maybe comment a little bit more on this topic and these relations between Politics and Knowledge? Because one of your recent books, if I'm not wrong, has as the title "How Do You Know: The Economics of Ordinary Knowledge"? So, could you talk a little bit about what Ordinary Knowledge is?

Russell Hardin

You and I might talk about the same thing but have different knowledge about it. You think that the democrats did do this thing and I think that they didn't do this thing, so our knowledge bases are not very good. If you actually interview people in the US – probably this is true also in Brazil and lots of other places – if you interview people and ask them what they did and why, you get really sloppy answers.

First off, they very often misrepresent what they did. But it's not misrepresentation, it's that they don't really remember because when they did it, they did it sort of trying to get through this whole thing not knowing exactly what the correct answer was. And now afterwards they can't remember what answer they gave. So it's a mess and it's probably not going to be improved significantly ever.

The level of knowledge that you or I have about some things is really daunting. It's hard for us to know very much about that. So when all of these people in the Republican primaries said they believed that the world was created six thousand years ago and all of that stuff, they couldn't possibly believe. If they were even to think through it, which they do not do and that is weird. It has become a criterion for your being accepted as a good Republican that you say those stupid things.

The other day there was a brief interview with Newt Gingrich, who claims to be one of those religious nuts, and he said he was actually relieved that the campaigning was over because now he got to go to zoos and to look at dinosaurs! Dinosaurs?! (laughs) This is somebody who doesn't believe in evolution?! That is just astonishing!

I think actually he's a liar- he doesn't believe the things that they're saying. And I think that Mitt Romney is a liar- he doesn't believe that sort of stuff. But it matters that they say they hold those positions.

Fernando Lattman-Weltman

And what about the case of those ideological conservatives that vote against their own interest? For example, poor conservatives to vote against food stamps and stuff like that. How do you understand this?

Russell Hardin

Yes. There've been a lot of studies to try to figure that out. And there are many different explanations; none of them is THE explanation, they're all little pieces of it. The pieces

sound a little bit contrived. So saying that you have these views in the context of your talking with your neighbors and co-workers and so forth, and then you gossip about things and at that moment you have that view. Now when you come back into the voting booth, and you're voting on all of that stuff, you may not remember the discussions you had out there because you're having them over many, many months. The American primaries are a disaster, they gave people a very long period of time to come up with awful arguments, and that's what they have done.

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Fernando Lattman-Weltman

And how do you evaluate in retrospect the electoral scene and the future prospects for democracy in America? Are you worried?

Russell Hardin

Yes, I have been writing on the future and I think it's really a major problem. I think what's happening is a little bit like that book by Berle and Means. What's happening is that the nation is becoming Corporatist. Meaning it's organized like a corporation. Then it doesn't matter where you and I stand, the corporation is well organized, it will wind up pushing things through. And a corporation is probably going to have a more intelligent appreciation of what the issues are and how they ought to act on them. That doesn't mean it will happen but that's very likely what's going to happen. But that's a terrible thought, isn't it? Because it means that democracy per se is gone.

I really don't know what's in the future. I think it's poor, the future is really bad. And it's unfortunate those guys in the Republican primaries this year have made it a lot worse. Romney is just a consummate, really awful liar. On any issue he'll lie, if that will help. If it gives him a position that his audience will like, he lies. So he lies on both sides of the issue (laughs). So he, is, in a sense, easily nailed for his dishonesty. But it doesn't make any difference because people aren't that consistent and trying to figure out what's going on. And it's again back to that issue that you were raising, of the cost, the economics of voting and participating. The cost is really high. The cost of being at a meeting is not that high, a couple of hours a week or whatever, but the cost of knowing enough about what's going on to actually begin to interpret- that is hard.

Fernando Lattman-Weltman

So you think it really doesn't matter who's going to win the election?

Russell Hardin

No, I think actually in this case it does matter. That is to say, the voters may not be acting on that for your reasons, the thing you were just saying a while ago, but we probably will expect that if Romney wins the policies will be different from those that we would have if Obama wins. And you could probably say of either of them, they are smart enough to know what they are doing most of the time, and yet that leaves you wondering what's going on when somebody like Romney says he believes that global warming is a lie. A lie?!?! That's just insane because there are people who have devoted their entire research lives to that stuff.

Fernando Lattman-Weltman

But, let me be a little bit candid. What if Mitt Romney is really lying for the republican conservative electorate, especially in order to get to the nomination, and when it comes to office (Prof. Hardin: It's possible) not be as radical?

Russell Hardin

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It's possible. I don't know if it's very likely. I think he faces re-election four years later; so for the first four years he's going to have to continue at least some of the basics lies or he won't get his second four years.

Fernando Lattman-Weltman

I would like to explore a little bit more on the American constitution. How do you see the functioning of the American system? For instance, the problem of the Superpacs and the relationship between the president and the congress? Are you worried about this?

Russell Hardin

The superpacs, I think, are a raging disaster because the amount of money that can be spent will be spent. It's happening all over the place and there is no good reason for that. In fact the court took a decision against the expenditure, the mass expenditure, and then Chief Justice Roberts thought about it and decided "no they should not have done that". So he called a re-consideration of the supreme court. This has almost never happened in all the history of the US. They reconsidered and they voted to in fact allow the massive levels of uncontrolled spending, and in doing it, they added a little clause that made the superpacs possible. Without that clause there wouldn't have been. And one of the justices wrote this little thing and stuck it in there, and it's a disaster. It's said by some people who know Roberts that he is embarrassed that he did this thing and he wishes there was an easy way to undo it because it's so disastrous. I think there's probably not an easy way to undo it unless there's a constitutional amendment, and that's really hard because of the massive expenditure to block the change, and the law, through a constitutional amendment.

Fernando Lattman-Weltman

And there are a lot of people talking also about this- do you think that politics in America has become really more polarized than it was during the "cultural wars"?

Russell Hardin

There have been many times in the past when it was quite polarized. So, the polarization between about 1850 and the civil war in 1860 was horrendous. And it was very hateful. It was at least as hateful as what we saw from Romney and Newt Gingrich. The way in which they campaigned was destructive and they were willing to do that because they thought it would help them win. I think it has made campaigning look really ugly. And some of the people who lost in that system are really resentful that they lost. Rick Santorum is clearly resentful. He would have lost anyway I think, whether it had been done straightforwardly or the way it was. But I think probably everybody at the moment is worried about the court's decision in Citizens United, that decision, what that is going to do to the American political process. It's going to intrude a huge lot of money. When the money is available, it gets spent in the way it did against Gingrich by Mitt Romney. Romney basically had an almost full-time barrage of ads attacking Gingrich. And the truth is a lot of the attacks were true, but not all of them. And the amount of money spent was horrendous. Gingrich, who had been shown to be ahead in the polls before that primary, lost significantly in the primary because Romney had distorted everything so much. And then of course that was the primary in which, in fact, Santorum won. But they made an error in counting the votes from one part of Iowa that showed him to have lost, and had to change it. Had it

been correctly reported, it could have had an effect on how the campaign went thereafter and Santorum would have done better. I think Santorum would have been a disaster, but he would not have been a worst disaster than Romney perhaps. Unless the question you raised turned out to be true.

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Cristina Buarque

Let's go to Brazil. You told us you have visited Brazil a few years ago?

Russell Hardin

Yes, twice.

Cristina Buarque

What would you have to say about the interest the country has aroused lately? Do you see any relationship between this more recent interest on it and the recent developments in Brazil, specially concerning its political institutions?

Russell Hardin

Well, there are a lot of differences. And some of the differences in the way the systems are designed come from the fact that the US did it first and had no experience to look at to make corrections to what they were doing. and so there are some really dumb things in the American constitution. One of them is the rule for the selection of presidents through the electoral college- that is a really dumb thing. But at the time it made sense to many of the people because they thought it was sort of like having a platonic intrusion between what the voters do and what the government does; it didn't work that way, and in fact it's been a disaster. It's badly designed so that the minority person can get to be president. Most recently, Al Gore should have been the President in 2001, but he was not. Such a result is horrendously conflictual. In this case, Bush was made president by the Supreme Court and it was a disaster. An enormous number of things- policies- turned out to be different under Bush from what they would have been under Gore. And those policies were really important. Any nation writing a constitution today will not make those mistakes. There may be new mistakes to make, but there won't be those old ones to make. That probably makes a big difference, that you see things that work better. And I think Brazil actually has somewhat experimental things that may make a difference in lots of countries, if the other countries pick up those devices.

Cristina Buarque

What kind?

Russell Hardin

One of them is that you have a shorter election season, that's very important. In the US it goes on for a year. So one year out of every four is wasted in the election and that is really a disaster. Whereas with the English or the French or Brazilians, that gets settled in a brief period of time. In different ways those three are quite different, but we could learn a lot from those three if we were to design a constitution today. We'd want to look at Brazil, we'd want to look at any large country to see how they have made it work. And Brazil, France, England, would be among the countries we'd look at.

We would probably not go with the English system; it is even before the American constitution, and it has an even dumber mistake than the American constitution, as it

has Parliamentary districts in which there is nobody running for election because there is nobody living in that district. The district is this institution or some other institution, so those then wind up being called “rotten boroughs”, because they don’t have anybody but they elect people to Parliament. So you get elected from one of these boroughs in which there is nobody to vote, or vote against you. It’s really a strange system.

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So there are flaws in that system and flaws in the American. I don’t know what would be major flaws in the Brazilian constitution; or I do know one. Many constitutions have an emergency clause on how to deal with an emergency. So you look around the world, in emergencies that happened, every one of them followed the steps of this clause and that’s a disaster. So this actually has enabled and caused emergencies, rather than resolved them. The US had an emergency in the thirties. Had it had (an emergency clause) available at the time, it might have gone the way of Hitler. (Perhaps) not necessarily Hitler, but it would have gone the way that he went, that is, with seizing power and it would have been a disaster. As Argentina did and Brazil I think has done once, right? In, around 1980 when the military came in...

Fernando Lattman-Weltman

Yes, they came in 1964. But in fact, there was an emergency clause, but they would have come in anyway.

Russell Hardin

That may be. Where the military is set up and free to do that, civilian control of the military is a fundamentally important thing. And for whatever reason, most of Latin America does not have it. I guess Costa Rica in a sense does, but it has no military. That’s not quite the same thing. So if you could eliminate things like that from constitutions, they would be perhaps much more successful than they have been. Do you guys know of some thing that you think is wrong, with the Brazilian constitution, that it gets it wrong, that it could be better?

Cristina Buarque

I think since 1988 we have a quite exemplary constitution, and the main issue now is to adequate reality to the constitution.

Fernando Lattman-Weltman

I think it’s a little bit too big. I think it rules too much on things that should be left to the ordinary legislation, especially things that are related to policies. I don’t think the constitution should spend much time on policies (Russell Hardin I agree.), but the other side of the story is that sometimes it gives some sectors some kind of stability, and security to know that their interests are fixed on the constitution, but in any case the constitution is not that hard to change, since it was promulgated. It was changed many times, especially in Fernando Henrique’s government. Even the presidential mandate was changed, because we allowed for the first time re-election. We didn’t have reelection in the entire history of Brazilian republic, even in the military system. Of course, Getulio Vargas in the thirties was another story. But in fact I think the main problem is the size of the constitution, there are lots of things that shouldn’t be there, should be left to the ordinary legislation.

Russell Hardin

But the extreme case of that is the Indian constitution. Everything is in there. And it’s a disaster. The Mexican constitution is similar but it is for a different reason. For the period

when the PRI had an overwhelming majority in there, every piece of legislation passed by constitutional standards. It was like a constitutional amendment, so the constitution just grew and grew and grew. It had in it policies, which is ridiculous.

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Fernando Lattman-Weltman

Yes, it's no good. It's also a little bit undemocratic, because you fix things, and then the next government, the next majorities will think "no, we're gonna change this because the world is changing, and we have to change it"...

Russell Hardin

And it may be harder to change in that direction.

Fernando Lattman-Weltman

Yes. But I think they have another way of doing it, because most of it needs, in fact, complementary legislation which is not passed and so sometimes it gives a kind of leeway to the government or even the legislative or the judiciary to manage things. Because in fact the constitution has a kind of main principle, but (we do not know) how we're going to translate it into practice. And so it's a kind of game that we did not follow exactly, as it is. But, it takes a lot of...

Russell Hardin

And everybody takes part in that charade.

Fernando Lattman-Weltman

Yes, in the good moments everybody takes part in the charade. In the bad moments everybody's going to fight I guess (Russell Hardin: Yes.) and there is no common ground, and then you have to leave it to the judiciary to decide.

Russell Hardin

There's also the awful case of Hungary. Have you seen what's going on there?

Fernando Lattman-Weltman

Yes.

Russell Hardin

Viktor has used democratic institutions to create an autocratic government. That is really dreadful. And it would be almost impossible to change back, because there might never be a two thirds majority in the other direction, so Orban's party could just stay in power indefinitely.

Fernando Lattman-Weltman

You mean the, the....

Russell Hardin

The government was elected by a more than two-thirds majority. So, that gave them the license to go ahead and do anything. So they revised everything, made it much harder for the other side ever to win.

Fernando Lattman-Weltman

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In Mexico or...?

Russell Hardin

In Hungary.

Fernando Lattman-Weltman

Oh, in Hungary. Oh... I don't know the case.

Russell Hardin

It's extraordinary! If you look on the web you'll find it, but Viktor Orban is currently the president and got elected by more than two thirds enough to amend the constitution, as he has immediately done. The end result is the other parties are now virtually criminal. Or they're being treated as if they were criminal. So that and the Egyptian experience, at the moment, are probably the two saddest cases of modern constitutionalism.

Fernando Lattman-Weltman

Yes, very complicated issues.

Cristina Buarque

Well, are there any final comments that you would like to make on any piece of our conversation?

Russell Hardin

One thing that would be of real interest to most people, probably, is the role of religion in most of the constitutions.

The US turns out to have been just lucky, because it had so many different religions, that there was no chance that any one of them would gain control. Whereas in Bolivia and various other places there is part of the constitution that you have to be, if you are a citizen, Catholic. You have to go to confession and you can't vote if you don't go to confession and so on. Even people who are really adamant and want religion in the American constitution, recognize that if they put it in there, their religion might be the loser. And so they all acquiesce to, literally, having religion not be the constitution.

Cristina Buarque

And how was the political building of this non-inclusion of religion in the constitution?

Russell Hardin

The most interesting part of it was the arguments at the Pennsylvania and Virginia conventions for adopting the constitution.

In Virginia, where Madison was. And by then Thomas Jefferson, who'd been out of the country in France during the writing of the constitution, was now back and was in the Virginia legislature. Jefferson and Madison wanted there to be no religion in there, but they both were very strategic and said "you know, if we put that in then these guys will take over". And so they won very straightforwardly. And then that meant the rest of the country had to go along, because they couldn't adopt a constitution that had a change in it compared to the one adopted somewhere before. So everybody had the same

constitution, the one that passed in 1788. And they had now to follow that, their only choices were to accept that constitution or to break up the nation choice. That was very interesting, and nobody thought of it that way, except that Madison probably did. He was strategically much quicker than anybody else. But that's a really difficult question to answer; what's happening in Egypt right now, of course, is that there is a main religious group and that is trying to take control. And you couldn't have the American separation of religion and governance in Egypt. There is therefore a great difference between the American case and the Egyptian case. And a really hard difference. The US was easy; Egypt would be very hard or even impossible.

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Cristina Buarque

Ok. Fernando, any other..?

Fernando Lattman-Weltman

Just one other question: you mention in your book that democracy may be a good way to deal with marginal problems, but not with the big ones?

Russell Hardin

Yes. Right. As Dahl says, it's good at handling the trivial chaff; but not such core issues as the current Egyptian struggle over constitutionalism and democracy, as in the deep split between rigid Islamists and secularists.

Fernando Lattman-Weltman

Yes. Are you worried about what people say about a kind of "cultural war" in America?

Russell Hardin

No, not yet. It may happen, but so far it doesn't happen. In actual fact, there are people who would probably like to gain control, and run things; they're just not going to. So their program doesn't matter. But this could change. I think actually the truth is that the average level of education is going up, even in this bad time, and that makes it harder to mobilize people behind stupid ideas.

Fernando Lattman-Weltman

Yes. And do you think that American political institutions have anything to do with the polarization, for instance, discussions on re-districting?

Russell Hardin

Yes. I think that if there were a straightforward election at the national level instead of at the state level, for the presidency, that would relieve a lot of the conflict that we see today. Part of the problem today is that people know that just because it's big, Pennsylvania is going to be divided between Democratic and Republican positions. Pennsylvania is going to have a big impact on the outcome of a national election, whereas New York, Texas, California or whatever will have any impact because we're already written off. We know how much Texas will get and how much California will get, and that's not going to change anytime soon.

Fernando Lattman-Weltman

Ok, so the main thing would be the system to elect the president? Not the fact that you have a two-party system or stuff like that?

Russell Hardin

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No, the two-party system almost automatically follows, as it does in England and the US, from this “first past the post” kind of electoral system. You can have different run-off systems. Louisiana has a fairly complicated run-off system, so that in the end the person who is elected finally gets a majority vote. But that’s because all the other candidates are pushed out, just as in France. So the first round in France usually doesn’t produce a majority candidate; it did back in the days of De Gaulle, but not most of the time. Therefore you could have more conflict than you would like to have, but maybe it’s good in the French case. It’s not good in the American case. Because maybe in the French case it gives you a chance. If you’re going to be one of the losing parties- like Marie Le Pen’s party- you might come closer. You might have an impact. You might actually change the outcome of the other candidates, even though you yourself don’t get elected.

Fernando Lattman-Weltman

Ok, for me it’s....

Cristina Buarque

Ok. So, we should thank you again...

Russell Hardin

Thank you!

Cristina Buarque

... so much for this. (It was a) great opportunity.

Quote this interview

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