The Paradox of Federalism: Does Self-Rule Accommodate or Exacerbate Ethnic Divisions?

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The Paradox of Federalism: Does Self-Rule Accommodate or Exacerbate Ethnic Divisions?

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ABSTRACT The paradox of federalism is about whether self-rule accommodates or exacerbates ethnic divisions. A federal arrangement that formally recognizes ethno-linguistic diversity to help manage divisions can also pave the way for eventual disintegration. In this introductory piece, the editors of this Special Issue highlight a number of common reference points for the study of the secession-inducing and secession-preventing features of federalism: First, the political will of the secessionists and their capacity to mobilize to this end; secondly, the characteristics of federal institutional/constitutional design; and, thirdly, economic and sociological uncodified factors that have a bearing upon these questions.

KEY WORDS: Federalism, autonomy, secessionism, nationalism, accommodation, ethnic divisions

Introduction

In the last few years, the study of federalism has come to enjoy a new-found prominence (Erk, 2006, 2007). From the European integration process to the World Bank policies in the industrializing world, the boom in the study of federalism is accompanied by growth in its applied side. One particular area where federalism is increasingly prescribed is in the accommodation of territorial divisions and the management of ethno-linguistic conflict. It is especially marketed as a palliative to secessionist conflict. That is, federalism has come to be seen as a way to accommodate territorially based ethnic, cultural and linguistic differences in divided societies, while maintaining the territorial integrity of existing states. Here, however, we have a paradox that puzzles students of federalism.

Territorial recognition of minorities through the adoption (or strengthening) of federalism may intuitively seem to be the best way to manage ethno-linguistic conflict...
but, in the long run, such recognition perpetuates and strengthens the differences between groups and provides minority nationalists with the institutional tools for eventual secession. Further, federalism provides opportunities for conflict between regions and centres that might otherwise not exist. The fundamental question, then, is whether federalism provides a stable, long-lasting solution to the management of conflict in divided societies or is, instead, a temporary stop on a continuum leading to secession and independence. A federal arrangement that formally recognizes ethno-linguistic diversity to help manage the political system can also set this newly—or increasingly—federal state on a path to eventual disintegration. Here, in a nutshell, is the paradox: federalism has features that are both secession inducing and secession preventing.

While forms of collective representation are generally seen to be a positive measure for stability in divided societies, there are also significant risks. The paradox is, in many ways, part of the broader question of recognition of diversity: Institutions, policies and practices that are designed to manage (ethnic, racial, social, linguistic, religious and economic) divisions may also ensure the perpetuation of these very divisions. Self-rule tends to reinforce and strengthen the divisions by institutionally ‘freezing’ them in various forms. Measures designed to guarantee minority representation and thereby bring inclusion can also act as a base for further separation—both in physical form and in mentality. This “dilemma of recognition” is inherent in all forms of group rights (de Zwart, 2005). Group recognition ensures the perpetuation of the differences and provides minority elites with a vested interest in the continuation of the divided system. Recognition also means that collective groups will have the institutional tools to strengthen their internal cohesion, heightening the ‘us vs. them’ mindset. The paradox of collective representation is that it perpetuates the very divisions it aims to manage. Furthermore, it provides the tools that reduce the costs of secession, thereby making it a realistic option.

Ethnic conflicts are often rooted in a desire for increased autonomy from the central state (Gurr, 2000: 195). Group demands may range from a minor devolution of political authority to complete formal independence. These demands are often rooted in the belief that the group’s social, economic or cultural survival is threatened by the actions or inactions of the central state, or the group may simply chafe at the perceived efforts of the central state to interfere with issues that are considered exclusively regional concerns. Given the region’s desire for increased independence and the presence of international law that privileges the ambiguous norm of national self-determination—not to mention the norm of maintaining the territorial integrity of the state—it should come as no surprise that one mechanism of conflict reduction explored by social scientists includes the creation (or strengthening) of regional political structures of self-rule. Federalism is one of the most important tools of collective representation, providing autonomy to the constituent regional political structures. Of course, self-rule for constituent groups co-exists with federal shared-rule (Elazar, 1987). A defining feature of federalism is that self-rule and shared-rule are constitutionally (or otherwise) enshrined (Riker, 1964). Decentralization, ethnic partition and devolution are other forms of self-rule designed to give groups collective representation.

While they are marketed as mechanisms of conflict management, tools of collective representation have features that might exacerbate divisions under certain
circumstances. The very same institutions that appear able to calm secessionism, reduce or eliminate the possibility of conflict and manage diversity might actually work in the opposite intended direction. These institutions might freeze identities that are meant to be fluid, provide incentives to mobilize in favour of separation and, most alarmingly, provide institutions that can be used to overcome the collective action problem and accomplish secession. These institutions hold over into independence, thereby reducing the fairly significant costs of secession. Self-rule, then, might actually promote secessionism rather than resolve it.

Ethnic Conflict and Federalism

Students of ethnic conflict and federalism often acknowledge the paradoxical characteristics inherent in self-rule and have tried to find ways to reconcile the secession-inducing and secession-preventing features inherent in federalism, yet quests to resolve the paradox have so far fallen short of a clear consensus.

In her analysis of federalism and unitarism in divided societies, Nancy Bermeo (2002) stated that she expected to find that federalism exacerbated ethnic conflict. Instead, Bermeo (2002: 97) found that “federal institutions promote successful accommodation”. According to her analysis, this conclusion is borne out both in advanced democracies in which “federalism has helped to keep states unified and democratic in the face of possible secession by territorially based minorities” and in less developed countries, which “have all evinced the positive effects of federal structures” (Bermeo, 2002: 98). Bermeo (2002: 108) claimed that “no violent separatist movement has ever succeeded in a federal democracy”, painting federalism as an unmitigated success as a method of ethnic conflict resolution. Other advocates of self-rule tend to offer more nuanced endorsements of federalism. In their analysis of ethnic conflict regulation, John McGarry and Brendan O’Leary (1993: 4) identified federalization (or cantonization) as a “macro-method” of “managing differences”. Federalization “can be used to manage ethnic differences in ways which are fully compatible with liberal democratic norms” (McGarry and O’Leary, 1993: 30). Federalism, however, is unlikely to satisfy groups that have not achieved a critical mass of demographic dominance within the constituent political unit in question. Although confident in employing federalism as a method of conflict regulation, McGarry and O’Leary noted that “democratic federations have broken down throughout Asia and Africa”, but they still consider “genuine democratic federalism” an “attractive way to regulate ethnic conflict” (McGarry and O’Leary, 1993: 34, 35).

Donald Horowitz’s Ethnic Groups in Conflict (1985) continues to be a central text in the study of ethnic and regional conflict. In it, Horowitz (1985: 602) noted that the “skillful division of authority between regions or states and a centre has the potential to reduce conflict”, but he did not exhibit the overconfidence that is common among more recent advocates of self-rule. He warned that federalism may be little more than a resting point on the road to secession. His case study of Nigeria showed that “federalism can either exacerbate or mitigate ethnic conflict” (Horowitz, 1985: 603). He wrote: “the most potent way to assure that federalism or regional autonomy will not become just a step to secession is to reinforce those specific interests that groups have in the undivided state” (Horowitz, 1985: 628). In other words, would-be secessionists need
to be convinced of the continued benefit of remaining within the extant state. Among the benefits of membership that can be stressed or strengthened are the security umbrella provided by the state and central state-supplied social policies that benefit the group (Bartkus, 1999). Regardless of the potential for problems, Horowitz (1985: 619) was confident that “federalism or at least some devolution has conflict-reducing possibilities for many more countries than have so far contemplated it”. Ted Robert Gurr (2000: 195) asserted that most “of the ethnic wars of the last half century have been fought over issues of group autonomy and independence”. “Negotiated autonomy”, he stated, “has proved to be an effective antidote for ethnonational wars of secession in Western and Third World states” (Gurr, 2000: 366). Gurr advocated “preventive diplomacy”, which may include supporting negotiations for the pre-emptive granting of autonomy for territorially concentrated substate groups whose goal is independent statehood. Like other supporters of self-rule, Gurr recognized that this method of conflict resolution has its drawbacks: States may not be willing to devolve power to the regional unit.

For those concerned with resolving ethno-linguistic conflict, Yash Ghai (2000: 483) advocated exploring “the potential of autonomy”. Like Horowitz, however, Ghai’s confidence in self-rule is tempered by the concern that federalism may freeze and entrench what would otherwise be a fluidly forming and reforming of group identity (Ghai, 2000:499). Ghai (2000: 501) also warned that federalism may serve as a “springboard to secession”. Despite these concerns, he is confident that autonomy “can play an important constructive role in mediating relations between different communities in multiethnic states”. It is, he wrote, a “valuable option, notwithstanding its own difficulties” (Ghai, 2000: 524). For Ghai, self-rule is a tool of conflict reduction because it promotes integration, not disintegration; it provides a basis for interaction between the region and the centre that is satisfactory to both. He concluded (Ghai, 2000: 525), “Autonomy should be chosen not because of some notion of preserving sovereignty but in order to enable different groups to live together, to define a common public space”. This is the essence of the “shared rule” side of federalism, of course.

Others have been less enthusiastic about the palliative potential of federalism. While a great deal of recent political science literature sings the praises of self-rule as a method of conflict resolution, some social scientists have recently begun to question the enthusiasm with which it has traditionally been put forward as a solution. In his examination of minority ethnic mobilization in the Russian Federation, Dmitry Gorenburg (2003: 25) found that “ethnic mobilization is most likely to occur in countries that combine an ethnically based federal state structure with efforts to assimilate minority groups”. Philip Roeder (1991:199) made a similar claim about the antecedent Soviet federalism: “Autonomous homelands provide essential resources for the collective mobilization of ethnic communities”. Others have found a similar dynamic operating in other former communist systems. Jack Snyder (2000) wrote, “While ethnofederalism does not always produce ethnic violence in late-developing, transitional societies, it does create strong incentives for their elites to mobilize mass support around ethnic themes. When other factors are favorable for intense nationalist mobilization, the legacy of ethnofederalism heightens the likelihood of conflict” (Snyder, 2000: 202). Snyder argued that ethnofederalism in Yugoslavia helped to weaken the central state and fuel nationalism (Snyder, 2000: 210). Those who have expressed concerns about
the effectiveness of self-rule as a method of conflict resolution tend to be those who study
the consequences of autonomy in the context of former communist states (Brubaker,
1994; Dorff, 1994; Treisman, 1997; Bunce, 1999; Leff, 1999; Cornell, 2002).

In between the advocates and opponents of self-rule as a way to accommodate
ethnic divisions are those who have ventured to propose ways to determine under
what conditions federalism’s potential can be realized. Henry Hale, for example,
attempted to resolve the paradox by focusing exclusively on demographic institutional
structures in ethno-federal states, arguing that states with core regions (defined as a
“single ethnic federal region that enjoys dramatic superiority in population”) are
more likely to be vulnerable to secessionist pressures than states without core
regions (Hale, 2004: 166; see also Levy, 2007). Michael Hechter (2001: 146) has
also tackled the paradox “Whereas [federalism] may provide cultural minorities
with greater resources to engage in collective action, leading to a rise in protest
events, at the same time it may erode the demand for sovereignty”. This reduction
in the demand for sovereignty ought to reduce the incidence of secessionism. Thus,
while decentralization enhances protest events, it does so in a way that curtails seces-
sionism. However, Hechter also argued that the relationship between federalism and
secession is highly dependent upon the specific context in question. A decentralized
environment that is able to contain secessionist conflict may, thanks to exogenous
forces, end up facilitating secessionism. For Hechter, resolving the paradox of feder-
alism requires taking exogenous factors into account. Lustick et al. (2004: 223)
explored the impact of power sharing on secessionism and found that such institutions
“seem to inhibit secessionism”. They accounted for the paradox by suggesting that
power-sharing institutions, such as federalism, may decrease the chances of secession,
but that they increase the likelihood of mobilization along ethnic lines; that is, analysts
of federalism and secessionism who see groups mobilizing along ethnic lines have mis-
takenly identified mere ethnic mobilization as secessionism. From this point of view,
the paradox is simply a case of mistaken identity (see also Snyder, 2000). Dawn
Brancati (2006) looked at regional political parties as an intervening variable that
resolves that paradox. While decentralization might reduce the chance of secessionism,
the federal bulwark against secessionism obtains when regional political parties are absent; it does not
obtain when parties are present (for more on the importance of political parties for
federal stability, see Filippov et al., 2004). Allen Buchanan’s (1995: 55) solution to
the paradox is legalistic one: “if international law unambiguously rejects the principle
that an existing federal unit may secede if there is a plebiscite in that unit in favor of
secession”. However, to what extent international law could have averted the Yugoslav
civil war is open to different interpretations. So why are some federations beset by
strong secessionist pressures, while others are virtually free of such forces? When
and under what circumstances is federalism secession inducing or secession
calming? In short, can the paradox of federalism be resolved?

The literature on ethnic conflict and federalism does not seem to provide us with an
unambiguous verdict on the paradox. In some cases, federalism does seem to work as
advertised: satisfying groups that are or might be in conflict with the centre or with
one another and managing diversity within a single state, all the while keeping
international boundaries intact. In other cases, federalism works as feared: freezing
identities, creating incentives and opportunities to pursue secession rather than other strategies and creating institutions through which secession can be pursued—with fewer costs than if federal institutions were not in place.

Secession-inducing or Secession-preventing Factors

While no magic formula for resolving the paradox is yet unearthed, there are nevertheless useful paths to explore. Certain factors might tip the federal balance in the secession-inducing or secession-preventing direction. In a quest to put the spotlight on these factors, we propose to highlight three dimensions: (1) the political will of the subunits and their institutional and societal capacity; (2) federal institutional design codified in the constitution; (3) uncodified economic and social factors.

‘The Paradox of Federalism: Does Self-Rule Accommodate or Exacerbate Ethnic Divisions?’ aims to unpack the conditions under which self-rule induces or prevents secession. From devolution in the UK to federalism in Iraq (Anderson, 2007), the expected returns from trying to resolve the paradox are not only academic. Ranging from Sri Lanka to Bosnia-Hercegovina there are ongoing federal experiments seeking to create secure and stable democracies in deeply divided societies. But the paradox confounds the study of federalism and real-world efforts to design stable institutions: the same institutions that seem to be able to resolve differences, acknowledge diversity and prevent states from breaking apart along various fault-lines seem to encourage conflict, harden divisions, facilitate the break-up of states. A central question is whether it is possible to design federal solutions in ethnically divided societies, which are stable over time. The applied side of federalism thus has immediate contemporary relevance. We believe that focusing on three dimensions could lead toward a fuller understanding of the paradox.

Will and Capacity

The twin factors of will and capacity together form a dimension that focuses on the internal politics of the subunits. There is a complex relationship between the two. While the will to secede might be high in a unitary setting where minority groups have no option for self-government other than separation, they often lack the capacity to bring this about. While the capacity of the subunits to secede increases in a federal system, there is often less of a political will to do so. However, things are unfortunately not this simple. The will to secede can increase if self-rule proves to be a success. Or the opposite can happen, i.e. the unacceptably high costs of secession in a unitary system can dampen the will to secede. The two are, therefore, closely interlinked.

Secession is unlikely without it being sought by at least some subset of a population. Where does this will to secede come from? How does it develop? What is its link to the background conditions in which the state was formed and the present conditions of the state itself? In the existing literature, the presence of the will to secede is grounded (typically) in some dissatisfaction or grievance with the status quo. This dissatisfaction might take the form of retrospective displeasure with policy governed by the centre, or it might be prospective hope for better policies and more economic growth.
Self-rule brings with it a number of institutional and societal tools for the management of territorial diversity and even conflict reduction, but these very tools of self-rule can then be the bases that make secession possible. What role is played by the institutions of self-government and autonomy in the development of secessionism? How much government is there at the regional level? What role does more autonomy (or less) play in secessionism? The will to secede can be expressed through these self-governing institutions. Capacity, then, is a critical element of the paradox. Capacity is precisely what is sought by groups seeking increased autonomy from the centre—including groups seeking outright independence. Depending upon other factors (e.g. a will to secede), capacity can contribute to secessionism, but increased capacity might also satisfy an aggrieved group short of independence. While will and capacity are factors internal to the subunit where secessionist tendencies exist, the overall institutional structure of the federal system in question has immediate consequences for the paradox.

**Institutional Design**

The federal institutional design codified in the constitution is often the first dimension that attracts scholarly attention. This dimension includes questions such as drawing subunit boundaries, the number of subunits, constitutional division of powers, representation in central institutions, integration of markets and legal systems, constitutional amending formulae, shared vs. separated jurisdictions, and secession clauses in constitutions. Some of these questions are primarily about finding a proper distribution of authority between the centre and subunits, but others have an indirect impact on the secession-reducing and secession-inducing features of federalism. At the end of the day, the core concern is whether there are elements of federal institutional design that make one federation more prone to secession (or secessionism) than another.

The number (and size) of constituent subunits plays an important role in reducing or exacerbating conflict between the subunits and the central government as well as between the subunits themselves. The general observation seems to be that federalism tends to be more stable with multiple constitutional units rather than two or three large units or a single dominant one. A federal system defined by multiple units produces more room for shifting alliances and reduces an ‘us vs. them’ mindset. At the same time, when only a handful or one of the subunits is ethno-culturally distinct (Spain, Canada), subunits of the minority culture(s) might feel overpowered by the rest of the subunits representing the majority culture.

Although not formally part of the federal institutional design, electoral systems have indirect influence on the workings of the federal system and are thus part of the overall institutional structure. The number and nature of political parties are immediately linked to the electoral system in place; and parties, in turn, play a critical role in how a federal system functions. Proportional electoral systems provide incentives for political actors to reinforce their bonds with core homogeneous groups of supporters, while majoritarian electoral systems reward parties that bridge appeals to heterogeneous groups (Norris, 2004: 4). While majoritarian electoral systems can help weaken the divisiveness of group identities, they provide little protection to distinct minorities that resist co-optation into majoritarian politics.
Another key institutional element influencing the relationship federalism has with secessionism is the constitutional role of the judiciary. Whether the judiciary has the final authority to rule on conflicts between levels of government has direct implications on the choices and constraints secessionist movements face. While the courts can provide a critical role as the neutral umpire on the relationship between subunits and the central government, often at times the issues at play are more political than legal.

Uncodified Factors

The third dimension we seek to highlight is the economic and social factors that normally would not be codified in the federal constitution. The main emphasis here is to explore whether there are extra-constitutional features that make some federations more prone to secession than others. Economic and social factors that lack formal institutional recognition can often play a key role in exacerbating secessionist tendencies or mollifying them. Economic disparity across regions—especially if it corresponds to ethno-cultural distinctiveness—can increase secessionism in a federal system. Economic disparity can be based on the level of economic development or the distribution of natural resources.

Sociological factors—in particular, the social cleavage structure—is part of the uncodified dimension. Whether cleavages overlap and reinforce one another or whether they cross-cut and thereby decrease the political saliency of particular cleavages is of critical importance here. While a reinforcing cleavage structure often leads ethnicity, language and religion to converge and consolidate the minority cultural identity, this makes federalism an ideal territorial solution to demands of the minority. In a cross-cutting cleavage structure, it is often harder to reach territorial solutions that would satisfy all groups involved. An additional important social factor is whether kin-groups exist in neighbouring territories. The existence of such kin-groups often fuels secessionist irredentism.

Of course, at the end of the day none of the three dimensions exists in a vacuum. They interact with one another leading to complex combinations and difficulty in separating out which factor is responsible for what outcome. The existing literature on the factors that influence secessionism focuses, by and large, on these uncodified factors. Grievance at economic (or political or cultural) injustices creates a will to secede that is then expressed through available institutions and is designed to right the perceived wrong. Clearly, however, this dominant story misses too much: it does not explain secessionism and it does not explore the interaction between will and capacity, institutional design and the uncodified, but critical, features of the federation. ‘The Paradox of Federalism: Does Self-Rule Accommodate or Exacerbate Ethnic Divisions?’, thus, seeks to bring a degree of order to factors that would otherwise be explained away as contingency.

Different Perspectives on the Paradox

The paradox has been the object of study that crosses over various subfield boundaries with the aid of a wide-collection of theoretical and conceptual tools. One of the aims of
this collection is to link up the literatures on ethnic conflict, comparative federalism, nationalism, political philosophy and group rights and, finally, constitutional law and institutional design in divided societies. In addition to the different theoretical repertoires of these various literatures, the paradox is studied through different methodological perspectives ranging from the rationalist to normative. ‘The Paradox of Federalism: Does Self-Rule Accommodate or Exacerbate Ethnic Divisions?’ includes contributions from various methodological schools focusing on the same puzzle. And, finally, the substantive context of the paradox ranges from the constitutional debates around devolution in the UK to the violent secessionist struggle in Kosovo. The following articles explore the paradox in various guises of self-rule, ranging from de facto partition to devolution. As editors, it was our aim to pull together different theoretical, methodological and substantive perspectives on the paradox. The end product suggests that neither perspective has the claim to have unearthed the magic formula to resolve the paradox. As the following contributions to the issue show, the approaches to the puzzle are diverse, but the overall verdict seems to point in a common direction: on its own, federalism is not a panacea for conflict. Nor, however, is it simply the next step on the road to secessionist conflict. It is, at once, a problem and a solution. Whether it is one or the other seems to depend a great deal on factors that are external to the design of federalism itself—the uncodified factors identified earlier.

The first empirical contribution to ‘The Paradox of Federalism: Does Self-Rule Accommodate or Exacerbate Ethnic Divisions?’ is by Philip Roeder. In a piece entitled ‘Ethnofederalism and the Mismanagement of Conflicting Nationalisms’, Roeder offers a tour de force exploration of the problematic career of ‘ethnofederalism’ in the world. Here, he pulls together his significant body of work in this area, examining the consequences of ethnofederalism and autonomy arrangements. The core lesson that seems to emerge is that institutions shape subsequent politics. The adoption of ethnofederal institutions gives groups in conflict with political centres what they want without stopping them from wanting more. In short, ethnofederal arrangements institutionalize competing national projects, increasing the chances that secessionist conflict will develop. This fate is in contrast to the prospect of simple (or non-ethnic) federalism, which has the potential to calm and divide these alternate loyalties. In the following piece, Hudson Meadwell approaches the same analytical puzzle through a different angle. Based on a game-theoretical orientation, ‘The Political Dynamics of Secession and Institutional Accommodation’ challenges the conventional interpretation of the paradox of federalism. It is not possible, Meadwell argues, to fine-tune the institutions of federalism to make them secession-proof. Instead, secession-proofness and secession-proneness are functions of the underlying strategic dynamic of the situation. In this view, the hope that tinkering with institutions might prevent, reduce or eliminate the prospects of secession is simply misplaced. Thus, by definition, there can be no solution to the paradox. The question then becomes: to what extent does federalism impact the underlying logic? Meadwell concludes that, to be successful, a solution to the problem of secessionism will have to be imposed; in the absence of such imposition, there is no way to guarantee that any solution—federal, or otherwise—will succeed.

The fourth contribution to the issue explores the paradox in the context of British constitutional politics. Stephen Tierney’s goal is to see how the paradox of self-rule
reveals itself in a unitary state. What makes this a particularly interesting case is that self-rule to Scotland (and Wales and Northern Ireland) has been devolved from the centre without a federal redesign of the constitution or, indeed, without a structured system of inter-governmental relations. That is, the regime guiding self-rule in the UK is an *ad hoc* one that exists outside the traditional parameters of a formal written constitution. According to Tierney, the result of this is that the tensions defining some of the other case are partly relieved and partly exacerbated by this *ad hoc* regime.

One point that Tierney’s paper deals with is, of course, the role party politics played in the Scottish devolution process. In the following piece entitled ‘The Partisan Logic of Decentralization in Europe’ Jason Sorens expands on this angle. The analytical puzzle guiding the paper approaches the paradox of self-rule through the angle of the host state: Given the possibility that federalism will not work as planned, why do some states risk it and make the decision to decentralize? What explains the timing and character of this move? Sorens finds that the decision to decentralize is related to the structure and character of political party competition, particularly the electoral prospects of a given party in the central (or regional) government. Parties that expect to perform well in newly decentralized regions will support decentralization. Thus, for Sorens, resolving the paradox of federalism means explaining why central governments ever agree to decentralize, given the dangers that seem to attend this choice. The answer lies in the structure of party competition.

Whether or not self-rule helps accommodate ethnic divisions or whether it exacerbates them is a question not limited to the context of electoral party politics, of course. Erin Jenne tackles the paradox in two cases emerging from ethnic conflict and political violence. Her contribution to the issue focuses on the unintended consequences of ethno-territorial partition in Kosovo and Bosnia. Here, the paradox revolves around the implementation of post-conflict institutions that are designed to prevent future conflict. Rather than resolving and preventing conflict, separating warring parties into ethnic enclaves manages to harden these identities and create opportunities for conflict. Integration with measures taken to ensure ethnic security, not partition, Jenne argues, has a better chance of creating a lasting peace.

The seventh paper of this collection examines the paradox in the context of the world’s largest democracy, which also happens to be one of the most ethnically diverse—India. Many observers tend to see federalism as the key to India’s success in holding together, in spite of ethnic tensions and separatist tendencies. However, Punjab and ongoing conflicts in India’s North East and Kashmir are notable exceptions. It is within this substantive context that Kristin Bakke explores the paradox of self-rule. In order to explain under what conditions federalism induces or prevents secession, Bakke focuses on state–society interactions. Federal institutions respond to societal traits, in particular ethnicity and wealth, and influence whether—and which part of—the state becomes a target of political mobilization. In her in-depth analysis of the paradox in the Punjabi case, Bakke analyses how state–society relations interact to affect political mobilization, how political mobilization in turn affects the institutional organization of the state, as well as the consequence of such institutional changes. The key theoretical point which emerges from this article is that understanding the ways in which federal institutions can help preserve peace requires that we theorize and examine how those institutions interact with societal traits. Thus, just as there
seems to be no single response to the question of whether federalism calms or encourages secessionism, there is—and, by definition, cannot be—no “one size fits all” federal solution to conflicts in divided states that is independent of the societies in which the institutions are embedded.

As a scholar of federalism who has been involved in the applied side of devising federal solutions to divided societies, David Cameron offers the final word on the topic. His contribution explores the promise and paradox of federalism in Iraq, Sri Lanka and Quebec and Canada. The paradox we have identified exists to various degrees in the environments he explores, but he has his doubts as to whether the paradox can be effectively resolved with institutional fine-tuning. Rather, for him, questions of political justice prevail when exploring whether federalism leads to or calms secessionism. It is here that Cameron recommends that students of ethnic conflict/federalism pay more attention to the centrality of the liberal democratic principle of justice in all this. The challenge then is not institutional but pre-institutional—things that must be agreed upon before normal politics can operate. While it is comparatively easy to adjust institutions, it is more difficult to adjust—let alone bring about—these pre-institutional features. Having said all of that, Cameron acknowledges that justice might require the adoption of federal institutions. Despite the risks inherent in the institutional set-up of federalism, there might be little else on the table to keep divided societies together in a liberal democratic system that respects the basic demands of justice.

The aim of ‘The Paradox of Federalism: Does Self-Rule Accommodate or Exacerbate Ethnic Divisions?’ was to bring together theoretically, methodologically and substantively diverse perspectives to examine the very same puzzle. While a clear resolution to the paradox did not materialize, one important lesson seems to emerge. It seems that whether federalism is a problem or a solution depends a great deal on factors that are external to—and, indeed, deeper than—the design of federalism itself. Most contributors display a fair amount of scepticism that political institutions can be constructed or finely-tuned to eliminate, reduce or prevent secessionist pressures. That being said, Philip Roeder cautions us that the guiding logic of federal institutional design, i.e. whether it is designed to asymmetrically empower ethnic groups or bring about a symmetrical division of powers between the centre and the regions, does play a role. But we must be equally sceptical of the conclusion that federalism should be avoided at all costs because of its propensity to encourage challenges to central states. David Cameron reminds us that, despite its imperfections, sometimes federalism could be the only tool available.

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References


