Book Review

Comparative Federalism as a Growth Industry


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In a recent review article in Comparative Politics titled “Does Federalism Really Matter?” I proposed four benchmarks to evaluate the growing literature on comparative federalism: Does federalism matter for democratic participation, representation, and accountability? Does federalism matter for the representation and accommodation of territorially based ethnic, cultural, and linguistic differences? Does federalism matter for public policy and governmental effectiveness? If federalism matters, then does the design of federal institutions...
matter? (Erk 2006). The title of the article is an in-house reference to William H. Riker’s original article “Six Books in Search of Subject or Does Federalism Exist and Does it Matter?” published in 1969 (Riker 1969). Riker’s conclusions were quite dismissive of the output in comparative federalism. However, my review documents the recent growth in the federalism literature and thus challenges Riker’s harsh verdict. I argue that, despite the absence of a common framework for its analysis, federalism has experienced a remarkable renaissance in the recent decades—as an alternative way to accommodate ethnic differences, as a way to combat remote, undemocratic, and ineffective central governments, and lastly, as a way to bring together members of the European Union (Erk 2006, 105). Thus, a diverse literature dealing with various theoretical and empirical questions of comparative federalism has emerged.

This article follows the path I proposed in “Does Federalism Really Matter?” and examines half a dozen new books on federalism through these four benchmarks. All of the books examined are comparative in outlook. In other words, their focus is not confined to federalism in the United States. In a recent piece published on the pages of this journal, Frank J. Thomson drew attention to the fact that three quarters of the books reviewed in *Publius: The Journal of Federalism* dealt exclusively with federalism in the United States (Thompson 2006). But the growth in scholarly output dealing with comparative federalism calls for a broadening of our field. Furthermore, there is a mini boom in textbooks on comparative federalism (Burgess 2006; Swenden 2006; Hueglin and Fenna 2006; Sturm and Zimmermann-Steinhart 2005). This reflects the growing number of undergraduate and graduate courses on federalism and the accompanying demand for comparative course material.

One problem besetting comparative federalism is the absence of a common framework and terminology that would help bring students of federalism from different subfields into dialog with one another. Without common benchmarks, the emergence of big debates and grand questions that define healthy and energetic fields of study remain beyond reach. “Does Federalism Really Matter?” maintains that the field of comparative federalism remains divided into separate pockets of scholarship. Some of these subfields display signs of revival but they seem to be going their own way without the benefit of a common framework that might encourage theoretical cross-fertilization (Erk 2006, 104). Of course, the quest for a common framework and terminology should not mean the imposition of a unified and standardized canon that could stifle productivity and creativity. In the context of international relations, Robert Jervis brought attention to risks of seeking a standard framework for a field of study: “a high degree of diversity within the discipline, although often annoying, is conducive to intellectual progress. It would be unfortunate if we were to develop a sort of consensus that would narrow our lines of inquiry” (Jervis 1985, 148–9). David Laitin made a similar point in his
review of the influential Gary King Robert O. Keohane and Sidney Verba (1994) volume on research methods. Building on Mikhail Bakhtin’s work, Laitin highlighted the negative effects an imposed framework could have in terms of undermining dissent (Laitin 1995, 455). However, Laitin also acknowledged the benefits of a common vocabulary and benchmarks: “it must be remembered that sharing a language promotes not only effective communication but also focused debate across subdisciplines” (Laitin 1995, 455). While comparative federalism is fortunate to be free of the stifling pressures of a dominant framework, it also is without a common medium that can provide the basis for theoretical exchange. So at this stage there seems to be no immediate danger of an overpowering standardized canon. In fact, some profound theoretical disagreements even fail to relate to each other due to the different wavelengths on which scholarship is conducted. The four benchmarks to evaluate federalism can thus help bring these separate pockets of scholarship together. In particular, the political economy literature—fiscal federalism, federalism and economic reform, federalism and welfare state—hardly ever communicates with its sister literature on federalism and ethno-linguistic divisions; mostly due to the absence of a shared framework.

In addition to the divisions that result from different theoretical and empirical priorities, comparative federalism is further split among issues that have differing degrees of importance in different national settings. Thus the absence of a comparative framework is accentuated by the different preoccupations of the students of federalism. While American, German, Austrian, and Australian scholars tend to focus on questions like efficiency, effectiveness, and accountability between different levels of government, Canadian, Belgian, Spanish, and Swiss students of federalism prefer to deal with issues that relate to their ethno-linguistic divisions. In this context, comparative references to federal experiences elsewhere tend to be ad hoc and arbitrary. Edited volumes that bring together different country studies reflect the divisions between these different national styles in the study of federalism (Amoretti and Bermeo 2004; Heineman-Grüder 2002). In fact, the very term federalism carries different connotations in different national settings. If the starting point is unitary, then federal implies decentralization or devolution, as it is the case in Spain and Belgium. If, on the other hand, the starting point is separate and independent entities that are coming together, then federalism is centralizing. As a result, in some countries the term federalism represents increased central power—federalism as the coming together of previously separate entities—in others it represents further devolution of political power to substate units. The British discussion illustrates this phenomenon well: When federalism is discussed within the context of European integration, the term has centralizing connotations; when the term is used in the context of Scottish and Welsh devolution processes, it has a decentralizing meaning (See Publius 2006). However, it is interesting to note that when the term is used in reference to supranational European federalism, it often
carries negative overtones as this is seen to lead to the gradual erosion of British national sovereignty. The term federalism is frequently used by other continental European countries to refer to the same phenomenon, i.e., the deepening of the European integration process, but generally has positive connotations.

This brings us to another factor that works against a shared comparative framework. Various political agendas often permeate the federalism scholarship. A normative attachment to divided political authority experienced by some scholars can sometimes corrode the objective evaluation of the workings of federalism. As a result, federalism becomes the explanation for widely divergent phenomena ranging from the slow growth of the welfare state to the excessive growth of government. A much rarer breed is scholars with normative misgivings about federalism—particularly about the powers the subunits enjoy in a federal system. Be it the policies of the southern U.S. states during the civil rights movement, or the opposition of the small mountainous cantons of central Switzerland to women’s suffrage, the federal system is seen to be a barrier on the path to progressive democratic reform. According to Jean-François Bergier: “Federalism [in Switzerland] did not develop primarily as means for conflict management, but as a conservative, defensive-aggressive reaction to territorial rule which at the time was embodied in political modernization” (Bergier 1993, 61). But it is once again William H. Riker who delivers the harshest verdict on federalism:

If one approves the goals and values of the privileged minority, one should approve the federalism. Thus, if in the United States one approves of southern white racists, then one should approve of American federalism. If, on the other hand, one disapproves of the values of the privileged minority, one should disapprove of federalism. Thus, if in the United States one disapproves of racism, one should disapprove of federalism (Riker 1964, 155).

Others have a more sympathetic view of federalism as a safeguard against reckless government activism. Thus, opinion is divided between those who see federalism as a barrier to large-scale progressive reforms, and those who believe that divided political authority is the best protection against the tyranny of the majority.

In sum, comparative federalism scholarship varies across countries—in the underlying normative premises that guide it, in the questions asked, in the methodologies employed, in the evaluations that are made and in the reforms that are proposed. According to Ivo D. Duchachek some of this is due to the elusiveness of the very term federalism itself: “There is no accepted theory of federalism. Nor is there agreement as to what federalism is exactly. The term itself is unclear and controversial” (Duchachek 1970, 189). But for a long time, this heterogeneity was not seen as a major liability for comparative federalism, but was in fact cherished as an asset instead. While acknowledging the inexactness of the concept, scholars like
André Bernard viewed the absence of a shared framework an advantage for federalism:

One difficulty with federalism is that it does not allow itself to be the object of an precise, single and indisputable definition, but this draws from one of its appeals, that is, its adaptability to extremely varied circumstances and situations of different countries, and finally, its ability to accommodate to conditions and hence its success (Bernard 1971, 33–4).

S. Rufus Davis puts it in the following terms:

No single perception of the subject will provide us with an accurate means of decoding and translating the transactions of any single federal culture; nor will any combination of the known ways of looking at the matter enable us to decode and translate the transactions of all the heterogeneous phenomena that move about in the ‘federal’ galaxy (Davis 1978, 216).

Part of this heterogeneity is also due to the applied nature of some work on federalism. The approach to the study of federalism is closely related to the political, social, and economic circumstances that federalism is designed to address. This is particularly relevant for federalism research in the field of political economy.

Half of the books reviewed here have a common interest in the political economy of federalism. Particularly two of these seem to inhabit the same wavelength in comparative federalism scholarship. Jonathan Rodden’s *Hamilton’s Paradox: The Promise and Peril of Fiscal Federalism* and Erik Wibbels’s *Federalism and the Market: Intergovernmental Conflict and Economic Reform in the Developing World* are both driven by a quest to examine the widely held assumption concerning the economic benefits of federalism. Both books share a common desire to bring a more nuanced treatment to federalism than the prevailing one-size-fits-all endorsement of federalism as something that is good for economic performance. This normative attachment to federalism has distinctly American roots and is closely associated with the views one of its champions, Thomas Jefferson. Jeffersonian federalism extols the virtues of small government, divided political authority, and citizen participation. This view stresses the importance of dispersing political power and bringing democracy closer to the citizens, which in turn would maximize the freedom and liberty of individuals. Essentially this approach to federalism is concerned with limiting and constraining government. Elazar (1984, 1987, 1994) exemplified the Jeffersonian tradition in American federalism scholarship. This is a literature that celebrates the benefits of political and economic decentralization. A more recent example of this type of thinking is Barry Weingast’s idea of “market-preserving federalism” (Weingast 1995). Weingast came up with five key points for an ideal federal system: There should be precisely stated powers for each level; state governments should have primary responsibility
for economic development; national government's role should be limited to provide free movement and a common market; all governments should be facing a hard budget constraint with few transfers; and finally, there should be constitutional guarantees for this federal model. Economic theories of competitive federalism also underscore this perspective (Tiebout 1956; Breton 1987; Congleton 2000). Rodden and Wibbels take on some of these established views in the political economy literature. Federalism and Economic Reform edited by Jessica Wallack and T. N. Srinivasan shares a similar interest in advocating a more balanced approach to the political economy of federalism, but the emphasis here is more on economics rather than politics.

Wallack and Srinivasan have put together a volume of in-depth case studies, which deal with the political economy of institutional and economic change in Argentina, Australia, Brazil, Canada, China, India, Mexico, and Nigeria. Most of the emphasis is on how the division of authority between central and substate governments shapes debates over policy changes. Thus, the book clearly fits into the third dimension I proposed to evaluate federalism. In fact, Federalism and Economic Reform starts with the very sentence “how does federalism affect policy making?” (Wallack and Srinivasan 2006a, 1).

Most of the reasoning in Federalism and Economic Reform is based on game theory but the presentation is narrative. All case studies are in-depth historic overviews that deal with a common set of questions driving the inquiry. In the first chapter, the editors lay down the theoretical parameters of the volume. In line with the concerns Rodden and Wibbels share about the blanket endorsement of federalism, Wallack and Srinivasan draw attention to the inherent prescriptive risks:

The basic insights of the economic federalism literature on the advantages and disadvantages of sharing responsibilities across levels of government continue to form the backbone for much policy advice, but the political and politico-economic literatures list numerous and important caveats for evaluating decentralization (Wallack and Srinivasan 2006a, 21–2).

Wallack and Srinivasan believe the recent literature on the political economy of federalism provides a more nuanced and realistic assessment of federalism, but this comes with the price tag of diminished parsimony:

The politico-economic end of the spectrum may best describe the reality of how sharing taxation and expenditure power among levels of government affects and is influenced by its context, but this descriptive power comes at the cost of generality of lessons for the design of federalism (Wallack and Srinivasan 2006a, 17).

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policy making. The detailed case studies certainly improve our understanding of federalism’s interaction with economic and political conditions around the world. There are two common patterns that emerge from the country chapters. One is the constantly changing relationship between the center and the subunits. The second one is the complex way institutional/constitutional factors interact with the broader political, social, economic conditions; and hence the limitations inherent in the federalism versus unitary dichotomy often-used in large-n studies. But the main pattern that comes out of the country chapters is the prevalence of self-interested behavior as an explanation to the workings of federalism:

Overall, the country studies imply that an assumption of self-interested politicians involved in multi-level contest for reelection and riches is a better picture of reality than the collection of benevolent social planners in economic federalism analysis (Wallack and Srinivasan 2006b, 469).

Federalism and the Market: Intergovernmental Conflict and Economic Reform in the Developing World by Erik Wibbels continues where Wallack and Srinivasan left off. According to Wibbels “the theory developed here suggests that many market reform policies are a function of a constant process of bargaining between national and regional leaders struggling for political survival” (Wibbels 2005, 5). Seen this way, Federalism and the Market is about putting politics back in to the study of market reform in the federations of the developing world. So far this literature has tended to emphasize the positive aspects federalism brings to economic performance. Hence the stress is on how decentralization helps overcome aggregation problems by bringing policy decisions more in line with citizen preferences, and how it provides electorates with an opportunity to discipline local officials. As a result, the inflationary dispositions of national governments are checked. But according to Wibbels, the literature on economic reform is weak in appreciating the role of decentralized politics for economic reform processes. Due to the complex political context, intergovernmental competition is not guaranteed to always bring better economic performance. There are indeed collective action problems that result from the fragmentation of political authority over public policy. There are simply more veto players than in unitary states since federalism increases the number of political actors with autonomous control over significant portions of the public sector. Furthermore, subunits often have policy objectives different from national ones. This can lead to coordination difficulties among levels of government, which in turn hamper economic reforms.

Moreover, even with good economic performance we see differences among federal systems. The tremendous diversity in economic outcomes across federations indicates that factors other than just having two levels of jurisdiction play a role. For Wibbels these factors are part of the political context—particularly at the lower levels of government. The focus here is not confined to formal institutions,
but includes uncodified factors from the broader political environment. Electoral rules and party systems are particularly relevant as they provide the milieu in which intergovernmental relations are negotiated. *Federalism and the Market* shows that increased fiscal power of lower level governments and high levels of partisan harmony across levels of government improve macroeconomic performance, stability, and adjustments. But when subunits with high deficits are over-represented in the upper houses of federal parliaments—due to customary federal malapportionment between territory and population—macroeconomic performance suffers.

Wibbels moves from a macro analysis using cross-national data to a detailed microanalysis of Argentina. Intergovernmental relations from other Latin American federations also figure prominently in the book. The explicit emphasis *Federalism and the Market* puts on intergovernmental politics at the expense of formal institutions is coupled with a note of prescriptive caution: “Focusing on the formal rules of the fiscal system at the expense of the bargaining that produced them is likely to lead to excessive emphasis on institutional engineering as a solution for intergovernmental economic problems” (Wibbels 2005, 9). In addition to doling out institutional prescriptions with abandon, another shortcoming Wibbels identifies with the literature is the way certain assumptions from the United States experience are embraced without comparative references:

Historically, the decentralization and federalism literatures have posited that highly informed local voters will be able to hold their local governments responsible either through the ballot box or by voting with their feet, that is, moving to other jurisdictions that more closely match their policy preferences (Wibbels 2005, 246).

But there is no comparative evidence establishing that voters always know about the performances of the various levels of government, that geographic mobility is an available option—especially in ethno-linguistically divided federal systems, and that lower levels of government are more responsive to the complexity of local needs. The obvious way out of this problem is of course to make comparative federalism truly comparative rather than a perfunctory application of lessons derived from American federalism to every other federal system.

Jonathan A. Rodden’s *Hamilton’s Paradox: The Promise and Peril of Fiscal Federalism* is also driven by a desire to bring in a nuanced evaluation of federalism’s role in political economy. In light of IMF and World Bank policies celebrating the advantages of decentralization and downplaying its dangers, the importance of such balanced approaches is clear. It is worth noting that, instead of picking Jefferson as an intellectual forebear, Rodden has decided to explore Alexander Hamilton’s influence on federalism instead. Hamilton did not believe in the wisdom of dividing sovereignty between central and regional levels.
He remained skeptical about giving fiscal autonomy to constituent units fearing they would spend and borrow excessively. Since federalism and decentralization are now widely prescribed around the world, Rodden believes in the need to assess the effects of federalism before deciding on its promises and perils. He employs an interesting analogy to make his point:

At the beginning of the twenty-first century, decentralized federalism is to political economy what Prozac is to mental health. Use is on the rise and everyone is talking about it, but some tout its extraordinary benefits while others insist that it just as often makes things worse. It is increasingly clear that the treatment has vastly different effects on different subjects, but no one knows how, why, or under what conditions it succeeds or fails (Rodden 2006, 4).

In order to examine the promises and perils of a liberally prescribed remedy, Rodden undertakes an exploration of the conditions under which fiscal federalism delivers the promised results. The key to this exploration is the bailout game model in which the lower level governments are unsure whether the central government will bail them out in times of fiscal crises. Rodden explains how the various bailout expectations of lower levels of government are affected by the institutions and the fiscal organization of a federal system. The conclusion is that the promise of federalism will only occur when constituent units (states, provinces, Länder, and cantons) have full fiscal autonomy. This lowers the prospects of the federal government bailing the lower level units in difficulty out. If, on the other hand, these are semi-autonomous units allowed borrowing and spending on their own while still being dependent on central grants, the prospects for a federal bailout increase. In this case, it is only when the centre and the regional levels are governed by the same political party, do we see some fiscal discipline. Lower levels of government are then likely refrain from overspending knowing that their party would be held responsible for economic imprudence.

In sum, it is not the autonomy of the subunits, as Hamilton believed, but their semi-autonomy that creates the perils of fiscal federalism. Rodden shows that the promise of improved accountability and better governance is not an automatic outcome of federalism. Furthermore, instead of having clearly defined and separated jurisdictions that form the foundations of the Jeffersonian vision of federalism, many federal systems are in fact marked by overlapping and blurred sovereignty. Hamilton’s Paradox is a timely contribution to an issue that is of increasing relevance to the developing world. Both in applied and theoretical terms, Rodden’s work will have an impact on the way the performance of economic federalism is evaluated. There are, however, some minor problems with the comparative references in the book: Rodden’s characterization of Spain as a long-standing democracy that has chosen to adopt an explicitly federal structure is
a little puzzling (p. 3). The 1978 constitution that was adopted after the end of Francoist authoritarian rule is at best ambiguous when it comes to the powers of the Autonomous Communities of Spain. Rodden’s assertion that the Swiss federal history was shaped by ethnic and linguistic communities (p. 262) is also problematic, since these are relatively recent bases of political mobilization in a federal system where religion used to be the main cleavage. There is also some inconsistency with foreign-language terms. Québec is spelled sometimes with and sometimes without the accent aigu. ‘Länder’ has now become the accepted term in English for the 16 constituent units of the German federation, but the individual Land names do have English equivalents. For some reason Rodden has decided to use the German-language originals instead. In all fairness, Hamilton’s Paradox does not aim to provide in-depth studies of these countries in a comparative perspective; the goal is to assess the effects of fiscal federalism. Readers seeking in-depth country studies dealing with the political economy of federalism are more likely to find what they are looking for in the following book.

Federalism and the Welfare State: New World and European Experiences is the fourth book in this review that deals with the political economy of federalism. However, the emphasis of this volume edited by Herbert Obinger, Stephan Leibfried, and Francis Castles is more on politics than economics. Federalism and the Welfare State includes a number of in-depth case studies on Australia, Canada, the United States, Austria, Germany, and Switzerland that explore the interplay between political, economic, and social circumstances influencing the workings of federalism. While the case studies differ in their emphases, they are still anchored by a set of common questions the editors introduce in the first chapter. This provides more coherence than it is the case in many edited volumes. The book brings together ten scholars who explore whether the dominant view that federalism inhibits the growth of social solidarity always holds in face of detailed examination of the cases selected.

What emerges from the country chapters is a pattern where the system of multiple jurisdictions that define federalism initially inhibits the emergence of the welfare state, but these very divisions then slow down contemporary retrenchment. Furthermore, despite the barrier it represents in face of large-scale social reform, fragmentation also encourages policy innovation. At the same time, the case studies show the dichotomy introduced in the beginning of the book, i.e., New World versus Old World federalisms, does not provide a clear-cut correspondence between federalism and welfare state types. Nor does the inter-state versus intra-state typology provide a clear way forward. What seems to matter is whether federal welfare development took place under democratic auspices or not. Austria and Germany lacked fully representative political institutions in the formative phases, but they were in the vanguard of social policies. It was in federal democracies where the institutional veto-points gave vested interest groups an opportunity delay
the emergence of the welfare state. Once established however, the comparative analysis of these six cases shows that expenditure cutbacks are harder to achieve in federal welfare states. The editors believe that in-depth country studies bring out important patterns that would have remained indiscernible in large-\(n\) studies:

In contradistinction to the necessarily undifferentiated conclusions of [statistical studies], our historical ideographic approach allows us to locate the precise circumstances under which federalism matters and to identify the underlying mechanisms explaining why federalism has been an impediment in some contexts and not in others” (Leibfried, Obinger and Castles 2005, 319).

In-depth country studies also help link various pockets of federalism scholarship. It is especially in the chapters on Canada and Switzerland where one finds signs of a burgeoning dialog between two areas of federalism literature; i.e., the political economy of federalism and federalism in ethno-linguistically divided societies. Keith Banting’s study of Canada includes the most explicit articulation of this merger:

In Canada the co-existence of multiple political identities transforms the debate about the division of powers from a discourse about effectiveness into a discourse about community and national unity. Social programmes become cultural instruments, and controversies over jurisdiction take on a political symbolism that has made their resolution more difficult (Banting 2005, 136–7).

In federal systems where political identities are contested, public policies emerge as instruments of nation building. Other examples of the merger between the literature on the political economy of federalism and identity politics have started to make an appearance in academic journals (Erk 2003; Béland and Lecours 2005, 2006).

A general pattern that emerges from the country chapters in Federalism and the Welfare State is something that characterizes all the books reviewed; i.e., the complex way institutional/constitutional factors interact with the broader political, social, economic conditions in federal systems. Banting articulates the consequent caveat in the following terms:

The traditional dichotomy between federal and non-federal states misses the very divergent impacts of different models of federalism at work in different countries. It also misses the extent to which different social programmes within an individual federation can be governed by different models of federalism (Banting 2005, 135).

In overall terms Federalism and the Welfare State is an important contribution to the growing literature on comparative federalism. While its theory-driven country
chapters offer richly detailed studies of the relationship between federalism and the welfare state, the introductory and concluding chapters of *Federalism and the Welfare State* present comprehensive overviews of the literature. As a result, the appeal of the volume extends beyond specialists who work on federalism and the welfare state. But the usefulness of this comparative and comprehensive outlook is a little inhibited by the absence of an index of authors cited and a general bibliography. Despite this minor flaw, in terms of its mix of theory and evidence, *Federalism and the Welfare State* epitomizes the ideal path for comparative federalism. And on a side note for enthusiasts of numismatics: each chapter in *Federalism and the Welfare State* is introduced by the charming reproduction of coins reflecting the tradition of federalist heraldry in minting.

Readers who are partial to comparative historical analysis are likely to find Daniel Ziblatt’s *Structuring the State: The Formation of Italy and Germany and the Puzzle of Federalism* a welcome new addition to the growing literature on comparative federalism. Ziblatt’s examination of German and Italian unification processes gives the book a decidedly comparative historical bent, but *Structuring the State* is full of interesting theoretical insights for contemporary politics. In the context of the current political experiments in Iraq and Afghanistan, the analysis of founding moments and federalism is bound to be of interest to an audience beyond students of comparative federalism and historical institutionalism. Ziblatt wants to explain why federalism was the vehicle for national unification in Germany, while it failed to take root in Italy. What makes this an interesting comparison is the fact that Prussia was powerful enough to create a unitary state but refrained from doing so, while weaker Piedmont led a unification process that ended with a unitary state. As Ziblatt puts it: “why did Prussia, a military heavyweight, make concessions to southern Germany to establish a federal state, while the much weaker Piedmont conquered southern Italy to establish a unitary state?” (Ziblatt 2006, 141).

Ziblatt proposes an explanation that builds on what Michael Mann calls “infrastructural capacity”; that is, the ability to tax, maintain order, and regulate society. While Prussia could rely on the infrastructural capacity of the constituent German states, the infrastructural weakness of constituent Italian states made the imposition of central authority a necessity. This is an argument that turns the conventional idea on federal origins on its head. The widely held view is stronger states with political, military, and economic capacity will seek to establish unitary regimes, while federalism will often be the result of an inability to impose uniformity. But Ziblatt’s conclusion is that “federalism was not a second-best strategy adopted when necessary. Instead, federalism emerged when possible, while it was unitary structures that were viewed as necessary” (Ziblatt 2006, 142). In other words, Germany became federal because it could afford to rely on the infrastructural capacity of its constituent units,
but following the political vacuum after the collapse of the Kingdom of Two Sicilies, Italians had no option other than (re)establishing political order through the creation of a unitary state. As a result: “This study finds that the most decisive factor in such moment of institutional creation is the preexisting supply of regional political institutions, shaping which strategies of institutional creation are possible and desirable” (Ziblatt 2006, 144).

The comparison in *Structuring the State* is not only theoretically interesting, but it is also a good example of a thickly contextualized investigation that does not sacrifice the quest for scientific generalizability. In this respect, the study fits in with the so-called “historic turn in the human sciences” (McDonald 1996). Ziblatt should be applauded for successfully taking on such a risky endeavor. This is the type of work that is too historical for fans of decontextualized large-\(n\) studies, and too variable-based and rooted in social science for students of 19th century European political history. But at the end of the day, Ziblatt does an outstanding job in presenting the comparison without losing either audience.

The last book to be reviewed is Wayne Norman’s *Negotiating Nationalism: Nation-Building, Federalism and Secession in the Multinational State*. Most of the book’s contents fit under the second benchmark I proposed for evaluating federalism. That is, Norman is interested in exploring federalism’s role in the representation and accommodation of territorially based ethnic, cultural, and linguistic differences. Parallel to this concern, Norman explores various options for the design of federal institutions—albeit only in the context of multination federations. Thus, the fourth proposed dimension also plays a very prominent role. *Negotiating Nationalism* includes an overview of various institutional mechanisms to accommodate nationalism that can be employed in federal systems—what Norman calls the ‘plumbing’ of federalism. There are sections devoted to questions like drawing subunit boundaries, division of powers, representation in central institutions, integration of markets and legal systems, constitutional amending formulas, and secession clauses in constitutions. The book does not endorse or propose one of the institutional models discussed, but evaluates the potential advantages and disadvantages of different options. Norman does not shy away from some of the related normative issues that are part of the foundational principles underpinning these institutional models. There are also chapters that are exclusively devoted to examining the role of federalism in normative political philosophy. The intellectual origins of a big part of the discussion in *Negotiating Nationalism* lie in political philosophy, but the comprehensive overview of federal pipes and fixtures is certainly of interest to comparative federalism. However, the comparative references are limited to the multination federations of the industrialized West—especially Canada. The Canadian experience with federalism includes in one way or another almost all of the issues that are of interest to comparative federalism. Linguistic/cultural diversity, size differences between subunits, economic disparities across regions, aboriginal self-rule, multiculturalism,
differentiated party structures, the coexistence of exclusive and shared jurisdictions all contain interesting lessons for comparative politics. However, Norman’s emphasis is on ethno-linguistic differences and federalism. Canadian and comparative references are put to use in a search for ways of reconciling competing nation-building projects within a common political space.

Norman finds the theoretical debates in comparative federalism disconnected from the discussions about federalism in political philosophy: “the federalist theory emerging from the social scientists is almost never set within the context of contemporary theories of justice and democracy more generally” (Norman 2006, 93). According to Norman, social science literature on federalism ignores the work of Rawls, the Oxford Political Theory series, the major theorists of deliberative democracy and the work that comes out of the top three of the political philosophy journals (Norman 2006, 93–4). It is clear that there is much in political philosophy that can enrich comparative federalism, but Norman is liable of a similar shortcoming in the opposite direction: Despite chapters that are devoted to the question of federal institutional design in multinational states, the bibliography of Negotiating Nationalism contains only a handful of examples of work on comparative politics. There is nothing on new institutionalism, nor is there any entry from a top comparative politics journal—including Comparative Politics and Comparative Political Studies. The picture is not much better concerning academic journals devoted to the study of federalism itself. There are only two articles cited from Publius: The Journal of Federalism and none from Regional and Federal Studies. Of course, this does not take anything away from the usefulness of Negotiating Nationalism, but it shows how a common framework and terminology could have helped link up pockets of federalism scholarship. If we had a bird’s-eye-view of the literature comprising both the analytic and the normative, dealing with various issues like public policy, democracy, and conflict management, we could build on the contributions of each other, and thus avoid the risk of trying to reinvent the wheel on our own at each turn of the way. But while there is still much room for improvement in comparative federalism, things are not as bad as Riker had us believe.

The six books reviewed here reflect the emerging status of the comparative federalism as a growth industry. One thing that defines most of the new literature is a healthy distance to the subject matter. By undertaking an even-handed evaluation of federalism, most of the new work acknowledges that federalism is no one-size-fits-all panacea. A nuanced view of federalism together with a prudent stance towards its assumed benefits has done more for the field than a blanket endorsement of this complex phenomenon. Federalism studies does not have to be within the monopoly of federalists. A more balanced evaluation of federalism is likely to contribute to further growth in the literature. The benefits are not only in the scholarly field. Flawed and partial theoretical analyses can form the foundations of misleading prescriptions. In a recent piece Erik Wibbels notes the boom in
research on Comparative Federalism, but also draws attention to the dangers of prescriptive license:

At a time when the United States finds itself engaged in several attempts to engineer institutional solutions in sharply divided societies (Iraq, Afghanistan, and Haiti), the shortcomings of facile institutional recommendations are becoming clearer by the day (Wibbels 2006, 166).

Notes

1. “So hat sich der Föderalismus nicht primär als ‘Mittel der Konfliktbewältigung’ entwickelt…, sondern als konservative, defensive-aggressive Reaktion gegen die Territorialherrschaft, die damals wohl die politische Modernität verkörperte” (Bergier 1993, 61).

2. “C’est une difficulté du fédéralisme qu’il ne puisse faire l’objet d’une définition précise, unique et discutable, mais c’est l’un des attraits qu’il puisse, de ce fait même, s’adapter aux circonstances et aux situations extrêmement variées des divers pays et finalement, s’accommoder des conditions même de son succès” (Bernard 1971, 33–34).

References


