

Ziblatt, D. (2006). *Structuring the State: The Formation of Italy and Germany and the Puzzle of Federalism*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

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For those whose intellectual trajectories were shaped by the likes of Barrington Moore, Alexander Gershenkron, Gregory Luebbert, and other practitioners of macro-historical sociology, Daniel Ziblatt's *Structuring the State* comes as a very welcome contribution to the literature on state building. Taking up the German historian Heinrich Treitschke's 130-year-old invitation to compare the national revolutions in Italy and Germany, Ziblatt uses these cases to develop a provocative new theory about the origins of federalism. Explicitly drawing on the methodological tradition of comparative historical analysis, he finds that institutional inheritances and historical legacies largely explain the different paths that Germany and Italy took during their moments of national unification. Although both Cavour and Bismarck desired decentralization, only Bismarck inherited the conditions to make federalism possible. Whatever their theoretical dispositions and feelings about macro-historical sociology, scholars of federalism will need to contend with Ziblatt's arguments. His book is also sure to become required reading for students of European political development.

One of the hallmarks of comparative historical analysis is its use of empirical puzzles to generate important theoretical questions (Mahoney & Rueschemeyer, 2003), and Ziblatt's study is motivated by the following paradox:

Why did the militarily powerful state of Prussia, after defeating Austria and its southern German allies in 1866, establish a federal system of territorial governance, while the less militarily powerful and less dominant state of Piedmont, after defeating Austria in 1859, established a unitary system? (p. 11)

Because rational choice accounts, such as those of William Riker (1964), assume that politicians at the center will create unitary systems if they possess the requisite military power, they cannot explain the German and Italian outcomes, nor can theories that explain federalism and unitarism as a function of either the presence of federalist ideology (it thrived in both cases) or historical-cultural legacies (there were strong regional loyalties within each state). Rather, Ziblatt's central argument is that the preexisting infrastructural capacity of national subunits determines the outcome. If the subunits can govern themselves effectively, "they can both serve as credible negotiating partners in a process of nation-state formation and can also govern in a federation afterwards, leading the way to a federal outcome" (p. 13). But if the subunits lack constitutions, parliaments, and effective administration, the center has no choice but to absorb them in a unitary system. Politicians at the center

thus seek to follow the “path of least resistance” (p. 146), and unitarism is a second best solution.

To advance this argument, Ziblatt first explains the origins of the drive for national unification in Germany and Italy. Two views predominate in the vast historical literature, the details of which Ziblatt spares us. In the society-centered view, federalizing impulses emerge from economic actors seeking larger markets. The prediction is that wealthier regions will favor federalism, whereas poorer and less competitive regions will be against the elimination of protectionist barriers. In the state-centered view, regions seeking to project their military power will favor federalism, whereas militarily less powerful states will have neither the inclination nor capacity to engage in federalist enterprises. To settle this historical dispute between neo-Marxists and statist, Ziblatt marshals an array of economic statistics and indicators of state size for the 17 German states and 7 Italian states to see if either correlates with support for federalism. In short, Ziblatt finds that both views are correct. The two initiators of unification—Prussia and Piedmont—were both big, rich states. The statist are thus correct that state capacity and the projection of military power are necessary requirements for support for unification. Yet they are not sufficient, for both Bavaria and the Kingdom of the Two Sicilies were large states that were hostile to unification. It was the relative poverty of these two states that made them resistant to unification, and neo-Marxists are thus correct that economic development strongly influences support for unification. Ziblatt conducts some basic statistical tests to measure the importance of the two variables on the rest of the cases, although the small number of cases in Italy precludes regression analysis.

Chapters 2 through 4 are thus concerned with the “push-and-pull” of unification and with assessing the relative weight of economic and statist explanations. This section of the book is most relevant for specialists of the period because it brings an impressive amount of evidence to resolve an old debate. The cost of this approach is that it somewhat detracts attention from the central argument, which only begins to unfold halfway through the book. My sense is that some readers will find such attention to the properties and preferences of the 24 German and Italian states well worth the price, whereas others will long for a fuller treatment of the causes of federalism.

I only raise this possible objection because Ziblatt’s central argument is so provocative and could potentially provide a fruitful research agenda for scholars examining federalism in comparative perspective. Chapters 5 and 6 focus on the outcomes of the “national moments” in Italy and Germany, respectively. These two narratives are compelling: they recount the machinations of two of the most intriguing statesmen in 19th century Europe—Cavour and Bismarck—while advancing the central argument about institutional legacies and demonstrating the incompleteness of alternative explanations. Despite their preferences for decentralization, Cavour and the Piedmontese leadership found themselves pursuing “unification by conquest,” which involved the destruction of the political entities that could have constituted a federal state. Why? According to Ziblatt, the infrastructural weakness of many Italian states—and the Kingdom of the Two Sicilies above all—left Cavour

with no option other than extending Piedmontese rule. Security and the fear of foreign intervention were driving concerns. Piedmont could not allow Sicily to descend into anarchy following the collapse of the Bourbon regime in May 1860. This point could have used a bit more empirical support, if only because this decision had such dramatic consequences. Once Piedmont had set on this course, it became impossible to devolve authority to subnational institutions as, in the logic of path dependence, “self-reinforcing” processes pushed Italy toward centralization.

Prussia, as opposed to Piedmont, was able to follow the “path of least resistance” and create a federal entity precisely because it had strong partners with which to negotiate. As Ziblatt documents, every German state ranked higher on a “political development index” (a composite score the author constructs of constitutional, parliamentary, and administrative development) than any Italian state except Piedmont. Complete annexation was not necessary after Prussia’s military victories, and Bismarck opted for “unification by negotiation.” Ziblatt suggests that Bismarck learned from Italian unification (a point that could have been developed a bit further) and saw the value in “negotiating with regionally embedded political actors” and avoiding “the disorder of the experience in southern Italy” (p. 127). But his actions that pushed Germany down the federal road were not simply the result of political acumen but more importantly a function of the existing infrastructural capacity of the German states.

This is a carefully researched and theoretically stimulating book that will reshape our thinking about German and Italian unification and about the origins of federalism in general. The few minor criticisms I have in no way undermine its importance. Like most books, it is repetitive in places. Ziblatt’s frequent references to the “quantitative evidence” are also unlikely to bring quantitative types on board, and although his empirical data are impressive, his statistical tests are rather basic. Given the small number of cases, I am not convinced that the regression analysis Ziblatt performs in chapter 2 adds much to the analysis. His is a finely executed qualitative study that uses a wide array of evidence, some of which takes numerical form. Although this quibble may just derive from semantics, it is also reflective of a broader trend among qualitatively oriented scholars who perhaps try too hard to defend their methodological sophistication by invoking the term *quantitative*. With its structured, focused comparisons, tests of alternative explanations, and attention to causal mechanisms, Ziblatt’s book represents rigorous social science.

My last two points concern the portability of the argument and its policy implications. Chapter 7 applies the argument to 18 other cases in Western Europe and finds that it works rather well. But this section could have been strengthened by treating another country that opted for federalism in slightly more depth. This would help allay concerns that Bismarck’s decision for federalism, despite having the option of centralization, is somehow exceptional and another manifestation of his political genius. Looking at cases outside of Western Europe would also have been welcome. But these are, of course, questions for future research. Finally, what might the implications of Ziblatt’s analysis be for policy makers, a subject that the author

does not address? Although they are not necessarily wrestling with projects of national unification, Ziblatt notes that policy makers “increasingly view federalism as a potential solution to a diverse range of problems” (p. 3). But is federalism only a viable solution when the subunits possess the requisite institutional infrastructure? Again, addressing this issue would require Ziblatt reaching far beyond his cases, but it is a testament to the book’s importance that readers are likely to raise such questions.

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## References

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