



CENTRO STUDI SUL FEDERALISMO

PERSPECTIVES ON FEDERALISM



ISSN: 2036-5438

## Perspectives on Federalism: Why a new journal?

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Perspectives on Federalism, Vol. 1, single issue, 2009



In launching a new journal we feel the need to explain the reasons why the Centre for Studies on Federalism takes this initiative, characterised by a range of specific features. Several interesting scientific journals in English devoted to federalism are already issued all over the world. They are generally focused on one geographic area in particular, on certain levels of government or on specific academic disciplines. Therefore we believe there is room for a new interdisciplinary journal to consider federalism – federal institutional arrangements as well as potentially federalising processes - at all levels of government. The very name *Perspectives on Federalism* stresses that the journal will consider federalism from different disciplinary, geographic and theoretical perspectives.

Federalism is somehow a buzz-word, a contested concept, defined in different ways and conveying various meanings and connotations. In the British debate about European integration it refers to centralisation, while almost anywhere else in the world it refers to decentralisation. Some authors define federal institutions in strict and specific terms. Others employ broader definitions which can comprise a vast range of institutional arrangements. Some consider it only as an institutional theory. Others propose it as a fully-fledged political thought or a new paradigm. Some focus their analysis on federal states, others on integration and disintegration processes which could lead to federal arrangements. The deepening of the European integration process has generated an enormous amount of academic studies debating the federal features of the European Union, which is still short of being a fully-fledged federation. Indeed, the European Union is often considered as the laboratory of a new federalism.

The journal embraces a wide conception of federalism, just like the Bibliographical Bulletin on Federalism launched in 2005, which receives significant attention from the international academic community, with an average of 15000 visits a month. Mario Albertini (1963-1993) defined federalism as a new political thought or a new vision of the world, and Daniel Elazar (1991) as a new paradigm. They share insights with the institutional analysis of Kenneth Wheare (1963), and the study by Carl Joachim Friedrich (1968) of federalising processes. As a working definition we could say that federalism is a single word for the theory and practice of multi-level democratic government from the normative and descriptive standpoints. This obviously must include the historical, social, political, economic and cultural processes through which they are created and/or developed.



Federalism is about acknowledging that the world is complex and plural, increasingly ill-fitted for monist conceptions of the State, sovereignty, nation, identity, etc. Just as the federation was initially conceptualised as a middle ground between a confederation and a unitary state, so supranational federalism can be located somewhere between international anarchy and a centralised world state – often chosen by many authors as a polemical target, even if nobody actually advocates it. The processes creating new levels of government, within existing states and between and above existing states, are all part and parcel of federal studies. The weakening of the legitimacy of the nation-state – although it continues to be the main identity reference for most people in the world - is a common condition of possibility of processes in both directions. This also sheds light on the vast debate and trends towards fiscal decentralisation and fiscal federalism (Oates 1998; Ahmad and Brosio 2006). Just as the increase of interdependence in scope and extension underlies both the regional integration process and the global governance debate and developments.

Federal arrangements and federalising processes are one of the available answers to the issue of interdependence and of regional and global governance. The analysis of the advantages and disadvantages, of the costs and benefits, of the pre-conditions for and of the actual development of potentially federalising process are thus of crucial importance to best assess the institutional choices ahead. Federalism is definitely more demanding than simple intergovernmental cooperation in terms of trust, delegation of competences and powers, deciding and acting together. But it is also more democratic and effective. However, sometimes the better can be the enemy of the good. The normative value of federalism and of the potential alternatives, such as the conditions of possibility for its establishment or those of the potential alternatives, must be subjected to scrutiny and analysis. Until a few years ago, most scholars discarded the idea that European integration could lead to a fully-fledged federation. Now, although the EU is not (yet?) a federation, there is a vast and growing amount of theoretical, empirical, and comparative literature about its federal features. This shows that all processes of institution-building are potentially federal in character, precisely because they are open-ended. A federal outcome is not at all certain, just as it cannot be excluded in advance. Therefore, decentralising processes, regional integration processes, the global governance debate and development can all be considered as potentially federalising processes.



European integration and several decentralising processes around the world suggest that the processes of creating new institutions within and/or above the states – which may or may not be or become federal – can produce institutional settings with some federal features. Institutions do matter and do influence the behaviour of people and states (Keohane 2002). Institutional design is thus a crucial element in trying to solve several problems and ensuring public goods at all levels of government. As Hamilton pointed out: institutions must produce incentives for people's interests and duty to coincide. The reflection on the best normative institutional solutions – or more precisely the assessment of the relative costs and benefits of the potential alternatives and the analysis of their suitability to the specific situation and context to which they shall apply – and the analysis of the potential and actual transition processes, or institution building processes, will thus be at the core of the *Perspectives on Federalism* focus.

Just as European integration may turn out to be the transitional institution building process which leads to a European federation (although this is not at all certain), so the intense institution building processes occurring at regional and global level may turn out to be the start of an integrative path leading elsewhere and at world level. Global governance is not federal at the moment. But federalism is about supplying public goods to groups which share certain problems but not others and which want to deal with them separately. Global governance is about providing public goods at world level, in a situation in which the states want to continue to handle most problems separately. It may or may not acquire federal features, but the basic problems involved are the same. Therefore federal studies can offer some insights into the global governance debate both from a descriptive and a normative perspective, building on the literature which has analysed the strengths and weaknesses of the federal solutions.

Federalism is also about the recognition that there are no closed boxes in world politics. All levels of government and of political struggle interact with one another. The sharp distinction between domestic and international politics and the analysis of one aspect in complete isolation from the others cannot bring a fully satisfactory comprehension of either sphere. If politics and society were as simple as many hard-nosed realists assume, the researcher's job would be easier. Unfortunately, the world is complex, plural and nuanced. This requires an open-minded attitude to other disciplines and perspectives to try to cope with this complexity and grasp the fundamental linkages of the interdependence figurations

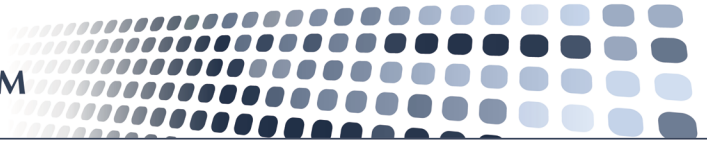


(Elias 1939-2000) which characterise and influence individual and group behaviours at different levels of analysis.

*Perspectives on Federalism* thus aims to become an open forum for debate to discuss this whole complex bundle of issues. Also with this in mind, the Centre has chosen to publish it only in its electronic version. Printed versions are expensive and force the publisher not to provide the contents freely on the web. The statutory goal of the Centre for Studies on Federalism is to promote studies on federalism. Just as the Bibliographical Bulletin is a free service to the international academic community, so *Perspectives on Federalism* will be a free and open forum for debate, although it will comply with the international academic standard with regard to the double blind review in the selection of the essays to publish.

Advocates and critics of federalism are equally welcome to contribute. The contribution of scholars from different disciplines is necessary if the journal is to fulfil its aim. Both normative and descriptive papers are welcome, as we are conscious that there is no sensible normative theory which does not carefully consider empirical reality, just as there is no descriptive analysis which is not theoretically informed and which can completely expel the normative preferences of the author. The journal is not planned as a tribune for scholars of the Centre of Studies on Federalism, but as a meeting point for scholars of federalism around the world. With this in mind we have set up an extensive editorial board made up of young scholars who will monitor the main developments in federal states and international organisations relevant to scholars of federalism. The journal will also publish short notes about such developments to provide raw material and information for scholars around the world to build up their researches.

We hope this new initiative will be as successful as the Bibliographical Bulletin, although we are aware that it requires much more active participation by the international academic community. That many scholars of federalism have shared and supported this project by joining the journal's scientific committee, forming a selected pool of reviewers for the incoming contributions, is a promising start. We hope you will find the journal interesting and will actively contribute to its development.



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