

Federalism

The Foundation of the United States of America and the Birth of Federalism

Since ancient times there have been various attempts by different states to create unions. But it was in North America, with the Philadelphia Convention of 1787, that history's first federal constitution was realised. It was the result of a compromise between those who wanted to unite into a single state, and those who sought

A. HAMILTON

THE EVILS OF DIVISION

To look for a continuation of harmony between a number of independent unconnected sovereignties situated in the same neighbourhood, would be to disregard the uniform course of human events and to set at defiance the accumulated experience of ages.

THE FEDERALIST, 1788

to preserve the absolute sovereignty of, the thirteen colonies that had just won independence from the mother country. The federal constitution represented a happy compromise because, as Alexander Hamilton immediately recognised, it allowed for the spread of representative government over an area composed of many states, thus realising unity through diversity. Under the federation, the people

I. KANT

FEDERALISM AND PEACE

Peace cannot be attained without a federation of peoples, in which even the weakest member can look for its rights and security not to its own power or adjudication, but to this great confederation, to the united power and the adjudication of the collective will.

IDEA OF A UNIVERSAL HISTORY ON A COSMOPOLITAN PLAN, 1784

were represented in the House of Representatives, while the states could defend their specific interests in the Senate. The

federal government was competent for the common matters of foreign and commercial policy: all other competencies were reserved to the states.

As a result of the federal union, American citizens were able to experience notable economic development, and above all to avoid the conflicts and wars which continued to afflict the great European powers, and all those countries, such as those in South America, which having won independence failed to achieve political unity.

Federalism, Cosmopolitanism and Nationalism

In the same years that the American colonies were embarking down the road to independence and union, the philosopher Immanuel Kant was arguing that since states live in a condition of anarchy, like individuals in their natural state, warfare and not the law was the only means to which they could ultimately resort to gain justice. There would therefore be no true international law as long as states did not abandon their present condition of unlimited freedom and accept a common federal constitution, that is a government which had sufficient powers to ensure universal peace and the independence of each member state.

The cosmopolitan value of federalism, which is implicit in the American constitution and explicit in Kant's political thought, was however immediately stifled by the overwhelming rise of nationalism. The historical conditions for the development of federalism as a universal project were not existent at that time. The French Revolution asserted the model of the sovereign nation-state that is centralised and closed within secure borders, which was universally adopted.

The nation-state stifles local autonomy and ethnic minorities. Nationalism conceives of relations between states as between powers which assert their own

interests by force of arms and which claim the absolute loyalty of their citizens, even to the extent of the supreme sacrifice of one's life. Nationalism is the political culture of the division of the human race, it

P.J. PROUDHON

NATION-STATES AND CENTRALISM

National sentiment is in inverse proportion to the extension of the state. As the latter gradually incorporates new territories there is a progressive denaturalisation. This will be one of the causes of the dissolution of the state. Nationality restricts sentiments and genius. Agglomeration broadens them. The French nation is currently composed of at least twenty distinct nations and their character, observed in the people and in the peasants, is still strongly defined... The Frenchman is a being of convention, he does not exist. That which it pleases us to represent in novels, in plays, in caricatures, be it soldier or cook, barber or travelling salesman, is a joke. Such a large nation can only hold itself together by force. The standing army serves above all for this. Take this support away from the administration and from the central police and France falls into federalism. The local attractions prevail.

FRANCE ET RHIN, 1867

teaches the hatred of foreigners and exalts and justifies violence. Nationalism is the political ideology that led Europe and the world into the tragic episodes of nazifascism and total war.

European Federalism

In the course of the resistance, there began to form spontaneously in all the European countries – in prisons, in places of confinement or in clandestinity – opposition groups which proposed to rebuild a pacified Europe, with no more racial hatred or borders. The idea of the European federation, which during the 19th century had been considered a noble ideal, became instead a concrete political project.

The *Ventotene Manifesto* (1941) set out the “dividing line between progress and reaction” between those who regard a European federation to be the primary objective of the political struggle, and those who continue to think that the values of liberty, freedom and social justice can be pursued within the nation-state. It was for this reason that the *Movimento Federalista Europeo* was founded in Italy.

In the post-war period, European governments were no longer able on their own to guarantee their citizens either economic independence or security. European unity increasingly seemed the only reasonable option, and federalist action became possible. From 1950 on, thanks to the courageous initiatives of Jean Monnet and Altiero Spinelli, European governments set out, even if only gradually, on the road to political unity. Today, after many years of struggle, defeats and successes, the European federalists must face the final decisive battle. Following the end of the cold war, the direct election of the European Parliament and the creation of single currency, Europe has now reached a crucial choice: either federal unity, so as to build an increasingly interdependent world that is peaceful and capable of solidarity, or a return to the divisions, nationalisms and evils of the past.

Federalism and the Traditional Ideologies

The experience of the federalist movements, which were, and continue to be, fully autonomous of the national parties, demonstrates that federalism is an ideology which fosters a new kind of political behaviour. As Mario Albertini has argued, federalism is an “active political thought” which contains a value aspect, that of universal peace, as defined in Kant’s political thought; a structural aspect, namely the theory of the federal state; and a socio-historical aspect, the stage of development corresponding to a pluralistic society that is open to interdependent relations.

Federalism has a critical relationship toward the traditional ideologies. Feder-

alism does not set itself up against liberalism, democracy and socialism. However, it does affirm that the great values of freedom, political equality and social justice cannot be valid only for the citizens of one nation-state. By accepting such a limitation, the traditional ideologies have implicitly subordinated their ideals to *raison d’Etat*, even to the point of nakedly betraying, as during the First and Second World Wars, the international solidarity which united liberals, democrats and socialists of all countries. Only through federalism can the values of liberalism, democracy and socialism be affirmed in a world without frontiers.

The Two Polarities of Federalism

Federalism extends between two ideal polarities, cosmopolitanism and communitarianism.

The national dimension of the state is now inadequate not only for tackling the great problems of our time whose scope is global, but also for guaranteeing citizens effective participation in the life of the state and the effective land and urban planning. Particularly in Europe, where the integration process has reached a very advanced stage, it is clear that the nation-state must cede responsibilities both upward (to the European government) and downward (to smaller territorial communities, such as the regions and districts).

Federalism enables relations between different territorial communities to be organised democratically, from the lower levels, such as the districts, to ever higher levels, such as the regional, national and continental ones. Ultimately, through the union of different continental federations, it is possible to conceive of a democratic world government. The sub-division of powers for the various levels of government must respect the principles of subsidiarity, because problems should be resolved at a higher level only when it is impossible to tackle them satisfactorily at a lower level that is closer to citizens; and territorial solidarity, because the citizens of richer and more well off territorial communities should share in the poorer terri-

torial communities’ efforts to achieve a higher level of prosperity.

However, the struggle by local communities to gain greater autonomy risks, in the current European situation that is

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FEDERALISM, TRADITIONAL IDEOLOGIES AND INTERNATIONALISM

The history of European federalism is nothing more than that of the manifestation of the contradiction between the affirmation of democracy in the national context, and its negation in the international context. This is equivalent to saying that European federalism, starting from the French Revolution, is an aspect of European history, a much broader aspect than it is often thought to be (even if imprecise, like all historical tendencies that have not yet reached maturity), in which, alongside an adventure of thought begun philosophically by Kant, lies the slow unfurling of the universal element of the great revolutionary waves. These are liberalism, for what concerns the rights of citizens; democracy, for what concerns the rights of peoples; and socialism, for what concerns the socio-economic rights of the peoples.

These three great ideologies, which have gradually furnished the nation-state with democratic and social content, have de facto, from the very beginning, contained an element of federalism, even though the awareness of this has been undermined by the theoretical confusion of federalism with its opposite, internationalism, which entrusts rulers rather than the people with the solution of international problems.

THE HISTORICAL AND CULTURAL ROOTS OF EUROPEAN FEDERALISM, 1973

still balanced between unity and division, turning into tragedy, when claims to independence are combined with micro-nationalism, as the case of Yugoslavia demonstrates. An aspiration to autonomy is progressive only if it recognises the political priority of overcoming the national dimension of political life, because as long as peoples are forced to regulate international relations by force of arms, the reasons that in the past have caused the centralisation and bureaucratisation of the state will survive.