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The Northern Ireland Experience of Conflict and Agreement. A Model for Export

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Book Reviews

The Northern Ireland Experience of Conflict and Agreement. A Model for Export? by Robin Wilson. Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 2010, ISBN 9780719082894

Consociational (or power-sharing) democracy is a well-known normative concept and an empirical model for divided societies. Yet it seems that it was largely ignored by the politicians who were involved in the design of institutions of such societies. Nonetheless, quite often they did apply the consociational elements such as executive power sharing, group autonomy, proportionality, and minority veto. As a Dublin official declared to Robin Wilson, in reference to the Belfast (Good Friday) 1998 agreement: ‘I don’t recall that we had any particular academic inspiration for what we were doing’ (p. 149).

This is one of many anecdotal quotes that we can find in Wilson’s volume on conflict and agreement in Northern Ireland in which the author emerges as a fierce, but thoughtful and well informed, critic of consociationalism. It is based on numerous citations from the media, as well as on many personal interviews with known and less known politicians, civil servants and other decision makers involved in the Northern Ireland peace process.

Wilson displays an excellent knowledge of the most influential theoretical and empirical contributions in political theory and comparative politics on the topic of ‘democracy in divided societies’ and is able to constantly link this knowledge to his empirical analysis. In Chapter 2, for example, he regrets the fact that essentialist, multiculturalist and nationalist normative approaches have underpinned most institutional solutions aiming at democratisation of post-conflict societies like Northern Ireland, and Bosnia and Herzegovina. He pleads instead for a ‘new paradigm’, whose outcome should be ‘integrative’ institutions based on interculturalism and an anti-essentialist view of personal and collective identities.

It is no surprise that a whole Chapter (3) is dedicated to ‘Balkan lessons’ in which Wilson explores the current institutions of Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Macedonia. He rightly criticizes the rigid power-sharing regime in Bosnia, based on the institutionalisation of its three ‘constituent peoples’ (Bosniaks, Croats, and Serbs), and claims that this country represents ‘a failed state’ (p. 63). On the other hand, more flexible power-sharing arrangements in Macedonia have carefully avoided the institutionalisation of its two main ethno-linguistic groups (Albanians and Slav Macedonians).

Yet the main focus is upon Northern Ireland. By referring to personal interviews and media reports, the author first (Chapters 4 and 5) reconstructs and reinterprets the dilemmas that decision makers on all sides faced in the 1970s and the 1990s negotiations. What conclusions and policy implications shall we draw from the case of Northern Ireland? In the final Chapter (6) Wilson pleads for ‘intercultural dialogue’

and states that the internal governance of Northern Ireland ‘must place a premium on dialogue and deliberation across sectarian boundaries’ (p. 189). He indicates a number of solutions that might allow it to overcome the current institutionalisation of ethno-religious communities, like a super majority (e.g., 65 percent) for forming the executive, or informal conventions instead of rigid quotas for sharing power.

There is one aspect that has been often mentioned in the book but that, in my view, would have deserved a more systematic and comparative treatment. It concerns the role of ‘others’ in consociational regimes. Indeed, the consociational institutions in places like Northern Ireland, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Belgium or South Tyrol are based upon the fundamental premise that the society is composed of groups rather than individual citizens. As a result, the ‘others’ – i.e., citizens who cannot or do not want to identify with any group that has been officially recognised – are often discriminated against. See, for example, the 2009 ruling of the European Court of Human Rights (*Sejdic and Finci v. Bosnia and Herzegovina*) or the South Tyrol’s ‘ethnic objectors’ (*obiettori etnici*), led by the late MEP Alexander Langer. According to Wilson, Northern Ireland’s consociational regime can be criticised for similar reasons. He quotes (p. 184) the 2006 and 2008 surveys showing that, for the first time, more respondents (40–44 per cent) ticked the ‘neither’ box and, thus, refused to accept a ‘unionist’ (i.e., Protestant) or a ‘nationalist’ (i.e., Catholic) identity tag. But the problem is, again, that this spontaneous abandoning of sectarian identities is not reflected in the institutions of Northern Ireland, for they remain deeply rooted in and around group identities.

To sum up, the main strength of the book is Wilson’s ability to identify and tackle the current dilemmas that are embedded in the institutions of Northern Ireland, by combining the traditional academic approach (both theoretical and comparative) and journalistic enquiry. Its principal shortcoming is the lack of a systematic analysis of the role of ‘others’ in power-sharing regimes.

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From Dual to Cooperative Federalism, The Changing Structure of European Law
by Robert Schütze. Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2009, ISBN 978-0-19-923858-3

The *dénouement* of Robert Schütze’s *From Dual to Cooperative Federalism* should not come as a surprise. Indeed the title is all revealing. But obviously it is not this final conclusion about the development of European constitutionalism that draws the reader into this highly interesting book but rather the journey the author undertook to arrive at that conclusion. One of the innovative features of this work is the way the concepts of dual and cooperative federalism, developed in political science literature, are applied to structure what is essentially a *legal* analysis. This gives the book a multidisciplinary twist, enjoyable for both lawyers as well as for political scientists.

Dual and cooperative federalism are applied as the ‘heuristic compass’ for this journey towards (re)defining European constitutionalism. In a (remarkably concise)