

Providence College

DigitalCommons@Providence

Political Science Faculty Publications

Political Science

1983

Review of Federalism and Federation by Preston King

William E. Hudson
Providence College

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.providence.edu/political_science_fac



Part of the [Political Science Commons](#)

Hudson, William E., "Review of Federalism and Federation by Preston King" (1983). *Political Science Faculty Publications*. 7.

https://digitalcommons.providence.edu/political_science_fac/7

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Political Science at DigitalCommons@Providence. It has been accepted for inclusion in Political Science Faculty Publications by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@Providence. For more information, please contact dps@providence.edu.

philosophically oriented reader will find Hardin well versed in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century thought that he draws on frequently to illustrate the earlier understanding of specific theoretical situations and their likely results. Some formal theorists may be disappointed that Hardin does not develop his arguments more rigorously. However the breadth of insight and richness of empirically testable predictions more than compensate for the more general and less rigorous form of argument. There is much grist here, and it can be further refined by formal theorists, empirical researchers, and those seeking a general understanding of the eternal puzzles and paradoxes facing all humankind.

ELINOR OSTROM

Indiana University

Federalism and Federation. By Preston King. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1982. Pp. 159. \$18.95, cloth; \$6.50, paper.)

More than a decade ago William Riker subtitled a review essay "Does Federalism Exist and Does It Matter?" (*Comparative Politics*, October 1969, pp. 135-146). His answer was largely negative, concluding that federalism is a "legal fiction," and he admonished political scientists "to study the real forces in a political system." In spite of this advice, political scientists continue to study federalism (including Riker), and so it is appropriate that Preston King has seen fit to address once again the complex issues surrounding this concept.

King divides his "analytical theory" for federal union into discussion of federalism as political ideology and federation as a particular institutional relationship. As ideology, federalism has been favored by those who seek "diversity in unity" (p. 20) in political regimes. However, as King clearly shows, this notion is so ambiguous as to encompass a wide variety of specific and contradictory political programs. He analyzes three varieties of federalist ideology: as an argument for centralization in *The Federalist*; as an argument for decentralization in the diverse theories of Prodhoun, Calhoun, Bakunin, and Kropotkin; and as a means of political power balance. Federalism's use on behalf of such divergent purposes makes it useless as a label for a coherent ideology.

King's attempt to establish "a defensible connection relating to the nature of federation" (p. 14) is the more interesting and innovative part of this book. Before useful empirical work can be done to see if federation matters, improvement

must be made to existing approaches for distinguishing federations from nonfederations. Those who define federations in terms of a contract between territorial regions and a central government imply more of a degree of equality and volunteerism in the relationship than actually exists in practice, as shown dramatically by the American Civil War. King also finds wanting the more common method of distinguishing federation in terms of degree of decentralization or local autonomy. Since all central governments provide at least some autonomy to local units ("the whole idea of a 'unitary' state would appear something of a myth," p. 126), some unambiguous, objective criteria are needed for distinguishing how much and what kinds of decentralization result in federation. King does not think that such criteria exist or can be provided, and, in practice, "there is no observed degree of centralization/decentralization which commonly and distinctly marks off federations from so-called unitary states or empires" (p. 126). Therefore, he has no use for the conventional textbook distinction between federal and unitary states that obscures real empirical differences such as the fact that "federal USA in . . . 1970 was far more centralized . . . than was the 'unitary' British Empire in . . . 1920" (p. 139).

Although some might be persuaded by this analysis to discard federation as a useful scientific concept, King proposes instead a new definition. Federations are to be distinguished "solely by the fact that its central government incorporates regional units into its decision procedure on some constitutionally entrenched basis" (p. 77). Critical to the notion is the requirement that "regional representation at the centre cannot be easily altered, as by resort to the bare majoritarian procedure which serves normal purposes. . ." (p. 143). Accordingly, the United States is a federation because of equal state representation in the Senate, which cannot be altered without resort to the constitutional amendment procedure. King intends this definition to be of "a constitutional kind . . . whether these arrangements are written on paper or firmly imprinted on men's minds" (p. 145), but he is careful not to leapfrog into any empirical conclusions.

Thus, King has embraced enthusiastically the legal fictions that define federations as the best approach for finding out if they matter. Most readers should be persuaded that King's approach is likely to permit a more objective classification than the other approaches he discusses. (Although many will object that, for some hard cases, determining what constitutes "constitutionally entrenched" representation is difficult, as in the French *cumul des mandats*. King could help his case by a more complete list of examples.) However, many readers, unlike King, will also find

reinforcement in his analysis for an intuitive judgment that federation may not matter.

WILLIAM E. HUDSON

Providence College

The Rise and Decline of Nations: Economic Growth, Stagflation, and Social Rigidities. By Mancur Olson. (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1982. Pp. xi + 273. \$14.95.)

In one of the most publicized and quickly reviewed books in modern social science, Mancur Olson has again tackled a momentous problem with his accustomed energy, imagination, and some originality.

Although Olson begins his inquiry into the rise and decline of nations with a detailed summary of his earlier volume *The Logic of Collective Action* (Harvard University Press, 1971), perceptive readers may note that the current book is rooted not so much in the general thesis of *The Logic*, i.e., the free-rider theorem, as it is in a footnote on page 124 dealing with the efficiency and equity of pressure group activity.

It does not follow that the results of pressure group activity would be harmless, much less desirable, even if the balance of power equilibrium resulting from the multiplicity of pressure groups kept any one pressure group from getting out of line. Even if such a pressure group system worked with perfect fairness to every group, it would still tend to work inefficiently. . . . Coherent, rational policies cannot be expected from a series of separate ad hoc concessions to diverse interest groups.

Much of *The Rise and Decline of Nations* consists of a theoretical argument elaborating the footnote and supported by a vast array of diverse national data showing how those interests that are organized will evolve into a system that at once decreases the efficiency of the private economy and shifts the concerns of politics toward distributional issues. The nine implications developed in chapter 3 are conveniently summarized on page 74. Olson's argument is essentially correct, but it is also incomplete. He focuses his attention on the conflict between efficiency and equity and resolves the conflict by showing how both suffer from a highly rigidified protectionist interest group economy. What Olson has not done is to show how the polity itself has created these problems, and why it is in the self-interests of the government to engage in ad hoc concessions to those interests. Olson is strangely silent on this phenomenon of particular importance in public choice and rent-seeking. Olson makes but one

brief reference to the latter and startlingly few references to the former, a field in which he is a major contributor. Yet Olson's thesis is most compatible with the work of his colleagues from Blacksburg and, now, Fairfax, Virginia. It is also consistent with those political theorists including E. P. Herring, William Riker, and John Ferejohn who have shown the conditions for the inefficiency of logrolling among politicians and interest groups. One simply cannot grasp the current economic difficulties of the Western democracies without a theory of public choice, and Olson does not supply one. There are few politicians, bureaus, and bureaucrats in *The Rise and Decline of Nations*.

Olson's vivid descriptions, extensive data, and interpretations of the social and economic difficulties are persuasive and eloquent. He has a remarkable talent for combining sobriety of thought with formal but graceful prose. His reasonableness, gentle logic, and desire to communicate with the educated layman are manifest on every page but the last chapter on inflation, in which the analysis is on another, higher level. Nevertheless, not only does Olson take a long step toward Blacksburg (Fairfax) in his recognition of the perversity of interest groups, but also in his frank and repeated admonitions about the fundamental importance of the microfoundations of inflation and, indeed, all economic policy.

Although the title of the book suggests that all nations might be considered, Olson confines himself largely to the democracies where interest groups have long existed and had time to rigidify society. With considerable skill and originality he shows how the devastation of World War II wiped the slate clean of interest groups in Germany and Japan so that the take-off into economic development could proceed with the remarkable results we have all observed. Olson also applies his theory to American regional development and the new capitalist economies of Korea, Hong Kong, Singapore, and Taiwan. His book will surely spawn dozens of articles and doctoral dissertations.

Political scientists are indebted to Olson for this stimulating and ambitious effort to write a theory of political economy. In his sometimes quaint and subtle manner, he has managed once more to address the big issues and make sense of them in nontechnical language both respectable among his peers and accessible to noneconomists. His only remaining tasks are to incorporate into the framework a theory of public choice and to give some indication of how it might be possible to reform politics by using an inefficient redistributive politic.

WILLIAM C. MITCHELL

University of Oregon