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Subnational Government: The French Experience

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Secondly, the editors have preferred to concentrate on the study of the two most relevant parties, one right-wing and the other left-wing, in each of these South European countries. Instead of organising the volume through country chapter, they have devoted one chapter to each party. In doing so, the editors provide a deeper understanding and description of party dynamics, as well as a more detailed analysis of the issues involved around the broad topic of party change and transformation. In this regard, the choice of collecting a set of case studies in which the latter are the parties, instead of the party systems and their units as a whole, is one that pays off, producing very good results. Furthermore, these editorial choices are complemented by the concentration on a short period of time (1995–2005). Consequently, we obtain a picture of a period in which parties have been exposed to a number of relevant changes, and of a time-frame that is not well covered in the existing literature.

However, as it is not infrequent in this kind of volume, these decisions are also the origin of some of the weaknesses of the book. There are certainly good, both pragmatic and theoretical, reasons to concentrate only on the two most relevant parties of each country. But devoting a chapter only to each of the major centre-left and centre-right parties leaves unanswered very interesting questions that are linked to party change in countries with multi-party systems. In this regard, it is worth noting that some of the parties not considered in the volume are certainly not small elite parties and meet every criterion of relevance. Perhaps a more relevant methodological objection is referred not so much to the selection of parties but to the selection of countries included in the volume. The editors have considered jointly South European countries that, apart from the strictly geographical criterion, differ quite markedly in several other variables that are very relevant for this type of political analysis. This results in a clear limitation for the comparability of the case studies. To give an example, the editors have chosen not to include in the volume a country such as France, which in several important aspects of party politics and party system configuration is rather similar to some South European polities like Spain or Italy. Therefore, a case selection that would have been guided by theoretically-relevant criteria, and not just geographical definitions, would have probably produced even richer results.

In any case, this very valuable volume edited by Bosco and Morlino allows us to adequately appreciate some interesting features of party change in Southern Europe. Some of these are common to other European countries, whereas others are more exceptional as, for example, the importance of incumbency on party behaviour, the coming to an end of the acute trends in party membership decline or growth of the previous decades, the innovation in leadership selection procedures, the personalisation of leadership, and the lingering relevance of the left–right divide in spite of the common ideological blurring produced by the centrist drive of the major parties.

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Subnational Government: The French Experience

By John Loughlin

Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke, 2007, ix + 239 pp., £55, ISBN 0-333-80440-6 (hbk)

It is a well-known fact that majority state nationalism of the type inaugurated in France after the 1789 Revolution has had a wide-ranging influence on the modern process of nation-building all over the world. French Jacobins succeeded in making equivalent the concepts of reason and homogeneity, or those of state and nation.

This form of nationalism aimed at integrating an ethnically heterogeneous society, for example in nineteenth century France. As a result of Jacobinism, the French nation-state claimed to be composed exclusively of individual citizens and not of ethnoterritorial communities (such as Alsatians, Bretons, Catalans, Corsicans, Occitanians or Basques). The picture in recent decades has somehow changed as decentralisation and regional political autonomy have become major factors in contemporary political life in the European Union. In the case of France, decentralisation has been largely a top-down initiative aimed at increasing governmental efficiency and offloading the day-to-day responsibility for administering welfare from the central to the local level.

John Loughlin has written a most comprehensive text on the reforms of sub-state (or sub-national, a term preferred by the author) government in France since the reforms first initiated in the early 1980s. In its various sections and chapters, the book examines the transformation of a highly centralised unitary state and pays attention to the evolution of the French municipalities, and the struggle for dominance between the departments and regions. The link between decentralisation and the reform of the French state, as well as the role of politicians, electoral systems and the financing of the sub-state government are key areas analysed clearly and systematically by the author.

A product of long years of research, this book is well written, highly informative and provides the reader not only with detailed accounts of facts but also with sound interpretations. The author convincingly presents the French case of decentralisation as an example of the recalibration most capitalist welfare states have been subject to. The author contrasts with the institutional processes which have taken place in the Hexagon the range and scope of those experienced in recent times on the same level of other European countries such as Italy, Spain or the United Kingdom, to name some of the most remarkable cases. Certainly, both French regional/meso and local governments have undergone dramatic changes in the midst of both processes on globalisation and Europeanisation as have the other countries. But he also shows how France's response to those challenges can be regarded as one that is specifically French, where a state-centred mentality and a top-down approach still prevail *tout court*.

The book is a much needed contribution to the theoretical debates on territorial governance because many academics and experts on territorial politics have tended to neglect the French case as being simply an exception in the general rule of multi-level governance in advanced Western democracies. John Loughlin magisterially clarifies how mistaken is this preconception and indicates those analytical areas where more attention should be paid in the future. This volume should become indispensable for courses in French politics and will be read with profit by anyone interested in comparative studies of regionalism and reform of the state in Europe.

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Divide and Pacify

By Pieter Vanhuysse

Central European University Press, Budapest, 2006, 170 pp., £21.95, ISBN 9-637326790 (pbk)

Pieter Vanhuysse examines in this volume why profound economic reform in three East European post-communist countries did not produce massive social unrest. He focuses on the period between 1989 and 1996 in Hungary, Poland and the Czech