

“Why No Federalism in Italy? A Comparative Historical View”

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## Introduction

It is gratifying to respond to the three distinguished critics, Professors Maurizio Cotta, Gianfranco Poggi, and Alfio Mastropaolo. Their remarks confirm my belief that a comparative historical approach to the study of European political development can serve not only as a source of debate for topics of contemporary relevance but also ought to be a central priority for our discipline.

The reviewers raise important concerns but all seem to accept the basic premise of the argument proposed in *Structuring the State*. Their comments, which reflect the the richness and diversity of their own scholarly backgrounds, also demonstrate the slight impertinence required for scholars who dare venture into the social scientific subfield of comparative historical research. This kind of work faces precariously high criteria because it speaks to multiple audiences: in addition to asking a question relevant for the one's social science colleagues, the comparative historical social scientist must also have an in-depth knowledge of the details of *at least* two national experiences, entering into the arena of scholars who know at least one country especially well. Moreover, one must be methodologically self-aware and committed to the systematic collection of evidence. And perhaps, most challenging of all, one may, while “trespassing” (to borrow Hirschman’s phrase), stumble across results that are theoretically novel, casting the cases under study into new light, thereby challenging the conventional wisdom.<sup>1</sup>

Such a scholar understandably prompts strong resistance, especially if he asks a question that has for many years eluded the attention of systematic scholarship. In this case, the certainty of conventional wisdom has had the time to harden. In the following I will respond to three sorts of hard resistance that the reviewers draw upon in response to *Structuring the State*: 1) why

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<sup>1</sup> Albert Hirschman, *Essays in Trespassing* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 198).

undertake a comparison of German and Italian experiences of national unification in the first place? 2) how ought one best deal with evidence that either supports or undermines an argument; 3) can one generalize one's findings from apparently 'unique' national cases that always seem exceptional? By considering the reviewers' critiques in these three areas, the following essay also makes the case for a comparative historical approach to the study of the most important questions in politics.

### **I. Why Compare German and Italian National Unification?**

What is the purpose of comparing the Italian and German experiences of nineteenth century national unification? As all the reviewers note, this is under-explored terrain for political scientists. The stated aim of *Structuring the State* is to ask a relative straightforward question that may have broader theoretical implications and that takes advantage of a historical puzzle: why despite so many similarities in their processes of national unification, was a federal national government adopted in Germany and a unitary governance structure in Italy? The question is important, I believe, because it contributes to our understanding of specific differences between Germany and Italy and sheds light on how two prevalent governance forms are created. In his critique, Professor Mastropaolo expresses his suspicion that this question also contains a hidden agenda. He states that I have a 'subtle federalism prejudice' [*"pregiudizio federalista"*] that I share with a certain 'political faction' [*"parte politica"*] in Italy. It is true that in order to show the book's relevance to contemporary debates, the footnotes of the first chapter cite several empirically-minded political scientists who investigate the consequences of federalism. But that the book's research question would generate such an overtly contentious claim is puzzling since the focus of the book is nineteenth century Europe. Mastropaolo writes, 'Come one, where is it written that federalism is better and centralism worse?' [*"Suvvia, dove sta scritto che il*

*federalism è meglio e il centralismo peggio?*”] This question is even more puzzling because nowhere in *this* book is it written by *this* author that federalism is better and centralism worse. In fact, the research question, research design, and evidence in the book are explicitly constructed *not* to say anything about the consequences of federal and unitary governance structures. The work’s central question is about the *causes* of the differences between governance structures in Italy and Germany with a focus on the nineteenth century.

But, for that purpose, is the comparison useful? The study’s main argument emphasizes two very different patterns of pre-national state-building and two resultingly different processes of national unification in the otherwise very similar collection of states. In the Italian context, the smaller entities outside of the political core that would make up the nation-state were fragile, absolutist, and infrastructurally weak. Despite plans and efforts to assure that these smaller entities might serve as the basis of an Italian confederation, they imploded and dissolved upon national unification leading to a unitary pattern of governance.<sup>2</sup> In the German parts of Europe, the smaller entities outside of the political core were fledgling parliamentary and constitutional states, with robust structures of administrative. Here, despite the existence of some proposals for the core to “annex” all of Germany directly, the building blocks of federalism were in place, allowing for relatively “negotiated” pathway of nation-state formation. In short, institutional strength, not weakness, bred federalism. Again, entering understudied terrain is precarious because it contains a prickly thicket of conventional wisdom. Professor Mastropaolo suggests that I have contrived a research problem where one really does not exist because Germany and Italy’s different paths were historically inevitable. A single cause seems to explain the differences between Italy and Germany reaching back to the Holy Roman Empire. That single

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<sup>2</sup> For evidence of pre-national confederative proposals in Italy, see *Structuring the State*, pp. 67; for evidence of Cavour’s effort to establish diplomatic ties with other Italian states „on the German model,“ see *Structuring the State*, pp. 92-94.

cause, Professor Mastropaolo tells us is a ‘federalist culture.’ [“*cultura federalista*”] Did nothing else matter? Not really, says Professor Mastropaolo, because the possibility of federal Italy was ‘never seriously on the table.’ [“*non fu mai seriamente sul tappeto*”] Why? He continues ‘In politics ideal reasons count more than economic and institutional ones.’ [“*In politica le motivazioni ideali in politica contano di più di quelle economiche o dei vincoli istituzionali.*”] But, what about the empirical evidence in the book that would add nuance to such a self-assured statement? Professor Mastropaolo appears to accept the central thesis of the book but dismisses the book’s evidence at one point as “distorting the truth.” [“*fa torto alla realtà*”] Instead, he suggests I should read several important novels (*Il Viceré* and *Il Gattopardo*).

Is this really how a social scientific discussion should end? Is there no better way of evaluating evidence? How would one assess whether the evidence brought to the bear in the book actually supports the proposed argument or the counter-arguments? The heat of the debate suggest there is much at stake and there might be good reason to compare Germany and Italy. This latter set of questions suggest there is a need for a better route forward.

## **II. Evaluating Evidence: The Comparative Historical Research Agenda**

One of the goals of the comparative historical research program is the development of methodological solutions to the challenge of assessing the relative merits of existing theories. Rather than solely relying on whether critics find a work’s ‘reasoning’ [“*Il ragionamento*”] ‘linear’ [“*lineare*”] or ‘convincing,’ [“*convincente*”] we can look to an argument’s relationship with the evidence. In the literature on comparative historical research, two techniques in particular stand out: first, the matching of outcomes and causes across cases; second, exploring the process by which outcomes are reached as a source of observations to assess the relative importance of

competing theoretical claims.<sup>3</sup> The research design, the quantitative data, and narrative evidence of *Structuring the State* use these two devices to evaluate the three most prominent explanations in the political science literature on federalism's origins—ideology, military power, and national culture. After showing the limits of each of the three existing arguments' capacity to explain the contrasting outcomes in Germany and Italy, the book argues for a new fourth perspective—one that emphasizes infrastructural capacity of existing state units.

But are the above mentioned theories not sufficiently dismissed? In his thoughtful and generous critique Professor Poggi contends that while largely convincing, the book does not deal with *all* existing versions of these explanations and points to three more sophisticated ideological and cultural theories of federalism that might have potential relevance in the German and Italian cases. In both cases, the alternative arguments center around two variables—ideology and culture—and the implicit though unanswered question is the same: what criteria ought we use to decide if competing theories are sufficiently weakened by the evidence?

We can start with Professor Poggi who turns to *ideology* as a factor. He correctly argues, that unlike in Italy, in Germany there existed a long-standing ideological and institutional tradition of *Verhandlung* (negotiation) among the pre-existing states, as seen in the post 1815 German Confederation and the Zollverein of 1834. This tradition served what Poggi rightly calls a 'precedent' [*precedenti*] for German federalism. Naturally, this 'precedent' was absent in Italy in the same period. Is this an alternative argument for the contrasting fate of federalism in Germany and Italy that the book overlooks? In fact, the book raises this same question on pp. 10-11 (Chapter 1). But, as also explained there, the presence or absence of a tradition of *Verhandlung* quickly becomes a conceptually problematic explanation of federalism when German and Italian state-building experiences are viewed alongside each other. The inevitable

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<sup>3</sup> See James Mahoney and Dietrich Rueschemeyer (eds.) *Comparative Historical Analysis in the Social Sciences* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

and important question emerges why was such a ‘precedent’ possible in Germany but not in Italy in the first place, especially when there were repeated efforts across the course of the nineteenth century to create a customs union or a confederation of Italian states explicitly on the German model?<sup>4</sup> *Structuring the State* proposes an answer to this question that resonates with important empirical work on international conflict by political scientist James Fearon. In Fearon’s account, parliamentary states (such as found in the German states but not in the Italian states) are more likely to opt for international cooperation than autocratic states.<sup>5</sup> The institutional ‘building-blocks’ that eventually made federalism viable in Germany but not in Italy (highly infrastructural-parliamentary states) also made the confederative structure that was a *precursor* to federalism more viable in Germany than in Italy. In short, while I agree with the assessment that the ideological and institutional traditions of *Verhandlung* were important features of German federalism, I would argue that it is a factor that is so causally proximate to the outcome being explained that it too requires explanation.

Also, in terms of ideology, Prof. Mastrapaolo suggests a strong alternative argument. He agrees with the analysis presented in the book that federal sentiments were stronger and more prevalent in Italy (and Germany) than is normally considered, thus suggesting the limits of an ideological argument of federalism origins. But, he rightly argues that *Structuring the State* ‘underestimates’ how ‘vigorous’ [*vigoroso*] unitary feelings were in many circles in pre-unification Italy. Might the presence of strong unitary sentiment in pre-unification might explain the demise of federalism in Italy after all? Again, a comparative historical perspective attentive to how events actually unfolded over time in more than one national case is particularly useful. Just as we ought not underestimate the strength of ‘unitary’ sentiment in Italy, so too ought we

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<sup>4</sup> See *Structuring the State*, p 67; pp. 92-95.

<sup>5</sup> James Fearon, ‘Domestic Political Audiences and the Escalation of International Disputes’ *American Political Science Review* 88 (1994), 577-592.

not do the same in Germany. A strand of unitary sentiment was found prominently among influential national liberal intellectuals in Germany in the years before unification. Important figures such as Heinrich Treitschke and public legal minds sought more broadly unitary structures for Germany, and one advisor, Max Duncker, proposed constitutional structures that were rejected by Bismarck for being, in Bismarck's own words 'too unitarian.'<sup>6</sup> Likewise in several of Treitschke's influential works, including *Cavour: Der Wegbreiter der Neuen Italiens*, Treitschke jealously notes the ease with which a unitary state was built in Italy. Both Duncker and Treitschke were representative of the influential conservative-leaning liberal nationalist vision of Germany that viewed a centralized France as the model to emulate. Moreover, this vision did not disappear upon unification and was a source of national integrating legislation in the years following unification.

What is analytically important, then, is not to ask whether there was a strong unitary sentiment in Italy (no doubt there was), but rather why, if in the two cases ideology was a mixed bag of federalism and unitary designs, did federalism only triumph in Germany? The purpose of the comparison of Germany and Italy is not to downplay *a priori* the importance of ideas but only to try assess the conditions under which they actually shape institutional outcomes. It is a core finding of *Structuring the State* that political leaders armed with strong ideas cannot entirely fashion their own reality to reflect their visions. In short, even great political leaders are constrained by institutional realities.

Finally, in terms of alternative explanations utilizing *culture*, Professor Poggi suggests two arguments that he is correct to note that the book does not consider. The first is the idea that German restraint toward its constituent parts flowed from the 'fact' [*fatto*], according to Poggi, that Germany was a *Kulturnation* and did not, in Poggi's words, 'require' [*richiedeva*] the

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<sup>6</sup> *Structuring the State*, pp. 133-135.

forced union that Italy did. The second cultural argument that Poggi suggests is actually the opposite of the former: German federalism was a product of religious fragmentation in Germany while Italy's unitary structure reflected Piedmont's struggle with the Catholic Church and the Papal States. That the two contradictory culturalist positions should both appear so plausible should give us pause, possibly indicating the conceptual and theoretical limits of the perspectives. What are the conceptual and theoretical limits? First, it seems dubious to claim that Germany was any more or less of a *Kulturnation* than Italy at its founding.<sup>7</sup> As recent German historiography has also made clear, the very notion of a *Kulturvolk* only gained widespread circulation beyond the domain of ardent and utopian nationalists *after* 1871, as German anthropologists borrowed Herder's older ideas to distinguish between the civilized *Kulturvolk* of Europe and the uncivilized *Naturvolk* subjects of their "scientific" studies.<sup>8</sup> To attach too much meaning to the contested concept is historically anachronistic.

But, even if the premise of this argument were correct, it is unclear why and how the cultural homogeneity of a *Kulturnation* would give rise to a federal pattern of governance. One can of course construct what at first glance is a compelling causal logic that, for example, a stronger sense of nationhood in Germany allowed for a looser form of federal governance, while the absence of a common *Kultur* "required" the forced union of a unitary structure in Italy. But, interestingly, if history had ended up the other way—say, Germany were created as a unitary state and Italy a federal state, the *Kulturnation* thesis could just as easily and convincingly be deployed to explain precisely the opposite outcome: Germany, as a culturally homogenous and compact *Kulturnation* 'required' an equally compact unitary state, while the only governance

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<sup>7</sup> The strongest evidence that the idea of a *Kulturnation* was more a contested political weapon than an accurate description of empirical reality is found in Bismarck's own *Kulturkampf* (the name not being an accident) to stabilize and secure the new fragile regime where anti-unification forces were still at play. For a discussion of the new regime's fragility, see Thomas Nipperdey, *Deutsche Geschichte*, 1866-1918, Bd. 2, pp. 23-24.

<sup>8</sup> See the powerful analysis of Andrew Zimmerman, *Anthropology and Antihumanism in Imperial Germany* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001).

structure that would hold the culturally heterogeneous Italy together was a loose federalism. It is worth noting how easily the same argument can be used to explain two opposed outcomes, highlighting the theoretical problem of nonfalsifiability inherent in the argument

The broader point is simple: arguments that utilize cultural or religious heterogeneity as explanations of governance forms tend to play loosely with their concepts and tend to utilize the logic and language of ‘functional necessity’ (witness the idea that governance forms are created in a particular form because they are ‘required’ or ‘demanded’). Such functionalist reasoning tends to suffer from an underspecified indeterminism. Just because an institution is ‘needed’ does not mean it will be created. Rather, as the case of creating federalism instructs us, the *demand* for federalism will go unmet unless there is a *supply* of “high infrastructure” governance structures in place.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, even if the causal logic of the argument were compelling, the actual historical evidence of how events unfolded does not support the idea that religion was decisive. The correspondence of public officials and constitution designers in the crucial years of unification which records the negotiations, strategies, and tactics of the state-builders themselves are filled not with queries about religion or culture, as a cultural perspective emphasizing religion might expect. Instead, the correspondence express political nervousness about assuring monarchical control over the the unfolding events, a concern about gaining access to fiscal resources, and a desire to secure as much continuity as possible in civil service structures in newly occupied territories.<sup>9</sup> Maybe religion was so important that state-builders simply did not refer to it in their writings? Again, with such a claim, we quickly slide into the domain of nonfalsifiability. Instead, if we take seriously the notion that secret correspondence among crucial state officials is a reliable indicator of the motivations and strategic goals of those state

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<sup>9</sup> On Italy, see evidence in *Structuring the State*, 103-105; on Germany, see pp. 124-126.

officials, we confront the fact that governance concerns were paramount in their minds. In Germany, because effective governance structures were already in place, federalism offered the best route of national unification. In Italy, absent effective governance structures at the regional level, a unitary pattern of governance made the most sense to political elites.

In sum, by comparing two cases, trying to match outcomes with causes, and by tracing the processes that link causes to outcomes, I believe that *Structuring the State* follows in a successful tradition of comparative historical analysis that both provides a successful approach for evaluating theory and for formulating innovative theory. Finally, by calling for close attention to how events themselves actually unfold, this approach reminds us that unless we remain attentive to the details of how polities develop, we will miss the reasons why states develop in such diverse ways.

### **III. Using Comparative Historical Analysis to Help an Argument Travel**

But even so, how generalizable are the findings? In his comment Professor Maurizio Cotta appears convinced that *Structuring the State* effectively makes sense of the divergent patterns of state-building in nineteenth century Italy and Germany. He reports he is disappointed, however, by the effort in the last five pages of the last chapter of the book to test how well the central argument applies to other places and times. The technique that is utilized in the last five pages of the book to extend and refine the argument is one developed originally by sociologist Charles Ragin that is frequently called Qualitative Comparative Analysis (QCA).<sup>10</sup> The purpose is to test the validity of an argument across a mid-size number of cases, using qualitative data where quantitative analysis is impossible because of limited sample size.

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<sup>10</sup> Charles Ragin *The Comparative Method: Moving Beyond Qualitative and Quantitative Strategies* (Berkeley/Los Angeles/London: University of California Press 1987).

Before addressing Professor Cotta's reasonable concerns directly, we might begin by asking: why even undertake an effort to extend an argument into a different context? What is gained by such an effort? Isn't it enough to explain two major cases of European state-building? The answer is straightforward: it depends on what the purpose of a scholar is. The account offered in *Structuring the State* could have easily stopped once the two puzzling cases of Italy and Germany were examined and explained. Though ideology and culture were shown to be factors that shaped the motivations of political actors, a causal relationship between infrastructural capacity and federalism was established that demonstrated that even state leaders such as Cavour and Bismarck, normally granted immense powers of foresight and cunning, are shaped by the institutional landscape in which they find themselves. This conclusion though intriguing was not entirely enough for my tastes as comparative social scientist.

Why? As a comparative social scientist, I am interested in both what is often called 'internal validity' (establishing the existence of a causal relationship) and 'external validity' (the degree to which the causal relationship extends to the larger universe of cases). Why be concerned with external validity? The very act of conceptualization entails abstraction so that concepts such as "infrastructural capacity," "federalism," and "unitary governance" at least *implicitly* make claims about a broader universe of cases. To act as if one is only narrowly talking about Germany and Italy while simultaneously using broad concepts is misleading. In his celebrated essay on "concept misformation," Giovanni Sartori usefully tells scholars to be "conscious thinkers," and thus warns against "conceptual stretching," where scholars, in his terms, "augment the extension" of a concept without "diminishing its connotation," thereby giving rise to abstract concepts that are overly vague.<sup>11</sup> Less frequently noted but equally

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<sup>11</sup>Giovanni Sartori "Concept Misformation in Comparative Politics", *American Political Science Review* (1970) 64, 4, 1970: 1033-1053.

important in Sartori's call to be "conscious thinkers" is his appeal to avoid the opposite problem that he dubs "logical perfectionism," where excessive concern with accuracy of denotation generates a form of paralysis where one is afraid to say anything beyond a very narrow and particular context. In short, rather than being paralyzed and remain trapped in empirical setting where a study's findings only *implicitly* "suggest" broader conclusions, it makes sense to examine *explicitly* whether and how well a framework actually works in a larger set of cases.

But how to do this? Scholars typically pursue one of two routes. First, most commonly, in a last chapter of a book, comparative scholars who have explored several cases examine how the findings of the argument would play themselves out in several additional cases. Such an approach is itself typically more suggestive and illustrative than systematic. A second approach, less frequently done, is the testing of an argument in a large-n statistical setting against a range of competing hypotheses. Dubbed "nested analysis" by one scholar, this approach offers a fruitful alternative if data are not limited and the scope of one's argument truly applies to a sufficient number of cases to allow robust conclusions.<sup>12</sup> But if one's data are limited, or more problematically, if there are not a sufficiently large number of cases to which one expects one's theory to apply, what ought a scholar do?

It is this latter challenge that the last few pages of *Structuring the State* attempts to solve by pursuing a *third* less frequently used strategy that makes use of Charles Ragin's QCA methodology to study seventeen European cases. Though sympathetic with this effort to generalize, Professor Cotta raises three reasonable concerns: the problem of conceptual stretching, the problem of insufficiently detailed evidence, and the problem that the argument is adjusted in light of the new cases. First, in terms of conceptual stretching, Professor Cotta raises

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<sup>12</sup>Evan Lieberman "Nested Analysis as a Mixed-Method Strategy for Comparative Research," *American Political Science Review* (2005), 99, 3: 435-52.

the question of the “comparability of Germany and Italy” [*“comparabilità con i casi della Germania e dell’Italia”*] with cases such as Belgium in 1831 or Netherlands in 1814. He correctly points out that some of the cases were created before the age of nationalism. Can one compare episodes of state creation before and during the age of nationalism? Indeed, I would assert that one can. As Sartori tells us, it is possible to travel up the ladder of abstraction to compare what we might call functionally equivalent “constitutional moments” without losing in precision to ask: what determined the governance structure of each polity as it emerged after its first constitution was written?<sup>13</sup> While the constitutional moment coincided with national unification in Italy and Germany, this is actually quite rare in European political history. Coding cases in terms of their “constitutional moment” turns out to be largely unproblematic with the single exception of Great Britain, which I discuss in brief detail in the book.<sup>14</sup>

Second, what about insufficiently detailed evidence? Professor Cotta rightly points out that, unlike in the rest of the book, here the coding of the independent variables is “schematic” [*“schematico”*] and “quick.” [*“rapido”*] There are two reasons why this is the case. First, the QCA method requires coding independent and dependent variables dichotomously. As a result, nuanced data are inevitably lost. Second, the purpose of the analysis is to summarize roughly seventeen cases in a single “truth table,” allowing for an assessment of the plausibility of the argument. That data are omitted is correct. To equal the intensive level of detailed data collected on Germany and Italy in the larger set of cases in a single chapter is of course beyond the scope of the book. More crucial is that even a “schematic” review of the larger cross-national context provides us with more information than if the analysis had simply halted with the two cases that formed the centerpiece of the study.

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<sup>13</sup> For more discussion see Daniel Ziblatt, *The Federal Unitary Divide: Constitutional Moments and the Origins of State Structure in Europe* Harvard University, Center for European Studies, Working Paper (2006).

<sup>14</sup> This also receives more attention in Daniel Ziblatt (op.cit., 2006)

What evidence is there for this last claim? Professor Cotta's last critique ironically answers this question. Prof. Cotta notes, "The resulting explanatory model is thus partially different from the book..." [*“Lo schema esplicativo che ne emerge diventa quindi in parte diverso dal resto del libro”*] Put in other words, when put in a larger cross-national context, the central argument of the book gives rise to refinement, or possibly even improvement. The comparison of Italy and Germany, as stated above, held "ideology" constant, thus leaving unanswered the question: what happens when ideology is not held constant? Pushing the analysis to face what Max Weber called "uncomfortable facts" contained in a set of cases beyond Italy and Germany where no self-identified ideology of federalism was present, we discover, as the last chapter argues explicitly, that the argument needs refinement; that an ideology of federalism and developed infrastructural capacity are *both* necessary (and jointly sufficient) to explain the emergence of federalism in European political development. In short, the value of the last chapter is that we have a more fully-developed and refined theory of federalism's origins that does not contradict the analysis throughout the book but can explain more than just Germany and Italy. Though I would agree with Professor Cotta that these findings are probably "insufficiently discussed and explained," [*“senza essere sufficientemente discusso e spiegato”*] this is the task for future work for myself and others.

### **Conclusion**

This essay has made the case that the comparative historical approach adopted in *Structuring the State* is a particularly useful way of dealing with the challenges raised in the remarks of Professors Cotta, Poggi, and Mastropaolo. More than that though, the book, by examining an important episode in the political history of Italy and Germany within a single

comparative frame raises two more fundamental points concerning how to think about political development and history.

First, no country's history is exceptional. The powerful myth of a particular national *Sonderweg*, be it Japanese, German, American, or Italian, is seductive because, as James Sheehan has written, just as the idea of the nation conquered the life of *present* of the nineteenth century, so too did it gain "conceptual triumph over the study of the past."<sup>15</sup> But an odd historiographical tradition born in the nineteenth century should not distract us from the common and often interconnected challenges facing nation-states as they were created and develop. A central aim of the book, and a benefit of viewing national cases in comparative perspective is that the unfamiliar becomes familiar. And, the familiar, by contrast, might begin to look uncomfortably unrecognizable. In both cases, it is only by moving outside of confines of well-trod theoretical and conceptual frames that something new can be learned.

Similarly, a comparison of how political leaders in two national cases respond to interconnected problems and challenges suddenly makes the "inevitable" appear less so. When a single national experience is viewed in isolation, there is a tendency to presume that single political responses are compelled by inescapable and inevitable "forces," two in particular are usually noted: international forces of war and trade, on the one hand; and the "weight of history" on the other hand. In both instances, with a narrow gaze on a single country, contingency vanishes. When the scope of analysis is widened, however, we see multiplicity and diversity in responses to common challenges; we see that the actions and decisions of political leaders lead countries, often unintentionally, on trajectories that diverge sharply from what actors at the time thought likely or possible.

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<sup>15</sup> James J. Sheehan, "What is German History? Reflections on the Role of the Nation in German History and Historiography" *Journal of Modern History* 53 (March 1981): 3.

In sum, to examine Italian unification and German unification in comparative perspective is not to make an appeal for the superiority of one case over another or to argue that one governance structure is better than another. Nor is it really an act of trespassing. Rather it is to point to connections and commonalities among national cases too often treated as discrete and unique. The aim is to recast how we think about what we *thought* were well-known cases; it is to offer a different understanding of problems we *thought* we already understood. And, hopefully, above all, it is to suggest new lines of inquiry for future research that would have otherwise remained hidden.