How did German Federalism Shape Unification?

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The answer to this question depends in part on how we conceive of German unification itself. If by "unification" we mean the political and military events that led to the creation of the German Empire in 1871, then the question can be answered in fairly straightforward military, diplomatic and constitutional terms. The legacy of pre-unification German federalism, in the shape of the German Confederation and its thirty-five sovereign states, is easily identified in the federal constitution of the new German Empire, which granted extensive powers to member states and initially restricted the role of the new nation-state to military, diplomatic and economic policy.

But what if we see German unification in broader terms, not as the process of Bismarckian nation-state formation culminating in 1871, but rather as a process of nation-state formation *tout court*? On one level, this invites us to consider the role of federalism in shaping the German Empire in the longer term. This line of enquiry has produced important insights into the role of the federal states in the German constitutional system, the political contradictions caused by the coexistence of a democratically elected national parliament with less democratic state parliaments, and the role of cultural regionalism in mediating between locality and nation.1 On another level, however, conceiving the relationship between federalism and unification in Germany as part of a general problem of nation-state formation invites international comparison.

The tension between centre and periphery, nation and locality was a basic tension in nineteenth century Europe.2 In political terms, the conflict between local interests and the centralising aspirations of modern bureaucratic government was a persistent and fundamental problem of state formation. At first sight, the problem appears to have been essentially administrative: how could governments with limited resources create uniform structures that would work effectively in a world where
the locality remained the primary frame of reference for most people? In practice, however, conflicts between centre and periphery often pointed to a more fundamental tension between local and national identity. From this perspective, the problem was not administrative but cultural.

One solution to this problem lay in the construction and dissemination of a national culture and sense of national identity that would legitimise and reinforce modern forms of government. In many ways the need to construct a national culture within a given state transcended issues of governance. Speaking at Annecy in 1872, Leon Gambetta declared that the French Republic was not the ‘meeting of associated provinces […] It is not the Touraine united with Provence, nor Picardy joined with Languedoc, nor Burgundy attached to Brittany […] No! This whole, this unity, it is the French Republic!’ This declaration is strikingly reminiscent of Ernst Moritz Arndt’s famous poem ‘The German’s Fatherland’ (‘Des Deutschen Vaterland’), which surveys Germany’s constituent states and regions before concluding that only ‘the whole of Germany’ (‘das ganze Deutschland’) could claim to be the German fatherland. Yet France was a historically united state with a tradition of highly centralised government, whereas before 1871 Germany was a conglomeration of states held together in the loosest of political unions.

If the need to displace regional identity with national loyalties could be conceptualised in almost identical terms in France in 1872 to those used in pre-unification Germany over half a century earlier, then the contrast between nation building in ‘unitary’ France and ‘federal’ Germany begins to break down. Consequently, we need to think carefully about what distinguished German federalism from broader tensions between centrifugal and centripetal forces within nineteenth century states.

In exploring these issues, I will contrast the German experience with those of France and Italy. These two countries present useful points of comparison for different reasons. The much-vaulted centralisation and unity of France throughout the nineteenth century meant that nation-state formation was essentially internal, taking place within the shell of a pre-existing, self-consciously national state. By contrast in Italy, as in Germany, nation-state formation entailed the unification of pre-existing territorial states into a single national unit. Unlike Germany, however, the new Italian nation-state had a highly centralised political and administrative system. Looking at France from a German perspective leads one to ask how significant a factor federalism really was in shaping German national and local identities, given the persistence of regionalism, linguistic diversity and the increasing political importance of the provinces in this highly centralised state. Looking at Italy from a German perspective leads one to ask why Germany adopted a federal solution when Italy did not, and why, despite Italy’s highly centralised political