

Alexander Brenneis, 2009, *Das parlamentarische System in Slowenien und Österreich im Vergleich* (The Parliamentary System in Slovenia and Austria in Comparative Perspective), Leykam, Graz, 207 pages.

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Written within the broader theoretical and empirical frameworks of institutional politics and separation of powers, Alexander Brenneis' volume fits into a series of legal comparative studies under the aegis of the Institute for Legal Studies in Graz. The latter strives to initiate a sequence of research papers with a cross-national lookout. With a clear and concise title, Brenneis provides a comparative analysis of the structures, functions, competences, and roles of the parliamentary system in the two neighboring republics of Slovenia and Austria. The aim of this endeavor is to discover similarities and differences, strengths and weaknesses in the two systems, and to identify possible directions for improvement.

The book displays an exquisite, well-structured, and detailed presentation in which the well-versed public can discover, in addition to an intricate legal analysis, also a political and historical perspective. It is an important source of information for academic research, political practice, and a valuable learning tool for political science/law students. By providing a complex description of the processes involved in the two parliamentary systems, Brenneis embeds his effort in a relevant body of theoretical ideas and provides evidence and evaluations on the basis of empirical data.

The book is structured in eight main chapters: The first summarizes the development of democratic institutions in both states in a historic perspective; the second refers to the basic structure of the parliamentary system; the following two, to the structure, function and attributes of the first, respectively the second chamber; the fifth chapter discusses the lawmaking process, whereas chapter six and seven refer to the popular will expressed through the mechanisms of direct democracy and the party system. Chapter eight comprises a roundup section and conclusions.

A few merits transform this academic work into a useful reading. The first obvious strength of this volume is the choice of the topic. The case selection is theoretically and empirically well grounded, bringing great contribution to the knowledge about the parliamentary systems in this part of Europe.

Of particular relevance to the choice of cases, and the author points it out clearly, are the numerous commonalities (e.g. parliamentary system, EU membership, long common historical experience in the Habsburg Monarchy), but also the fundamental differences between the two states (e.g. divergent ideological paths underwent at certain historical stages: communism under greater Yugoslavia vs. *Anschluss* to fascist Germany). The chapters reveal these as the root of many common or divergent developments of the two systems. This justifies the claim that parliamentary regimes are, indeed, a family of many options and particularities, and not an identical form of government, even at territorial vicinity. It also shows that cultural and historical factors can cause distinctive development within equivalent institutions. This gives a good reason for the exercise of comparison in this book.

Knowing and understanding these differences and similarities within the parliamentary setting is especially useful to improve the qualities of democracy and of parliamentary practice. This thought certainly corresponds to the general idea underpinning the narrative of this volume and its final conclusions. Moreover, the author points out the contribution of new parliamentary democracies to improve the qualities of current practices. Leaving aside the many changes that are still imperative in these systems, the author substantiates the fact that their adaptability, vigor, and learning power prove to be qualities from which older systems can learn much. Notwithstanding these many theoretical gains, the book has a strong potential to become practically relevant, by increasing knowledge about desired national partners.

A further strength of this work is its structured and systematic approach with ideas and arguments flowing coherently and soundly, making them easy to follow. This becomes evident both in the structure of the chapters and in the manner of conducting the investigation: at theoretical, methodological and empirical levels. More particularly, the theoretical assumptions, which he rigorously makes at the beginning of each part, serve as a general measurement tool. He then applies them alternatively to the two chosen cases. Eventually, the two studies are compared in final sub-sections that allow drawing relevant conclusions. By applying a systematic approach, the author covers all issues raised in theory, which allows him to almost effortlessly reach his initial goals. Furthermore, he succeeds to go into depth in his case analysis, to discover strengths and weaknesses, and to contribute with meaningful empirical data.

Apart from the aforementioned merits, there are a number of shortcomings. The first argument engages a matter of approach. Explicitly, the author conveys throughout the book a slight temptation to develop an exclusively national approach, while marginalizing the importance of the larger European/international "eyesight". In an increasingly globalized world, supranational structures bear a growing influence on the functions and relevance of national parliamentary mechanisms. Such state of facts can render an exclusively local perspective obsolete. For that reason, it might have been beneficial to include a separate chapter, or individual subchapters, to capture the changes brought about in the systems by the European integration and the engagement of the state in other international initiatives. A second limitation is the restrictive reference to equivalent or distinctive mechanisms and principles of other parliamentary systems. A more persistent use of such exercise can possess the potential to expand the theoretical gains of a comparative study. There is a third weakness that can be mentioned. This regards the style of the book referred to also at an earlier stage of the present review. Despite the clarity of the arguments conveyed through the systematic approach, as it happens with most volumes that stick to a too rigid of an argumentative structure, this book suffers from the risk of becoming too scholastic and tedious and thus, at times, loose the excitement of the reader.

In a nutshell, the book succeeds to make relevant contributions to the legal comparative literature. It crosses the rigorousness of a pure legal analysis and offers an interdisciplinary viewpoint. This makes Brenneis' work an abundant source of information for both learners and practitioners.