

# Habsburg Central Europe: Culturally Heterogeneous and Polysemous Region

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## Abstract

Central Europe is characterized by linguistic and cultural density as well as by endogenous and exogenous cultural influences. These constellations were especially visible in the former Habsburg Empire, where they influenced the formation of individual and collective identities. This led not only to continual crises and conflicts, but also to an equally enormous creative potential as became apparent in the culture of the fin-de-siècle.

Central Europe must be understood as a relational space, constantly being redefined in new and variable ways. And yet, considering that every historical space is mutable and subject to processual change, it is thoroughly permissible from a *historical* perspective to refer to the conglomerate of lands that once made up the historical Habsburg Empire as a political manifestation of Central Europe – as a Habsburg Central Europe.<sup>1</sup> In contrast to a physical space, Habsburg Central Europe represents a historical and political manifestation in which numerous territories, peoples, cultures, languages, religions, and social groups existed in various entanglements with and alongside one another. It is precisely the awareness of this heterogeneous diversity that both enables and necessitates us to also keep an eye on the Central European space existing beyond the empire, in which the same elements can be found that characterized the empire. A necessary first step thus consists of identifying

<sup>1</sup> Cf. Pieter M. Judson, “The Study of the Nineteenth Century in Habsburg Central Europe,” *Central European History* 51:4 (2018): 629–634.

those typical criteria that can be shown to have been characteristic of the Habsburg Central European Empire.

An important finding of recent comparative research on historical empires such as the Romanov, Ottoman, and Habsburg Empires is the fact that these were all characterized by ethnic, national, cultural, and linguistic pluralism and/or heterogeneity. Thus, they by no means corresponded to “modern,” essentialist understandings of the homogeneous nation state, which is also why they were challenged by the representatives of this latter concept. Indeed, the region is characterized by both endogenous pluralism, which has demonstrably existed for centuries, and exogenous pluralism, meaning additional and manifold extra-regional, pan-European, and/or global influences constantly entering from without. For example, as early as the 17<sup>th</sup> century, long before Béla Bartók discovered the plurality of heterogeneous musical elements in the region, the Silesian composer Daniel Speer had recorded the region’s typical musical elements in his *Musicalisch-Türkischer Eulen-Spiegel*, which included Turkish, Polish, Hungarian, Muscovite, Wallachian, Greek, and Cossack folk songs and dances.<sup>2</sup> One might well ask whether even the Viennese modernism of the fin-de-siècle could not also be productively viewed from such a perspective, namely from the other side, from an outsider’s perspective, taking into account the entanglement of numerous cultural elements of pan-European, French, Italian, Spanish, British, Scandinavian, Russian, and Jewish provenance, but especially also extra-European, Indian, or Japanese elements – whether this modernism could not be viewed as a bundle of predominantly exogenous cultural influences that combined with endogenous influences to create a new, transnational symbiosis.

Pluralism and difference are by no means independent, closed systems. Pluralism much rather implies continuous mobility, migration, and interaction and thus serves as the foundation for interconnections, as researched by theorists of *connected history* or *entangled history*, sometimes also in the context of research on empires.<sup>3</sup> Pluralism also implies creative potential,

<sup>2</sup> Zoltán Falvy, “Speer – Musicalisch-Türkischer Eulen-Spiegel,” *Studia Musicologica Academiae Scientiarum Hungaricae* 12 (1970): 131–151.

<sup>3</sup> Serge Gruzinski, *La Pensée métisse* (Paris: Fayard, 1999); Margit Pernau, *Transnationale Geschichte* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2011), 37–42 (connected history) and 56–66 (entangled history).

insofar as a hybrid “Third Space”<sup>4</sup> – a space that is continuously determined by heterogeneity – enables unexpected encounters between heterogeneous cultural elements that may consequently blend together into something new. The sociologist Robert Ezra Park pointed to this potential with specific regard to the migrant, who represents a “marginal man,” a “cultural hybrid, a man living and sharing intimately in the cultural life and traditions of two distinct peoples”: This boundary-transgressing individual possesses a special creative potential as he is “a man on the margin of two cultures and two societies, which never completely interpenetrated and fused.”<sup>5</sup> Park later observed in an autobiographical sketch that he only arrived at this insight on the basis of his own experience traveling through the former Habsburg Empire, during which he was able to witness and study pluriculturalism and multilingualism as the most characteristic phenomena of this region.

A “marginal man” who finds himself in a multilingual border region is of course also constantly confronted with conflicts and crises insofar as he has to choose between various identities. He may try to escape this situation by choosing a particular identity in order to achieve stability, yet thereby he abruptly finds himself in an in-between space in which the various possibilities of identification blend together into something inspirational, creative, and new. Franz Kafka metaphorically associated this problem later identified by Park with a hopeless mimicry practiced by some Jews: “Most young Jews who began to write German wanted to leave Jewishness behind them, and their fathers approved of this [...]. But with their posterior legs they were still glued to their father’s Jewishness and with their waving anterior legs they found no new ground. The ensuing despair became their inspiration. [...] They existed among three impossibilities, which I just happen to call linguistic impossibilities. It is simplest to call them that. But they might also be called something entirely different. These are: The impossibility of not writing, the impossibility of writing German, the impossibility of writing differently. One might also add a fourth impossibility, the impossibility of writing [...]”<sup>6</sup>

<sup>4</sup> Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1994).

<sup>5</sup> Robert E. Park, “Human Migration and the Marginal Man (1928),” in *Theories of Ethnicity: A Classical Reader*, ed. Werner Sollors (New York: New York University Press, 1996), 165.

<sup>6</sup> Franz Kafka, “To Max Brod [Matliary, June 1921],” in *Franz Kafka: Letters to Friends, Family, and Editors*, transl. by Richard Winston and Clara Winston (London: John Calder, 1978), 289.

The very presence of so many different peoples who called the Habsburg Empire their home led to this polity being perceived as a state of diversity and heterogeneity, as a “Europe in miniature,” as expressed in an entry to the famous *Staats-Lexikon* by Carl von Rotteck and Carl Welcker in the mid-nineteenth century. According to them, the empire exhibited the most “conspicuous paradoxes of national spirit and national character”: “The position and scope of the many principal nations of the empire leads to the conclusion that this should be regarded as a Europe in miniature, predicated not just on a European, but on a special Austrian equilibrium.”<sup>7</sup> Hugo von Hofmannsthal would later, probably unknowingly, pick up this comparison between Austria and Europe, describing Austria as being “after all itself a Europe in miniature.”<sup>8</sup>

The Viennese geographer Friedrich Umlauft already described the Habsburg Empire as a “state of contrasts” in 1876 due to its outspoken diversity, its “glaring paradoxes,” including geographical, national, linguistic, cultural, and religious differences. Umlauft’s treatise can be viewed as a key text with regard to the region’s heterogeneity insofar as it by no means entails a euphemistic description of the multicultural empire, but rather addresses precisely those complex social and cultural processes that have become so topical and theoretically sophisticated in cultural studies discourses in recent decades. This includes the application of a hermeneutic that remains constantly aware of cultural differences and complexities: “Just as our fatherland constitutes a transitional zone between the structured and mountainous west of the European continent and its unstructured and level east, so its considerable longitudinal and latitudinal expanse incorporates the *most glaring paradoxes* with regard to physical circumstances, demographics, and spiritual culture. Hence, the empire can justifiably also be called a *state of contrasts*. [...] From an ethnographic perspective, the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy is home to all of Europe’s principal peoples, and that to a considerable extent: Germanic peoples in the west, Romanic peoples in the south, Slavic peoples in the north and south, followed by the totality of Magyars in between all the principal peoples. Thus, *Austria’s history* coalesces from the histories of Germany,

<sup>7</sup> “Oestreich,” in *Staats-Lexikon oder Encyklopädie der Staatswissenschaften*, ed. Carl von Rotteck and Carl Welcker, vol. 12 (Altona: J. E. Hammerich, 1841), 143.

<sup>8</sup> Hugo von Hofmannsthal, “Krieg und Kultur [1915],” in *Hugo von Hofmannsthal: Gesammelte Werke in zehn Bänden. Reden und Aufsätze*, ed. Bernd Schoeller and Rudolf Hirsch, vol. 2: 1914–1924 (Frankfurt a. Main: Fischer, 1979), 417.

Hungary, and Poland, comparable to the way various tributaries will sooner or later coalesce into one great stream in which the absorbed masses of water flow communally onward. Since, however, the above-cited peoples do not all live in clearly delineated, discrete territories, these *border regions* often evince *idiosyncratically mixed populations*. Indeed, nowhere else in Europe can the admixture of the most various nationalities be observed in such a conspicuous manner as in our fatherland.”<sup>9</sup>

Umlauf’s observation that the empire consisted of “contrasts” can also be found in other contemporary works like the so-called “*Kronprinzenwerk*,” *Die österreichisch-ungarische Monarchie in Wort und Bild* (The Austro-Hungarian Monarchy in Word and Picture). As Crown Prince Rudolf emphasized in his 1885 introduction: “Where else can a state be found that – through such a wealth of paradoxes as regards its soil structure, which through its natural history, landscape, and climate has succeeded in uniting within its borders such magnificent diversity, and its ethnographic composition of various peoples – could offer comparably interesting pictures in such a grand opus?”<sup>10</sup> Decades later, the Viennese cosmopolitan Stefan Zweig would also emphasize these paradoxes and contrasts in the retrospective on the empire offered in his autobiography *The World of Yesterday* (1942), which were visible not least of all in the metropolitan center, Vienna: “At court, among the nobility, and among the people, the German was related in blood to the Slavic, the Hungarian, the Spanish, the Italian, the French, the Flemish; and it was the particular genius of this city of music that dissolved all the contrasts harmoniously into a new and unique thing, the Austrian, the Viennese.” Vienna was thus a microcosm of the macrocosm of the region and of Europe itself, which “dissolved all the contrasts harmoniously.”<sup>11</sup> Hofmannsthal had made a similar argument twenty years before Zweig, highlighting the heterogeneous character of the army of the Austrian “universal monarchy,” which was “in its composition as colorful and supranational as ancient Rome.” The army, according to Hofmannsthal, was representative of the “supranational” atmosphere of Vienna and the

<sup>9</sup> Friedrich Umlauf, *Die Oesterreichisch-Ungarische Monarchie: Geographisch-statistisches Handbuch mit besonderer Rücksicht auf politische und Cultur-Geschichte für Leser aller Stände* (Vienna/Pest: Hartleben, 1876), 1–2.

<sup>10</sup> Brigitte Hamann, ed., *Kronprinz Rudolf, “Majestät, ich warne Sie ...”: Geheime und private Schriften* (Munich/Zurich: Piper, 1987), 328–329.

<sup>11</sup> Stefan Zweig, *The World of Yesterday* (London: Cassell and Company, 1947\*), 28.

empire as a whole: "Right into the World War, the military structure evinced an officer corps that was shot through with the descendants of Frenchmen, Walloons, Irishmen, Swiss, Italians, Spaniards, Poles, and Croats, the descendants of men whose ancestors had in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries made their homes, so to speak, within this army."<sup>12</sup>

Umlauft's early, above-cited thoughts really did already incorporate all the key aspects that need to be taken into account in any cultural studies analysis of sociocultural phenomena: Aside from an emphasis on differences, on "contrasts," which can neither be harmoniously euphemized nor eliminated, but must necessarily remain as "the most glaring paradoxes," one of his most pertinent observations relates to the relevance of borders as cultural threshold zones, as "border regions" characterized both by processes of segregation and by cultural symbioses, where "idiosyncratically mixed populations" may be found. Umlauft here seemed to preempt a key finding both of cultural semiotics and of postcolonial theory. This finding also correlates with the history of such peoples and societies who find themselves in such contradictory, heterogeneous situations. Thus, Umlauft did not follow the homogeneous nationalist conception of history that already dominated in his time, which treated the empire's individual nationalities in isolation and in competition with one another. His was rather a conception of a thoroughly complex "shared history" that drew on "various tributaries," in this case meaning various traditions, coalescing into one "great stream" that would in turn determine the historical memory of the inhabitants of the entire region. This is, metaphorically speaking, a "text" that can constantly demand to be read and interpreted anew. This view of a concrete, complex, and heterogeneous past corresponds exactly to Michael Werner's notion of an "histoire croisée," demonstrating the aporia of homogeneous, nationalist conceptions of history and allowing instead for various, equally valid possibilities of interpreting the past.<sup>13</sup> This view of an "histoire croisée" also corresponds to the practical experiences recorded by Edward Said with regard to the entangled, polysemous

<sup>12</sup> Hugo von Hofmannsthal, "Bemerkungen [1921]," in *Hugo von Hofmannsthal: Gesammelte Werke in zehn Bänden. Reden und Aufsätze*, ed. Bernd Schoeller and Rudolf Hirsch, vol. 2: 1914–1924 (Frankfurt a. Main: Fischer, 1979), 474.

<sup>13</sup> Michael Werner and Bénédicte Zimmermann, "Penser l'histoire croisée: entre empirie et réflexivité," in *De la comparaison à l'histoire croisée*, eds. Michael Werner and Bénédicte Zimmermann (Paris: Seuil, 2004), 15–49.

histories of Palestine. Such a multipolar, polysemous experience is also etched into Jewish consciousness, as Franz Kafka tried to elucidate with regard to the Yiddish “jargon”: “It consists solely of foreign words. But these words are not firmly rooted in it, they retain the speed and liveliness with which they were adopted. Great migrations move through Yiddish, from one end to the other. All this German, Hebrew, French, English, Slavonic, Dutch, Rumanian, and even Latin, is seized with curiosity and frivolity once it is contained within Yiddish, and it takes a good deal of strength to hold all these languages together in this state.”<sup>14</sup>

However, according to Kafka it is precisely this fragmentation that cultivated “self-confidence” as a typical characteristic of the self-consciousness of Jews, who, as Hannah Arendt also remarked, for centuries constituted not only an integral, but also a determining component, a constitutive factor, of this region – of Habsburg Central Europe. With regard to their complex historical existence, Jews are also a reflection, a microcosm, of precisely that pluralistic, complex, multilingual polysemy that was and is characteristic not only of Habsburg Central Europe, but of the entire Central European region and moreover of the entire globalized world into the present day.

This essay has been translated from German into English by Tim Corbett.

<sup>14</sup> Franz Kafka, “An Introductory Talk on the Yiddish Language,” in *Reading Kafka: Prague, Politics, and the Fin de Siècle*, ed. Mark Anderson (New York: Schocken, 1989), 264.