

Seeing the Habsburg Monarchy as a Global Empire in an Era of Self-Styled Nation-States

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Very recent work on Habsburg Central Europe demonstrates in diverse but compelling ways the substantial benefits that accrue to historians of this part of Europe when they frame their subject in both regional and global terms. Scholars who pursue a range of different strategies to apply concepts such as “the global” to their subjects, have been able successfully to relate the “global” to different scales of region and locality. Their historical imagination is not limited by a methodological nationalism typical of work on Habsburg Central Europe, nor by the constraints of state borders, although their work also demonstrates how state-building practices often contributed to forging interregional and global networks. Scholars working to link Habsburg Central Europe to global networks generally embed their studies in highly specific contexts and use carefully chosen scales of analysis to reassess the historical processes that shaped Habsburg Central Europe in the 18th and 19th centuries.

Their reassessment is particularly welcome because the field of Habsburg Central European history has often been missing from conversations about global history. Alone among the European powers, the Habsburg Monarchy held no extra-European colonies, apart from a neighborhood concession in Tianjin. Yet this fact by itself hardly explains the empire’s absence from global history writing. Any number of studies have long since demonstrated the degree to which Habsburg entrepreneurs, explorers, scientists, artists, military advisers, or adventurers (to name just a few professions) initiated or participated in significant ventures outside of Europe, from circumnavigating the globe to constructing interregional trade networks, to imaging global climate patterns.¹

1 Two notable exceptions for the modern period are the scholars Walter Sauer and Alison Frank Johnson who have each published studies that seek to place the history of the Habsburg Monarchy in a more global context. See, for example, Walter SAUER, *Austria-Hungary’s Role in Europe’s Overseas Expansion Reconsidered*. In: *Austrian Studies* 20 (2012), p. 5–23 and Walter SAUER, *Schwarz-Gelb in Afrika. Habsburgermonarchie und koloniale Frage*. In: Walter SAUER (ed.), *K. u. K. Kolonial. Habsburgermonarchie und europäische Herrschaft in Afrika*, Wien 2007, p. 17–78; Alison FRANK JOHNSON, *The Children of the Desert and the Laws of the Sea. Austria, Great Britain, the Ottoman Empire, and the Mediterranean Slave Trade in the Nineteenth Century*. In: *American Historical Review* 117 (2012), 2, p. 410–444. For other possibly global approaches, see Deborah COEN, *Climate in Motion. Science, Empire, and the Problem of Scale*, Chicago 2018; Stephen A. WALSH, *Liberalism at High Latitudes. The Politics of Polar Exploration in the Habsburg Monarchy*. In: *Austrian History Yearbook* 47 (2016), p. 89–106. There is also a considerable (often more popular) literature on the circumnavigation of the globe by the Austrian ship *Novara* in 1857–59 including David G. L. WEISS/Gerd SCHILDDORFER, *Novara. Österreichs Traum von der Weltmacht*, Wien 2010 and Christa KNELLWOLF KING, *The Novara Expedition and the Imperialist Messages of Exploration Literature*. In: Christa KNELLWOLF KING/Margarete RUBIK (eds.), *Stories of Empire. Narrative Strategies for the Legitimation of an Imperial World Order*, Trier 2009, p. 157–176, cited in SAUER, *Austria-Hungary’s Role*, p. 14.

Why then should Habsburg Central Europe remain missing from global history? The answer, I believe, can be found in the way history writing about Central Europe has too often been held hostage by a twentieth century methodologically nationalist approach to region, to empire, and to chronology.

The idea that the twentieth-century nation state served as the telos of historical development decisively influenced the ways that many historical schools framed the history of this part of Europe. It determined the very questions they researched, and it shaped the ways they understood the term “empire.” The primacy of nationhood has meant that historians too often treated the category of “empire” in Central Europe in a parochial, inward-looking sense, rather than seeing the ways that empire initiated, facilitated or encouraged interregional and global forms of connection. This is not true for other parts of Europe where even the most traditionally Eurocentric accounts of the nineteenth century treat the concept of empire as a vehicle for examining the actions of individuals and networks outside of Europe. By contrast, when it comes to Habsburg Central Europe in the nineteenth century, historians too often saw empire not in relation to European global networks, but rather in terms of its – usually negative – relationship to a modern concept of nationhood. Empire in Habsburg Central Europe was primarily important as a constraining – if declining – force against which allegedly emerging nations struggled to fulfill their historical destiny.²

The hegemony of a nation-state framework for understanding Habsburg Central Europe has also meant that significant legacies of the early-modern period, from its commercial or cultural networks to the composite character of its polities, became largely irrelevant to modern histories. In particular, claims of nationhood displaced the importance of regions for understanding cultural, economic, and social developments within Central Europe. Thus, Galicia is understood primarily in terms set by Polish or Ukrainian national history-writing, while Dalmatia and Istria should be understood in terms of Italian, Croatian, or Slovene national histories. This way of thinking leaves little room for understanding the historical relations among regions within empire on their own terms.

How might one see this part of Europe with fresh eyes if one were to abandon those methodologies that derived from traditional understandings of “nation” and “empire” in Central Europe? Focusing our investigations according to scales defined more by locality, region or empire than by nation, we reveal diverse relations among communities across Central Europe and the world, relations that would otherwise remain hidden to us, were we simply to imagine empire’s primary function to suppress forms of emerging nationhood. Another change of

2 This tendency is particularly ironic since, as I have argued elsewhere, ideas of nationhood and ideas of empire developed in close relationship to each other on the 19th century. Pieter M. JUDSON, *The Habsburg Empire. A New History*, Cambridge MA 2016, p. 9–10.

focus involves moving back from the traditional period of high imperialism (late 19th century) to the period of the eighteenth and the first half of the nineteenth centuries. This move, in turn, also makes it easier for historians to move their focus away from nationally defined to more regionally defined histories.

Let me highlight five important lessons or challenges that I draw from recent work that seeks to place Habsburg history in a more global context:

First, quite simply, we do better when we start our investigations with people as our subjects rather than with abstract concepts. Region, locality, even the globe are all ultimately defined situationally by the actions, and potential for actions, of real people. It is they, not abstract national communities (or data sets), who find opportunities to create commercial, cultural, or social networks, often for highly idiosyncratic reasons. This kind of work traces people's movements from one region to another, often for the sake of extending commercial opportunities, and often to other parts of the globe. Sometimes those individuals and their families returned to specific towns in Habsburg Central Europe, sometimes not. At the very least, the complexity of their experiences scrambles our traditionally static understandings of national or regional identification, and makes us consider them in terms of their work as "cultural brokers". At the same time, the individuals who initiate exploration or economic networks between regions and other parts of the globe can also be the employees of the state. In this case their abilities to persuade the gatekeepers who controlled access to the ruler gave them the ability to achieve funding for their expeditions of exploration and trade.

Yet another kind of traveler in the nineteenth century is the Austrian bureaucrat posted to a range of locations. Austrians from across the empire who also used its different languages, frequently travelled great distances to serve as civil servants, military officers, recruits, or sometimes as entrepreneurs. Often for strategic reasons, however, local elites in Milan, Lemberg / L'viv / Lwow, or Buda, might label these individuals derogatorily as "Schwabs" or "Germans", no matter their linguistic or ethnic background. The engagement of these men with local civil society – especially with local elites – could often be highly conflictual, as in the cases of Lombardy, Venetia, or Galicia. Local nobilities resented and fought against the imposition of imperial bureaucrats who themselves often sought to alleviate the local situation of the entrepreneurial or working classes in order to raise their economic productivity. Nationalist histories, however, made this derogatory social label of "German" into something ethnic or national, by framing bureaucrats' relations to locals purely in nationalist and exploitative terms: German bureaucrats oppressed Italian subjects. In accomplishing this maneuver, those historians gave regional social conflicts – often among different elite groups – a misleadingly nationalist interpretation that pitted entire nations against each other. In the case of Lombardy and Venetia, this version of events fed highly teleological accounts of an Italian *Risorgimento*.

Secondly, this diverse range of histories also teaches us historians that we should not start by trying to define or assign authentic identities to our subjects. Rather, if identifications interest us, we should start by researching those situations that produced particular feelings of loyalty to nation, region, or empire in people. Not “what is identity?”, or “what is nationhood?”, but rather “what situations produce feelings of identification?” Here I paraphrase Rogers Brubaker’s sensible theorizing of ethnicity and identification.³ What factors and what kinds of situations shaped the ways our historical subjects understood different types of identification, loyalty, or action, especially when they were far from their previous homes?

Thirdly, to reiterate a point several other historians have made, as part of the situation to be investigated we nevertheless do need to pay even closer attention to the role of specific legal systems, institutional practices, administrative procedures, and general political frameworks (*politische Rahmenbedingungen*) as we compare individuals’ expectations, the creation of opportunities, and networks. This kind of contextual framework is critical to understand what actions are indeed possible in the first place, what situations are likely to occur within certain limited spaces? Territorial borders may not matter as such in our transnational and global histories. Nevertheless, local, regional, state laws, institutions, and practices play enormous and qualitative roles in creating the possible spaces for individual initiative or community agency. With regard to Habsburg Central Europe, instead of seeing peoples and the territories in which they lived as part of nation states in-the-making, we need to understand their place more fully in the context of a large composite empire, always in-the-making. How did various regional laws, overlapping institutions, or administrative practices create spaces for particular forms of action? And rather than seeing the imperial state simply as a fundamentally constraining force, we need to recognize how it could also have shaped creative possibilities for its subjects or citizens. This is what I have called “state building from below,” to illustrate that state structures are not simply imposed from above, but that they can produce different constructive responses by those who take advantage of them locally. Such an approach in no way involves treating imperial states with a nostalgic attitude, as is the case with some literature on the Habsburg Monarchy of the nineteenth century. It does, however, require us to remove the moral imperative of the nation state from our view, so that we can begin to evaluate the possibilities and limitations of different imperial regimes on their own terms. Only in this way can today’s societies come to understand more fully the legacies of empire in which they have historically played an active role.

The fourth point has to do with different scales and their possible commensurability. Historians often express concern that in framing their research

3 Rogers BRUBAKER, *Ethnicity Without Groups*, Cambridge MA 2006.

questions, different scholars use different scales of analysis, thus making it more difficult to assess the comparability of their research outcomes. This is especially but not only the case, I find, in examples of economic history. How can we meet the challenge to integrate forms of research oriented toward different scales of analysis? Here I return to the first point, that our particular use of concepts should derive from our research into the actions and intentions of our subjects. What is a regional or a global relationship largely defined not by an objective scale, but rather by the situation and the perceptions it engenders. The very notion of scale could itself become a constraining factor in some cases, if we allow it to pre-define the subject too decisively.

Here I would like to raise the innovative approach to issues of scale and definition developed by Deborah Coen, an historian of the natural sciences in Habsburg Central Europe. In her historical studies of scientific knowledge and professional fields, from earthquake science to meteorology, Coen deploys the concept of “scaling” as a way to think about relations between what we often call the local, the regional, and the global. Already the use of the term “scaling” as a verb rather than as a noun, moves us away from a static view of fixed scales that cannot be compared. Two of Coen’s recent books on science and empire address this question directly.⁴ Both works argue that scientists in the Habsburg Monarchy developed unique methodologies by European standards, methodologies that constructed large imperial spaces as a distinctive scale made up of the local observations of individuals located in different vantage points. Using examples from earthquake observation, geology, botany, and above all from climate study, she argues that scientists in the Habsburg Monarchy used small-scale, individual localized observation to help measure, map, and represent large-scale global phenomena, including empire. This particular way of interpreting local observation made those larger phenomena (empire, globe) more understandable, capable of graphic representation, and even logical to the local observer who otherwise could not have understood her place in the larger schema. Coen’s work reveals a particular and specific relationship of natural scientists in Habsburg Central Europe to imperial scales of thinking, one based repeatedly on ways of relating the most intimate of local observations to each other. She also argues that one does not find this particular way of correlating evidence among climate scientists in self-described nation states. Indeed some of her analysis documents how scientists from the empire had to constrain and adapt their broader visions to new the narrower and nationalist scales after 1918.⁵ Coen’s analysis also asserts

4 Deborah COEN, *Climate in Motion. Science, Empire, and the Problem of Scale*, Chicago 2018; Deborah COEN, *The Earthquake Observers. Disaster Science from Lisbon to Richter*, Chicago 2014.

5 See also Deborah COEN, *Scaling Down. Mapping the Austrian Climate Between Empire and Republic*. In: James R. FLEMING/Vladimir JANKOVIC/Deborah COEN (eds.), *Intimate Universalities. Local and Global Themes in the History of Weather and Climate*, Sagamore Beach 2006, p. 115–140.

that as a result, scientists in Habsburg Central Europe also developed a particular ability to understand phenomena such as climate (or climate change) in far more dynamic ways than did their colleagues in other parts of Europe.

My fifth point relates to another issue frequently raised nowadays by historians who seek to pursue a more global approach: whether or how our engagement with global history may reiterate or mask profoundly Eurocentric presumptions and approaches to the rest of the world. In this regard, those of us who study Habsburg Central Europe could equally well reflect on the ways in which standard Eurocentric historical narratives and scholarly presumptions continue to marginalize the very field in which we work, often simply by means of a benign neglect. Even today Habsburg Central Europe is rarely treated as an integral part of Europe and sometimes not as a site of economic or social innovation. More often scholars treat it as a receptor for trends originating in an imagined West, trends that then diffuse eastward. It is hardly new to point out that in much historiography, “Europe” has usually meant what is called “Western Europe”. This term “western” in turn is itself highly misleading because, at least with regard to the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, it generally referred not to a geographic West, but specifically to a limited number of societies in northwestern Europe. The Iberian Peninsula, Ireland, the Italian peninsula, these geographically western European regions are not at all what is meant when historians speak of “western Europe”. The experience of the cold war hardened already resilient ideas about differences that allegedly separated west from east and made the latter marginal to the European story, only now with an added dose of what was called “economic backwardness”. Most of Habsburg Central Europe was viewed as Eastern Europe, and many modernization theories sought to explain the allegedly qualitative differences between East and West in normative terms. The west saw the early rise of ethnically homogenous nation states, of advanced forms of trade and industrial capitalism, and therefore it also first experienced the rise of democracy. The east, allegedly burdened by ethnic heterogeneity, imperial state forms, and cultures of backwardness, failed to develop economically in the same way and never developed democratic political institutions.⁶ Those of us who write the history of Habsburg Central Europe are burdened by the frequent need either to remind readers of the very Europeanness of our subject or to justify its importance against presumptions of marginality. Of course, it is perfectly possible that we too indulge in specifically Eurocentric attitudes and approaches when we consider global relations. If we do so, however, we will simply continue to build on the scholarship that has for centuries refused to treat our part of Europe as a legitimate site of Europeanness.

6 This was standard in the political science and historical literature both Eastern Europe during the Cold War years. For a closer analysis of this literature, Pieter M. JUDSON, *L'Autriche-Hongrie. était-elle un Empire?*. In: *Annales. Histoire, Sciences Sociales* 63 (2008), 3, p. 563–596.

Finally, thinking about the scholarship that, similarly to Coen, attempts to understand and represent relations on both local and global scales, I want to address another concern regarding narrative strategies. The question arises, whether in their abandonment of so-called master narratives decades ago, historians have not ceded the field of history too easily to those politicians and journalists who provide the public with clear master narratives – such as nationalist ones – for understanding history in relatively clear, simple, and persuasive terms. Those older master narratives may not make much sense to us any longer, thanks to decades of scholarly research. Yet they continue to hold the attention of the public and of private and government funding agencies. Complexity is a critical element of the dynamic historical relationships which we historians repeatedly confront. The complexity of our arguments does not mean, however, that they cannot also be persuasive. All of us engaged in historical research are keenly aware of the difficulties in presenting our scholarship using a clear narrative logic that will persuade non-professionals of its validity. We do not need to replace older master narratives with new master narratives. Simply by organizing our research around a persuasive narrative does not preclude the possible simultaneous existence of several plausible narratives. The goal is not to foreclose other possibilities, but rather to present complex relationships in more persuasive narrative terms.

The diversity of approach in the existing scholarship on global history in Habsburg Central Europe demonstrates the variety of ways that historians are exploring the local and regional networks that frequently attained global dimensions. In the context of Habsburg Central Europe these histories reveal the ways that people originally from one region of the empire, for example, played influential economic, social, scientific, or political roles in other parts of the empire. But practicing this kind of history still comes at a high price in a world where nation-based narratives remain the norm and nations play the role of building blocks for most peoples' understanding of history. We historians must continue to search for ever more persuasive ways to incorporate the big empire – and imperial and global ways of thinking – into our historical narratives, precisely by re-examining the local and the regional. Even in this era of the European Union, or precisely in this era of the European Union, and despite gestures to the global, popular histories of Europe remain fundamentally linked to nation-state cultures, and to the governments that finance and produce those cultures. How then to write a convincing history that removes the limits of political nationhood from the study of history and places the important cultural, economic, social, and political ties that extend beyond today's political borders at the center of the narrative? We are still negotiating that challenge. And once we have done it, we must still make certain that we make these narratives as persuasive as possible to our publics.