

*Judson, Pieter M.: The Habsburg Empire. A New History.*

Harvard University Press, Cambridge/MA 2016, 592 pp., ISBN 978-0674 9867-63.

The monograph by Pieter Judson responds positively to at least two major demands in the domain of recent Habsburg historiography. One of them concerns comprehensive works which transcend both national historiographical barriers and the Trans- and Cis-Leithanian divide. After long neglect because of its putatively complicated and irrational mechanisms, Habsburg state-building has inspired numerous innovative approaches in the past years, which situated this topic into the framework of European and global state building.

The second topic concerns the physiognomy of the national movements on Habsburg soil during the long 19<sup>th</sup> century. Since the establishment of constructivist, transnational and micro-perspectives in the research canon, it is particularly comforting to see their deployment in a monograph with a comprehensive scope (especially in the chapter about 1848, pp. 199-201). Judson addresses this important topic

of the classical canon. He has a distinguished record in dealing with nationalisms in the Austrian Lands – just think of his earlier monograph *Liberal Politics, Social Experience, and National Identity in the Austrian Empire, 1848-1914*.<sup>1</sup> This time he approaches the Habsburg state in its entirety and asks about its integrating power during the long nineteenth century. While traditional historiographies tended to cast the Monarchy either as an anachronistic ‘prison of nations’ doomed to fail in the era of modern nation-building, or, on the contrary, as a tolerant, accommodating polity successfully coordinating its diverse populations into a unified whole, revisionist works have cast a more balanced image, while there is much to be discussed about the fine-tunings. Within this range, Judson’s work has been justly identified as an optimistic account.<sup>2</sup>

The book builds on the research results of the past decades published in German and English, developing an inquiry into top-down state building in combination with the social and cultural historical investigation of the ‘state effects’ on the everyday lives of its inhabitants/citizens. The chapters of the book are organized around the classical chronological blocks of modern Habsburg political history: the reforms of the enlightened monarchs Maria Theresa and Joseph II, the reign of Francis II/I, particularly the Metternich era, 1848, the decades leading up to the Austro-Hungarian Settlement, the “culture wars” (esp. p. 269-332) emerging on behalf of liberal politics after 1867, fin-de-siècle everyday life. A separate chapter is dedicated to World War I and the dissolution of the Habsburg state. An epilog with a survey of the successor states, dealing with the legacy of the old regime, concludes the book, bridging the topic to the twentieth century and the present.

Judson calls his subject a liberal empire whose foundations were set by the enlightened reforms of Maria Theresa and Joseph II. He does not provide a definition of the empire, which, in light of the results of New Imperial History, is rather disappointing. The meaning of the empire evolves in the course of reading, designating a composite polity, whose nascent government embarked at the end of the eighteenth century on new fiscal and military projects, to build a centralized and economically efficient state. Chapter 1 names the key themes of modern Habsburg state building: centralization, citizenship policies (including economic and social emancipation and the regulation of migration), education, the institutionalization of public administration (and the secret police). The book surveys these realms of state activity during the entire ‘long’ nineteenth century, while striving at a balanced overview of the lands. The latter is no easy task, given the different measures of negotiation of these policies in the various lands, except, of course, the decades of relentless centralization during Joseph II and in the 1850s. Regional differences in the responses are underlined, Hungary being one of the most conspicuous exceptions to the rule. This gives a structural clarity to the chapters that employ a transparent, everyday language, keep specialized terminology at a minimum and eliminate digressions on theory and method. There are many poignant formulations and

<sup>1</sup> Judson, Pieter: *Liberal Politics, Social Experience, and National Identity in the Austrian Empire, 1848-1914*. Ann Arbor 1996.

<sup>2</sup> Beller, Steven: *The Habsburg Monarchy, 1815-1918*. Cambridge 2018, 21.

anecdotes, which not only illustrate the interactions of the state and local society, but also make the book accessible to a larger audience.

Dealing with the central topics of the historical canon would not just be enough for the sweeping success of the book; it needs the fine insights and reflected assessments on the workings of the Habsburg polity as a whole, synthesized from an impressive bibliography. I find it brilliant how the book explains the sequences of state building from chapter to chapter. It depicts the paradoxes of post-Josephist rule: a war-exhausted, economically defunct government dragging on the legacy of centralization of 1792 until 1848, instead of fostering regional development (the cases of Dalmatia, a territorial gain in the course of the Napoleonic wars, and Galicia, pp. 125, 128-9). A state and its “demoralized” administrators (Waltraud Heindl’s monograph on the topic resonates throughout the book) face vivid, economically prospering middle classes and a common, inter-regional civic culture after 1814. But there is also the legacy of the Josephist *Rechtsstaat*, embodied by the Austrian Civil Code of 1811, enshrining modern liberal citizenship law in the regions west of the Leitha. Citizenship is also the key subject in the chapter on the Frankfurt Parliament and the revolution of 1848, becoming a battleground between the “national conversions” (p. 209) in the provinces and a monarch adamant on the coherence of the empire.

The term ‘liberal empire,’ not unlike the German formulation “Verwaltung statt Verfassung” by Harm-Hinrich Brandt, acquires its specific meaning in Chapter 5 and indicates the reform policies driven by the post-1848 “naked bureaucratic absolutism” (p. 219) that nevertheless institutionalized the social and economic reforms of 1848. Accordingly, the Austrian liberal politicians of the 1860s may have endorsed “unique cultural values,” but in political terms they did not differ much from the “activist absolutism” of the government (p. 268). Even their cultural policies after 1867, culminating in the culture wars against the Catholic Church, are seen in the light of the emulation of imperial patriotism.

Liberal politics enshrined in Cisleithania the use of native language as a constitutional right and organized politics around the vernaculars. In the long run these measures produced those “event-driven or situational nationalisms” (p. 274) which precipitated around elections and depended on constant mobilization. The author does not regard them as lethal and disruptive forces that brought down the monarchy but rather as factors of limited influence in everyday life. Even the crisis triggered by the Badeni language ordinances in 1897, mandating the equality of German and Czech language use by civil servants in Bohemia, which threatened the stability of the system, yielded negotiated solutions and forced the Emperor to accept the democratization of universal male suffrage to diffuse the power of nationalism (p. 315). A crucial insight of the monograph is indeed that political nationalism, instead of the immanent forces of the ‘nations,’ should be regarded not as autonomous, enduring forces emanating from the Lands but as a political phenomenon actively shaped by the government and local activists alike.

There is a flipside to this otherwise highly welcome perspective on nationalism, particularly when it deals with the regional elites of the Monarchy. Particularly the old regional elites, like the Galician Polish-speaking upper strata and the Hungarian-

speaking gentry in Hungary, are cast predominantly in terms of political behavioralism and appear as reactionary, narrow-minded nay-sayers to the leveling policies of Vienna. There is no explanation why Hungarian reform movement was “largely rhetorical” during the *Vormärz*, which I do not think it was (p. 111-112), nor for the assessment of the same movement as ending up with a similar reform program like the central government, despite the oppositional tone, on the eve of 1848. One reason is the overwhelming reliance on English and German-language publications, and the absence of research literature in the regional vernaculars is a significant shortcoming, particularly in discussions about Hungary.

Yet I find the narrative structure and the general perspective on the Habsburg polity highly relevant. Judson’s book is ideal classroom material, its encompassing ambition invites further discussions, complementary information and dissenting opinions, particularly in its optimistic assessment of the integrating force of the Monarchy. It is not simply because of (un-)intended parallels with the uncertain future of the European Union today, but one really wishes that this had indeed been the case.