THE DEBATES ON THE FUTURE OF AUSTRIA-HUNGARY ON THE EVE OF THE FIRST WORLD WAR

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this paper is contextualise the debates on the future of the Habsburg Monarchy on the Eve of the First World War. The context included the assumed possibility of a European war, the issue of proposals to partition provinces and "National Compromises" in Cisleithania; the prominence of the debates on the electoral reform of 1906/1907, and the relevance of concerns on trends in ethnic demography. The final section of the paper makes reference to the terms in which the collapse of the Monarchy could be envisaged, and in conclusion addresses the issue of the actual collapse.

Keywords: Austria-Hungary, Dualist Era, Austrian electoral reform, language census

I DIBATTITI SUL FUTURO DELL'AUSTRIA-UNGHERIA ALLA VIGILIA DELLA PRIMA GUERRA MONDIALE

RIASSUNTO

Lo scopo di questo articolo è di contestualizzare i dibattiti sul futuro della Monarchia Absburgica alla vigilia della Prima Guerra Mondiale. Il contesto comprendeva la supposta possibilità di una guerra europea, la questione delle proposte di spartizioni di province e di "Compromessi Nazionali", la preminenza dei dibattiti sulla riforma elettorale del 1906/1907, e la rilevanza dei timori per le tendenze della demografia etnica. La parte conclusiva fa riferimento ai termini in cui il crollo della Monarchia poteva essere prevista, e in conclusione affronta la questione del crollo effettivo.

Parole chiave: Austria-Ungheria, Età Dualista, riforma elettorale austriaca, censimento linguistico

CISLEITHANIA IN THE DUALIST ERA: AN OVERVIEW

In 1899 Ivan S. Bloch published a book entitled *Is war now impossible?* This was an abridgement of *The War of the Future in its Technical, Economic and Political Relations*, a six-volume work published in Saint Petersburg in 1898, and then translated into many languages. In hindsight, the title seems hopelessly naïve. In fact, the core of Bloch's argument was not that the war would have been impossible, but rather that, in the new circumstances, war would have been much more devastating in its material, human and social effects than any previous conflict:

> *I maintain that war has become impossible alike from a military, economic and political point of view* […]. *The dimensions of modern armaments and the organisation of society have rendered its prosecution an economic impossibility, and, finally, if any attempt were made to demonstrate the inaccuracy of my assertions by putting the matter to a test on a grand scale, we should find the inevitable result in a catastrophe which would destroy all existing political organisations. Thus, the great war cannot be made, and any attempt to make it would result in suicide. Such, I believe, is the simple demonstrable fact* (Bloch, 1899, xi).

The relevance of Bloch's work has been periodically emphasised by many authors (Howard, 1984; Ferguson, 1999; Janiak-Jasińska, 2014; Kornat, 2016).[1] The significance of Bloch's work is not so much that the outbreak of war was avoidable, but, rather, that its possible outbreak had become increasingly thinkable, and had been clearly envisaged.

From this starting-point one may proceed in two quite distinct directions: (i) collecting all sorts of factual elements which can explain the final breakout of war; or (ii) selecting some underlying trends which could have led to the outbreak of war, and which in fact did.

Both approaches are relevant, but in the case of the Habsburg run-up to the war it is more productive to start from long-term trends. It can be argued that the common (but often implicit) basis for debates on the future the Habsburg monarchy which took place in the Late Dualist era were two factors: (i) "ethnic demography" (as reflected in the Austrian language census), and (ii) electoral reform.

This brief overview covers only the provinces (*Länder*) of Cisleithania, commonly known as the Austrian part of the Habsburg monarchy. The period discussed is the late Dualist era, taking 1897 as a convenient starting point (both for the creation of the Fifth Curia of voters for the Reichsrat in Vienna and the Badeni ordinances) up to the eve of the First World War.

This perspective excludes the lands of the Crown of St Stephen (commonly known as the Hungarian part of the monarchy). This is not simply because of the obvious problems of sources and relevant literature, but because the Hungarian part of the monarchy was run on the basis of a quite distinct constitutional system, with its own political and legal

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1   For a discussion of Bloch's Russian, Polish and Jewish background, see Bauer, 2010.

structure (Péter, 2012).[2] Furthermore, in the late Dualist era the Hungarian constitutional crisis of 1906 was looming, because of the periodic renewal of the Austro-Hungarian agreement (Stone, 1967; Sugar, 1981).[3] The two parts of the Monarchy may well be contrasted, but they cannot be analysed in a common framework.

The focus of historiography has often been the issue of the break-up of the Monarchy at the end of the First World War. Less attention (if any) has been devoted to the possibility of partition within individual provinces (as a tool for achieving a political solution to national conflicts) before 1914 (without involving any break-up of the monarchy as such).[4]

The Heartlands: Bohemia and the Hereditary Lands

The lands of the Crown of Saint Wenceslas (which included Bohemia proper, Moravia, and what remained of Austrian Silesia). First of all, it was one of the most important areas of Cisleithania, indeed of the entire Monarchy. This was true in terms of wealth, population and levels of literacy. On almost any social and economic indicator, Bohemia was at the top (together with the Austrian Hereditary lands).

The Bohemian national conflict was often seen (and is still portrayed) as a conflict of a particularly virulent nature. But it is also the least representative case of all the lands of Cisleithania. It was the only case in which a "non-historical nation" actually managed to beat (and sometimes overtake) a "historical" one in the political and social arena.[5]

None of this means that there was no case for a partition of the Bohemian Crownland. On the contrary, this was exactly what was beginning to emerge. But the form in which such a political imperative emerged was a slightly different one: it was the form of the "National Compromise" (an internal partition of sorts). Indeed, in Moravia a National Compromise was in fact reached in 1906 (with unforeseen implications for the future, as sometimes happens in history) (Stourzh, 2007; Fasora, 2006).

The Hereditary Lands (to use this label as shorthand for the provinces which make up the Austrian Republic) can be left out of the picture; not because they were not important, but because there the national conflict (to the extent that there was one) was quite different: dealing with what was considered one of the *geschichtslosen Völker*, the Slovenes. This of course did not apply to Tyrol: here the clash was between two "historical" nations: "Austro-Germans" (to use a later label) and Italians. This was quite a different case.

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2   Even the language census differed, since in the Hungary it was based on *Muttersprache*, while in Cisleithania it was based on *Umgangssprache*.

3   Bosnia-Hercegovina must also be excluded from the picture, since it was not formally part of the Monarchy until its annexation in 1908.

4   Partition should not be confused with a break-up of the monarchy: in 1921 the United Kingdom experienced a partition of its Irish territory, but there no break-up of the monarchy.

5   The definition of the Czech-speaking populations of Bohemia-Moravia as a "non-historic nation" may appear controversial, if not incorrect. Yet even a sympathetic observer, such as Lewis Namier, did not classify it as a "historic nation". In fact, Namier distinguished merely between "master-nations" and "subject peasant-races" (Namier, 1958, 115). "Master-nation", in Namier's usage, is clearly a translation of "*Herrenvolk*".

The Eastern Periphery

The political set-up in Galicia was as close as one could get to full autonomy, Hungarian-style. Of course, it was marginal, in terms of social and economic indicators. But it was not marginal in terms of territory, population and political influence. It had a minister for Galicia in the Viennese government. It had influence in Vienna. Kazimierz Badeni, Leon Biliński, and so forth: these were Polish surnames, and not simply remote ancestry.

Galicia was actually partitioned, but under the name of "electoral geometry". In Eastern Galicia, universal suffrage risked having consequences which would have been disastrous for the Polish ruling class. So, the Electoral Reform of December 1906 had to insert special clauses to ensure that the "non-historical peoples" (Ukranians/Ruthenes, and Jews) did not have a disproportionate (i.e. accurate) representation at the Reichsrat. There was no need for any crude partition of territory.

Bukowina was instead an extreme periphery, as eastern as one could get. Given its marginality, it could also afford to have a National Compromise. It even had a dispute on an issue which would have been much more sensitive in other Crownlands (and even more in Vienna): the recognition of a Jewish Nationality as such. As Gerald Stourzh has shown, the fiercest opponents of such an idea were the Jews of Vienna. They had not spent years striving to be accepted as true Austro-Germans, just to have this achievement ruined by Jewish autonomists (or nationalists) from Bukowina, of all places (Stourzh, 1989).

Southern Periphery

Tyrol (in its northern and southern parts) was not actually periphery, but it did have an element in common with the Cisleithanian South: the presence of a non-German "historical nation": the Italians. This created an acute conflict in Tyrol (especially after the loss of Lombardy and then Venetia: there was no longer an Italian-speaking University at hand (Galician Poles did not have that problem, having the universities in Kraków and Lwów).

The situation in the Littoral was more complicated. There a third party had emerged: the Slovenes (definitely "non-historical", from an Italian point of view) and the Croats (who may not have considered themselves "non-historical", but who were considered as such by the Italians). Dalmatia was a living illustration of what might happen in the Littoral: the Crownland of a "historic" nation taken over by the Croats. This was something which should not be repeated.

In an Italian Nationalist (not necessarily Irredentist) perspective Vienna was bound to play the "divide and rule" tactic, inventing "nations" which had never existed (e.g., Slovenes). After all, in Galicia they had done the same, inventing another non-existent "nation" (Ruthenes/Ukranians). Indeed, it was the one and the same Frantz Stadion who had hatched the plot, to perpetuate Viennese rule (Franzinetti, 2006).

What all of this meant in practice was that the Italians always felt too vulnerable to propose any partition, which would not have been very easy over the territories

of the Littoral. The "Slavs" (as they were labelled) were, for their part, too weak to demand anything. They could benefit from the protection of Cisleithanian state in terms of public sector employment, and they could obtain a revision of the 1910 language census, but no more than that (Franzinetti, 2011). Perhaps for this reason, the territorial demands for Trieste/Trst were always mutually exclusive; there was not much room for partition or even compromise. A compromise was instead considered possible in Istria/ Istra, which had a different territorial and social composition (Ara, 1974). Görz/Gorica/ Gorizia also had a quite different social and historical profile: a ruling elite much more integrated with Vienna, a different religious configuration, etc. In short, the political contest in the Littoral was always a three-sided contest. Partition never really emerged as an issue.

Partitions or population transfers?

Had the Monarchy been a real, full-blooded autocracy (such as the Czarist system remained) it could have easily imposed solutions of one kind or another in its lands. It could have carried out population transfers (which were beginning to be carried out in the Balkans and in Ottoman territories). But this was inconceivable in "the World of Yesterday" to which the Monarchy still belonged. The calculus of what was politically "thinkable" would begin to change from 1914 onwards. As John Deak has pointed out,

> The war would launch a coup d'état in which the military took supreme command of civilian policy: Austria would go down a different path from the one which it had followed since the days of Joseph II: it was a path from which it could never return. State building and reform would be jettisoned in favour of arrests, prosecution, and progress to the countryside; it would bring troop recruiters, gendarmes, food commissars, and the, after years of war, death, hunger, and suffering.
> The end of the state-building project and the state of emergency under military government should not color how we see the last decade of the monarchy […]. The bureaucracy's attempts to reform itself and the constitutional framework of the state was less a mark of bureaucratic absolutism than a search for solutions to a multinational and increasingly democratic polity. (Deak, 2015, 260).

THE FALL OF THE HABSBURG MONARCHY

In Paris, in 1908, a doctoral student from Bohemia published his dissertation on the national conflict in his homeland. It is striking for two aspects. The first is its optimism on the future of the Monarchy, and, more importantly, the dismissal of any partitionist idea:

> People have often spoken of a dismemberment of Austria. I do not believe in it at all. The historical and economic bonds among the Austrian nations are too strong to make such a dismemberment possible […]. The reconciliation of the two nations in Bohemia is only possible if each people enjoys full autonomy (Beneš, 1908, 306–307).

But this passage is preceded by an even more important one, which can explain the optimism of the young Beneš:

Universal suffrage has [...] *given all that one could expect from it. The power of the nobility was completely broken, it no longer has any economic influence, if we put aside its influence in the bureaucracy. At this point, all we need is to modify the electoral system in the Bohemian Diet and in the other provincial Diets and the situation will present itself in a perfectly normal way: economic struggles will take the place of national struggles* [...] (Beneš, 1908, 306).

What went wrong in the intervening years, 1908–1914? It is all too easy to construct a list of factors which led to the First World War, and therefore to the demise of the Habsburg Monarchy. The literature on this topic is quite abundant, indeed overwhelming. Yet on the topic which was exciting the young Beneš in 1908 (i.e. electoral reform, and electoral behaviour generally) there is still a scarcity of historical research on this topic. The wealth of material and research which is available, for example, to historians of Irish nationalism illustrates what is missing in Habsburg historiography. Historians of Western Europe (British, French and German) can all rely on a solid base of studies of electoral behaviour. Undoubtedly, since the publication of William Jenks' book (Jenks, 1950) there has been a trickle of studies on these themes, and there have been more studies on local politics in the Habsburg regions.

The electoral history of Late Dualism has been clouded by a deterministic or teleological reading of its political system in this period: the nationalities were always in conflict, the Vienna Parliament was unworkable, emergency powers were regularly invoked, and – in retrospect – this would explain why the Monarchy collapsed.

Lothar Höbelt has argued that the parliamentary system actually worked; conflict was driven by the internal competition within the various national groups, and the parties representing them (Höbelt, 1990; Höbelt, 1996; Höbelt, 2002). Of course, 1908–1914 saw quite a few changes on the international scene (not least in Bosnia-Hercegovina). On the other hand, many of the most informed and perceptive observers of the Monarchy (Louis Eisenmann, Robert W. Seton-Watson, Henry Brailsford) found reasons to remain optimistic about its future right until the war broke out.[6]

But two very basic, and perhaps obvious points need to be restated. The first is the issue of "historical nations" and "non-historical peoples" (*geschichtslosen Völker*). These two labels are sometimes considered controversial, since they were often used in a derogatory manner. Nonetheless, they still indicated a basic fact of life of the Habsburg system: the distinction between nations which could claim a historical continuity of elites, and nations (or rather, "peoples") which (allegedly) could not. However controversial it may have been and still is, this classification did matter in historical practice, and in fact it reflected historical and social realities.

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6   See, for example, Louis Eisenmann's view of the future of monarchy in 1910 (quoted in Sked, 2001, 236–237).

There is a second (interconnected) factor: the role of "historico-political entities" in framing political discourse and demands on all sides. In 1860 Count Anton Szécsen described them in these terms:

The historical individuality of the different lands precisely the expression and the reunion of all the development and of all activity – national, historical and political – of the different parts of the monarchy […]. The sentiment of historico-political individuality exists, albeit in varying degrees, in all the lands of the monarchy: to intentionally ignore it does not mean abolishing it (Eisenman, 1904, 227).

In fact, in the same year Count Heinrich Clam-Martinic argued against modern theories of nationalism

which consistently wants to draw the frontiers of lands is according to the language frontiers is erroneous. Thereby the frontiers of the empire would be blasted just as well as the frontiers of the individual lands of which it is composed. In all lands, not just in Hungary, peoples are striving as far as possible for autonomy of the lands (Kann, 1948, II, 35–36).

Taken together, "historic nations" and "historico-political entities" conditioned not only political discourse, but also the political processes of the Dualist period (and, for the matter, also the subsequent ones).

CHANGING THE QUESTION: SOCIAL AND POLITICAL HISTORY

Since the 1960s, the historiographical consensus has shifted away from the old idea of Austria-Hungary as a "prison-house of nations". There was a short-lived revival of interest in the Monarchy in the early 1990s (in the wake of the Yugoslav wars of dissolution) because of it connection to the Balkans, the "power-keg of Europe", if not as the nesting-ground of ancient hatreds (Good, Rudoph, 1992; Barkey, von Hagen, 1997).

More recently, a new trend has emerged in Habsburg historiography, focussed on the category of "national indifference". The new paradigm raises the inevitable issue of the extent to which the concept is actually new. But some critics have already contested some of the historiographical assumptions made by proponents of the National Indifference paradigm (e.g., Stourzh, 2010; Cole, 2012). Laurence Cole has recently pointed out (in a discussion of Leo Valiani's work on the Habsburg collapse) that

Valiani's wide-ranging analysis of the international arena reminds us of the need to always integrate power politics into the study of nationalism in the Habsburg Monarchy, an aspect that is arguably missing in current discussions about different permutations of national identity (Cole, 2017; Cole, forthcoming).

In response, Rok Stergar has wondered if, in the face of the dynamics of the First World War, "history from below" (of which he is a long-standing practitioner) turns out

to be irrelevant.[7] As usual, it depends on what question is being addressed. But Sterger's point cannot be easily dismissed. How can historians integrate the fruits of research on (previously neglected) history "from below" with the omnipresent "power politics" to which Cole refers? Or is social history to be (once again) defined negatively, as "the history of a people with the politics left out" (Trevelyan, 1942, vii)?

WAS THE COLLAPSE OF THE HABSBURG MONARCHY REALLY INEVITABLE?

In his reminiscences on Lewis Namier, Isaiah Berlin describes how Namier saw his own role in the collapse of the Monarchy:

'I remember', said Namier to me, 'the day in 1918 when the Emperor Karl sued for peace. I said to Headlam-Morley: 'Wait'. Headlam-Morley said to Balfour: 'Wait'. Balfour said to Lloyd George: 'Wait'. Lloyd George said to Wilson: 'Wait'. And while they waited, the Austro-Hungarian Empire disintegrated. I may say that I pulled it to pieces with my own hands (Berlin, 1966).

There is no need to take at face value Namier's narrative, nor even Berlin's recounting of it. It remains a brilliant evocation of the *psychology* of the collapse of an empire (indeed, of any political system).[8] This kind of perspective is certainly a recurring experience shared in the experience of contemporary political actors in different contexts. Historians and later observers will beg to differ, finding retrospective causes and factors which led to what will then seem the "inevitable" collapse of the monarchy. But they will still need to address this issue, as they will need to address the issues raised by Cole and Stergar.

Foresight and Hindsight

In 1913, at the congress of the German Social Democrats of Bohemia, Otto Bauer stressed the risks which an unreformed Habsburg Monarchy was running:

We want to demonstrate once again that this Empire can base its survival only on political democracy and national autonomy, which are essential for a solution of social problems […] *the capitalist system is no longer solid enough to withstand the upheaval which would derive from the collapse of Austria* […]. *We do not want to pin our hopes on a catastrophe, we always want to show others the ways of reconstructing the state to make it viable. But if they will not listen to use, the last word will have said by Marx: proletarians have nothing to lose* (Bauer*, 1913, quoted in Kirby, 1987, 39).*

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7   Stergar made this remark in the round table discussion which followed the keynote lecture by Cole at the Rijeka conference *From Leo Weiczen to Leo Valiani*, University of Rijeka, 29 September 2015.

8   A more recent example of state collapse was provided by the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991. See the memoirs of Stanislaŭ Šuškevič (Šuškevič, 2012; Šuškevič, 2014). It should be noted that at the end of the Communist systems the only cases of state collapse occurred in the Soviet Union and Albania.

In 1917 Henry Brailsford, a keen observer of the Monarchy and of its neighbours (who, had actually advocated the partition of Kosovo in his book on Macedonia, in 1906):

Austria-Hungary has the merit of existing. One cannot make a substitution at will. The 'independence' promised to these nations would be at best illusory. […]. *Most of these national states would include an 'Ulster'* […]. *A just and skilful redrawing of frontiers might somewhat reduce the numbers of the German minority in the case of Bohemia and Posen…The drawing of frontiers, in short, is the least part of a solution of the problem of nationality* […]. *Peace in Europe cannot be achieved merely by a settlement of the national problems – the various 'Ulsters' stand in the way* […] (Brailsford, 1917).

The Habsburg debates on the future of the Monarchy may not have provided durable solutions, but they certainly did not lack foresight.

RAZPRAVE O PRIHODNOSTI AVSTRO-OGRSKE NA PREDVEČER PRVE SVETOVNE VOJNE

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POVZETEK

Razprava sintetično prikaže pregled političnega konteksta provinc Cislajtanije in tistih dejavnikov, ki so po eni stani spodbujali po drugi pa preprečevali nek "Nacionalni kompromis" (v bistvu neke vrste delitev), da bi tako lahko ublažili oziroma omilili nacionalne konflikte v Avstro-Ogrski. Avtor podčrta pomen postopka volilne reforme, ki je dosegel višek z reformo iz decembra 1906 (oziroma na začetku naslednjega leta) in slednja se je izkazala za relativno uspešno. Vsekakor se je naposled avstro-ogrski politični sistem pod težo prve svetovne vojne podrl. Novi trendi t. i. habsburškega zgodovinopisja se osredotočajo na socialno zgodovino (oziroma "zgodovino od spodaj"), vendar avtor meni, da bi morale biti vsakršne razlage habsburškega propada integrirane s pogledi glede tedanje realne politične močni.

Ključne besede: Avstro-Ogrska, dualizem, avstrijska volilna reforma, jezikovni popis

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