THE ROLE OF CULTURE IN THE DECLINE OF EUROPEAN EMPIRES

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1 For the principal strands of cultural history cf. Tosh, John: The Pursuit of History. Aims, Methods and New Directions in the Study of Modern History. London: Longman ³2000, pp. 177-192.

2 Motyl, Alexander J.: From Imperial Decay to Imperial Collapse: The Fall of the Soviet Empire in Comparative Perspective. In: Rudolph, Richard L./ Good, David (Eds.): Nationalism and Empire. The Habsburg Monarchy and the Soviet Union. New York: St. Martin's Pr. 1992, p. 40. Cf. also Kennedy, Paul: The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers: Economic Change and Military Conflict from 1500 to 2000. New York: Random House 1987.

3 Davies, Norman: Europe. A History. Oxford, New York: Oxford UP 1996, p. 853.

4 Cf. Davies 1996, p. 853f.

5 As an example for a study which tries to combine sociological, political and historical research cf.: Keyder, Çaglar: The Ottoman Empire. In: Barkey, Karen/ Hagen, Mark v. (Eds.): After Empire. Multiethnic Societies and Nation-Building. The Soviet Union and the Russian, Ottoman, and Habsburg Empires. Boulder, Oxford: Westview Pr. 1997, pp. 30-44.

6 Schorske, Carl E.: Fin-de-Siècle Vienna. Politics and Culture. London: Weidenfels & Nicolson 1980.

7 Pynsent, Robert B.: The Decadent Nation: The Politics of Arnost Procházka and Jirí Karásek ze Lvovic. In: Péter, László/ Pynsent, Robert B. (Eds.): Intellectuals and the Future in the Habsburg Monarchy 1890-1914. London: Macmillan 1988, p. 70.

8 Qutd. in Pynsent 1988, p. 70.

There seems to be no field of social research or historical analysis today which is not taken over by experts for cultural studies.[1] Sometimes this fact promises new insights into old questions. This holds true when trying to ascertain which cultural characteristics accompanied the process of political and economic decline in the history of continental European empires from the 18th to the 20th century.

There is a generally accepted view that the »lifespan« of political empires (whatever their particular form) follows a recognisable pattern of rise and fall. The traditional view of political scientists such as Arnold Toynbee and Karl Deutsch has been summarised by Alexander Motyl: »[...] imperial decay appears to be inevitable«.[2] It is regarded as an internally driven decline resulting from political and bureaucratic overload relating to power, territory and identity. This article concentrates on aspects of identity, on effects of variable group consciousness and on the question of whether these changes in group consciousness and loyalty are caused by cultural changes or simply reflected in them. Culture is understood as the web of meaning which characterises a society and holds its members together.

From the Bible to Karl Kraus, the rise and fall of empires has always been one of the most popular cultural narratives. Reflection on imperial decline has world-historical resonance because it records for all the fallibility of seemingly unshakeable human enterprises. In most cases the debate has more to do with moral reflection than with critical analysis. In order to shed some light on the critique of political structures I will concentrate on the relationship between the decline of multinational European empires before the First World War and the cultural situation in these empires. The position of colonial imperial powers differed, because in economic and political terms overseas territories still provided for countries such as Britain and France before 1914 major advantages: political domination relied on a specific military capacity (»Naval power was the key to imperial success«[3]) and assimilation or absorption of peoples with a different ethnic loyalty was not a major objective in the imperial design.

There are two different narratives of the decline of empires in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. One is concerned with political and economic changes which determine the development and fate of empires.[4] Devolution of power and abortive attempts to re-centralise in the spirit of more or less enlightened absolutism can be found in Ottoman, Habsburg and Russian history.[5] The other is concerned with intellectual history and is discussed in two ways. Both start by analysing the gradual secularisation under the impact of the Renaissance, the Scientific Revolution and the Enlightenment. Either liberalism and nationalism are interpreted as the main causes of the break-up of empires or there is the more subtle argument according to which political and economic crises within an empire (including nationality conflicts) create cultural excellence (a hotbed for innovation[6]) making culture less dependent on, and supportive of, the given political system. This can be illustrated by the consequences of the introduction of compulsory general education which was based on the idea that the dominant groups within the empires wanted to create loyal subjects but resulted in fundamental changes in the power structure within states.

I can note only in passing that a differentiation between culture and civilisation might explain the different abilities of empires to cope with change. The concept of »Western civilisation« was more successful in integrating change than more static cultural concepts. In the history of Central and Eastern European empires one can find attempts to base government power on civilisational issues (e.g. Peter the Great, Joseph II), but on the whole the static concept of »cultures« dominated the 19th century intellectual discourse from Germany to Russia. In Czech Avant Garde literature of the 1890ies one can find an outspoken repulsion of what these writers thought about the consequences of ranking civilisation higher than culture. Jirí Karásek noted that the true villains of this century of »commercial baseness and inventions« are the English.[7] He called England a country of »nothing but industrialism and practical materialism«. In an essay on Ruskin he sums up his cultural frustration by calling London a »confused heap of fuming chimneys and stinking dens and filthy brick buildings«.[8]

9 As an excellent case study see: Hanisch, Ernst/ Fleischer, Ulrike (Eds.): Im Schatten berühmter Zeiten. Salzburg in den Jahren Georg Trakls (1887-1914). Salzburg: Müller 1986.

10 Schorske 1980; Johnston, William M.: Österreichische Kultur- und Geistesgeschichte. Gesellschaft und Ideen im Donauraum 1848 bis 1938. Wien, Köln, Graz: Böhlau 1974; Le Rider, Jacques: Das Ende der Illusion. Die Wiener Moderne und die Krisen der Identität. Aus d. Franz. v. Robert Fleck. Wien: ÖBV 1990.

In the 19th century process of modernisation the three »Eastern European empires« (Habsburg, Ottoman, Tsarist Russia) were not only countries where issues of civilisational backwardness became politically relevant but also where the lack of cultural unity came to be seen as a disintegrative factor. There were some specific characteristics in the cultural life of these empires which might clarify the relationship between culture and the decline of empires, a refer to questions of identity.

The models of interpretation for cultural change in these empires around 1900 adhere to three concepts. All try to find explanations for cultural prosperity amidst political decay in the years before the First World War:

The concept of ›centre and periphery‹ concentrates on the influence of peripheral areas (less modern, less urban) on the development of centres and on the negligence and denial of progress (which derives from the centre) in the periphery. What makes centres exist is the unattractiveness of the periphery but at the same time the periphery keeps up older traditions which have already disappeared in the centre.[9]

The concept of ›national emancipation‹ describes especially the artistic life of the late Habsburg monarchy as a direct or indirect result of the growing conflicts and processes of disintegration between the intellectuals of the various ethnic groups. Art is seen as a mirror, or even as a propagator, of the growing disenchantment in the national parts of the empire. Artistic life is interpreted as an expression of »national« awareness and therefore more stress is put on the analysis of specific national features than on the question of artistic dialogue between the ethnic components of the empire. Preoccupation with constructing national identity may explain how culture strongly contributed to feelings of »untimeliness« in multinational empires. I add, cautiously, that at least in Prague and in Budapest around 1900 the notion of »national« art was already being questioned. Czech writers stated that if being a good Czech artist meant anything, it meant being simply a good artist. The difficulty of analysing the artistic dialogue between the main Habsburg urban centres Vienna, Prague and Budapest lies also in the fact that mainly Czech and Hungarian intellectuals pretended to ignore everything going on in Vienna. They were strongly influenced by the destruction of the »self« by Freud, Mach, Schnitzler and Klimt, but they also felt that by acknowledging any influence they would have been questioning national revival. A dialogue between intellectual circles of different ethnic backgrounds did exist but for the sake of national revival especially the non-German writers preferred to speak and write about the imagined dialogue between the social groups of their own nation. The intermarrying of the ruling national elites with the peasantry was a literary theme that may be found in the works of the Pole Stanislaw Wyspianski, the Slovak Pavol Hviezdoslav or the Hungarian Zsigmond Justh.

The third concept takes as its point of departure the obvious decay of the political system and other socio-economic changes which were felt by the intellectuals around 1900 and which made them look for new artistic expressions. Reality itself was at stake because politics could no longer offer convincing solutions for the survival of a multinational empire. Starting with Fernand Braudel who took Venice as his example it became very popular to write about the relationship between political decay and intellectual innovation in the Habsburg monarchy (William M. Johnston, Carl. E. Schorske, Jacques Le Rider)[10]. It cannot be ruled out that this scholarly interest in the decades before the fall of the Sovjet-dominated communist regimes in Eastern Europe presented the intellectually most challenging aspect of cold war historiography.

Taking into consideration these three models of interpretation of the cultural life in the last decades of the political existence of the Russian, the Ottoman and the Habsburg empires it is possible to enumerate specific cultural characteristics. My examples are taken from the late Habsburg monarchy:

1. The plurality of languages, of ethnic loyalties, of religions and of the whole socio-economic system determined the structure of cultural life because it confronted people with obvious contrasts and conflicts and asked for personal decisions (questions of identity). Gustav Mahler may serve as an example. He regarded himself to be a Bohemian, an Austrian, a

11 Hanisch, E.: Der lange Schatten des Staates. Österreichische Gesell-schaftsgeschichte im 20. Jahrhundert Wien: Ueberreuter 1994, pp. 244-251.

12 Wittgenstein, Ludwig: Geheime Tagebücher 1914-1916. Hg. u. doku-mentiert v. Wilhelm Baum. Wien, Berlin: Turia & Kant 1991.

13 See the description of Vienna in Robert Musil's *The Man Without Qua-lities* and Sombart, Werner: Wien. Repr. in: Pircher, Wolfgang (Ed.): Début eines Jahrhunderts. Essays zur Wiener Moderne. Vienna: Falter 1985.

14 Botstein, Leon: Judentum und Modernität. Essays zur Rolle der Juden in der deutschen und österrei-chischen Kultur 1848 bis 1938. Wien, Köln: Böhlau 1991.

German and a Jew. In order to become the director of the Vienna Court Opera he converted to Catholicism. In his music he formed out of various musical traditions a concept of ›crea-tion‹ which might be interpreted as an attempt to respond to the permanent confrontation with pluralities. Concepts such as language, nation and consciousness which were well established ideas in other parts of Europe were still in dispute and begged artistic and intel-lectual response. The challenge for music, literature and the visual arts consisted in not only finding new formal ways to express the given pluralistic situation but also in having to deci-de permanently between aesthetics and ethics. In the case of the late Habsburg monarchy intellectual life may be seen as a relentless process of interaction between baroque aes-theticism and the ethical qualities of the Enlightenment.[11]

2. The possibilities for »changes of horizons« which were inherent in the political and social build-up of the state structures (social mobility, processes of assimilation, and career pat-terns) exposed cultural élites very often to various social environments and to different places. It is worthwhile to study not only the cases where artists were attracted by St. Petersburg, Istanbul, Vienna, Budapest and Prague but also to look for cases of migration to peripheral parts or to local urban centres. The example of Martin Buber who was born in Vienna but educated in Lvov shows the possible significance of a »change of horizons«. In Lvov Buber was brought up in seven languages (Polish, Russian, Yiddish, Hebrew, German, French and Latin) and he was confronted with different Jewish traditions. Another well known case concerned the poet Georg Trakl whose experiences in Galicia during the first months of the First World War are reflected in his poem *Grodek*. Trakl volunteered for the Austrian army because of his desperate search for a change of horizons which could help him to solve his own inner conflicts. By its very nature the war increased the confrontation of intellectuals with peripheral parts of their countries (such experiences are for instance documented in the diaries of Ludwig Wittgenstein[12] and Ferenc Molnar).

3. The number of urban centres which supported the arts and cultural activities was higher than in ethnically homogenous countries, because artists were involved in the ongoing pro-cess of national emancipation. In order to build up national structures within the framework of a multinational empire city councils and »national« associations were interested in sup-porting co-national artists and in creating culturally active microclimates. In ethnically mixed urban centres in Austria-Hungary cultural competition often resulted in the estab-lishment of »parallel« institutions (for instance »German« and »Czech« theatres in Prague and Brno or ethnically separated arts associations for Italians, Slovenes and Germans in Trieste).

4. The dialogue with tradition (even by the secessionist movements) and between the newly evolving urban centres was kept alive at the price of being less modern than Paris or Berlin. For instance Robert Musil and the German sociologist Werner Sombart characterised Vienna and the Habsburg monarchy as being »slower« than Western Europe – a view both inter-preted in a positive way (less uniformity).[13] Complicated political structures as well as soci-al and economic backwardness proved to be culturally inspiring because these factors enhanced the chances of pluralism and created willingly or not spheres of artistic freedom which a highly organised modern state can only try to reproduce artificially.

5. Ongoing assimilation processes between ethnic and religious groups as well as migration processes followed economic and political demands but had also cultural causes and con-sequences. It has been well documented, how much Austrian culture owed to Jewish tradi-tions. The high percentage of Jews among intellectuals (artists and recipients) was a posi-tive precondition for intellectual dialogue within the multinational Habsburg monarchy in the second half of the 19th century, because the process of emancipation and assimilation of Jews had brought new traditions into Austrian baroque aestheticism – mainly the insis-tence on ethics.[14] Without these traditions 19th century Austrian liberalism would not have been possible.

15 For the reasons of Mucha's romantic misconception cf. Todorova, Maria: Imagining the Balkans. New York, Oxford: Oxford UP 1997, p. 127f.

16 Kann, Robert A.: A History of the Habsburg Empire, 1526-1918. Berkeley, Los Angeles: Univ. of California Pr. ²1977, p. 564.

17 Taylor, A.J.P.: Europe. Grandeur and Decline. London: Penguin 1967, p. 219f.

18 Koralka, Jiri: Comment. In: Austrian History Yearbook. Vol. III, part 1 (1967), pp. 147-150.

In addition to this process there are many more aspects of plurality which contributed to culturally creative climates (e.g. the feeling of living in manifold minority situations, the simultaneousness of the unsimultaneous, ambivalence of feelings, reflections on language, discussions about the imperial past as part of a critical cultural discourse).

All these specific factors may be summarised by calling them cultural aspects of a gradual but constant increase of plurality in political regimes which relied until their dissolution on clear ethnic, religious or social hierarchies.

By the end of the 19th century, especially in Russia and in Austria-Hungary, cultural life had achieved a modern fragmentation which made the contrast to the traditional political structures all the more obvious. When the Czech painter Alphonse Mucha enthusiastically wrote about a visit to Russia »It's like living in the ninth century... Nothing has changed for two thousand years« he said more about politics than about culture.[15]

Cultural historians tend to describe the situation of the »Eastern empires« in the decades before their dissolution in very general terms as weak political systems: »Cultural stimuli are with much better grace accepted from a state which does not present any longer the danger of cultural penetration in the service of a dreaded political supremacy«.[16]

A.J.P. Taylor wrote in his book *Europe. Grandeur and Decline* about the true spirit of the late Habsburg Monarchy: »[I]t was not tyrannical or brutal; it was merely degenerate and moribund«.[17] Ideas of the timeliness or untimeliness of political structures are cultural perceptions. Multinational European empires were at the beginning of the 20th century regarded to be culturally anachronistic (Ottoman Empire, Habsburg Empire, Russian Empire). Shortly before his death in 1916, emperor Francis Joseph confided to an Austro-Hungarian diplomat: »I have been aware for a long time of how much of an anomaly we are in the modern world«. The cultural perception of colonial empires was different. For these countries none of the three prime causes for decline usually attributed to the »backward« Eastern European empires – social injustice (Russia), religion (Ottoman empire), ethnicity (Austria-Hungary) – seemed to play a role.

As for the Habsburg Monarchy there is an ongoing controversy among historians regarding the causes for its dissolution and the question of whether there was decline before the fall. The bone of contention is the significance of the »nationality conflict«. The Czech historian Jiří Korálka sums up the discussion with a convincing undoctrinaire marxist explanation: »[...] the main reason for the disintegration of the Habsburg Empire was not nationalism as such, but the failure of the monarchy to create a national concept of its own which would be in harmony with the dynamic growth of modern capitalistic society. In Western Europe very heterogeneous ethnic groups and political territories were often united by dynasties into nation-states«. The major reason why the Habsburg dynasty did not follow suit lay »neither in the way in which the nucleus of the Austrian Empire was formed [...] nor in the strong position which its constituent parts, especially the Kingdoms of Hungary and Bohemia, enjoyed«. Rather, the Habsburgs scarcely even attempted to unify their heterogeneous domains into »a West European-style nation-state« because they were »overburdened for too long [...] with the heritage of the universalism of the Holy Roman Empire«. Until 1866 the Habsburgs interestes »were not exclusively, and sometimes not even primarily, concentrated on those lands which actually formed the Empire which broke to pieces in 1918«. They were repeatedly distracted by their dynastic ambitions in Italy, in the Netherlands, in Spain and, fatefully, in Germany. The overstretched empire ultimately fell back upon a policy of trying »to live with all the problems without ever really attempting to solve them«. Legal attempts to solve the problem could not prevent the scenario that in the end the collapse of the empire was »a logical consequence of the inability of the monarchy to create its own concept of a modern society. Wherever a number of modern national societies rather than a single modern society have evolved within an empire it has been impossible to halt this development at the ethnic-cultural stage and prevent the formulation of political nation-state programmes«.[18]

Such an analysis goes beyond Eric Hobsbawm's admission that he would prefer to say nothing about the causes of the fall of empires: »One can reasonably place Ottomans, Habsburgs, and Romanovs into the same pigeon-hole; all were obsolescent political entities in an era of nation-

19 Hobsbawm, Eric J.: The End of Empires. In: Barkey/ v. Hagen 1997, p. 13.

20 Bideleux, Robert/ Jeffries, Ian: A History of Eastern Europe. Crisis and Change. London, New York: Routledge 1998, p. 404.

21 Broch, Hermann: Hofmannsthal und seine Zeit. In: Lützeler, Paul Michael (Ed.): Hermann Broch. Schriften zur Literatur 1. Kritik. Frankfurt/M.: Suhrkamp 1975, p. 154.

22 Motyl, Alexander J.: Thinking about Empire. In: Barkey/ v. Hagen 1997, pp. 19-29.

23 Deák, Istvan: The Habsburg Empire. In: Barkey/ v. Hagen 1997, p. 130.

24 Broch 1975, p. 162.

state building, to which they offered no alternative. All were weak (relative to their official size and resources) and therefore endangered players in the international power game. All were regarded as doomed, or at least as on the slide, for many decades before they actually fell«[19].

Following this interpretation Robert Bideleux says: »The First World War merely drove the final nails into the imperial coffin«.[20] All this sounds like Hermann Broch's description of the hollowness of late Habsburg culture which he depicted by calling Vienna »das Zentrum des europäischen Wert-Vakuums«. He compares the English and the Austrian empires with their fixation on 19th century traditions which he regards to be similar. England produced the economic, political and cultural strength to modernise the state which Austria did not: »England befand sich seit zweihundert Jahren im Aufstieg, Österreich im Abstieg«.[21] But does it suffice to say that the Habsburg Empire was doomed by capitalism and democracy, because its inner structure was too complicated and because it tried to reform its structures too late? Empires are complex structures. They are – to cut a long story short – political entities which do not form one »Community«.

The role of culture in the process of political disintegration has to be seen in the context of emerging modern societies with political units dependent on a set of values shared by the élites and by the majority of the population. When there is a basic dispute about values in a state, culture (innovation) may thrive but politics has a difficult time.

The relationship between political decline and cultural excellence seems to be straightforward. Prague around 1600, Venice around 1700 and Vienna around 1900 are examples which are often analysed. Fernand Braudel formulated the paradigm that a declining empire creates cultural excellence. The example of fin-de-Siècle Vienna as a »hotbed for innovations« (Carl Schorske) seems to prove that economic growth and political democratisation do not suffice to create a sustainable political unity if this is not supported by a cultural belief system which sustains the common political identity of a state. Much scholarly research is devoted to trying to establish the reasons why Vienna around 1900 was a center of innovation and of modernity. The political decay of a multinational empire and the cultural creativity which emanated from this feeling of the decay of an old order are often seen as decisive complimentary factors for the mental pattern of late Habsburg society. In spite of the political collapse of the multinational empire in 1918 »fin-de-siècle Vienna« has become a catch phrase for early twentieth century modernity. One might say that there is nothing extraordinary in such a situation. Civilizations and cultures rise and decline according to the ability they show in adapting to the social and economic changes which they themselves bring about or which external influences force them to accept.[22] The case of Vienna around 1900 shows that decay and innovation can happen practically at the same time and in the same place.

Is the decline of empire a result of economic shifts, military-political changes or of a change in cultural perceptions? Nowadays this question is often raised in regard to the collapse of the communist regimes in Eastern Europe. If we only look at the point in history where the multinational Empires broke up at the end of World War One we might be quite surprised about the speed of events and the lack of resistance to these dramatic changes. Istvan Deák recently commented on the fall of the Habsburg Empire: »It is amazing how quickly such a venerable state was replaced«.[23] But looking into the preformation of national cultures within the late Habsburg Monarchy this becomes less amazing. Hermann Broch in his description of the vacuum of values before the First World War formulated: »The more the nationalities had their say, the more Austria disappeared«.[24]

The symbolic function of culture in the life of empires as »large composite polities linked to a central power by indirect rules« is at least twofold. Culture can retain or establish the identity of particular segments and it can retain or establish an imperial identity. In a period of imperial decline culture becomes mainly an emotional bond for particular segments. The present day British situation which can be characterised by a gradual shift towards renewed Scottish, Welsh and English identities has also to be analysed in the context of imperial decline.

Comparing late 19th century European empires it becomes evident that the two dominating complimentary elements of legitimate political power, that is »nation« and »popular sovereignty«, were of crucial importance for the future of European empires. There is a clear distinction between how Western European empires coped with these aspects of modernisation and how

Eastern empires failed to integrate these concepts in the political system and in their state identity (it is tempting to say that the reasons we now have on a world-wide scale only one »super power« may be due to the fact that only the USA managed to integrate both concepts in their state identity). The Russian, the Habsburg and the Ottoman Empire all tried to create state identities which tried to reconcile demands of the dominant ethnic groups with the demands of the other ethnic groups by trying to promote state ideas which were not primarily based on the concept of a »nation«. But this even exacerbated the sense of national discrimination among the non-dominant national groups and loosened the support of the dominant ethnic groups for the idea of the empire.

Empires are heterogeneous entities which are usually held together by a dominant group (elite): in Central and Eastern Europe it was only from the 19th century onwards that these groups were »ethnic« groups. Such a domination does not only rely on political and economic factors but also on the conviction of the superior culture of the dominating ethnic group. When this conviction can no longer be sustained within an empire (by the dominating group and by the dominated) the unity of the empire begins to be questioned. In this group conflict (ethnic or civic) culture plays a central role in legitimising political demands.

This is a very general assessment which holds true for traditional continental European empires and for colonial empires. Applying this analysis to the present day situation of state order it is reasonable to say that it is difficult to imagine that any political entity which fulfils statelike functions can avoid problems of cultural disintegration if political integration is not supported by a majority of the élites and the population of the ethnic groups within this political entity. The lessons for the EU from the history of European empires are not unequivocal. The creation of an intellectual and emotional common bond is essential, but it is just as important to do this at right time in history (witness the history of nation building in Western and in Eastern Europe).

The European Union embodies some imperial designs, not the least among them is the contemporary articulate idea of élites to promote a strong emotional cultural bond which should support the deepening of integration in Europe. Imperial history does not teach us whether this will lead the European project towards the American or the Ottoman way.

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