National discourse, regional identities, and multiculturalism in the Habsburg Empire, 1860-

1914

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Thank you very much for the invitation to this conference!

First, I would like to devote myself to the task of clarification: When I speak of "multicultur-alism" in my presentation, I will not be using the term as a category for describing relations between groups that can be culturally defined (mostly by the use of their standard languages). Rather, I will refer to political discourse. The term itself, of course, was not in use in the 19th century. The problem, however, how to deal with different ethnic groups was of utmost rele-vance for debates in the Habsburg monarchy.

On the one hand, national activists thought that the Habsburg monarchy became more and more incompatible with the norm of the time, that is: the centralized, modernizing, and "culturally" uniform nation state. As I will show later, multiculturalism had exclusively nega-tive connotations in this kind of national discourse. This stood in contrast to the official read-ing which developed outside of Hungary. Since the 1820ies, representatives of the imperial political system were convinced that the political approach of the Habsburg monarchy to mul-ticulturalism could serve as a successful, because peaceful counter-model to the more and more aggressive national mobilization.

These two perspectives are often reflected in historiography until these days. One ten-dency was almost omnipresent in the early historiography of the successor states; it stressed the negative or even oppressive effects that Habsburg policy had for the respective national community. The other tendency is represented for example by Gerald Stourzh or Moritz Csáky and holds that within contemporary Europe, the Habsburg monarchy came closest to implementing the legal guarantees which were necessary to protect national minorities and

prepare the political ground for political emancipation and cultural creativity. Their point of reference is the famous §19 of the Constitutional Laws of 1867 which stipulated that every language and nationality had equal rights in protecting and developing their culture. It is often forgotten, however, that it was at the responsibility on the regional level to define the two or three languages which in that respective territory could enjoy legal protection.

From my perspective, the two positions are not contradictory at all. One reason for this was dynastic language policy, the other the constitutional framework of the Empire. In this context, it is important to underline that since the 1760ies, we can speak of a specific Habsburg language policy that consisted out of three elements: First, the stability of rule of the dynasty in all the different lands was built on a centralized state bureaucracy which had to be loyal to the emperor only. One of the ties between peripheries and the centre was the use of a common language as a tool for interior communication. In this respect the German language remained practically unchallenged until the end of the monarchy. In this respect, Hungary after 1867 was the only exception. Second, in order to secure direct influence on the local level it was thought necessary that the representatives of the central state also spoke the main languages of the respective area. In most cases this resulted in a multilingual performance as soon as they came into contact with the population, and it also paved the road for the linguistic and cultural scientific emancipation of all groups which had become recognized as nations.

The third element can be classified as a *divide et impera*-approach: The imperial centre tried to downsize the political influence of any of the national elites (including the German one). In the eyes of its representatives, these pressure groups were something to be carefully kept in balance. The result was the creation of a complicated system of give and take that guaranteed more manoeuvring space for non-dominant ethnic groups to implement their national agendas than in many other European countries where they were confronted with legal restrictions. It also resulted in the fact that national activists were constantly frustrated by being denied direct influence on state-wide matters. The Habsburg approach to multiculturalism was therefore implemented on the basis of a strict top-down approach that did not encourage a single national agenda in a fully satisfying way. This is even true of Hungary, which after the compromise of 1867 was a sovereign state with its own citizenship and passports and where the political establishment was almost unlimited in their state and nation building policy.

Although outside Hungary political multiculturalism was one of the raisons d être for the political system, it would be quite misleading to conceptualize the constitutional structure of the Habsburg monarchy as a multinational or multicultural one. The Habsburg monarchy of the 19th century was rather based on the principle of a pre-modern monarchic union of king-

doms and lands with a strong sense for their historical individuality.[1] The crown lands which were inherited from past centuries were endowed with parliamentary bodies (the *Landtage* or diets), constitutions and responsibilities in legislation of their own. Thus the political relevance of the crown land went far beyond the phenomenon of crown land patriotism (or *Landespatriotismus*) which is sometimes seen by historians as a partly pre-modern and naïve sentiment out of which ethno-regional and national agendas developed over time. On the contrary: Since outside of Hungary the central state was not available to them, the regions were the main platform of activity for the national elites.

It is crucial to see that in contrast to the national level, within single crown lands the Austrian central state was prepared to accept a nationalizing policy as soon as it remained on a regional level. That is fist of all true in the case of Galicia, where the Polish nobility had been given a political carte blanche in their dealing with the Ukrainian and Jiddish speaking population, and of Bosnia-Hercegovina, where in the years after the occupation a system had been established, wich was based on the principle of ethno-religious segregation and the recognition of three main "national" groups (the Serbs/Orthodox, the Bosniaks/Muslims and the Catholic/Croat entities). A nationalizing impetus also became clear in the case of Carinthia, where the Slovene language was not accepted as a regional language by the diet, although one third of the population spoke that language as their mother tongue. After the turn of the century, the so called "small compromises" in Moravia, Bukovina, the Litorale and even the city of Budweis/České Budějovice were clear indicators for all observers that the political system on the crown land level was about to become nationalized.[2]

Outside of Hungary, the regional level therefore served as one of main area for the competing national movements to achieve their goals and bargain over the national agenda. This fact can, however, only by adequately explained by taking a closer look at the changing setting at the local level as well. Here it is very important to see that from the 1860ies onward, in the Austrian state local administration underwent a fundamental change. The most important step is defined by the so called "municipality law" (or *Reichsgemeindegesetz*) which had been passed by the central parliament in 1862 and the respective regional legislations individually during the 1860ies. Again, this was not implemented in Hungary.

According to this law, the communities were not part of the state administration and were therefore comparatively free in conducting their activities within the limits of the law.

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[1] Brunner, Otto: Staat und Gesellschaft im vormärzlichen Österreich im Spiegel von I. Beidtels Geschichte der österreichischen Staatsverwaltung 1740-1848. In: Staat und Gesellschaft im deutschen Vormärz. Zitiert nach: Heindl, gehorsame Rebellen, S. 64.
[2] King, Jeremy: Budweisers into Czechs and Germans. A local history of Bohemian politics, 1848-1948. Princeton 2005.

For example, the communities were free to choose the language they wished to conduct the local affairs in, and state administration was obliged to communicate with them in that respective language. With the exception of the so called *Statuarstädte*, smaller towns of strategic or other importance, where the influence of state authorities was more remarkable, the representatives of the central state administration were reluctant to become involved directly into community affairs, unless it became obviously unavoidable in cases of violent conflict, mismanagement, or corruption. So most of the times, they displayed a certain amount of respect – or ignorance in other words – of how local affairs were run by those in charge of the village. The municipality law played an important role in triggering a chain of developments resulting in the complex overall transformation of local politics. It placed local affairs on an equal legal basis within the whole of the Austrian state and made literacy and a minimum of management skills basic requirements successfully filling in leading administrative positions in village life. The consequence was the exchange of local elites even in remote villages. Individuals were now in charge of community affairs who had already acquired some education mostly in nearby towns and became affiliated with one of the competing national networks.

It is important to note, however, that since the 1880ies, central state legislation transferred more and more duties to be taken care of at the local level without substantially improving the financial basis of the communities in charge. Therefore, even towns lacked the sufficient income to deal with the administrative as well as social responsibilities. In order to secure additional funding, they had to turn either to the Austrian central ministries, the central parliament or to the diets of the respective "crown land". In this context, it was first of all the provincial diets and the funds of the crown land administration that proved to be most promising for local interest groups. As a consequence, the decision making process not only in the diets but also in most of the crown land administrations was increasingly shaped by representatives of nationally defined parties and networks. The fact that – because of the limited franchise and in contrast to the national level – hardly any Social Democrat was represented in the crown land parliaments, had the effect that national parties became active more and more in social affairs and according legislation making.

But how did agents at the local and at the regional level interact? What role did premodern cultural, lingual and religious forms of diversity and conflict play in this context? I would like to stress that ethnicity had had a function within rural society, and notions were quite wide spread that the respective groups had their inherited place within the social hierarchy of the respective village. Rural communities were therefore by no means indifferent to notions of groupness and othering. Their self-definition, however, depended on a highly local-

ized interpretation of what was meant by *the* community. Although we are far from talking of communities isolated from the world, we should yet consider different layers of identification with the main elements being religion, social prestige and something that has been labelled "village ethnicity".[3]

In the course of the 19th century, however, this self-centred local reading of what constitutes the community became less and less salient. This was in part due to the fact that local economies and notions of social reliability had gradually changed. The speed and intensity of this challenge for local politics depended on the socio-economic environment of the respective village, the accessibility of modern communication, the amount of integration into market economy, labour migration, and many other factors. On the one hand these processes corresponded to the transformation of the overall socio-economic setting, on the other it ran parallel to the persistence of traditional forms of community life. Due to face to face communication a great deal of inner-community relations, loyalties and conflicts were still highly personalized and not too transparent for observers coming from outside the micro-region.

National activists sometimes lacked the knowledge as well as the sensitivity necessary to properly de-code remnants of informal decision making and bargaining over local common goals. They were struck by the fact that conflicts which they would have thought to encounter were seemingly absent or only to be found in a half-hearted, "hybrid" form. Accordingly, the reaction to what the activists encountered was ambiguous: Some authors generated a picture of a harmonious world that was endangered by the uprooting and disintegrating effects of modernity. Others displayed a rather patronizing attitude towards phenomena // which were now being labelled as signs of backwardness, bad hygiene mixed with superstition, or the mismanagement of resources.

In this context it is important to see that besides the task of "awakening" the rural masses into a national identity, the national activists saw it as their duty to develop a civilizing mission by transforming the national programme into a programme that could serve as a blueprint for overall economic and cultural development of rural areas. In the imagination of national activists, the "authentic" local community had to become integrated into a "progressing" national society, because this was seen as being the only perspective of securing some kind of development compatible with the changing socio-economic setting of the Habsburg monarchy.[4] The cultural norms for this were to be defined by the national elite according to

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[3] Baumgartner, Gerhard: Der nationale Differenzierungsprozeß in den ländlichen Gemeinden des südlichen Burgenlandes. In: Moritsch, Andreas (ed.): Vom Ethnos zur Nation. Wien 1991, 93-155.
[4] Haslinger, Peter: Die „Arbeit am nationalen Raum". Kommunikation und Territorium im Prozess der Nationalisierung, in: Haslinger, Peter / Mollenhauer, Daniel (ed.): „Arbeit am nationalen Raum". Deutsche und polnische Rand- und Grenzregionen im Nationalisierungsprozess. Leipzig 2005, 9-21. (= Comparativ 15/2)

"international" standards for development. This is the reason why the concepts of the competing national movements in Habsburg Central Europe were much more compatible with the agenda of their rivals than with the needs, lifestyles and systems of value of co-nationals especially in remote rural areas. Since suggestions of national activists for improvement and cultural development often transcended or even violated local notions of order and stability, the national elites were dependent on local representatives in order to avoid confronting local expectations. Here we must underline that the national agendas also resulted in the transformation of social control by questioning the salience of traditional roles and hierarchies. Together with the effects the municipality law had on local political life, this widened the manoeuvring space for individuals who shaped themselves as local identity-entrepreneurs. By that they were able to redefine national necessities and core messages in local and regional terms and could increasingly shape local discourses.[5] On the national level, they were the more successful in shaping national discourses, the more they could link their biography and knowledge of local society with the overarching "national" message. So we can perhaps speak of middlemen between the national elite and their local audience: Towards the national movements these individuals could present themselves as the legitimate representatives of the basis. Within their local communities they could function as persons who were able to explain the new developments which had an increasing influence on everyone and propose adequate reactions. Together with the local and regional press, which showed a continuous growth from the 1860s to the 1890s, they were the main factor in "silencing" the local population.

In this respect, all settings and initiatives that were based on the acknowledgement of local cultural forms and its re-contextualization in a national frame proved extremely successful and served as a model for best practice all over the Habsburg monarchy. Probably one of the best examples for this is the "Czecho-slav ethnographic exhibition" which was shown in Prague in 1895.[6] In order to secure the most authentic material from all regions of Bohemia, Moravia, Silesia, Lower Austria and Upper Hungary, committees toured most of these regions with a special interest in rural peripheries. In nearby towns and under the surveillance of scientists, they organized meetings and smaller exhibitions where locals could present pieces of folk art from their respective village. To the surprise of the organisers, especially in Moravia these occasions met with overwhelming interest coming from the local population of the sur-

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[5] Albrecht, Katherine: The Rhetoric of Economic Nationalism in the Boycott Campaigns of the late Habsburg Monarchy, in: Austrian History Yearbook 23 (2001), 47-67; Haslinger, Peter: Der Rand als Zentrum? Die deutsch besiedelten Grenzregionen der böhmischen Länder als Wertezentren im tschechischen nationalen Diskurs (1880-1938), in: Haufe, Rüdiger (ed.): Mythen der Mitte. Zur Konstruktion nationaler Wertezentren im 19. Jahrhundert. Weimar 2005, 233-246.

[6] Haslinger, Peter: Imagined Territories. Nation und Territorium im tschechischen politischen Diskurs 1889-1938. Habilitationsschrift, Freiburg 2004, 100-102.

rounding villages. Within Czech bourgeois society in Bohemia the exhibition helped securing the interest in the folk culture of local groups on the periphery of Eastern Moravia (like the Lases or the Moravian Slovaks and Vlachs). In terms of the dynamics of nationalization and bargaining over cultural norms we can understand this as a strategy of *do ut des* resulting in mutual recognition: On the one hand, the locals were secured representation at the level of a national exhibition in exchange for defining themselves in a clearly Czech national context. On the other hand, the national activists gained evidence of the authenticity and cultural creativity of the nation in certain regions and proof of the salience of a Czech national territory. What is of special interest for us is the fact that for this ethnographic exhibition the Czech national politicians had successfully secured substantial funding coming from the provincial diets of Bohemia, Moravia, and Austrian Silesia.

By the end of the 19th century, the nationalists' logics more and more accounted for non-national political agendas as well. Even the nobility, whose influence was in part preserved by the political system, had to take it into consideration when engaging in economic and social affairs.[7] Many representatives of the Cisleithanian state who saw themselves mostly as observers or impartial agents, got used to adjusting to the logic set by competing national agendas, thus having their share in narrowing the social space for alternatives to national identification. Individual concepts were increasingly confronted with discourses that declared national cultural codes to be binding and mutually exclusive, especially since these national narratives were increasingly circulated and taken for granted even among the rural population. By time, overall development created social pressure that made it more or less a prerequisite to take a certain side in "official" settings, according to the need to take sides or in lack of other options being unavoidable.

Coming to a conclusion, I would like to stress that the process I have just tried to describe helps us to explain a paradox in the history of Austria-Hungary: Despite its multicultural rhetoric, the Austrian political system turned out to be an environment which was much more suitable for the transformation of populations into segmented national communities than the Hungarian one, where the policy was designed to promote assimilation into the Hungarian language.

Thank you very much for your attention!

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[7] Glassheim, Eagle: Noble nationalists. The transformation of the Bohemian aristocracy. Cambridge 2005; on the social salience of the national rhetoric see also: Zahra, Tara: Kidnapped Souls. National Indifference and the Battle for Children in the Bohemian Lands, 1900-1948. Ithaca 2008.