

Ines Peper, Thomas Wallnig (ed.), Central European Pasts. Old and New in the Intellectual Culture of Habsburg Europe, 1700–1750, Berlin, Boston (De Gruyter Oldenbourg) 2022, 660 S., 26 Abb. (Cultures and Practices of Knowledge in History, 6), ISBN 978-3-11-064911-6, EUR 94,95.

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Ines Peper and Thomas Wallnig's hefty conference proceedings contain three introductory and one concluding essay, as well as 18 dedicated chapters that illuminate various aspects – a »broad panorama« – of Central European intellectual cultures. Thematically, these revolve around the (Counter-Reformation Catholic) Church, the Holy Roman Empire, and the Habsburg monarchy. There is no way that a brief review might do justice to some, or all, of the essays present in this volume, which is why those interested in further particulars are recommended to visit the publisher's website¹. In what follows, I shall delimit myself to a few observations about the volume's underlying premises, its methodological approach, and its likely contribution to further research in this field.

In the editors' attempt to clarify their intentions, the three introductions by Peper (p. 3–19), Wallnig (p. 23–51), and O'Reilly (p. 53–95) outline, in much detail, the ambitious aims of the volume. As Wallnig declares boldly in his »roof intro«, the point of departure of the undertaking is the assumption »that intellectual history is a narrative«, thereby revealing at once the profound influence of what, for lack of a better term, might be called »(new) cultural history« into which the proceedings fall. Building on grand expositions that seemingly seek to simplify matters, Wallnig follows up on this notion by introducing »two chronological orientations« and »two epistemological variants« ... »Catholic universalism of the post-Westphalian era, and imperial globalism tending towards state formation processes of the later 18th century«, which are said to »represent complementary and at times conflicting or overlapping manifestations of the same historical setting – namely the intellectual culture of the Habsburg monarchy« (p. 21). In other words: the volume attempts nothing less than hypothesising that Central Europe differed – or not – markedly from the presumed norms of Western Europe's paths of modernisation.

This is a thought-provoking, if anachronistic and, frankly, quite contradictory assertion, and as such, it requires extraordinary proof. Yet, for all their extensive length, neither of the introductory

¹ <https://www.degruyter.com/document/doi/10.1515/9783110653052/html> (27 April 2023).



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essays manages to coherently argue their case beyond reasonable doubt. Peper's section on »methodological tools« (p. 7–15) is little more than a listing, without much rank-ordering, of the ideas proposed by Central European – mainly German-language – scholarship falling largely into the Postmodern-Cultural Studies categories. As such, Peper's statement that »there is no clear and explicit development from darkness to light«, which rests »on the grounds of critical scholarship« that would be »a promotor of the values of modernism« (p. 15) is both inherently contradictory and essentially devoid of meaning. After all, Whig history as a (historical) artefact had been deconstructed by, ironically, Western historians like Herbert Butterfield almost a century ago².

The other two introductory essays are similarly problematic on terminological and conceptual grounds: on the one hand, neither geographical considerations (as in: a more or less clearly defined spatial framework) nor the volume's explicit focus on what Franz Fillafer calls »chronopolitics« (p. 570) are explained, no less defined, in unambiguous terms. What remains is a somewhat arbitrary focus on »Central Europe« revolving on the areas and territories dominated by the Habsburg dynasty, which, as the editors hold, would be Western Europe's (significant) »other« (p. 14). By contrast, neither Eastern and/or East-Central Europe nor social history play a large, if any, role in the volume; O'Reilly's call to move from the study of structure to process (in the singular) in »small places« is perhaps indicative of this conceptual blind spot as most essays are »doing« essentially microhistory of those on, or close to, the top of the socio-economic hierarchies. As such, the volume contributes another »perspective from the pinnacle« that has dominated – bedevilled – historiography from around 1800 to the aftermath of the Second World War³.

Thus, this volume, despite the many interesting contributions »in-between« the introductory essays and conclusion, leaves a quite ambivalent impression. This is quite sad, for the volume contains a great deal of original research essays (e.g., Mona Garloff's chapter on the Viennese used book trade, p. 313–334), but in the final analysis the proceedings' underlying conceptual premises fall (far) short of the outlined ambitions: from the strange and, in all honesty, off-topic and unquestioning, framing (»the narrative of the ongoing Covid-19 crisis«) and the one-off reference to the »mostly peaceful«⁴ Black Lives Matter protests in the wake of

² Herbert Butterfield, *The Whig interpretation of History*. London 1931; see also Marshall Poe, *Butterfield's Sociology of Whig History: A Contribution to the Study of Anachronism in Modern Historical Thought*, in: *Clio* 25/4 (1996), p. 345–363.

³ Franz A. Szabo, *Perspective from the Pinnacle: State Chancellor Kaunitz on Nobility in the Habsburg Monarchy*, in: Gabriele Haug-Moritz (ed.), *Adel im »langen« 18. Jahrhundert*. Vienna 2009, p. 239–260.

⁴ For the CNN report of the »fiery but mostly peaceful protests« in Kenosha, Wisc., see <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kIVhCkhOTRQ> (27 April 2023); note that Peper, »in summer of 2020«, refers to the »killing of



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the death of George Floyd to the absence of any definition of (cultural) »practices« (passim). As regards the latter, it shall be noted that »practices« could be defined as »the institutionalized processes and settled procedures regularly used for handling public matters«, which stands at odds with the biographical/small places approach proposed by the volume⁵. Moreover, Counter-Reformation Catholicism emerged well before the Peace of Westphalia that, if anything, delimited the purportedly »global« reach of Catholicism significantly, in particular in Central Europe. Similar reservations appear elsewhere, e.g., when it is asserted that, »unlike many other go-betweens in 18th-century Europe, Habsburg political, military, scientific, and commercial brokers were the agents of a first-rate political power« (p. 65–66). It is hard to reconcile such statements with recent research into the administrative, military, and economic realities of the era, which clearly show the preponderance of British and French domination, as well as the growing power of Tsarist Russia. The absence of economic and social history from the volume speaks much louder than any of the otherwise interesting case studies themselves.

As such, the volume is very ambivalent: several pieces of original research are buttressed by problematic conceptual premises grounded in ill-defined postmodern verbiage and, worse, the questionable hypothesis that there existed something like »Central European« or »Habsburg Science«. There was no such thing; there is but science, as Marianne Klemun also quipped at the »Empire of Circulation« conference in Vienna, Austria, in early October 2019, which was organised by Fillafer⁶. In the final analysis, the volume is perhaps best described by its own reference to »the early stage of Koselleck's ›Sattelzeit‹« (p. 14), by which is meant the ups – and downs – of crossing over »a *Bergsattel*, over which a wanderer passes from one valley to the next«⁷. In other words: once the pass summit is reached, the road inevitably leads the wanderer downhill.

George Floyd by police«, although the trial of Derek Chauvin began »only« in April 2021.

⁵ Sheldon S. Wolin, *Politics and Vision: Continuity and Innovation in Western Political Theory*, Stanford 2006, p. 7–8, at 7.

⁶ <https://www.hsozkult.de/event/id/event-90998?language=en> (27 April 2023). The author of this review was present at the Hofburg when Klemun made that statement.

⁷ George S. Williamson, *Retracing the Sattelzeit: Thoughts on the Historiography of the French Revolutionary and Napoleonic Eras*, in: *Central European History* 51 (2018), p. 66–74, at 68.



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