Commentary

Making and Remaking the Habsburg Monarchy

Howard Louthan

There is something in a historian that loves wreckage. I am confident that scientists will one day identify a gene on our chromosomes that predisposes us to destruction. As a young graduate student, I listened in rapt attention as Lawrence Stone mesmerized our seminar describing the one opportunity he had in wartime to "sack a house." Most of us, however, sublimate these illicit desires, and the urge to destroy only becomes evident in our scholarship. Following Gibbon and Huizinga, we relish the study of decay and decline. Humor aside, R. J. W. Evans was well aware of this instinct as he began *The Making of the Habsburg Monarchy* with a simple but profound observation, "Many historians, in a dozen languages, have sought to explain why the Habsburg Monarchy declined and fell; none has ever seriously investigated the causes of its rise."[1]

This year we celebrate the thirtieth anniversary of this book, which fundamentally recast the study of the Habsburg lands in the premodern period. This forum offers an appropriate moment to consider where we have come and the state of the field today. Despite the passing of three decades, Evans's opening remark still carries weight, for scholars remain fascinated with the end of empire, perhaps best reflected in Maureen Healy's marvelous recent study, *Vienna and the Fall of the Habsburg Empire* (Cambridge, 2004). Though there are several recent English-language surveys of the Habsburg domains, as well as a massive two-volume German history of this territory in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, Evans's work on an interpretive level essentially stands alone.[2] Why? There are various reasons that could be put forward. Few have the linguistic skills to work simultaneously with Latin, German, Czech, and Hungarian. In an early review of the text, Geoffrey Parker counted sources in ten languages![3] But perhaps more daunting is the nature of the subject itself. What exactly were the Habsburg domains? Evans's now famous characterization of the dynastic dominions as "not a state but a mildly centripetal agglutination of bewilderingly heterogeneous elements" sounds more like a chemistry experiment gone terribly awry than a description of family property.[4] Matters become even more complicated when we examine

[1]R. J. W. Evans, *The Making of the Habsburg Monarchy, 1550–1700* (Oxford, 1979), vii.

[2]Thomas Winkelbauer, *Ständefreiheit und Fürstenmacht. Länder und Untertanen des Hauses Habsburg im konfessionellen Zeitalter*, 2 vols. (Vienna, 2003); Paula S. Fichtner, *The Habsburg Empire, 1490–1815: Attributes of Empire* (Basingstoke, UK, 2003); Charles Ingrao, *The Habsburg Monarchy: 1618–1815* (Cambridge, 1994).

[3]*History Today* 32, no. 8 (1982): 51.

[4]R. J. W. Evans, *The Making of the Habsburg Monarchy*, 447.

Austrian History Yearbook 40 (2009): 85–90 © Center for Austrian Studies, University of Minnesota
doi:10.1017/S0067237809000071

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0067237809000071 Published online by Cambridge University Press

the relationship between the Habsburg domains and the Holy Roman Empire. There was never a clear-cut divide between the two; and when we consider that the empire was comprised by more than a thousand territorial units, even the bravest of historians surely shudders at the prospect of untangling that Gordian knot.

Despite the complexity of the subject and the erudition of his scholarship, the real beauty of Evans's work was its simplicity. Evans argued that the rise of the Habsburg monarchy was dependent on a series of alliances forged among the dynasty, the nobility, and the church. It is this formulation that may be the most useful means to evaluate the field today. The essays presented in this forum all speak to different aspects of Evans's classic equation and point to new trends and influences shaping contemporary scholarship on the Austrian Habsburgs.

The articles of Regina Pörtner and William O'Reilly take us directly to the Habsburg family and questions of governance. As they focus on issues critical to our understanding of the eighteenth century, they reopen discussion on two key themes in particular. Pörtner highlights the curious history of absolutism. Nearly two decades ago, Nicholas Henshall, in a popular overview of the subject, proclaimed the death of this analytic construct.[5] Pörtner argues that postmortems may be premature. Historians of the seventeenth century, in particular, have sought to qualify this term as they have grappled with the policies of Emperor Ferdinand II (1619–1637) who during his Styrian days confidently proclaimed himself a *princeps absolutus*.

More recently Petr Maťa and Thomas Winkelbauer have supervised an intriguing project that uses absolutism as a point of departure to evaluate the complicated structures of power and governance in the Habsburg monarchy.[6] The model they use, however, is far more sophisticated than the cruder version critiqued by Henshall. For Mat'a and Winkelbauer, absolutism is less descriptive and more heuristic, a means of posing questions and viewing problems. A comparative analysis of court nobility in Vienna and Versailles, the creative tension between centralization and local administration in Hungary, and the surprising institutional vitality of the *Landtag* in the Bohemian and Austrian lands are examples of the ways in which this model has opened new terrain for debate and discussion. Although recognizing that historians may never completely understand the relationship between the family's political aspirations and the actual "practice of negotiated power" in the Habsburg lands, Pörtner revisits the reign of Maria Theresa and elucidates her religious policies and the complex nature of "confessional absolutism." The empress's dogged suppression of dissent was not merely a reflection of her zealous confessional commitments. It was a reaction both to an outside pressure, the threat and aggression of Protestant Prussia, and part of a broader campaign to control and limit communal autonomy of which religion was but one feature.

With William O'Reilly, we backtrack to the beginning of the eighteenth century for a fresh look at Charles VI (1711–1740), an emperor recently described as a "hopeless mediocrity."[7] Though O'Reilly's examination of a prince who mumbled his way through most of his conversations does not drastically revise our view of the emperor, he does suggest that Charles was a more capable ruler than many have assumed. He points out that, during his tenure as archduke,

[5]Nicholas Henshall, *The Myth of Absolutism* (New York, 1992).

[6]Howard Louthan, *Converting Bohemia: Force and Persuasion in the Catholic Reformation* (Cambridge, 2009), 18; Petr Maťa and Thomas Winkelbauer, eds., *Die Habsburgermonarchie 1620 bis 1740: Leistungen und Grenzen des Absolutismusparadigmas* (Stuttgart, 2006).

[7]Ingrao, *The Habsburg Monarchy 1618–1815*, 130.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0067237809000071 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Charles actually initiated a number of reforms introduced by Spain's Bourbon kings. More generally, O'Reilly reminds us of the vitality of Spanish influence at the Austrian court and the ways in which Charles reinvigorated the ideals of universal empire articulated two centuries earlier by Charles V (1519–1556). In Vienna, Charles introduced a strict form of court etiquette that followed Spanish standards and began a building campaign that included the magnificent complex of Klosterneuburg, the marvelous Karlskirche with its complex iconography and the *Prunksaal* of the *Hofbibliothek*, which spoke to Habsburg claims of imperium.

Methodologically, O'Reilly's consideration of questions of representation demonstrates how our understanding of the dynasty has been enriched through interdisciplinary research. Evans's initial work, with its attention to cultural and aesthetic issues, helped inspire an entire generation of art historians. For Charles VI, there is Franz Matsche whose two-volume work on the *Kaiserstil* remains the starting point for anyone interested in how the arts reflected the ideals, values, and aspirations of the dynasty in the first half of the eighteenth century.[8] In certain areas, art historians have shed light on questions that have long perplexed historians. Though it was Evans who introduced the early modern community to the mysterious world of Rudolf II (1576–1612), the art historians who followed have clarified many important problems. Most notable is Thomas DaCosta Kaufmann whose books and articles on collecting, patronage, and science have given us a clearer portrait of one of the most puzzling Habsburg emperors.[9] For those interested in the great Renaissance prince, Maximilian I (1508–1519), the best recent scholarship available in English is art-historical. Larry Silver's *Marketing Maximilian* is a thoughtful examination of the wily emperor and his strategic use of the arts to bolster power and authority that was often more apparent than real.[10]

Though *The Making of the Habsburg Monarchy* is full of valuable insights across a range of subjects, many have argued that Evans's examination of the nobility is the book's most important contribution. Evans highlighted the bargains, compromises, and alliances that were negotiated between the elites and the dynasty during a period of dramatic social and political change. Michael Chisholm's essay, a prosopographical analysis of Tirolean nobility in the sixteenth century, is in some respects the closest in spirit to Evans's original work. Two points merit special attention. First, Chisholm reminds us of the complicated nature of governance in the Habsburg lands. To understand its workings, we must focus closely on that critical relationship between the prince and his landed elites. Elsewhere, Chisholm has illustrated the great delicacy with which the Habsburgs had to tread when negotiating confessional policies within the Tirol.[11] Second, Chisholm complicates the issue of ethnic identity by emphasizing the bi-cultural nature of the Tirolean nobility. Remarkably, only two of his families had their ancestral seats north of the Brenner Pass in what is today Austrian territory. Like Evans, Chisholm calls into question the categories of "native" and "foreign," all too easily imposed on this estate by scholars with nationalist agendas.

It is important to remember that Evans's work on Habsburg nobles was part of a broader body of scholarly literature dedicated to the fascinating world of early modern elites, a subject of inquiry that since 1979 has become a virtual subfield in historical studies.

[8]Franz Matsche, *Die Kunst im Dienst der Staatsidee Kaiser Karls VI.*, 2 vols. (Berlin, 1981).

[9]Thomas Kaufmann, *The School of Prague* (Chicago, 1988); *The Mastery of Nature* (Princeton, 1993); *Court, Cloister and City* (Chicago, 1995).

[10]Larry Silver, *Marketing Maximilian: The Visual Ideology of a Holy Roman Emperor* (Princeton, 2008); Christopher Wood, "Maximilian I as Archeologist," *Renaissance Quarterly* 57 (2005): 1128–74.

[11]Michael Chisholm, "The *Religionspolitik* of Emperor Ferdinand I (1521–1564): Tyrol and the Holy Roman Empire," *European History Quarterly* 38 (2008): 551–77.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0067237809000071 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Significant attention has been paid to the noble revolts that swept the continent in the seventeenth century and the processes by which erstwhile rebels later transformed themselves into loyal allies of their titular overlords. In France, a figure such as Le Grand Condé, a prominent leader of the Fronde, became a great fixture at the court of Louis XIV. Of all the regions of the Habsburg lands, Bohemia may offer the best setting to investigate the corporate refashioning of noble identity in the seventeenth century, for nearly all the great families of the kingdom were implicated by heresy or treason in the years before White Mountain. Evans's initial work on this question has encouraged younger scholars to probe this issue further with a different set of methodological tools. Studies on conversion, self-fashioning, and new understandings of the self have provided us with fresh means to discern and interpret the dynamic processes by which the nobility remodeled itself. Petr Maťa's massive *World of the Bohemian Aristocracy* is the best example of recent work highlighting the resourcefulness and creativity of this estate. Vilém Slavata, a victim of the famous 1618 defenestration, deftly reworked his family's genealogy in an effort to uncover pious forebears and quite consciously cast his own personal history at the center of Bohemia's Catholic revival as he rose to become one of the kingdom's most powerful royal officials.[12]

The third and final component of Evans's equation is religion or, more specifically, the Catholic Church. Evans considered how the church helped unify the Habsburg lands on at least two levels. Institutionally, it provided an administrative framework that, though based in the provinces, extended across the entire region and fostered a sense of territorial coherence. Ideologically, it provided common cultural ground and an intellectual foundation upon which an elaborate superstructure of baroque learning was constructed. Although Evans worked from the center and viewed religion as a dynamic that unified the Habsburg monarchy, Graeme Murdock moves to the periphery and examines how confession could be manipulated on the margins to constitute difference. Murdock investigates the famous incident of the Hungarian galley-slaves, underscoring the importance of the international Calvinist network that publicized these events abroad. He reminds us that as the Habsburg monarchy was rising so, too, were forces that would ultimately lead to its demise. Many of the building blocks of nationalist identity were being hewn in the rough quarries of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Murdock insightfully demonstrates how the liberation of the Calvinist captives was seized upon by their co-religionists and fashioned into one of their community's founding myths, notwithstanding the fact that at least one of the freed prisoners later converted to Catholicism and became a great apologist of his new faith. Murdock's essay also highlights one of the more difficult problems facing Reformation scholars in particular. The story of the galley-slaves and its appropriation by Hungarian Calvinists is but one example of how historians have frequently merged confessional and national interests. Outside of Hungary, the Hussite movement in Bohemia and the Catholic Church of both Austria and Poland have often been given the status of a national religion.[13] This tendency to examine creed in conjunction with nation can lead to a distortion of Central Europe's complicated confessional geography.

It is precisely this complexity that Rona Johnston Gordon features in her examination of the Gregorian calendar and its introduction in Lower Austria. One might expect that the imposition of a new "Roman" calendar would have precipitated a division on strict confessional terms,

[12]Petr Maťa, *Svět české aristokracie (1500–1700)* (Prague, 2004); Howard Louthan, "Reshaping Identity and Reforming the Kingdom: Confessional Change and the Bohemian Nobility," in *Converting Bohemia*, 47–82.

[13]See Murdock's observations here in "Central and Eastern Europe," in Alec Ryrie, ed., *The European Reformations* (Basingstoke, UK, 2006), 37–38.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0067237809000071 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Catholics quickly adopting and Lutherans stubbornly resisting. Instead, Johnston Gordon describes a religious landscape difficult to categorize where "standard hallmarks of Catholic and Protestant practice could not be applied uniformly or in their entirety." Here, defense of tradition and resistance to innovation could cut across confessional lines. This article raises a broader question concerning the study of religion. *The Making of the Habsburg Monarchy* was written as a group of German scholars was developing what became known as the confessionalization thesis. Though this model has faced significant criticism in recent years, it has been useful in helping us think through important issues concerning the development of confessional communities and the relationship of religion and the emerging state.[14] Johnston Gordon, in fact, highlights a critical alliance that was formed between the secular clergy and Habsburg administrators in the campaign to introduce the Gregorian calendar. At the same time, however, scholars using this model have all too frequently focused on difference and emphasized distinction. There has been a tendency to sort religious identities by imposing a simple set of prescribed confessional categories. Too often sixteenth-century Central Europe is reduced to a world dominated by resentful Catholics and angry Protestants who speak only German.

What then is the future for religious history in the Habsburg lands, indeed for all of Central Europe? It is imperative to broaden our understanding of the region and work across linguistic and cultural divides to reclaim the religious diversity of this terrain. The Reformation was no simple and static dialogue between Protestant and Catholic. A city such as the cultural melting pot of Leopolis, in what is now the western Ukraine (aka L'viv, Lwów, or Lemberg depending on your ethnic orientation), could boast of cathedrals to four Christian creeds, not to mention its Protestant and Jewish communities. If we are going to understand this region aright, we need an approach that intentionally seeks hybridity, crossover, and interaction. A figure such as Stanisław Orzechowski, an influential sixteenth-century Polish noble who studied in Vienna, Padua, and Wittenberg, complicates our standard models. When he returned to Poland after his travels, he was ordained a priest and then promptly married. As he reacted to an ecclesiastical establishment confounded by his actions, Orzechowski in his defense pointed not west (he had no patience with Luther and his ilk) but to the East and the Orthodox community, for here he saw a model of church reform. Priests could marry, and at the Eucharist the laity could receive both the bread and the cup. In similar fashion, there is the curious incident of Simon Abeles, a Counter Reformation saint in late-seventeenth-century Prague who just happened to be Jewish. The twelve-year old Abeles, a member of a prominent family in the ghetto, died under mysterious circumstances in 1694. He had evinced some interest in Christianity but was never baptized. His father and a family friend were eventually convicted of the boy's murder. The case became a cause célèbre with publications on this affair appearing in places as far afield as Amsterdam, Florence, and Königsberg. Bohemia's Catholic leaders seized on the incident, cast the boy as a young martyr, and promoted what became a local cult of some consequence. Miracles were reported at his tomb well into the eighteenth century. This fascinating story, which is still awaiting its historian who can effectively cross the Jewish and Christian worlds, is emblematic of both the challenge and the promise of understanding society and the sacred in Central Europe.[15]

[14]Thomas A. Brady, Jr., "Confessionalization: The Career of a Concept," in John M. Headley, Hans J. Hillerbrand, and Anthony J. Papalas, eds., *Confessionalization in Europe, 1555–1700. Essays in Honor and Memory of Bodo Nischan*, (Aldershot, UK, 2004), 1–20.

[15]Most recent on Orzechowski is Krzysztof Koehler, *Stanisław Orzechowski i dylematy humanizmu* (Cracow, 2004); for Abeles, see Elisheva Carlebach, *The Death of Simon Abeles: Jewish-Christian Tension in Seventeenth-Century Prague*. Third Annual Herbert Berman Memorial Lecture (New York, 2003).

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0067237809000071 Published online by Cambridge University Press

I clearly remember my initial encounter with Evans's work now more than twenty years ago. I was a senior at Emory University and enrolled in my first graduate seminar. As an introduction to the Habsburg lands, James Vann had assigned *Rudolf II and His World*. When I finished the book, I was thoroughly bewildered and confused but totally fascinated. Though perplexed by Evans's discussion of mannerism, hermeticism, and the magic universe, I did know that my quaint little picture of Central Europe where everyone spoke German, felt culturally inferior to the Italians, and were all Lutheran or secretly wished to be so, had been utterly destroyed. In breathtaking fashion, Evans had opened for me a multilingual, religiously diverse, and intellectually vibrant society at the crossroads of the continent. With their examination of Hungarian galley-slaves, bicultural Tirolean aristocrats, Spanish diplomats, and Austrian churchmen, the essays in this forum continue to speak to the captivating diversity of the Habsburg lands. They also indicate that for this field to remain a lively and vital area of intellectual inquiry, to avoid becoming a parochial backwater of antiquarian research and nationalist sentiment, we must preserve that cosmopolitan perspective from which Evans worked.

Howard Louthan is associate professor of history at the University of Florida.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0067237809000071 Published online by Cambridge University Press