'The Rise to the Status of Province'

Preliminary Observations

Introduction

GIVEN ITS complexity, the issue stated in the title must be approached on the basis of an example: the alignment of the provinces in the Austrian empire in regard to the center. Paradoxically enough, while in all the countries that were once part of the Austrian empire a large number of historical studies have dealt with the "common period of the dynasty," there are very few investigations devoted to the whole entity, but devised on the basis of a plural (multiple) perspective. The approaches to the history of the Empire as such[1] focus on the formal whole (the state), without paying sufficient attention to the numerous elements that fulfilled an integral function within the "whole." On the other hand, national or regional historical syntheses[2] turn their attention towards specific areas or social categories, leaving out any element unsuitable for such an approach. The numerous studies that focus on narrower topics do not even attempt to see the bigger picture, as their authors mistake the "whole" for "everything." Upon closer examination, the approaches to the issue featured in the title of the symposium are grounded on three main hypotheses:

Hypothesis 1: The rise to the status of province

The phrase above contains the premise that a province starts from a different position and only then "rises" to the new status. If a province is inferior to the other types of countries, understood since the Early Middle Ages as a primary model of political organization of a territory, and is expected to "rise" some day, then this presupposes a sort of interdependence among regions that shared more than just their geographic proximity to one another. In concrete terms, it is obvious that the unifying and therefore ordering element is the fact that they all belonged to the Habsburg Empire. The agglutination of the various "countries and provinces" under the authority of the Habsburgs implies the existence of various "times of arrival," and therefore of different conditions for their respective integration, necessarily leading to a hierarchy of "accessions." This approach is quite a plausible one indeed, as from many points of view those countries of the *Monarchia*

austriaca that came under Habsburg suzerainty as early as the Late Middle Ages cannot even be compared to the latecomers (Bohemia, Hungary etc.).

The metaphoric expression "rise to the status of province" becomes more credible when we look at the events occurred after the middle of the 18th century, when the reform policies of the time strove for or at least envisaged a closing of the gap between the old provinces and the new ones. However, the reforms in question brought mixed results, in keeping with the pre-imperial history of the respective provinces and with its length. Regardless of their various "pre-histories," all Austrian countries (from the Low Countries to Bukovina) managed to achieve a "rise" when Vienna—the imperial residence, home to the main central authorities, the place where the quest for future strategies intersected with the influences exerted by the various progressive factors coming from abroad (mainly from the West)—forced the provinces to participate in a dialogue (even if only in a bilateral one) aimed at their eventual alignment to the center. As until 1918 the number of these countries remained almost unchanged (the new additions were Dalmatia and Bosnia), regional differences diminished considerably. This did not happen by accident, but came as a result of creative processes that operated mainly from the top to the bottom. Even the shift of 1848/49 in favor of constitutionally-regulated relations between the "top" and the "bottom" was the result of an evolution initially started at the "top."

The decreasing distance between center and periphery, clearly felt by some individuals, must nevertheless remain just a hypothesis because, despite all the substantial gains made by the provinces as a consequence of this process, two questions persist: how significant were their losses, which were unavoidable if we consider the principle of communicating vessels? What would have been the type and the nature of this "rise," had the dialogue been a real one, instead of a monologue?

Hypothesis 2: The alignment process

A simple retrospective glance at the internal development of the Habsburg Monarchy from the middle of the 18th century until the outbreak of World War One shows us that the numerous progressive measures undertaken over several generations significantly supported the alignment of the various provinces in the empire. The measures in question concerned the fields of education and welfare, as well as the transformation of the provincial landscape (Landschaft) and of the model of organization. The time of Maria Theresa seemed a distant memory around the year 1900, and the considerable and manifest results of the transformations occurred in the space of approximately 150 years indicated an irreversible process.

Nevertheless, even this alignment must remain just a hypothesis, if approached frontally, for the question concerning the nature and the foundation of inequality or inadaptability is yet to find a definite answer. There is also a secondary question: can we talk only about a process of alignment, or does historical reality require us to talk about several processes, or indeed stages of this process? The post-colonial approach (Denkansatz)[3] prevents us from considering that the alignment between the "top" and the "bottom" relies exclusively on "bottom-to-top" processes. As the traditions of each province clearly speak of the considerable resistance opposed to these developments, we must start

from the premise that the alignment process also involved the ruling categories (even during a later phase, that of the constitutional era, the will to accept such changes was obviously modest wherever the respective parliaments had decided to go in a different direction). The personal factor indubitably played a significant role in this regard and must be therefore be envisaged as a third hypothesis.

The issue of the alignment also includes the horizontal changes stemming from the multitude of neighboring and heterogeneous provinces, a process that was not "managed" or even initiated exclusively from the center. It is obvious that we need more studies focusing precisely on the analysis and the assessment of this broad spectrum, but here one must start from the premise that we are dealing with complex phenomena, such as those highlighted by the temporary "partnership" between Galicia and Bukovina based on the national affinity between Dalmatia and Croatia-Slavonia (nonetheless located in a different part of the empire) or on the "twinned historical countries" of Upper and Lower Austria. The national solidarity between the various countries in the empire is also to be approached from this angle.

The question regarding the number of alignment processes leads to another, namely, the one concerning their periodization. Indeed, can we truly talk about a completed period, considering that the context of the Late Baroque period differed sharply from that of the Modern Era, that the will and the capability of the monarchs to effect modernization were also extremely different, and the involvement of society in the alignment process can in no way be described as homogeneous (consider the differences between the aristocracy, the bourgeoisie, the peasantry, the fringe groups).

Hypothesis 3: The center as a non-province

A third hypothesis concerns the validity of labeling everything that came from the center and was put in the service of the alignment as being structurally non-provincial, because the drive for change largely coming from the direction of Vienna still does not provide a sufficient explanation, unless we factor in both its content and its nature. The idea whereby Vienna, the supreme center of the greater state, automatically meant progress simply by virtue of its hierarchical position (hence the arguments in favor of the "historical" thesis of the alignment) is operable only if we take into account certain limits, for two reasons. On the one hand, seen from the outside (from Paris, London, later Berlin and even Munich), Vienna was hardly a non plus ultra of modernity. On the contrary, it was perceived as the epitome of conservatism and traditionalism, and even the avant-garde of Prague and Budapest was nurtured not just by Vienna, but by other sources as well.[4] The other, more pertinent reason to consider Vienna somewhat provincial as a metaphor for the "entire state" has to do with the fact that many of those who managed to climb the social ladder, regardless of their province, ethnicity, or initial social category, gradually became part of the system of the so-called "public class" (administration, army, railroads, postal service, justice, academia, etc.).[5] All of them—those who remained home in their provinces, rose to high positions in the regional centers, or even made it to Vienna, Budapest, or Prague—did not automatically become cosmopolitan liberals, educated and urbane, completely severed from their provincial roots. On the contrary, they largely maintained their limited perspective upon the

world and became the involuntary source of inspiration for literati, cabaret artists, cartoonists and satirists.[6]

Conclusions

In order to constructively overcome the paradox stated at the beginning, one must start with a theoretical and interdisciplinary discussion on the very notion of "province." The outcome of this discussion could indicate the general direction to be followed by future specialist investigations. Then, in keeping with the spatial horizons, the variable periods of time and the broad range of relevant topics, one must proceed with a thorough investigation of the sources,[7] which in time would produce sufficient material for a renewed discussion on the central topic, namely, the "rise to the status of province, or "Aufstieg zur Provinz."

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(translated by Bogdan Aldea)

Notes

1. See Jean Bérenger, *Geschichte des Habsburgerreiches 1273–1918* (Vienna-Cologne-Weimar, 1995).
2. For instance *Istoria Transilvaniei*, vol. 1–3, coord. Ioan-Aurel Pop, Thomas Nägler, Magyari András (Cluj, 2007–2009).
3. A general outline in Karen Struve "Postcolonial Studies," in *Kultur. Von den Cultural Studies bis zu den Visual Studies. Eine Einführung*, ed. Stephan Moebius (Bielefeld, 2012), 88–107.
4. William M. Johnston, *Österreichische Kultur- und Geistesgeschichte. Gesellschaft und Ideen im Donauraum 1848 bis 1938*, third edition (Vienna-Cologne-Weimar, 1992) passim, and the publications of the special research field "Moderne – Wien und Zentraleuropa um 1900" at http://www-gewi.kfunigraz.ac.at/moderne.
5. *Die Habsburgermonarchie 1848–1918*, eds. Helmut Rumpler and Peter Urbanitsch, vol. IX/1: Sozialstruktur (Vienna, 2010), 15–250.
6. Johnston, *Kultur- und Geistesgeschichte*, 127–137, 393–404.
7. See the studies featured in the present volume.