

Integration, Counter-Integration, Disintegration

by Timothy Snyder

How did the Habsburg Monarchy deal with the problem of nationalism? Which policies of integration prevented the empire from falling apart? And what conclusions should the European Union draw out of that Habsburg experience? These were the central questions Timothy Snyder posed at the Conference on The Political Logics of DisIntegration.

I am going to say a word about what kept the Habsburg Monarchy together, a word about what actually brought it apart, and a word about what this might mean for the European Union. This has to be a bit of a counter-propaganda effort, because in general there is in Western Europe, in Central Europe, and in the West as a whole, the sense that the Habsburg Monarchy was doomed, that it had inherent flaws, that it had to collapse. This sort of thinking arose, on the one hand, as a result of the fact that Britain, the United States and France won World War I and, on the other, because the Habsburgs were an enemy, although it wasn't really clear exactly why they were an enemy. Therefore we have a guilty sense of triumphalism with respect to the Habsburg Monarchy, which led us to the sentiment that the Habsburg monarchs, the emperors, were—to quote a famous judgment—“mad, bad and unfit to rule.” Some of them were indeed mad, some of them were indeed bad, some of them were indeed unfit to rule. But nevertheless we are dealing with an institution, with a state, which lasted for ten times longer than the European integration project has lasted and for three times longer than the United States has lasted. We are looking at a project, at a state, which lasted for something like 600 years.

I think it's fair to begin with this question of duration. How could something like this have lasted so long? If the European integration project lasts another 550 years, we would consider that to be a great success. Six hundred years is a very long time. Six hundred years of endurance, also as very different kinds of states, as a kingdom in the middle of Europe, as the largest empire in the history of the world. The notion that the sun never sets on an empire was originally applied not to the British Empire, but to the Habsburg Monarchy. The Habsburg monarchs in the early modern period controlled the Spanish and the Portuguese possessions, and the Dutch possessions later on, which meant that they literally controlled much of the globe. And then there was the Habsburg Monarchy's final phase as a multinational European empire in the 18th, 19th, and early 20th centuries.

How did the Habsburgs deal with the problem of nationalism, which we now see as central for the European Union? I would stress that for the Habsburgs, as for the

European Union, nationalism was a kind of European problem and not exactly a particular problem. The easiest way to think about nationalism is that there are these particular faiths, there are these minorities, who cause problems for majorities. I would say that the proper way to think about nationalism in the 19th century, as today, is that it is a European problem that has to be handled on a large institutional scale. What I mean is that the Habsburg Monarchy had institutional ways of dealing with national questions. Over the course of the 19th century, nationalism quite literally washes across the empire, starting with Napoleon at the beginning of the 19th century and washing through the empire again during the revolutions of 1848; not to forget also that nationalism surrounds the empire. But there are responses.

The responses involve, first, cooperation with elites. The Ausgleich, the famous compromise of 1867 that turned Austria into Austria-Hungary, as a compromise with Hungarian elites, as well as the less famous but perhaps equally significant compromise with Polish elites in Galicia, allows Habsburg rule to continue in the East. After that there are a series of even more forgotten compromises with one nation after another which in their sheer intricacy rival anything that the European Union has ever done. The notion of a European Union that seeks peace by finding ways to keep people negotiating in rooms for extraordinary long times certainly also applies to the Habsburg Monarchy in the early 20th century. Take the Moravian compromise, in which every Moravian school child was to be given a nationality, as a means of dealing with school attendance. Or the Galician compromise, interrupted by World War I, which was going to do the same thing for Poles, Ukrainians and Jews in Galicia. These things are forgotten except by historians of law in Central Europe. But they are incredibly interesting, because they demonstrate that the monarchy had the capacity not just to compromise with elites, which in a way is an easy thing to do, but to pursue these intricate compromises that were meant to anticipate problems in generations to come. They might not have worked, but the impulse for compromise was certainly there from within.

Then, of course, there are other ways of handling nationalism. One of them was parliament. After the compromise with the Hungarian nobility comes dissatisfaction from the non-Hungarian majority in South Hungary. After the compromise with the Polish nobility comes dissatisfaction from the non-noble and also non-Polish majority in Galicia. The compromises with the elites had the effect of forcing the Habsburgs to do something else. That something else was parliament. That something else was the expansion of what eventually became the universal suffrage in 1907. The parliament of Austria was truly national; if one overlooks the exclusion of women, it was an incredibly inclusive parliament. For example, just to give you a comparison: When Woodrow Wilson at the end of World War I made his famous speech about the 14 points, there were no blacks in the American Congress. In the Austrian parliament, every single nationality was represented.

This was a way of diffusing the national question. Another way was by central institutions, the most important of which in the 19th century was the Emperor himself.

The fact that Franz Josef ruled from 1848 to 1916 meant that in the early 20th century almost everybody who was alive had lived under no other emperor, and the Emperor, as a Head of State, was able to absorb national questions in a certain way. He spoke most of the languages that it was possible to speak. He spoke them locally, as he travelled from place to place, and he presented himself as a non-national figure. The other non-national central institution that was incredibly important was the bureaucracy, and in particular the officer class. The constitution of the officer class of the Habsburg Monarchy shows very well that it had an influential class that was non-national, which was loyal to the institutions and the monarchy as such. Some of the nations were also centralizing. If you think of national interest, you think of nations wanting to spin off from empires and cause trouble. But very often what nations want to do is preserve empires. Take the critical case of the “trouble-making” Czechs. They were right in the middle of the Habsburg Monarchy. Basically every Czech political thinker in the 19th and 20th centuries, from Palacky to Masaryk, thought that the best thing to do was to preserve the Habsburg Monarchy, not to take it apart. Why? Because the moment that the Habsburg Monarchy fell apart, they were going to be absorbed or threatened by a unified German nation state, an analysis that proved to be exactly correct in the 20th century. That’s why the Czechs wanted the Habsburg Monarchy to prevail. It explains also why small nation states in Eastern Europe like the European Union. Vulnerable nations within a multinational institution understand that it is in their own interest for that institution to continue because a return to nation states will be threatening for them. The Czechs changed their mind about this during World War I, and the reason they changed their mind is because it was clear that after the war there was going to be a German nation-state anyway. So as long as there is some possibility that the Habsburg Monarchy was going to survive, the Czechs were largely in favor of it.

Which leads me to the German problem. If you think of a nation that betrays the Habsburg Monarchy, it’s not the ones that are difficult to pronounce, it’s the Germans, it’s the ones who are already in the middle. The one political party that was the closest to being truly treacherous was the German national party of Schonerer, which was important right here in Vienna. It was the German speakers here and elsewhere in Austria who wanted to join Greater Germany after 1871, who were closest to being political traitors while the monarchy still existed. Here I want to draw a certain analogy to the 21st century, mainly because I want to make a transition to the way that the threat of nationalism was actually posed. It was actually not posed from within. The Habsburg Monarchy was not a collection of nationalities yearning to be free, battling against the monarchy, trying to break out. The Habsburg Monarchy was a collection of complex problems that also had complex solutions. The reason why nationalism was a problem was not that the Habsburg Monarchy was a prisonhouse of nations, which it most certainly was not. The reason why nationalism was a problem had to do with the rest of the world. In the rest of the world, you had what might be seen as counter-integration.

Everything that the Habsburgs were doing can be thought of as a kind of policy of integration: The monarch, the parliament, the officer class. This is one means of integration. But on the borders of the Habsburg Monarchy you had something that might be seen as counter-integration. The more familiar word for counter-integration is national reunification, but I'm avoiding that term because it's so teleological. When we say "national reunification", it makes it sound like the Germans were just there to be unified, the Italians were just there to be unified, and so on. As a matter of fact, there was an Italian as well a German unification, and there were the beginnings of a Yugoslavian and a Polish unification. All this happened on the borders of the Habsburg Monarchy. And this, of course, posed a problem in principle: if you have national self-determination, the multinational monarchy cannot exist. The difficulty in practice, though, was that these were counter-integrations that drew attention from the Germans and others inside the monarchy. So how does the monarchy actually fall apart? Even given the attraction that these counterintegrations exert, it takes the most punishing war in the history of modern Europe, four years of that and then defeat, for the Habsburg Monarchy to fall apart.

So what is it that brings about the end of the monarchy? I will tell you a little story which is going to be a bit unfamiliar. What brings about the collapse of the monarchy are not its internal problems, but one of these external counter-integrations: the third Balkan War. The first two Balkan Wars, in 1912 and 1913, respectively, were directed against the Ottoman empire, but the third Balkan War in 1914 was directed against the Habsburg Monarchy. By a series of coincidences that war became a World War which in turn brought down the Habsburg Monarchy. Why is this Balkan War important? It's an example of a general pattern. Serbia was trying to unify what it saw as the Serbian nation. This was one of these counter-integrations or national unifications. It so happened to be the one that provoked the Habsburgs into a very stupid war.

How did it destroy the Habsburg Monarchy? First of all, by physically eliminating the officer class. By Christmas of 1914, a huge majority of the officer class was dead or wounded to such an extent that they were not going to be participating in politics or anything else. The war physically eliminated the loyal classes, and exposed the whole population to national propaganda from outside. The British and then the Americans used nationalist propaganda against the Habsburg Monarchy quite consistently throughout the war in an effort to try to get the monarchy to fall apart. The second way that the war destroyed the monarchy was that it generated hunger, and hunger made the inter-ethnic differences much more sensitive than they would have been otherwise. And the final reason was that it ended with a series of peace treaties that balkanized Central Europe. The war began because of Balkan nationalism and the Balkan idea of nation states, and at the end of the war the Allies applied the Balkan solution to the rest of Europe. That is exactly what we did. We brought to an end a multinational state by applying the notion of national sovereignty, thereby taking the problem that began the war and applying it to much of the rest of Europe. That meant the end of the Habsburg Monarchy of course.

What does this mean for today? The first thing that this story shows is that integration over a very long term is possible. The second thing is that neutral, top-level institutions are crucial. I even dream of a European Monarchy or a European soccer team. Something that can absorb symbolic weight is very important. Top-level institutions also include a parliament, not just as a legal body. In the case of the Habsburg Monarchy the treasury was one of these important institutions. Another top-level institution is an officer class, and one of my obsessions over the last couple of decades has been a European military academy. The lesson is that you should have a very large officer class, but you should not let them fight stupid wars. Because as long as there is peace the officer class integrates. When you fight stupid wars and you kill off your officer class, then you have defeated the purpose. The threat to the Habsburg Monarchy came not from the inside, and not exactly from the outside. It came when rival projects of integration began to affect the inside of the Habsburg Monarchy. The reason to worry about the European Union would be projects of counter-integration that were actually tempting to people inside the European Union. With the worrisome exception of Hungary, which one can see as the leader of a future authoritarian camp, I don't think this is really the case. ◀