

# THE CITIES OF CENTRAL EUROPE AT THE TWILIGHT OF THE HABSBURG EMPIRE

Catherine Horel, *Multicultural Cities of the Habsburg Empire, 1880-1914: Imagined Communities and Conflictual Encounters* (Budapest: Central European University Press, 2023), ISBN 978-963-386-289-6, 574 pp.

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Catherine Horel is Research Director at the French National Center for Scientific Research (CNRS), specialist in Central Europe, teaches at Paris I Pantheon-Sorbonne. Her doctorate in history was obtained with the thesis *Les Juifs de Hongrie, 1825-1849, problèmes d'assimilation et d'émancipation*.

The idea of this book came to her during the years in which she taught the subject about the cities in the space crossed by the Danube (*Metropolen Donauraum*). She decided that she would research the smaller cities in this space, because cities like Vienna, Budapest and Prague already had studies, extensive research dedicated to them.

The structure of the book is that of a large case study, a collection of monographs. However, it is not a classic monograph, but one with an emphasis on micro-history, socio-cultural study, anthropological analysis and study of geography and political science. For this reason I think that this book has an air of historical eclecticism, because by its construction, by the directions of research that Catherine Horel follows, it does provide a clear, overall picture of the Habsburg city after the period of the Constitutions of 1867.

The sources used are the newspapers printed in that period, the works that appeared during the period that the book addresses or the works that appeared about the period covered in the book.

The author chose twelve cities, 4 of which remained under the influence of Vienna (Brünn, Lemberg, Czernowitz and Trieste), 7 under that of Budapest (Arad, Pozsony, Nagyvárád, Temesvár, Szabadka, Fiume and Zagreb), and Sarajevo, the capital of Bosnia and Herzegovina, which was administered by the joint Ministry of Finance.

The book is structured in 8 chapters, which, based on a comparative and qualitative analysis, lead us through the narrative created by Catherine Horel's research to the most eloquent conclusions, namely that the research of some medium cities, which were part of the Habsburg Empire and later of Austria-Hungary, is a desirable scientific approach because we can better understand European politics, the state of

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nations on the verge of the First World War and even current geopolitics, the re-emergence of nationalist and extremist currents.

The multiculturalism of these cities is, as the author herself says, a term used with a much broader meaning than its usual definition, Catherine Horel uses this designation of a situation existing at that time to explain her approach layered on several research plans: urban space, ethnicity, religion, the industrializing economy, the formation of national ideas and of the future modern European states of the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

Going through each chapter brings us closer to the way the author sees the city, namely as a mental map and as a product of culture.

Austro-Hungarian cities have similar characteristics in terms of the way of building buildings, such as churches, town halls, theaters, cafes, houses. This fact proves the connection between the cities of the old Habsburg Empire and also reveals the circulation of information, of knowledge, from the center now represented by Vienna, respectively Budapest, towards these cities included in the research done by Catherine Horel.

With strong industrialization, with the development of the railway network, an even better transmission of this information is ensured, people find out much faster what is happening in one part of the continent. There is a higher permeability of cities to these information exchanges.

Through the methodology used in this book, the author manages to make us witnesses to what happened in the cities studied, she does this through the stylistic effects used, so the cities appear as if they are living their story before our eyes.

What Catherine Horel does with this book is in line with what Hayden White proposed in the linguistic current of which he is a representative, namely that history is based on mental images created by the use of literary means such as metaphor, personification, epithet.

Horel has these devices used throughout the chapters of his book. She sees the city as a stage where the actors are precisely the citizens who populate it, the multilingualism present in these cities is seen as a real Tower of Babel, where, unlike the biblical one, languages do not get confused, but sit down and form the ethnic, confessional, cultural, and economic groups. If I were allowed to force an addition, a completion, I would say that this Tower of Babel turns into a Lighthouse of Alexandria, with the mention that this is one of Central Europe watching over the cities of the duality that arose with the year 1867.

An important chapter of the book is that of training, the development of schools in these cities, education being an important and recurring theme in the other chapters, because cultural, political, social and economic life is based on an educated people, on trained citizens, and all these 12 cities are living proof of this fact.

What pleasantly surprises us in this book is the fact that Horel makes the most of his accumulated experience in doing statistical analysis based on demographic studies, managing to perfectly complete the puzzle that is the development of these cities.

The figures provided over the approximately 40 years examined in this book add benchmarks to those already provided by the authors, so that we can more easily understand the pace of change in these cities, who was involved, the costs.

By using the media of that time, Catherine Horel offers us a good method of working in the construction of any monograph and comes very close to microhistory, using these articles as moments of local history, like microfilms that give us the picture at a given moment of a situation, of a person, of a city, fitting into the current of New Political History.

Even if Catherine Horel's work has great merits, the fact that the author uses a lot of articles from the press of the time as sources leads to the high risk of using erroneous data, if they are not corroborated with documents from the local archives of the cities studied or with the verification together with local historians. An example would be the fact that she mentions the year 1820 as the date of the appearance of the Old Theater in Arad, the Hirschl Theater, when in reality it was inaugurated in 1817, shortly after the one in Oravița.

In conclusion Catherine Horel's book is an analysis of about 40 years (1880-1914) in 12 medium-sized cities, with a population between 50,000-200,000 inhabitants, with ups and downs, essential changes in their urban, social, cultural landscape and economic. It is an intellectual effort both by the author and for the savvy or less savvy reader to watch the entire unfolding of cities before our eyes, to see how these cities came to be the modern, multicultural cities of today.

Reading the book is relatively easy, as the chosen narrative technique is one that grabs you, that makes you want to read more, to find out as much as possible about the chosen topics. Each city is a story in itself, with people, places, emotions, lived and narrated by Catherine Horel.