Pierre Nora Visits Habsburg Central Europe

Staging the Past is an important and challenging book--for its readers and for its authors. The essays in this collection artfully describe and analyze how disparate subgroups in Habsburg and post-1918 Central European society have attempted to obtain political, cultural, social and economic status by laying claim to some portion of Habermas' putative public sphere. Readers already familiar with the dominant narratives of nineteenth and twentieth century Central European history are challenged to reexamine their assumptions about agency, the intersection of culture and politics, the nature of historical memory and its resonance in the present, and of the very nature of the process of "becoming national." The challenge for the authors is where they go from here.

In his essay "Reasserting Empire" Daniel Unowsky tells us that Franz Joseph, the master of the dramatic understatement, was fond of muttering "Ach, that is very lovely" to children presenting him with flowers (p. 29). Historians devoted to the conventional political and economic narratives of the Central European past might be tempted to dismiss these essays as similarly "lovely." That would be a mistake. The ten authors whose work appears in this volume have done much more than offer up appealing accounts of public commemorations, protests and other invasions of the public sphere. They have done something that has not happened in quite such an organized fashion since the upsurge of theoretically based studies of nationalism almost two decades ago. Staging the Past provides us with examples of how new theoretical approaches to history can inform East Central European studies. In this particular case the theoretical frameworks used are primarily (but not exclusively) those articulated by Pierre Nora and Jay Winter and their collaborators--the authors who show up most often in the footnotes of the essays in this volume. Their work relies on a sophisticated reading of the constructed nature of the symbolic architecture of public displays, commemorations, and so on, as well as the ways that individuals construct a usable past from these artifacts.[1]
Rather than offer up brief overviews of each of the ten essays collected in this volume, I will focus on three examples that best exemplify the method and results of the authors whose work is included. All ten authors are HABSBURG members, (and HABSBURG editor Charles Ingrao wrote the Foreword), and so in this sense the book is a very HABSBURG effort. In addition to the two editors, the contributors include Daniel Unowsky, Steven Beller, Laurence Cole, Jeremy King, Keely Stauter-Halsted, Cynthia J. Paces, Melissa Bokovoy and Alice Freifeld.[2]

The most theoretically minded of the essays is Jeremy King’s “The Nationalization of East Central Europe. Ethnicism, Ethnicity, and Beyond.” King argues that, despite the vast corpus of work on the transformation of the region from societies organized along lines of class and status to societies organized by nationhood, “the nationalization of the region remains poorly understood” (p. 112). The flaw King sees in most of the scholarship on this process is the devotion of historians to what he calls "ethnicism"– a sort of crypto-primordialist approach to nationalism and nationalization. Although they formally reject the older primordialist approaches to nationalization, King argues that ethnicist scholars still presume that national Czechs or national Germans were first ethnic Czechs or ethnic Germans and so, “the ethnicist framework amounts to a geneology, an attempt to explain who joined which national movement” (p. 124). Thus, in King’s view, the most important flaw in the ethnicist approach is to divide regional populations into ethnic groups (Czechs, Germans, Jews) and to see them as the groups from which modern nations emerged. To do so is to read the evidence in a teleological fashion and, King writes, "to misunderstand nationhood."

This critique of historians of nationalism relies heavily on recent work by the sociologist Rogers Brubaker on “nationalizing states,”[3] and begins, appropriately enough, with the father of Czech historiography Frantisek Palacky, whose ten volume History of the Czech Nation in Bohemia and Moravia laid down the ethnicist line followed by so many ever since. While his ethnicism inspired many a resident of Bohemia and Moravia to become Czech, it also crippled subsequent generations of historians who were either unwilling or unable to find alternative interpretations of the process by which a Czech nation appeared in Europe.

To accept King’s critique of historians’ approach to nationalization in East Central Europe is to be forced into the shadowy place where ethnicity is “a large and shifting set of overlapping cultural-linguistic boundaries” (p. 141) that do not necessarily lead anywhere, including to nationhood. King wisely avoids offering up an alternative “grand approach” to navigating these shadows, instead using the example of the statue of Shipmaster Lanna erected in Ceske Budejovice/Budweis in 1879. Once immortalized on his pediment, Lanna could not change, but his importance to and meaning for various subgroups in the local community could. In his early years as a monument, Lanna was embraced by both Czech and German communities, survived the purging of German statues from town after October 1918, was partially "Czechified" in the First Republic, celebrated by local Nazis in 1944, replaced by Karl Marx in 1948, and following 1989 was returned to his pediment, symbolizing both his "rehabilitation as a Czech [and] signal[ing] to a considerable degree the burying of the Czech-German hatchet" (p. 118). This example of the elastic and highly contested nature of the identity of one nineteenth century resident of Budejovice, King argues, demonstrates the degree to which nationalization is a problematic process fraught with possibilities--only one of which is the ethnicist transformation of the ethnic community into the modern nation.

While the example of Lanna does indeed open up these possibilities to our view, King’s strong critique of an entire literature is sufficient-
ly damning that it will be incumbent on him to offer more than this one example in years to come if his critique is to stick. King starts with an advantage, in that several of the essays in this volume offer at least partial examples that might be used to support his argument. For that reason, and because it is the most theoretical of the lot, King's essay probably should have appeared first in the book.

In her "Rural Myth and Modern Nation. Peasant Commemorations of Polish National Holidays, 1879-1910" Keely Stauter-Halsted likewise challenges the teleological reading of the national past and, like King, sees multiple possible outcomes rather than the inevitable coalescing of ethnic groups into nations. Rather than challenging King's ethnicists, however, Stauter-Halsted's essay calls into question the emphasis on nation-building as a consequence of the convergence of modern forces--especially because in so many cases the nationalist project was so heavily dependent on premodern elements (p. 153). Using the late nineteenth century Polish peasantry in Galicia as her example, Stauter-Halsted argues that the idea of Poland that emerged after 1879 cannot be understood only as a project of the Polish elite. Rather, the outcome of this project became more and more uncertain as various social classes and subgroups became involved in and attempted to put their stamp on public patriotic occasions (p. 156).

Stauter-Halsted argues that over time Polish peasants increasingly used large public commemorations "to insert themselves into the national public space," (p. 160) often in the face of opposition from members of the Polish elite. In spite of, or perhaps because of, this opposition from above, Polish peasants began to impart their own particular peasant character to these celebrations, emphasizing the importance of the peasant to nation's survival, or as defenders of the nation from outsiders (Tatars, Russians, Prussians). This "stamp" often took the form of specifically peasant memories of the important occasions being commemorated--memories highly conditioned on the peasant experience of or interpretation of the event.

Of course, one can read peasant behavior as self-serving--claiming for themselves a role in the civic society emerging in late-Habsburg Galicia--and, to a degree, that is exactly Stauter-Halsted's point. Rather than examining peasant agency in late-Habsburg political life through the lens of elections, parties, or political associations, the author instead mines examples of that agency from the peasants' invasions of the public sphere during patriotic commemorations. The success of this invasion not only reduced the monopoly of the Polish gentry in political life, but also helped "Poland evolve into a 'modern' multiclass nation, allowing for a potentially broader distribution of power within public life" (p. 172). Stauter-Halsted's sophisticated reading of peasant behavior and its consequences forces us to reconsider what we know, or thought we knew, about the creation of the Polish nation, while also forcing us to consider the limits on "reading" public behavior as text. The task now for Stauter-Halsted is to enrich her reading of the peasants' actions with a thicker description of the peasants' understanding of what they were about.

The third and final selection chosen for this review is Melissa Bokovoy's "Scattered Graves, Ordered Cemeteries. Commemorating Serbia's Wars of National Liberation, 1912-1918." In this essay, Bokovoy uses "sacred grounds" including gravesites, cemeteries, and the entire province of Kosovo itself as her entry point into an analysis of the intersection of national memory and politics in Serbia. Like many, if not most historians of Yugoslavia and Serbia, Bokovoy argues that the importance of the memory of the Serbian defeat at Kosovo Polje in 1389 cannot be exaggerated. That memory "resonates with many Serbs well into the twentieth century because individually and collectively the Serbian nation has had multiple op-
opportunities to reenact, both physically and symbolically, the experience of their ancestors through its war for national unification beginning in the nineteenth century.“ (p. 237) Because the wars of national unification were almost universal experiences for Serbs, these sacred grounds “inextricably link the personal and collective experiences of Serbs to the physical and symbolic landscapes of Serbia” (p. 238).

In her analysis of these linkages, Bokovoy traverses the entire range of possibilities—from large and very public commemorations, such as the construction and consecration of churches visited by the King, to individual gravesites in the Mogle na mountains. As rich and interesting as her descriptions of these sites are, of more importance is Bokovoy’s analysis of the manipulation of the collective memories invoked by Kosovo and by the various gravesites by the Yugoslav king Alexander as part of the process of legitimating his rule. Alexander was excluding the non-Serb peoples of his new state from the symbolic interpretation of these sites of memory, a choice that specifically excluded Croats and Slovenes (not to mention others) from “full participation in the life of the state” (p. 251), instead emphasizing using these commemorations to frame the new state as the result of Serb heroism and sacrifice.

With hindsight, the consequences of this exclusion of the non-Serb peoples from the national mythology are obvious. Given this hindsight and our knowledge of the events of the 1980s and 1990s, it is puzzling that Bokovoy chose not to compare Alexander’s manipulation of the national mythology to Slobodan Milosevic’s actions in the late 1980s, especially because Milosevic’s behavior seems so clearly to be part of a tradition laid down in the first decades of the twentieth century. While comparisons over many decades like this one often lead historians into teleological readings of the past, Bokovoy’s analysis of Serb actions in the early decades of the century seems thorough enough to allow her to take this risk.

Given the mythology that has grown up around Milosevic’s manipulation of the Kosovo legacy, any continuities that could be established (or disproved) between the first and last decades of the century would be a welcome addition to the historiography.

In their own ways, each of the other seven essays in this volume grapple with some of the theoretical and methodological issues apparent in the three examples cited above. Taken as a group, the ten essays demonstrate that this theory and method can significantly expand our understanding of the history of East Central Europe and challenge us to consider which other new approaches to our work might similarly expand our too often limited historiographical world view. At the same time, the essays presented here demonstrate the dangers inherent in just such a project.

Enamored as they are with the possibilities of applying Nora’s or Winter’s or other’s method to the history of East Central Europe, these authors seem untroubled by the problematic nature of the theory they invoke. For example, while Winter’s work on the First World War has generally received positive reviews, Nora’s reception by his colleagues has been more equivocal. Similarly, Habermas’ contributions to historical study—until recently accepted as central to our understanding—are in the process of being reassessed.[4] Recognition of these potential critiques, if only to dismiss them, would go a long way toward improving each of the essays. Thus, the authors in this volume have successfully engaged a theoretical and methodological discussion that our French history colleagues (among others) have been having for a decade, and demonstrated the relevance of this discussion for East Central European historiography. What they have failed to do is advance that discussion beyond proving that it is relevant to our region of study. That, then, is the challenge for each author—how to take the fine work presented here and translate it into something that our col-
leagues outside the East Central European corner of the historical world will read and engage.

Notes

[1]. The two volumes cited most often by these authors are: Pierre Nora, Realms of Memory: The Construction of the French Past (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), reviewed on H-France at: http://www2.h-net.msu.edu/reviews/showrev.cgi?path=24348924277817); and, Jay Winter, Sites of Memory, Sites of Mourning: The Great War in European Cultural History (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995), reviewed on H-France at: http://www2.h-net.msu.edu/reviews/showrev.cgi?path=22880849042738)

[2]. Additionally, HABSBURG members may be interested to note that all ten authors are HABSBURG members, and so this collection offers a glimpse into the scholarly projects of one subgroup of our membership.


[4]. See, for example, Harold Mah, "Phantasies of the Public Sphere: Rethinking the Habermas of Historians," The Journal of Modern History 72 (March 2000), 153-182.

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