

## Book Review

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Christian Karner, *Nationalism Revisited: Austrian Social Closure from Romanticism to the Digital Age*. New York: Berghahn books, 2019, 308 pp, ISBN 978-1-78920-452-0

The book analyses the history of the nation and nationalism in Austria since the late eighteenth century. This is at once an ambitious goal – and the author states at the beginning that this is an ambitious book – and one that might not matter much except to scholars of a small country in Central Europe. However, Karner has digested a broad body of scholarly literature on the Austrian Republic and the Habsburg Monarchy and he needs just 220 pages for a well-structured overview that covers a long period of time. For anyone looking for reliable information on nationalising political discourse in Austria this is a good deal. It potentially makes the book useful for future comparative studies.

Karner starts out from autobiographical reminiscences that reveal him as someone whose position enables him to speak about the Austrian we-group from the inside. They also show what makes belonging to this national we-group problematic because at the base of the Austrian nation – and really any nation – are processes of selective memory, exclusions, and naturalization. Following a chronological order, the book traces the crystallizations of nationalizing discourse in Austria, a notion whose meaning involved shifting boundaries and geographies. Chapter 1 sketches an intellectual history of romantic ideas about nationhood in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. It discusses texts from



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Herder, Fichte, and Schlegel and asks how the concepts that formed a romantic ideoscape spread to Habsburg Central Europe.

Chapter 2 turns to the intense nationalizing dynamics of the last decades of the long nineteenth century, when nationalists sought to make grammars of assimilation and apostasy relevant in the sphere of the everyday and thereby erase sites of national indifference. His account of how nationalising dynamics played out in the Habsburg Monarchy is attuned to a perspective that has mainly been articulated by historians from the US since the 1990s. Pieter Judson distilled it into an influential monograph about the Habsburg Empire, which was published in 2016.<sup>1</sup> In this view nationalism does not appear as an all-pervasive force that doomed the Empire, which is portrayed in a relatively benign light (maybe it should not surprise that a 'liberal Empire' does not seem a bad idea to scholars from the US). This strand of literature reserves more scepticism for the nation-states that were founded in 1918. Indeed, it is in the ensuing decades that in Austria the exclusionary logic of social closure reached new heights and culminated in genocidal war and the Holocaust (Chapter 3).

Whereas in the 1920s the Austrian Republic failed to acquire all features of a nation state, in its second run after 1945 and under more favourable conditions it mastered the task of nation building (Chapter 4). Selective memory of the recent past and a selective Austrian particularism played a huge role in this process. Seeking to distance Austria from Germany and from the responsibility of Nazi atrocities went together with tacit pan-German assumptions. In an increasingly wealthy and politically stable country nationalism became banal. However, on occasion it turned 'hot' as for example when the Slovene minority in the southern province of Carinthia demanded language rights and met the open hostility of 'German-Carinthians'.

In Chapters 5 to 7 the author deals with the period from the late 1980s to the present. Relying on a broad corpus of sources it is here that his analysis comes into its own. Taking a long view on the history of Austrian social closure pays off in enabling perceptive remarks on recent phenomena. Karner for instance discusses current tendencies of social protectionism as a 'palimpsestic recycling' of an opposition between ethnonational 'rootedness' and cosmopolitanism (p.197). He also points out that on the one hand the 2016 presidential elections in Austria formed part of a global dynamic that pitted democratic liberalism against right-wing populism. (In the Austrian case liberalism eked out a victory, but one that was soon erased by elections for the national parliament.) On the other hand the 2016 elections saw the re-emergence of a rural-urban divide that in the interwar era had pitched social democrats against the Christian Social political right (p.204). This of course also had its parallels in other democracies.

It is worth placing Karner's work, albeit briefly, in the history of scholarship on the Austrian nation. The ambition of his book clearly differs from Ernst Bruckmüller's *Nation Österreich*, first published in 1984, which posited increasing identification with the small Austrian Republic as the happy end of a complicated history.<sup>2</sup> Contributing to the construction of this version of an Austrian nation was the avowed or implicit commitment that drove works on Austrian history of the long post-war era since the 1950s. It lost some of its urgency since the 1980s when an ever-larger part of the population had been born into the political, economic, and cultural context of a small wealthy nation-state. On the one hand this allowed for a critical reassessment of the role of Austrians in the Nazi period, while on the other hand it opened up a discursive space for a somewhat relaxed investigation into the more benign myths that had propped up the Austrian nation in her post-1945-form.<sup>3</sup> It also integrated Austrian society into the globalizing dynamics of

the 1990s and early 2000s, which among many other things increased international academic mobility.

Karner is professor of sociology in Lincoln, UK. From an Austrian perspective he lives abroad. His book will also mostly have non-Austrian readers. So it may be small wonder that he is not concerned with shoring up Austrian national identity, even less so as his book was written at a moment when processes of right-wing-renationalization had come into full swing. Although Karner wants to contribute to a democratic polity – in this respect not at all different from Bruckmüller in the 1980s – the academic, political, and economic context has markedly changed. This leads to a quite different stance vis-à-vis the Austrian nation. Not only does Karner fully embrace a constructivist theory of nationalism, which has long become the dominant approach in nationalism studies, he also applies it without reserve to the underpinnings of post-1945 Austria.

Karner brings a clearly defined theoretical and methodological focus to the task of revisiting nationalism. This greatly enhances the value of his book. At its theoretical core is the Neo-Weberian concept of social closure. Thereby the author moves away from writing a history of the Austrian nation as if it were a thing in the world that can be loved or hated but exists in the same way as the physical space that the Austrian state treats as its territory. Karner's interest lies instead with showing how social boundaries were drawn on the base of a national deixis. A nation is not an essence but a form of creating communal relationships: it allows to distinguish between those who belong and those who do not.

As a methodological approach Karner opted for an eclectic mix of tools taken from Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), which in Ruth Wodak's brand had already been applied to the analysis of national identities in contemporary Austria.<sup>4</sup> CDA claims to approach discourse as embedded in social practices. Even more than that it wants to show discourse as a

form of social practice itself. However, CDA has been criticized for falling conspicuously short in this respect.<sup>5</sup> This would also be my principal critique of an otherwise interesting book. There are many ways to overcome the limitations of CDA: by systematically relating utterances to the social, economic, collective and biographical constellations against which they acquire their particular meaning; by doing a multifaceted microhistory (the author quotes Jeremy King's work on Budweis/Budejovice, which is an impressive example); by paying serious attention to how institutional and organizational networks interact with discursive actions. It would also pay off going beyond a focus on political discourse that is typical for the CDA-lens and instead take a close look at economic aspects of nationhood.

As I am myself a historian, this might be my particular *déformation professionnelle*, but I am convinced that in order to come to full fruition the approach that Karner outlines in his introduction would need a source analysis that goes considerably beyond an assemblage of published texts. This would also allow to discuss in which ways and how far nationalism entered the realm of the everyday, of associational and educational practices, of production and consumption. Karner refers to 'banal nationalism' mostly as the opposite of 'hot', politically explicit and more fanatic forms of nationalism. This does not capture the complexity of nationalism as a 'whole way of life', to paraphrase Raymond Williams's famous definition of culture. Including everyday nationalism would give a fuller view of Austrian social closure and it would come closer to the book's declared goal of having nationalism 'emerge from research, rather than being presupposed or even predetermined by it' (p.215).

In spite of this critique, it is important not to overlook the merits of Karner's work. It proposes a conceptual framework that structures a concise history of nationalism in Austria. As is inevitably the case, such an account leaves open many questions, but this just calls for further

empirical research in order to deepen our understanding of nationalism as a means of social closure.

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## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> P. M. Judson, *The Habsburg Empire: A New History* (Cambridge, MA, 2016). It does not figure in Karner's bibliography but the author has made intensive use of Judson's earlier publications.

<sup>2</sup> There is an edition in English: E. Bruckmüller, *The Austrian Nation: Cultural Consciousness and Socio-political processes* (Riverside, 2000)3.

<sup>3</sup> Karner does not much relate to this research: S. Breuss, K. Liebhart & A. Pribersky, *Inszenierungen: Stichwörter zu Österreich* (2. ed. Vienna, 1995); E. Brix, E. Bruckmüller & H. Stekl, (eds.), *Memoria Austriae*, 3 vol. (Vienna, 2004–05).

<sup>4</sup> R. Wodak, R. de Cillia, M. Reisigl & K. Liebhart, *The Discursive Construction of National Identity* (Edinburgh, 1999).

<sup>5</sup> For example R. Breeze, 'Critical Discourse Analysis and its Critics', in: *Pragmatics* 21/4 (2011), 493–525.