Habsburg studies stand at a crossroads. We have come a long way since C. A. Macartney published his magisterial history, *The Habsburg Empire*, in 1968.1 He began his story with the death of Joseph II in 1790—and thus, for him and his narrative, with the beginning of the end of the monarchy. Macartney’s narrative represented the best and most complete traditional story of decline and fall, according to which the ever-present push of modernity put the Habsburg Monarchy in the larger story of modern Europe as an entity doomed to dissolution. Moreover, its leaders, embodied in the clever Prince Clemens von Metternich, foresaw the decline of the empire and did their best to resist change and forestall the future.

The story of the Habsburg Empire’s decline has long dominated the history of the empire. The result has become a series of histories that marked the Habsburg Monarchy as alternatively un-modern and resistant to change. In a larger view, the empire was a foil for a larger European story that was embodied in a long march to modernity, in all its attending forms. Macartney’s story was probably the last and the best of these histories, but it subscribed to a thesis that had been around for a long time—most notably, in Lewis Namier’s 1921 treatment, “The Downfall of the Habsburg Monarchy.”2 In some ways, then, Habsburg Studies have already had their crises. The first of these occurred in the aftermath of World War I. Historians then increasingly looked to histories bounded by nations, or they read the history of the nation into the past. Their work viewed the Habsburg Empire as a medieval holdover; studying it as a whole thus offered little to European history.

Scholarship since the 1970s has slowly and methodically undermined these larger assumptions about the Habsburg Empire. The first studies, which appeared on banking, industry, and economics, argued that the Habsburg Empire was integrated into the European and, indeed, world economic system: its industry was moving in tandem with its neighbors.3 From there, scholars studied urban politics and civil society, increasingly making claims that Habsburg domestic politics were not so much in decline but instead vibrant. In addition, the old trope of centrifugal forces—first mentioned by Oscar Jászi in his 1929 study, *The Dissolution of the Habsburg Monarchy*—came under threat by new understandings of

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Austrian local and regional politics. It was, first and foremost, Gary Cohen’s 1981 study of Germans and Czechs and Prague, *The Politics of Ethnic Survival*, that showed us how belonging to a nation was increasingly a social choice, more so than a category given at birth. This already pushed us to reexamine our national categories two years before Benedict Anderson’s *Imagined Communities* hit the scene in 1983. Since then, Habsburg studies have directly addressed these larger narratives about the rise of nations and imperial decline. And there are many stories to tell—new stories that had been unfashionable or unthinkable in the preceding one hundred years. Tara Zahra’s now Macarthur-Award-winning work on the battles over children and nationality in the Bohemian lands—which first saw the light of day in *Central European History* in 2005—is representative of the great thought and energy present in modern Habsburg Studies at the moment. Such work has shown how national political groups’ competition for access to state offices and subsidies was integrative; such competition actually bound nationalist movements to the Habsburg state. In discursive terms, it was hard for even hardcore nationalist politicians to think about a future outside the multinational Habsburg state.

The “imperial turn” has likewise been invigorating. Jane Burbank and Frederick Cooper wrote in their 2010 volume, *Empires in World History*, that “empire was a remarkably durable form of state,” whereas “the nation-state appears as a blip on the historical horizon … and [its] hold on the world’s political imagination may well prove partial or transitory.” Such thinking provided recognition of Habsburg studies, as well as a push to continue to revise the larger narratives; this compelled the field’s practitioners to rethink their own assumptions about the Habsburg Empire and its place in Europe. It was in this larger context that Pieter Judson’s 2016 volume, *The Habsburg Empire: A New History*, brought forth the first summation of decades of revision. Judson spent a decade as editor of the *Austrian History Yearbook*, which gave him a special perch from which to observe and nourish new research and new interpretations in the field. Judson has been able, with his work, to synthesize most of the new and exciting revisionist approaches to the Habsburg Empire. It consolidates much of the work that has been done and is, in many ways, a fitting replacement for Macartney’s magisterial work.

But where is the field going? Within studies of Habsburg Central Europe, scholarship has become vibrant, engaging, and optimistic. In fact, recent work in Habsburg studies has been marked by a confidence and a shift in attitude. Put simply, Habsburg scholars no longer approach the empire as an anachronism or as a doomed entity—and thus more confidently

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approach their subject with an eye to the empire’s larger contributions to European history writ large. In other words, Habsburg scholars do have something to say about European history as such. Within a larger European frame, the empire’s story can be portrayed not so much as a backwater but, perhaps for the first time in the historiography, as a polity that is right in the thick of things. Historians have also been eager to embark on multinational projects that recapture and reconstruct histories that have become broken and fragmented. The funding process within the European Union and collaborative grants in the United States make such endeavors possible. Multinational projects are getting off the ground, and teamwork is now key. How else can one study an empire and a civil society that used thirteen different languages?

But all this optimism comes at a time when the number of positions for historians of Europe is dwindling. University deans are shifting funds away from traditional liberal arts disciplines. History departments, recognizing the long-term neglect of the global South and Asia, are shifting positions away from Europe. The challenge, then, is to speak to the larger discussions going on in the historical profession, cultural studies, and the social sciences. The optimistic view that the Habsburg Empire was not an anachronistic backwater is helpful here because it means that the Habsburg past can be and is a relevant one. In fact, the major issues facing our world today have their own antecedents, ones on which the history of the Habsburg Empire may shed some light. My own work, for instance, delves into areas of law and extrajudicial justice. Recent studies on refugees and migration studies have also appeared. The institutional history of the multinational empire has become relevant once again for a Europe defined both by the European Union and separatist movements—from Brexit to Catalonian independence. Habsburg scholars are thus able to put their subject into the center of Europe again. This is a good thing and it should continue.

Habsburg scholars next need to engage the rewriting of the early twentieth century, long dominated by nationally fragmented narratives. A Europe divided into nation states after 1918 did much to try to cover up the multinational history within those states, and scholars are now recovering and thus complicating the story of “interwar Europe.” Those who focus on Habsburg Central Europe are also already working to rethink and reconfigure our historical understandings of space and territory. The ones working on the Adriatic, for instance, on the newly acquired territories of Italy, and on the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes, are all doing exemplary work. They are indeed writing the story of territories with layers of identity, but also of institutions, connections, and past possible futures that even lay at the intersection of new national projects: Slovenian, Italian, Croatian, and even imperial dreams left behind by imperial Austria and royal Hungary. What these studies do is highlight the reach and power of Habsburg histories: they transform and deepen our perspective—on fascism, on democracy, on national self-determination, and on national ascription—and thus have much to say on these major developments.

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