Austria, the Writing of History, and the Search for European Identity

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IN HIS ADDRESS TO THE INTERNATIONAL AUTHOR’S CONGRESS held in Paris in 1935, Robert Musil—who claimed to have always held himself back from politics because, in his words, like hygiene, he had no talent for it—attempted to describe the problem of being an Austrian writer. A German author, he suggested, is unproblematically German in his writings. But an Austrian writer, he said, was in a more problematic situation. “My Austrian homeland expects from its poets that they be more or less poets of the Austrian homeland, and there are the creators of cultural history who make of show of demonstrating that an Austrian poet has always been something other as a German one.”¹ It is perhaps the fate of Austria to have a surfeit of Kulturgeschichtskonstrukteure, of intellectuals who feel a need to build a cultural history of Austria and to project it into a distant past, and this largely in the face of the overwhelming reality that a unified cultural history of Austria is impossible, unlike, some might think, that of ancient nations such as Germany, France, or Italy.

But Musil was not so sure that Austria and Austrian intellectuals were quite so different from others. He saw his age as one characterized by an increasing emphasis on the collectivity and along with it a demand for a unifying culture and cultural history, one that would serve the ideological demands of the nation. Against such a tendency, he argued that culture is essentially international, and even if not entirely international, then transtemporal. “Culture is not a transmission that can simply be passed from one hand to another as traditionalists think, but rather a strange process: creators do not so much take it from other times and places but rather it is newly born in them.”² In a sense, the great modernist author of Der Mann ohne Eigenschaften—who, being born in 1880 and dying in 1942, lived to see the birth

²“Und die Kultur ist nicht eine Überlieferung, die einfach von Hand zu Hand gegeben werden kann, wie die Traditionalisten meinen, sondern dabei ist ein merkwürdiger Vorgang im Spiel: die schöpferischen Menschen übernehmen nicht sowohl das aus anderen Zeiten und Orten Kommende als daß es vielmehr in ihnen neu geboren wird.” Ibid., 274.
and the death of one iteration of Austria—was using the particular, precarious, and problematic perspective of an Austrian writer, with all of its political and social demands, its contradictions, and its inconsistencies, to look at European culture as a whole and to recognize it as no less contingent, discontinuous, and in a constant state of re-creation than the culture of Austria. I would like to suggest that the problem of Austrian history, no less than the problem of Austrian culture, far from being a stumbling block for Austrian historians, has given the best among them through the twentieth century a privileged perspective from which to contemplate the contingencies, transformations, and discontinuities of European history.

The problem of Austrian history is certainly well known to this audience. Austria is among the youngest of Europe’s national states: from its foundation in 1918, the republic did not even survive for a full generation before being annexed and absorbed into the German Reich, an event greeted by most of the republic’s inhabitants with approval. A new republic was proclaimed and established in 1945 and is now seventy years old, a bit older than myself. The traumatic birth of the first Austrian Republic and the challenges of the second have left their cultural and psychological marks on its inhabitants. Part of the challenge has been to project this young state into a past, to provide a history of Austria before its origins, in the words of the historian Herwig Wolfram. In other young states carved from the great empires that collapsed in the aftermath of World War I, this has been done by focusing not on national history but on cultural, ethnic, or linguistic groups that are said to have formed the nation prior to national independence. Thus Czechs, Croats, Serbs, Hungarians, Slovaks, Ukrainians, and Slovenes can claim, with greater or lesser justification, that their national histories, closely tied to specific ethnicities, reach into the distant past. Austria has no such unified national history to claim. Nor, prior to the Great War, did anyone feel compelled to make such a claim or to create such a history. “Austria,” after all, could refer to any or all of a number of different things, none of them equivalent to, say, France or Great Britain, let alone to Hungary or Croatia. In a narrow sense, Austria could mean the medieval Duchy of Austria made up of Upper Austria and Lower Austria and including Vienna. It could also mean, after the Ausgleich of 1867, that part of the Habsburg Empire that was not Hungarian. Finally, in its most expansive sense, it could refer to the whole of the Habsburg Empire. Thus nineteenth-century attempts to write the history of Austria largely failed to find a coherent unifying meaning of Austria projected into the past. What Austria could never mean was a nation-state or, especially given nineteenth-century ethnic aspirations, a people, a nation. What it did have, and continues to have, however, is an institution that paradoxically is specifically dedicated to its history, the Institut für Österreichische Geschichtsforschung (Institute for Austrian Historical Research), an institution founded in 1854 with the specific aim of promoting patriotism in Austria (whatever Austria was supposed to be) by researching and communicating its history. Thus from its inception, this

\[^{3}\text{From the voluminous literature on the discontinuous history of Austria and Austrian identity, see among others Ernst Bruckmüller, Nation Österreich: Kulturelles Bewußtsein und gesellschaftlich-politische Prozesse, 2nd ed. (Vienna, 1996); and Herwig Wolfram and Walter Pohl, eds., Probleme der Geschichte Österreichs und ihrer Darstellung (Vienna, 1991). The most successful attempt to write a history of Austria in the twentieth century is perhaps that of Ernst Hanisch, Der lange Schatten des Staates: Österreichische Gesellschaftsgeschichte im 20. Jahrhundert (Vienna, 1994), which appeared as volume 9 in the series Österreichische Geschichte under the general editorship of Herwig Wolfram.}\]


\[^{5}\text{On the early history of the Institut see Alphons Lhotsky, Geschichte des Instituts für Österreichische Geschichtsforschung 1854–1954: Mitteilungen des Instituts für Österreichische Geschichtsforschung (hereafter MIÖG),}\]
institution had as its mission to create a history for an entity that did not exist, or perhaps better said, to create an Austria by discovering or rather inventing for it a history.

Like Austria itself, the Institute is an anomalous and hybrid creation. Although its offices and library are housed in the main building of the University of Vienna, which, along with the Rathaus and the Parlamentsgebäude, was constructed between 1873 and 1884 on the former Parade Ground that formed the Ringstraße, and most of its professors and staff are part of the Faculty of History, the Institute has traditionally answered directly to the Federal Ministry of Science, Research, and Economy. But if it was conceived as an organ of national propaganda, the scholars appointed by the ministry quickly abandoned this mission, and it became instead an institution dedicated to the auxiliary sciences of history, that is, to paleography and diplomatics, the technical study of royal, papal, and private archival documents. As an educational institution, it assumed the role of training young scholars for careers in archives and until today is the only institution comparable to the older École nationale des chartes, founded in Paris in 1821 to train archivists and, like its Viennese counterpart, a nonuniversity institution that depends directly from a federal ministry. Generations of young Austrians have suffered through its rigorous three-year course of study in Latin, paleography, diplomatics, and history (recently transformed into a five-semester master’s degree program) before going on to fill positions in archives both in Austria and throughout the German-speaking world. Others remained in academe, becoming professors of history in Austria and even in the United States. The skills taught in the Institutskurse are among the most technical and positivistic tools of historical scholarship: According to what rules of rhetoric, language, and authentications were official acts of kings, prelates, and princes prepared? How does one accurately date and place these acts, which carry complex formulas devised by chancelleries? How does one distinguish forgeries (common in the Middle Ages and beyond) from genuine documents? According to what principles should these documents be organized, classified, and published? This work, carried on through generations at institutions such as the École des chartes, the Monumenta Germaniae Historica, and the Institut für Österreichische Geschichtsforschung, have won scholars who spend their lives studying and teaching such technical matters both a reputation for being narrow positivists and a begrudging respect for their unquestionable expertise.

In Vienna, however, the professors at the Institute have seldom been only diplomatists or paleographers; they are also, in accordance with the spirit of the institution, historians. That is to say they are supposed to use these technical tools to write history. In the first instance, of course, this was supposed to mean Austrian history, but as we have said, this is a slippery business, particularly since the Institute has always focused on the Middle Ages and the early modern periods, periods for which Austria and Austrians were notably absent. But at the same time, these scholars who were simultaneously focusing on the most elemental sources of history and on grappling with the meaning of Austria before Austria, were often also, or even primarily, engaged in the study of history at a wider scale, that of Europe. Here I discuss how postwar practitioners of this Austrian school of historical investigation, armed


with the highest level of technical competencies but also with a healthy understanding of the constructed, imaginary, and problematic history of historical study, took these insights out of their Danubian homeland and transformed how we understand Europe’s earliest history from the end of antiquity.

I concentrate on four major figures of the past sixty-odd years, Erich Zöllner (1916–96), Herwig Wolfram (1934–), Walter Pohl (1953–), and Helmut Reimitz (1965–). The second served as Director of the Institute for Austrian Historical Research; the third, while having been the prize student of the Institute, is currently the Director of the Institute for Medieval Research of the Austrian Academy of Sciences, an institution essentially constructed around and for him; and the fourth, having emigrated from Austria, is now Professor of History at my neighboring institution, Princeton University. Most of these four scholars made substantial contributions to Austrian history; after all, this was very much their job. However, even as they struggled to define Austrian history before Austria, they made enduring and contributions to the understanding of European history before and beyond Austria, contributions marked by their understanding that the complicated, discontinuous, and constructed nature of Austrian history is not unique to the Danubian Republic but rather very much the nature of European history writ large.

As medievalists, and in particular as historians of the early Middle Ages, these historians concentrated on a period when not only Austria, but France, Germany, Hungary, Bohemia, and indeed all of the other nations and nation-states of Europe did not exist. In a sense, then, the study of early medieval Austrian history was no more illegitimate or imaginary than that of other nations that eventually developed in western Eurasia. Zöllner’s dissertation focused on a short-lived polity that never developed into a nation-state: the Duchy of Burgundy in the tenth and eleventh centuries, a territory caught between the developing east and west Frankish polities that in time would become France and Germany and that was ultimately folded into the former. Following the completion of his dissertation in 1938, he began a research project within the Institute that, in theory at least, should have fit well into the National Socialist historical tradition: how the individual peoples of the Frankish kingdom gradually came to manifest their national self-understandings that resulted in the emergence of the German, French, and Italian Völker. The resulting study, which appeared only in 1950 as Die politische Stellung der Völker im Frankenreich, did not quite live up to Nazi expectations. Zöllner knew himself as the inheritor of various cultural and ethnic traditions; if his father’s family had come from the Bohemian Forest region to Vienna, other ancestors had come from Moravia and Hungary; his mother was Jewish. He recognized that he and his own society were the result of mixtures and combinations of different ethnic and regional groups into something new, and his work on the emergence of these three populations likewise saw the possibility of change and not simply eternal oppositions. Thus there was no hint of racial exceptionalism or Germanic superiority in the study, nor in his subsequent work on early medieval peoples, including his Geschichte der Franken bis zur

7Zöllner’s dissertation, “Burgund zwischen Frankreich und Deutschland” (PhD diss., University of Vienna, 1938), was never published, although he continued his interest in Burgundian history as is seen in his “Die Herkunft der Agilulfinger,” MIÖG 59 (1951): 245–64; and in his review of René Louis, De l’histoire à la légende: Girart, comte de Vienne in MIÖG 61 (1953): 183.
8Erich Zöllner, Die politische Stellung der Völker im Frankenreich (Vienna, 1950).
9On Zöllner’s family background and its influence on his work see Heidi Dienst, “Nachruf / Erich Zöllner,” MIÖG 105 (1997): 533–42, esp. 534. Although his mother was Jewish, Zöllner, like other threatened scholars in the Institute, was protected by his professors, even including the National Socialist Heinrich Brunner, whom Zöllner credited for his support and protection. See Stoy, Das Österreichische Institut, 315.
Mitte des sechsten Jahrhunderts, which took over a project begun by Ludwig Schmidt, author of numerous studies of “German Peoples.” Schmidt had never doubted the continuity, indeed the identity, between the Germani people of late antiquity and the Deutsch of his own time. Zöllner did not break with this tradition, but in writing about the Franks, he was from the start explicit in describing the Franks as a Stammesbund, that is, a federation of tribes. As he wrote, “The Frankish federation of tribes, for it is certainly correct to so characterize it, was not from its beginning a political or ethnic unity.” It was thus essentially historical, coming into being through the combination of smaller unities, even though Zöllner, still under the influence of generations of German scholarship on the Völkerwanderung and particularly that of Schmidt, assumed that these elements were themselves smaller Germanic tribes and failed to take into account the continuing complexity and shifting meaning of the term “Frank” through the centuries.

Still, this sense of historical development in the emergence of distinct political and social groups in European history likewise manifested itself in his writing about Austria. And when he wrote, Zöllner was absolutely clear on the protean nature of Austrian identity. In his numerous publications on Austrian history, including his Geschichte Österreichs, his Österreichbegriff: Formen und Wandlungen in der Geschichte, and elsewhere—and unlike other historians of recent nation-states such as Henri Pirenne, the historian of Belgium who saw a sort of manifest destiny that would united the regions that ultimately made up Belgium—Zöllner refused to essentialize “Austria” or “Austrian.” These terms referred to different things at different times. In 1991 he wrote about the changing meanings of the term “Austria,” emphasizing how Austrian identity had constantly fluctuated in both its extent and its content across the centuries. Austria could mean, as he wrote, the Bundesländer; the Erblande, which might be designated as österreichische or deutsche Erblande; the Römische-deutsche Reich, the Habsburg monarchy with its variations; or the modern Austrian Republic with its discontinuous history since 1918. Within these varying political and territorial units, populations that “became” Austrian at times saw themselves as deeply oppositional. He wrote about how those from Lower Austria considered Styrians uncouth. The Swabians introduced into lower Austria were considered foreign and threatening; when Duke Albrecht I settled them in the Duchy of Austria the nobility complained that genteel Austrian women would be forced to marry Swabians. Bohemians and Hungarians were often seen as barbarians. And yet in time, descendants from all of these oppositional groups could become Austrian, but Austrian in different ways across time. Unlike historians of other “peoples,” Zöllner never pretended that there was some essential

Austrian identity to which these foreign groups could be assimilated: together they and others created what might at different times be Austrian.

But is Austrian identity unique in Europe? Should one imagine that while Austrian identity is a constant process of becoming, other European identities are a matter of being? Are German, Serbian, Hungarian, French, and other national identities transhistorical phenomena that can be traced backward and forward from the period of barbarian migrations to the present as a gradual unfolding of an essentially unchanging identity? Or is becoming German, or French, or Serbian no different from becoming Austrian? Are these other peoples of Europe—and historically speaking, are the peoples of the early Middle Ages, Franks, Alamans, Burgundians, Goths, and others, the so-called Völker of the Völkerwanderungzeit—more processes than entities? Could the experience of becoming Austrian help scholars understand the process of becoming European?

This is the question taken up by the second of our four scholars, Herwig Wolfram, the best known living Austrian historian of the Middle Ages and a previous speaker in the Kann Lecture series. Although Herwig Wolfram never studied with Erich Zöllner, Zöllner paved the way for him to become C. H. Beck’s author of the Geschichte der Goten. Wolfram’s primary inspiration was the great Austrian historian Heinrich Fichtenau, who, while never specifically interested in the history of the migration period and thus the origins of the peoples of Europe, was likewise deeply involved in the deconstruction of myths of European and Austrian identity.16 Fichtenau’s book on the Carolingian kingdom, written in occupied Vienna and very much a meditation on the disasters of German imperialism, infuriated German language historians in neighboring Germany and Switzerland.17 His Das Urkundenwesen in Österreich, which was ostensibly a technical study of documentary production in medieval Austria, happily ignored Austria modern or medieval and simply dealt with the long tradition of documentary and archival practice in the region defined by the Danube and the Alps.18

From Fichtenau, Wolfram derived much of his sense of how to read administrative documents, not simply for political and constitutional history but for intellectual history; how to think differently and across the grain of current historiography. At the same time, from Fichtenau and the other medievalists in the Institute, Wolfram acquired the meticulous technical competencies necessary to manage the most complex and intractable medieval texts in a way that turned them from mere administrative documents or literary creations into vital ways into the inner thoughts and identities of individuals and communities. However, his breakthrough book focused neither on Austria nor, in the tradition of Zöllner, on a people like the Franks, who gave their name to France, but on the Goths: a people who created vast but ultimately ephemeral kingdoms in Italy, southern Gaul, and the Iberian peninsula between the fifth and the eighth centuries, only to disappear entirely from the European map.

Who were the Goths? Unlike the Austrians, whose name appears very late in history, the Goths already are named in classical geographers and ethnographers. But Wolfram—under the influence of the German historian Reinhard Wenskus, who had trained both in history

16On Fichtenau see Andreas Schwarz and Katharina Kaska, eds. Urkunden—Schriften—Lebensordnungen: Neue Beiträge zur Mediävistik (Vienna, 2015).
18Heinrich Fichtenau, Das Urkundenwesen in Österreich (Vienna, 1971).
and in ethnography—instead of assuming that the Goths were a people with a fixed identity and continuity from antiquity through the Middle Ages, asked if perhaps they might have been less a people than a discourse. First in a series of dense articles later published together as Gotische Studien, and then in his magisterial Geschichte der Goten, translated into English (History of the Goths), French, Russian, Polish, and Italian, he traced not so much the wanderings of a people from their legendary origins in southern Scandinavia to the Mediterranean but rather the various incarnations of particular mythic traditions, customs of rulership, and a certain sense of history into various populations across Europe over seven centuries. Rather than studying the Goths and the Gothic people as a somehow stable and eternal entity, he employed a term first used in Russian historiography: “ethnogenesis,” that is, the birth of an ethnos, a people, but a people defined not by biological descent, language, custom, or any other external marker but by their acceptance of and adhesion to a set of cultural and political norms. These, following Wenskus, Wolfram defined as the Traditionskern, or the kernel of tradition; one might say the “Gothic formula” that could be adopted and adapted by different populations and individuals across time. He saw the bearers of this tradition as Gothic kings, either descendants of the same lineage or upstarts who could claim this tradition and its royal genealogy as their own. Ultimately, anyone who joined these kings, who fought alongside them, could become a Goth and become assimilated into the Gothic identity.

The implications of such an approach were revolutionary. Zöllner, Schmidt, and generations of German historians before them had attempted to trace individual peoples, conceived of as bounded ethnic groups, as they moved across the European landscape. Wolfram’s understanding was different. Just as the Austrian people (for there is, today, an Austrian people) did not come to the Danube and Alps from some ancient Heimat but were rather formed in place from different ethnic, cultural, and political groups in the region—assimilating but also being changed by new groups, including the Habsburgs, who migrated into the region—one needed no longer to understand the changes in the ethnic landscape of Europe by large-scale migration. Instead, Wolfram saw small but effective groups arriving in areas such as the Black Sea region and there turning local populations into Goths, populations that later entered Italy, Gaul, and the Iberian peninsula, where they were in turn joined by dissatisfied Romans and remnants of other barbarian armies who could also become Goths. Central to such a process was a history, transmitted orally across the various incarnations of Goths, a story of their origin, the origo gentis Gothorum, or origin of the Gothic people, ultimately written down by the Roman senatorial aristocrat Cassiodorus in the Italian kingdom of the great Gothic king Theodoric and transmitted in an adaptation by one Jordanes, writing in Constantinople after the destruction of Theodoric’s kingdom in the

19Reinhard Wenskus, Stammesbildung und Verfassung: Das Werden der frühmittelalterlichen gentes (Vienna, 1977).
20Collectively republished as Herwig Wolfram, Gotische Studien: Volk und Herrschaft im frühen Mittelalter (Munich, 2005).
mid sixth century. That this story contained mythic elements, that it created genealogical links between kings who had never existed, that it could be disputed and appropriated by rival factions, did not matter as long as it remained a living sign of Gothic identity, just as the myth of the Mayflower and the Pilgrim Fathers can be embraced and celebrated not only by New Englanders but by recent arrivals from Mexico, China, Norway, or Austria as part of becoming American.

This revolutionary vision did not fail to elicit strong criticism, both from traditionalists who insisted that barbarian peoples such as the Goths must certainly have comprised large, relatively homogeneous ethnic communities moving across Europe, just as Jordanes and other contemporary authors had described, but also from scholars on the other end of the spectrum who objected to the suggestion that some small elite had carried a kernel of tradition from Scandinavia to the Black Sea and then on to the Mediterranean. Still others were ready to dismiss both ethnogenesis and migration altogether, arguing that it was simply impossible to study the history of barbarian peoples such as the Goths prior to their entry into the Roman Empire and that to attempt to do so was to support, in however mitigated a way, old tropes of Germanic identity that had reached their apogee under National Socialism.

The objection that because Wolfram and, before him, Wenskus, had made use of earlier generations of Germanic philologists and legal historians, they were somehow Nazi fellow travelers was, if insulting to the point of being libelous, without intellectual foundation. The problem of understanding why, if groups like the Goths were indeed recent formations, they were persistently described in ethnic language, was more serious, as was the objection that the notion of a kernel of tradition was simply not evident for many, perhaps most of the early medieval peoples that entered the Roman Empire. While stories of the Gothic or Lombard past indeed reflected some sort of preethnographic tradition, other groups such as the Franks, the Alemanni, the Burgundians, and others apparently had no such *origo gentis* legends. On the other hand, one asked if this general approach to the formation of medieval peoples was applicable only to those seen as Germanic, or if this process could somehow also explain the appearance, in the course of the eighth and ninth centuries, of Slavic peoples such as the Croats, Serbs, Bulgars, and others who transformed the Balkans and Eastern Europe.

Herwig Wolfram’s understanding of the phenomenon of ethnogenesis, particularly concerning the Goths, continued to develop from the late 1970s. For example, the concept of a kernel of tradition disappeared from later editions. However, the wider question of early medieval identity was increasingly taken up by his student Walter Pohl. Pohl, like Wolfram and Zöllner, is Austrian, but was born in postwar Vienna and marked by the opportunities of international exchange, travel, and collaboration that were lacking for the previous generation of Institute scholars. Pohl’s breakthrough book, *Die Awaren*, looked at another early medieval people, the Avars, but this time an enigmatic steppe empire created in the second half of the sixth century in the Carpathian Basin bridging the Byzantine and Frankish


24Walter Goffart has been among the foremost critics of Wolfram’s approach, particularly in his *The Narrators of Barbarian History: Jordanes, Gregory of Tours, Bede, and Paul the Deacon* (Princeton, 1988), in which he argues that narratives such as that of Jordanes are essentially literary traditions drawing exclusively on Roman sources and containing nothing of historical value concerning the prehistory of the Goths. Peter Heather, *The Goths* (Oxford, 1996), likewise criticized the suggestion of a kernel of tradition reaching into the distant past, but argued that the migration of the Goths was indeed a “large-scale migration of more or less the traditionally envisaged kind” (171–72).

worlds. Like Wolfram, Pohl approached this new polity not as a homogeneous ethnic community, but a newly created multiethnic empire of a particular type, that of the Great Steppe, which had previously seen the rise of the Xiongnu and the Huns and would later see the empires of the Magyars and Mongols. Drawing on Byzantine, Chinese, and Western sources, as well as on archaeology and the ethnography of the steppe, he showed how this vast empire, drawn together by its khagan, Bayan, and by his mounted archers in the sixth century, depended for its existence on its ability to extract wealth from raids, trading, and especially payments of tribute from the Byzantine world. Military victory quickly expanded small raiding bands into armies and empires; conversely, failure led to the equally rapid disintegration of the Avar Empire and the emergence from its ruins of new peoples. It was in particular this last aspect of the study that had the greatest resonance, since Pohl showed how breakaway groups from the Avars were the foundation of the new “peoples” of the Balkans, including the Bulgars, Croats, and various other Slavic “peoples” who suddenly emerge on the world stage in the seventh through ninth centuries. These peoples, whose mythic histories would be called upon in the nineteenth century as the foundations of nationalist ideologies that ultimately led to the disintegration of the Habsburg Empire, appear as the result of historical processes within the Avar Empire, undergoing their own ethnogenesis while the Avars, as a political unity and as a people, completely disappears in the early ninth century.

Following his study of the Avars, Pohl took a leadership role in an extraordinary pan-European research project funded by the European Science Foundation, the “Transformation of the Roman World,” which brought together more than one hundred and fifty historians, archaeologists, and philologists from across Europe to examine the process by which the political, social, and cultural traditions of European peoples and nations emerged from the Roman imperial system in the course of late antiquity and the early Middle Ages. In a certain sense, this pan-European project was Viennese ethnogenesis writ large and internationalized, since rather than assuming that the Roman Empire fell under the assault of primordial ethnic and political forces that had resisted Romanization within and without the limes, the research of the various participants uncovered the processes by which new peoples, cultural forms, and social structures emerged both within the empire itself and in the zones of Roman influence along its peripheries. Pohl’s leadership in this project led him to expand his investigations of ethnogenesis, community formation, and identity from Central Europe to the West. He has written important articles on the discontinuous history of the Lombards, a military confederation that formed in the region between the Vienna Woods and the Danube Bend in the early sixth century before conquering much of Italy.

26Ibid., 227–28.
27Ibid., 261–68.
28The project was directed by Evangelos Chrysos, Javier Arce, and Ian N. Wood and ultimately produced fourteen edited volumes on late antique and early medieval society, economy, communication, thought, and political power. A complete list of the volumes, all published by Brill, is available at: http://www.brill.com/publications/transformation-roman-world (accessed 1 December 2015).
29The four volumes edited or coedited by Pohl are vol. 1, Kingdoms of the Empire: The Integration of Barbarians in Late Antiquity (1997); vol. 2 (with Helmut Reimitz), Strategies of Distinction: The Construction of Ethnic Communities, 300–800 (1998); vol. 10 (with Ian Wood and Helmut Reimitz), The Transformation of Frontiers: From Late Antiquity to the Carolingians (2001); and vol. 13 (with Hans-Werner Goetz, Jörg Jarnut, and Sören Kaschke), Regna and Gentes: The Relationship between Late Antique and Early Medieval Peoples and Kingdoms in the Transformation of the Roman World (2003).
30Among others: Walter Pohl and Peter Erhart, ed., Die Langobarden–Herrschaft und Identität (Vienna, 2005); Pohl, “Paulus Diaconus und die ‘Historia Langobardorum’: Text und Tradition,” in Historiographie im frühen...
and has written decisive monographs on the Germani and the whole phenomenon of the Völkerwanderung that has loomed so large in European consciousness for two centuries and that has recently been invoked by populist leaders such as Geert Wilders and Jean-Marie Le Pen.31

In his studies of the Lombards and in particular of the way that Lombard history was constructed in the Middle Ages, Pohl addressed indirectly the question of the significance of whether there existed a kernel of tradition within the identity of a people. Lombard history is dominated by an extraordinary history written around the end of the eighth century by Paul the Deacon, a descendant of a noble Lombard family a few decades after the destruction of the Lombard kingdom by the Frankish ruler Charles the Great, or Charlemagne. Through a sort of textual archaeology, Pohl was able to uncover not only the various sources that Paul had used to construct his history but also the contexts in which these earlier documents, including genealogies, legal claims, and historical accounts, had been compiled, as well as the reasons for their composition. He also was able to uncover how specific religious institutions, principally the monastery of Montecassino where Paul spent his last years, became “memory workshops” (Werkstätte der Erinnerung) in which Lombard identity was restructured and transformed in the centuries after the fall of the Lombard kingdom, producing the compelling but artificial image of the Lombards and their past that had been the source of all subsequent understanding of the Lombards.32

More widely, combining the exacting text-critical approaches of the Institute for Austrian Historical Research with the insights gained from ethnography, he has been able to interpret the rhetoric of contemporary descriptions of early medieval peoples, a rhetoric that assigned certain physical, military, and social markers to particular peoples, markers too often assumed by modern historians to be genuine evidence of fixed identities. In reality, these markers, when compared across texts and with archaeological and other evidence, are exposed as literary fictions, contradictory and stereotypical, employed not to describe but to prescribe, and intended to create the impression of stable, transtemporal communities in a world that was essentially one of flux and change.33

Pohl’s continuing deconstruction of the received image of European nations in their origins and early histories has had a major impact on the entire understanding of community identity and solidarity in an historical perspective. Steering a path between traditional historiographies that posited massive movements of populations from Scandinavia and the lower Elbe regions into the Roman world, and those currently fashionable with revisionists who want to deny that any significant population movements took place, Pohl and his Austrian school, while not denying the reality of conquest and migration, stand the usual interpretation of these phenomena on its head: Germanic and Slavic peoples did not invade, conquer, and


31 Walter Pohl, Die Völkerwanderung: Eroberung und Integration (Stuttgart, 2002); idem, Die Germanen (Munich, 2000).
transform the western half of the Roman Empire. Rather, military victories, conflicts, and negotiations with heterogeneous groups within and without the empire created these peoples. Their ethnic identities were thus the results of complex historical processes, not their causes. Language, religion, material culture, real or supposed origins, all of which have long been taken as markers of difference, he has shown to be strategies by which successful confederations could mark their new identities and differences from others. This is not to say that these identities were any less real because they were invented. Once accepted, activated, and mobilized for group solidarity, they could become powerful lived realities that channeled collective action and could be mobilized by successful leaders, even if the disparate elements that had preceded these ethnic creations remained latent and thus held the potential for other, different identities to end the existence of these constellations. Thus, the Huns could utterly vanish after the death of Attila in the fifth century; the Goths could disappear after the destruction of the Ostrogothic kingdom in the sixth; and by the middle of the ninth century, no one would claim to be an Avar. Certainly not all of those who had belonged to these peoples died or went into exile; they simply became something else, merging into new, more successful peoples in the course of a few generations.

Herwig Wolfram assumed, at the time that he wrote his *Geschichte der Goten*, that ethnogenesis ended with territorialization. That is, he saw the protean malleability of these communities, which so easily absorbed others and could be easily subsumed themselves, severely limited by the adoption of Roman regional institutions of governance and economic production in those areas in which they settled. But was that strictly correct? Was ethnogenesis a process that was confined to the migration period, or did it (does it) continue after territorialization? The key medieval people to examine in this regard were the Franks, whose kingdom under the leadership of Clovis conquered the remnants of Roman Gaul in the late fifth century and went on to conquer the Visigothic kingdom north of the Pyrenees, the Burgundian and Alemannian regna, Frisia, Bavaria, and, ultimately under Charles the Great, Italy and the Danubian plain beyond the Enns. The Franks are easily identified as the ancestors of the French but also of the modern Germans, both of whom claim both Clovis/Chlodwig and Charlemagne/Karl der Große; they are the most successful people of Europe. Erich Zöllner, we have seen, recognized that the Franks at their inception had been a federation, not an ethnic unit, but he assumed that following their conquests, the identity of the Franks was stable and unproblematic. But was this actually the case? Our final Viennese historian, Helmut Reimitz, revisited this key ethnicity to look at Frankish identity, not as did Zöllner—to the middle of the sixth century, when according to the older historian their evolution as a people was at an end—but from the middle of the sixth century to the middle of the ninth. Drawing on the methods of Wolfram and Pohl, as well as the scrupulous attention to manuscript tradition, philology, and textual nuances he learned in the *Institutskurs*, he has examined how Frankish identity was reformulated, debated, denied, expanded, and mobilized across these centuries. Rather than the expansion of a core of Frankish identity carried by its royal dynasties, the Merovingians and later Carolingians, it was a discontinuous and disputed process in which multiple possible meanings of Frankish identity were constructed and contested in ways that were both creative and destructive.

34 Of course these arguments have not been without their opponents, primarily the students of Walter Goffart. See the essays in Andrew Gillett, ed., *On Barbarian Identity: Critical Approaches to Ethnicity in the Early Middle Ages* (Turnhout, 2002), which contains, along with significant essays on early medieval archaeology and ethnicity, a number of pointed attacks on the “Viennese school,” as well as a reply by Pohl: “Ethnicity, Theory, and Tradition: A Response,” 221–39.
identity coexisted in contradiction and competition. As self-consciously rulers in the tradition of Roman regional military and civilian administration, Merovingian kings did not from the start attempt to ground their authority in an ethnic Frankish identity. In the course of time other ways of thinking Frankish identity, increasingly taking on the understanding of the Franks as the chosen people of God, the New Israel, developed and were claimed by regional factions within a fragmented kingdom. Ultimately, the vast expansion of the regnum Francorum in the later eighth and ninth centuries meant that still more possible identities could be subsumed under the label of Frank, although the tensions between competing regional claims to Frankishness and more universal claims were never resolved, any more than the identity of Austrian claimed by those living in Ober- and Niederösterreich have either been fully subsumed or replaced by those of the Bundesstaat Österreich or, before 1918, in the Habsburg Empire. Nor does Reimitz assume that this open-ended process terminated when his study ended with the ninth century. Ethnogenesis, in the sense of a constantly disputed and constantly renewed process, continues to today. One need only look at the heated debates on European identity and national identity that threaten the delicate postwar balance of the European Union to understand that, pace those who would like to believe that national identities are finally fixed and that history is at an end, in the future, Europe and its nations will be very different from what they were in the past or are at present.

Thus we return to the wisdom of Musil we quoted at the beginning of this paper: “Culture is not a transmission that can simply be passed from one hand to another as traditionalists think, but rather a strange process: creators do not so much take it from other times and places but rather it is newly born in them.” Today, long-established Europeans as well as newly arrived refugees and emigrants are giving birth to new European cultures and identities, and I am certain that Austrian historians will be present to explain the process to themselves and to us.

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36See above, note 2.