Central European Cultures 2, no. 1 (2022): 127–131
doi.org/10.47075/CEC.2022-1.08

CEC Central European Cultures

Habsburg's "Dark Continent": Postkoloniale Lektüren zur österreichischen Literatur und Kultur im langen 19. Jahrhundert. By Clemens Ruthner.

Tübingen: Narr Francke Attempto, 2018. 401 pp.

Naser Šečerović
University of Sarajevo, Department of German language and literature; Franje Račkog 1, 71000 Sarajevo, Bosnia and Herzegovina; nsecerovic1@gmail.com

Clemens Ruthner's *Habsburgs "Dark Continent"* is the result of the author's fifteen-year work on the colonial history and the colonial legacy of the Habsburg Monarchy. This work took place within the internet publication project *Kakanien revisited*, founded by Ruthner and Wolfgang Müller-Funk, and in the context of other projects and publications of the author. As a matter of fact, it is a work that counters the Habsburg Myth, which until the twenty-first century has maintained the dominant perception of the Habsburg Monarchy as a "white spot" on the preponderantly dark "map of Europe's new postcolonial consciousness" (p. 18). That perception established the long-lasting narrative of Austria–Hungary as an empire that, unlike other European empires, had no colonies, which is believed to involve certain moral superiority.

Ruthner opposes this narrative with his thesis of a Habsburg "colonialism without colonies" (p. 31), which he builds on the previous work of various researchers in this field. This repressed colonialism was preeminently evident in the Habsburg Monarchy during the nineteenth century, and culminated in the occupation and annexation of Bosnia-Herzegovina. Ruthner's book primarily intends to "make visible again what was suppressed in the cultural order of 'Kakanien' during the long nineteenth century" (p. 20). Nevertheless, Ruthner does not want to make a final judgment. He sees his contribution as a part of an already existing discourse that could stimulate further research.

Freud's quote in the title of the book, his metaphor of the dark continent for the "sexual life of an adult woman" focuses on "*gendering*" (p. 19) in colonialism—namely, as internal occupation and the possible resulting manipulation of the colonized other by the colonizer. The image of one's own is "developed on the negative image of other collectives." The Other is accordingly "always the object of desire" and hence "written into one's own" (p. 71). In that matter, Ruthner's study does not deal only with concrete political desires but deals with "secret colonial desires in Austrian literature and culture in the long nineteenth century, but also with their confrontation with them" (p. 112). It is no coincidence that the book begins with a postcolonial reading of Kafka's *In the Penal Colony*. This interpretation intends to show how Kafka, as Ruthner quotes Bernd Neumann, becomes an "ethnologist of his own [decaying] culture" (p. 26) Ruthner, therefore, sees his study as a "first step, so to speak, towards comprehending the pertinent collective *unconscious* of the 'Kakanian' culture/s." Furthermore, he wants to "identify potential political and cultural parallel actions to the colonialism of the other major European powers" (p. 49).

Ruthner first develops a "literary and cultural studies imagology" (p. 101), based on the "Holy Trinity" (p. 8); i.e. on Edward Said, Homi Bhabha, and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. He exemplifies this imagology on selected Habsburg examples from literature as well as on the colonization of Bosnia-Herzegovina, where Ruthner finds "the k. u. k. dispositive is probably most clearly put in praxis" (p. 316). His book primarily offers a "contrapuntal reading," which is oriented on Edward Said. It is characterized by 1. "contrapuntal structure of identities," where "both poles of the dyad are to be perceived as an unit"; 2. theming "the repressed historical context of imperial writing"; 3. giving a voice to the "partially silenced," that "contradict and oppose" the dominant ones; 4. uncovering "the systemic contradictions of imperial writing" (p. 103). Besides this, Ruthner also consults David Spurrs "eleven modes of colonial representation of the Other" (p. 106) to make the selected texts speak.

The theoretical introduction to the particular analysis is followed by a postcolonial reading of Franz Grillparzer's drama *The Golden Fleece* (1819), which is confronted with the "author's ego documents" (p. 120). In the work of this "poet of culture conflict," the traveler Grillparzer and the argonaut Jason are brought together to disclose ambivalences and ambiguities in dealing with the foreign both in the *Golden Fleece* and in the ego documents of Grillparzer's travels to Dresden, Constantinople, and Italy. Jason and Grillparzer turn, according to Ruthner, "the writing into a conflict zone, where the reference points of 'civilization' and 'barbarism' can tip over, even change places: where one becomes a stranger to himself" (p. 137). In this respect, Grillparzer's writing is ultimately ruled by a "Kakanian dialectic of enlightenment" that brings all positions in the drama, the imperial as well as the nativist, to a collapse "by including all those affected and casting them in a skeptical light" (p. 148). Ruthner concludes that Grillparzer in his drama narrates "the contemporary history of Central Europe as a quasi-colonial tragedy," in which the Argonauts could be seen as the Austrians, the Colchians as the non-German-speaking ethnic groups of the Monarchy and Corinth as the Germans of that time. In doing so, Grillparzer protects himself by using mythologization against coming too close to the politics of his time.

In his interpretation of Peter Altenberg's prose sketch *Ashantee* (1897), Ruthner in first place tries to make the aposiopesis in this work productive for his postcolonial reading. Altenberg's prose sketch is the narrative treatment of an obscure scandal in the zoo of the Vienna Prater from 1896. It is the "Human zoo" of an Ashantee village and its people that blatantly expose the "voyeuristic racism of the epoch which the male imperial gaze represents in two respects" (p. 152). Ruthner sees *Ashantee* with Werner Michler as a "systematic revaluation of contemporary attributions towards blacks," which, according to Ruthner, remains in an irresolvable tension and is "torn between the concern to essentialize their anti-civilizational origins on the one hand, and on the other to emphasize their equality to the white visitors" (p. 163). Thus, Altenberg's *Ashantee* is "both the document as well as an opponent of the colonial imperialism of the time" (p. 166). Ruthner also identifies an "erotic vampirism" (p. 172) in *Ashantee* and interprets the narrator's obvious desire for the Ashantee women who for him act as "projection figures" (p. 172) as a latent abuse.

Finally, in the concluding analysis of this chapter, Alfred Kubin is diagnosed with an "inner exoticism" (p. 196) he internalized during his travels through Hungary, Dalmatia, and Bosnia. For Kubin's fantastic novel *The Other Side* Ruthner proposes a "'Kakanian' *postcolonial (re-)reading* of the text," which would deal with its manifestations of dominance and analyze its "presented ethnically coded imagines" (p. 193). Following that, Ruthner discovers "phantasms of a contemporary orientalism" (196) whose background is some sort of an imagined Asia. Ruthner reads Kubin's novel and the dream realm presented in it as an "Austrian journey into the 'heart of darkness' of 'Kakanian' phantasms of one's own and of the foreign" (p. 198).

The final chapter of Ruthner's book treats the "substitute action for coming up short or late in the international race of European colonialism" (p. 18); namely, the occupation and annexation of Bosnia-Herzegovina. "Reflections on (inner)continental colonialism" (p. 206) are made considering Habsburg's dealings with Bosnia-Herzegovina. Based on criteria that Ruthner applies to Habsburg's dealings with Bosnia-Herzegovina, such as popular orientalism, the repressive nature of its presence, legal status, development of the hegemonic knowledge regime, museumization of autochthonous discourses, military exploitation etc., he attests the Austro–Hungarian intracontinental expansion a "closeness […] to colonial projects of that time" (p. 234). The Bosnian-Herzegovinian interlude can therefore be viewed as "a kind of quasi-colonialism," which is then "to be shown and analyzed as a *cultural* phenomenon" (p. 235). Bosnia-Herzegovina also bears characteristics of a *dark continent*, because the "territories were […] quite obviously *the* continental expansion zone in the expansionist fantasies of the k. u. k Empire: *missing link* to the inwardly desired

Orient" (p. 236). In doing so, Ruthner contrasts Andrássy's commonly accepted notion of the occupation campaign as an "armed walk with brass band music" (p. 252) with concrete historical events and atrocities that disprove the image of a cheerful campaign that has been preserved in the collective memory for a long time.

However, Ruthner's focus is not on the political colonization of the country, but on the "narratives of occupation and their discursive legitimization" (p. 239). He assumes a double occupation of Bosnia-Herzegovina, not only in a military "but also in a semantic sense, as a 'colonisation de l'imaginaire', by ascribing even in this phase to the country and its people specific meanings which supported the political program of the Habsburg Monarchy" (p. 239). Ruthner exposes plausible narrative techniques that turned the native population of Bosnia-Herzegovina into an *alien other* on which the colonialist civilizing mission of the noble savages from the Orient, or the not so noble from the Balkans—Ruthner emphasizes Bosnia-Herzegovina's "hybrid position with orientalist (Said) and balkanist (Todorova) elements" (p. 265)—could be accomplished. Or as it is in a somewhat more pictorial way stated in an anonymously published contemporary text: One had to work on the human material "still untouched by culture" in order "to develop a cultured people, in a word: to shape Europeans out of Asians" (p. 276). Ruthner substantiates his colonialism thesis on the narratives and discourses constructed by the hegemonic k. u. k. occupation culture.

He is primarily interested in an initial elaboration of "leitmotifs in the imperial Austrian foreign images in relation to Bosnia-Herzegovina" (p. 269). In official and unofficial Habsburg depictions, Bosnia-Herzegovina is constructed as a double periphery, as an "extreme case of periphery that needs a new center" (p. 273). It is a periphery "at the edge of Europe, where it ends and yet never began"—to paraphrase the words from Ilija Trojanow referring to Bulgaria and the Balkans. In leitmotifs such as "agricultural backwardness and the colourful 'basar'" (p. 277), as well as for every Orient-obligatory harem, which as an inexhaustible "projection machine" (p. 283) manages to inseparably intertwine alterity and desire, a flawless exoticism becomes palpable. In this way, Bosnian-Herzegovinian Muslims in particular are pushed into an imagological intermediate position between "barbarians" who have to be civilized, and "noble savages" who one longs for and desires. The range of these orientalist-balkanist images is from too much to too little of the Orient. The "orientalist Disneylandization of Sarajevo" (p. 289) based on the North African model bears witness most impressively to that. Finally, these processes are convincingly exemplified in texts by Karl Heinz Strobl, Robert Michel, and Milena Mrazović-Preindlsberger.

At the end of this polemical and k. u. k. critical book, Clemens Ruthner poses a justified and, from today's point of view, possibly the most important question in this context; namely, the question of the "violent late consequences of imperial k. u. k. concepts and structures of power" (p. 317)—expressly those in connection with the Shoah and the Yugoslav wars of the 1990s. Although this question must remain unanswered for the time being, in the context of Bosnia-Herzegovina it would certainly be worthwhile to take a closer look at the traces of the Kakanian imagological heritage that are very present beyond any doubt.

© 2022 The Author(s).
This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-Non Commercial 4.0 International Licence (CC BY-NC 4.0).