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You Are What You Eat: Everyday Empire Through Food in the Late Imperial Habsburg Lands

Traditional histories of European imperialism focus on large empires that governed extensive territory in Asia and Africa. While this approach provides valuable insights regarding the impact and ramifications of expansionist colonialism, it overlooks non-colonialist states that were nevertheless deeply involved in global imperialism.

A study of food culture and practices in the Habsburg lands during the late 19th and early 20th centuries illuminates how residents in states without overseas colonies nonetheless participated in and perpetuated global imperialism in their everyday lives. Cookbooks and magazines featured so-called “colonial goods” such as spices, tropical fruits, coffee, tea, and cacao, which were transported to Central Europe via global networks of imperial commerce. Popular culinary exhibitions held in Vienna hosted chefs, manufacturers, and businessmen who displayed their wares from around the world, thereby proclaiming the Habsburgs’ ability to compete with other empires on the international stage. Finally, food advertising posters depicted exotic landscapes and Orientalist motifs that visually enacted conceptions of racial difference that arose from colonial encounters.

This presentation demonstrates that Habsburg residents regularly consumed imperialism through their eyes and stomachs as they viewed advertisements, purchased goods, prepared recipes, and attended exhibitions. Consumption of colonial products fueled the exchange of both commercial and cultural goods that traversed global trade routes between Central Europe and Africa, Asia, and Latin America. By examining food as a material and discursive agent of empire, this presentation illustrates the ways in which colonialism extended beyond the realms of statecraft and government policies into individual consumers’ lives, regardless of whether they were residents of a major colonial power.

Proposal for CEH-C 2025: Animal husbandry improvement and the modernisation of the Habsburg Empire in the nineteenth century

This presentation will analyse the projects for the improvement of animal husbandry developed in the Habsburg Empire during the nineteenth century. Agronomists and zootechnicians, imperial rulers and local civil servants, large landowners and smaller peasants collaborated on, and at times disagreed over a variety of schemes that aimed to make sheep and cattle more productive. Throughout the century, most of these schemes were framed within the larger project of building an “agricultural state”. Why did such projects of agricultural growth remain so important to these different actors? Beyond their prospect of economic growth, I argue that these projects were deeply political in nature and contributed to the material construction of the Habsburg Empire. Focusing on the actors’ practices to “improve” animals and to spread them throughout the territory of the monarchy highlights how breeding practices such as livestock selection constituted models for the government of the reproduction and circulation of (animal) populations. The thriving or demise of large groups of specific breeds depended heavily on the political projects they were meant to serve. The horizons of empire-building in Central Europe shaped the incorporation of animals, and more largely of the non-human world, into a productivist economic system in a crucial way (even more than technicist ideologies did). Looking at husbandry improvement in the Habsburg Empire in this way opens new perspectives for European history. By emphasising that visions of agricultural development in the nineteenth century were visions of empire as well, this history calls attention to the fundamental role of politics in the entanglements of strategies of economic growth with the environment. Moreover, the case of the Habsburg Empire highlights that modernisation was not a simple, straightforward process leading from the Industrial Revolution to the Anthropocene. Instead, agricultural improvement projects shed light on aspects of the modernisation of European societies beyond industrialisation, and on alternative processes of entangling human and non-human worlds.

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Food supply management in the period of political transition in Prekmurje: state endeavors from above and local agency from below

At the moment of Yugoslav occupation in August 1919, poverty, deprivation, misery, and hunger characterised the living conditions of the majority of the Prekmurje population. In the former Hungarian territory—westernmost areas of Zala and Vas counties—where 89% of the population were either agricultural labourers or smallholding subsistence farmers, the war undoubtedly worsened living conditions. Yet the limited access to essential caloric sources and other necessities among broader sections of the rural population cannot be solely attributed to the war attrition and the dissolution of the Habsburg Empire. Neither were shortages in Prekmurje a direct result of the social upheavals and the formation of successor states during the post-imperial transition period. Already before the onset of World War I, owing to agricultural overpopulation, a substantial portion of peasants in the western sections of the Hungarian counties of Vas and Zala struggled to acquire enough food for mere physical survival.

In other words, in the period of post-Habsburg political transition scarcity was not unknown to many residents in the westernmost areas of Zala and Vas (soon to become Prekmurje). What changed profoundly, however, at this point was the attitude of political actors and the state authorities towards the food provisioning situation in the region. Beginning in the autumn of 1918, post-war political mobilisation of ordinary people encouraged various authorities to ensure adequate supplies and improve the social conditions of the local communities. Against a background of ongoing social and political turmoil and competition between the Hungarian and Yugoslav authorities for the territory densely populated by the Slavophones, the prospect of a better life began to feature prominently as a subject of political propaganda and as a chief objective of state intervention into the existing social fabric. In my presentation, I aim to illustrate how and why numerous officials and political representatives identified the question

of supply, production, and allocation of food as an imminent political concern, but also as a means to win the loyalty of people and to establish control over the contested Slavophone region.