

In Defense of Empire: Austrian Sociology and the European Nation-State, 1870–1914

Veranstalter Internationales Forschungszentrum Kulturwissenschaften Wien

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Lecture by Thomas R. Prendergast at the "Internationales Forschungszentrum Kulturwissenschaften" in Vienna

Just what was the Habsburg monarchy? How was it to be defined, classified? While many legal scholars around the turn of the 20th century regarded Austria as an archaic state, others advanced a more positive interpretation, using the language of sociology to critique the analytical distinction between “normal” nation-states and “abnormal” empires.

By the end of the 19th century, the nation-state had come to be seen among historians, legal scholars, and political scientists as the “natural” form of political community. “Empire” emerged as a category of scientific analysis, and was used to describe states that did not correspond to the nation-state ideal, including the multiethnic Dual Monarchy. The rise of the nationalist conception of the state did not, however, go unchallenged. A critical contingent of intellectuals from the Monarchy’s geographic and social margins rejected the historicist paradigm on which notions of Austrian abnormality were based and began to formulate a unique sociological approach to the study of states, one that promised to rehabilitate “empire” as a form of government. Committed to preserving imperial diversity, these scholars forged global networks that sought to contest the pretensions of the nation-state, in the process laying the groundwork for a critique of social scientific Eurocentrism.

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