Imperial nostalgia: mythologizing Habsburg Trieste

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Published online: 02 Dec 2010.

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PERSPECTIVES

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Abstract

This article reviews three recently published books on Habsburg Trieste, inquiring into the reasons for increased interest in this topic. The author suggests that this represents a type of 'imperial nostalgia' for the world we have lost, in particular for a political experiment in religious and ethnic diversity (as embodied by the flourishing of imperial Trieste's Jewish community) outside of the nation-state form. This nostalgia, in turn, reflects current concerns with identity, including scholarly attempts to theorize the contemporary situation in which the power of the nation state has been transformed. The analysis reveals that certain authors misread the realities of imperial Trieste through the lens of contemporary meanings of cosmopolitanism and tolerance. As an alternative, the article sketches out what the 'actually existing cosmopolitanism' of the Habsburg city consisted in.

Keywords

Habsburg Trieste, cosmopolitanism, imperial nostalgia.

In 1918, the port city of Trieste – whose cultural and financial wealth derived from its unique role as the imperial maritime entrepôt of the Austrian half of the Dual Monarchy – was incorporated (or 'returned', in the language of Italian irredentists) into the Italian state. Since the nineteenth century, Italian irredentists had portrayed the Habsburg monarchy as ruthless in its oppression of the empire's subject peoples (for analysis of Italian narratives, see Ballinger 2002). Those members of the Italian military who assisted in Trieste's 'liberation' in November 1918, however, found a reality quite at odds with the image of a rotten, old Habsburg order fostered by pro-Italian propaganda. Notes one observer,

> They had fabricated the image of an Austria that was decaying, ready to fall apart at our first blow, governed by an old imbecile. . . . Then [when] we disembarked at Trieste, we had found a city that was much more modern than ours, and much more cultured, more open to culture; and more European, more mixed than our own.
>
> (cited in Filipuzzi 1988: 5)

In puncturing the 'fabricated' claims of Italian nationalists, this soldier embraced an equally idealized image of a multi-ethnic, cultured, bourgeois Trieste or, what we may call, for short, 'cosmopolitan Trieste'. Its symbolic and mythic dimensions would grow over the course of a century whose disastrous experiments in violent nationalism left Trieste on the political and economic margins. The process of mythologizing the world that had been lost began immediately (Filipuzzi 1988: 5–6), even as Italian nationalists (soon to be joined by the Fascists) touted the role to be played by a redeemed Trieste in a future Italian order. Indeed, the elaboration of a specifically Triestine myth drew upon, even as at points it differed from, what Magris (1996) has deemed a general 'Habsburg myth' whose origins date back to the early 1800s. In the post-Cold War era, this mythicized vision of Trieste has acquired new potency beyond its regional confines, as evidenced by the attention and praise given to recent publications such as Lois Dubin's *The Port Jews of Habsburg Trieste* (1999), John McCourt's *The Years of Bloom* (2000) and Jan Morris' *Trieste and the Meaning of Nowhere* (2001). In this article, I critically interrogate the claims to a cosmopolitan order that inform each of these texts. In doing so, I also reflect upon the recent interest in Habsburg Trieste. Why Trieste? Why now?

Portraits of cosmopolitan Trieste: myth or reality?

In their reconstructions of Habsburg Trieste, Dubin, McCourt and Morris all draw upon what have become standard tropes for describing the city: cosmopolitanism, the city's role as a 'melting pot' and hybrid place, and its subsequent decline and melancholic atmosphere. These images prove fairly consistent despite the fact that the authors' starting points are quite different, in terms of both time periods and topics covered. Dubin's work, for instance, consists in a carefully documented historical study of Trieste's Jewish community in the eighteenth century, the period when the policies of Empress Maria Theresa and her son Joseph transformed a sleepy fishing town into a mercantile emporium. From the perspective of a literary critic and biographer, McCourt instead explores the late Habsburg Triestine context in which James Joyce worked as a Berlitz teacher and struggling writer. He persuasively argues that this period in Trieste played a much more formative role in Joyce's writing than has been previously acknowledged, thereby refuting the claim made by Joyce's brother Stanislaus that '[t]he cosmopolitan atmosphere of the Trieste of the early twentieth century did not inspire him at all. . . . No, Trieste did not give Jim anything' (in McCourt 2000: 3).

Whereas McCourt, himself a long-time resident of the city, remains an impersonal presence in his book, Jan Morris intertwines her own biography with that of Trieste, genealogically linking herself to those other 'exiles' – like James Joyce – who have found themselves at home among the contradictions and peculiarities that make up Trieste. She admits, 'Much of this little book, then, has been self-description. I write of exiles in Trieste, but I have generally

felt myself an exile too' (2001: 200). She adds, 'For all its traditional sobriety Trieste is a hallucinatory city, where fantasy easily brushes fact, and a lot of what I have written about it has come from my own mind' (ibid.: 201). Yet Morris aims at something more than mere autobiography, offering readers various episodes from the city's complex and fascinating political and cultural history. She also introduces readers to the home-grown literary figures – among them Italo Svevo, Umberto Saba, Scipio Slataper – who have contributed to the perduring literary image of the place. McCourt, in turn, provides a considerably more nuanced account of the early twentieth-century intellectual environment (one characterized by political irredentism, on the one hand, and the artistic experimentation of the futurists and Vociani, on the other) in which these authors penned the works that crystallized an image of late imperial Trieste.

In such literary evocations, as well as these recent revisitations, of Habsburg Trieste, the city appears as a cosmopolitan space marked by a diversity of religions and peoples thanks to the imperial patents that encouraged non-Catholics to bring their talents to the developing port. Dubin, McCourt and Morris repeatedly stress the cosmopolitanism inherent in the place: McCourt writes of 'the rich cosmopolitan texture of turn-of-the-century Trieste' (2000: 4), Morris contends that '[t]he most appealing aspect of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, at least in retrospect, was its European cosmopolitanism' (2001: 45), and Dubin describes the city as 'a bustling hub for immigrants, a cosmopolitan center that attracted diverse non-Catholic religious-ethnic minorities. . . . The new Trieste was quint-essentially mercantile and cosmopolitan' (1999: 1, 17). Adds Dubin, 'Immigration had swelled the population of Trieste, and diversity was its watchword. Trieste's streets were a colorful mixture of peoples, languages, and costumes' (ibid.: 15).

While Dubin makes this diversity a central object of her study, inquiring into the juridical standing and experiences of such 'immigrant' and non-Catholic communities in Trieste (more on this later), McCourt and Morris largely take for granted that this diversity equaled hybridity and tolerance in the sense normally used today – that of a multicultural celebration and respect of difference. For Joyce, as for McCourt, the local Italian dialect known as *triestino* united the city's distinct peoples, 'But Triestino was essentially an inclusive force which, in each of its varieties, embraced different civilizations and became a living encyclopaedia of the cultures, nations and languages that had been assimilated in the city' (2000: 52). In lauding the Mitteleuropean mix of Latin, Slavic and German cultures, Morris maintains that the hybridity characteristic of the city is not just linguistic but also ethnic; after declaring that 'The human hybrid is the norm in this city' (2001: 112), she goes on to describe herself (in terms that seem derived from the colonial Raj) as a 'racial half-breed' (ibid.: 112).

For Morris, Trieste's Jews and their prominence in Trieste embody the religious and ethnic difference of the city. In spite of the devastation and near disappearance of the Jewish community as result of the Nazi occupation of the city between 1943 and 1945, she notes, 'In my mind Jews and Trieste go together. . . . In Habsburg times people in Vienna considered Trieste a Jewish

city, and in a way I still do' (ibid.: 105). James Joyce apparently did so as well, according to McCourt. Joyce linked, at least in part, the supposed Jewishness of Trieste with the idea of the Orient and the east. 'Applying the term "Oriental" to Trieste makes sense in so far as the city was "exotic" to Joyce, and in so far as it had a rare capacity to absorb and preserve "the other", to allow space for ethnic and linguistic diversity' (2000: 42). The richness of this linguistic mix in Trieste bears traces, contends McCourt, in Joyce's 'invented' language and word play. Joyce also drew on his knowledge of Trieste's 'Oriental' (i.e. Jewish and Greek) communities for *Ulysses*. Compared to the monopoly exercised by Catholicism in Ireland, Trieste – 'where so many different faiths worshipped side by side and in harmony' (ibid.: 4) – offered Joyce not only exotic color but also an exhilarating sense of religious liberation. Despite the relative religious and artistic openness of Trieste, Joyce and his family did not possess the commensurate financial freedom to move as he would have liked in the smart society rendered possible by Trieste's prosperity as a center for shipping, transport and insurance.

Unlike Dubin, concerned exclusively with the eighteenth century when Trieste's economic and social bases underwent radical transformation, McCourt and Morris draw upon popular associations of *fin-de-siècle* Trieste with this fashionable café society, 'a world of la bella figura' (McCourt 2000: 33), and the ostensibly charming and charmed society constituted by 'a cultivated bourgeoisie' (Morris 2001: 61). In her travelogue/personal memoir, Morris paints the most unabashedly nostalgic portrait of this lost world. She laments the passing of the bourgeoisie, as well as of the Habsburg empire, whose virtues Trieste comes to embody. 'It was closer to the European Community of the twenty-first century than to the British Empire of the nineteenth, and possesses still, at least for romantics like me, a fragrant sense of might-have-been. Trieste was its true epitome' (2001: 45–6). Not surprisingly, Morris admits openly to a related nostalgia for her own empire and the bygone era of Pax Britannica. Drawing repeated analogies between the British and Habsburg empires and lamenting their inevitable demise, she muses: 'Ours seemed to me a good empire then, and on the whole I think so still' (ibid.: 40).

Working as a freelance journalist during his Trieste sojourn, Joyce also remarked on the similarities and differences between the then-extant British and Habsburg empires. Even in his day, such comparisons were not novel.

> He would not be the first to write from Trieste on issues of empire and independence, nor the first to comment, albeit allusively, on the parellels [*sic*] between Ireland's relationship with Britain, Trieste's relationship with Austro-Hungary, and Hungary's relative autonomy within [*sic*] Austro-Hungarian empire.
>
> (McCourt 2000: 93)

A 'colonial' subject like Joyce could thus find something to admire in other empires, if not in the one in which he had come of age (whose record did not compare favorably with that of the Austrians, at least in Joyce's estimation).

Years afterward, Joyce would remember the twilight of the Habsburg monarchy with nostalgia.

'I cannot begin to give you the flavour of the old Austrian Empire', he wrote. 'It was a ramshackle affair but it was charming, gay and I experienced more kindnesses in Trieste than ever before or since in my life. . . . Times past cannot return but I wish they were back.' To Mary Colum he confirmed this, saying: 'They called the Austrian Empire a ramshackle empire . . . I wish to God there were more such empires.'

(ibid.: 96)

Joyce's fond recollections of Trieste were colored not only by the negative contrast with British imperialism but also by his brief and unsatisfactory return to the city after World War I. Faced with arrest as a foreign national, Joyce had moved to Zurich during the war years. (His brother Stanislaus, who chose to remain in the city that became his lifelong home, instead endured internment in an Austrian camp for civilians.) When Joyce rejoined his brother in Trieste after the war, the Habsburg empire no longer existed and Trieste had gloriously 'rejoined' the Italian *madrepatria*. Joyce abandoned Trieste for Paris and literary fame shortly thereafter, though McCourt notes that

even after leaving Trieste he would betimes remember the city fondly and refer to himself as a 'Tergestis Exul', an exile from Trieste . . . [for] the city itself had died on him and he could no longer bear to live in its ghostly reincarnation (*'de mortuis nil nisi bonum'*).

(ibid.: 252)

Morris, like Joyce, also traces the city's decline to the moment of annexation by Italy. Yet Morris has only known Trieste in its ghostly incarnation, having come to the city for the first time in 1945 as one of the Anglo-American soldiers occupying the city in order to prevent control by the Yugoslav communists. The eventual resolution of the nine-year territorial dispute between Italy and Yugoslavia over Trieste and the adjacent Istrian peninsula only signaled Trieste's further isolation, as Morris admits. 'Finally in 1954 the disconsolate and bewildered seaport was given its solution, and Trieste has been what it has been ever since, a geographical and historical anomaly, Italian by sovereignty but in temperament more or less alone' (2001: 132).

Most visitors to contemporary Trieste who know it through its literary associations, like the writer Joseph Cary, have been similarly struck by the provincialness of the place and the sense of faded glory and melancholy, of 'Triste [sad] Trieste' (Cary 1993: 7). Though melancholy also appeared to be part of the ether of late Habsburg Trieste, known for its denizens' interests in psychoanalysis (as chronicled by Svevo in his novel *Confessions of Zeno*) and for high rates of suicide and mental illness (Fölkel and Cergoly 1983: 94–106; McCourt 2000: 24), for those non-Triestines who come to live in the city today that melancholy often appears tinged with disappointment and resentment at having been rendered a periphery. Deeming Trieste and Triestines as neurotic, as

plagued by an 'identity crisis' due to its frontier status (Ara and Magris 1982; Fölkel and Cergoly 1983: 106), has become commonplace among commentators on the city. Interestingly, Morris differs in seeing the city as experiencing a rebirth in the present moment, claiming that 'Trieste's first summer of the new century – my last summer in Trieste – was a season transformed. . . . For the first time in my experience Trieste felt a young city, perhaps a hyper-active city' (2001: 191–2).

Having lived and carried out anthropological research in Trieste intermittently for the last decade, I barely recognize the Trieste of my experience in the city glowingly described by Morris. This likely reflects our differences in age (I have known Trieste only since 1991 and in my twenties and thirties) but also the focus of our interests. While Morris has known Trieste as soldier, visitor and writer, her primary interest appears to be in a mythical city that is the 'capital of nowhere' and whose citizens apparently remain remarkably free of both racism and nationalism (2001: 115, 133). My work instead concentrates on transformations in the city since 1954, and specifically since the loss of the nearby Istrian peninsula to Yugoslavia resulted in a massive emigration of self-identified Italians from Istria, with as many as 100,000 Istrian refugees permanently resettling in Trieste. Although Morris mentions these exiles once, attributing to them 'an ineradicable resentment against all Slavs' (2001: 116), she fails to consider the much more widespread chauvinism against Slovenes (as well as Croats) that marks much Italian discourse in the city.

Neither Dubin nor McCourt comments on contemporary Trieste, given that their stories end much earlier (for Dubin in the late 1790s, for McCourt in 1920). I would argue, however, that in both their texts the contemporary city does serve as an implicit backdrop, leading us from the current state of relative lack of outward cosmopolitanism back to the city's heyday when it 'embodied multiplicity and diversity' (Dubin 1999: 2). The tragedy of ethno-national intolerance (Italian versus Slav) and religious intolerance (toward Jews) that irrevocably altered the social and demographic fabric of the city during and after World War II becomes the 'backshadowing' – in the sense of 'a retroactive foreshading . . . [involving] shared knowledge of the outcome' (Bernstein in Zemel 2000: 196) – that renders the histories told even more poignant since the reader knows the inevitable fall from grace that follows.

Given the various degrees and forms of nostalgia expressed by each of these authors, it remains to inquire whether (and if so, to what degree) those recollections of past times reflect historical reality or if these authors project back onto the past an interpretation of Triestine history that reflects 'our' own contemporary concerns with multicultural societies and cosmopolitanism. Dubin expresses little nostalgia of the sort that animates Morris' book and, to a much lesser degree, that of McCourt, though she does use the term 'cosmopolitan' and 'cosmopolitanism' on repeated occasions and in a straightforward manner, as if their definitions were unproblematic. Dubin does not assume the meanings of religious tolerance and coexistence, however, and painstakingly evidences the official acts and internal political debates in the eighteenth

century that led to the granting of patents and privileges to various non-Catholic groups. Emperor Charles VI laid the groundwork for the port's commercial success with the patents of 1719 and 1725, which invited individuals of 'any nation, condition, and religion' (in Dubin 1999: 11) to settle in the 'free port' of Trieste. Dubin focuses on the experience of one such *nazione* or nation, that of the Jews, the first religious group permitted (under Maria Theresa) to organize itself as a corporate, communal body. The empress subsequently recognized the Greek Orthodox and Armenian Uniates, and later rulers awarded similar status to the Serbian Orthodox, Lutheran and Calvinist communities.

The extension of these privileges to non-Catholics followed out of a concern with *utility*, i.e. productive service to the state, argues Dubin. Much more so than his mother, Joseph embraced the Enlightenment belief that '[b]eing useful was equated with being virtuous' (ibid.: 62). Under Maria Theresa the port Jews of Trieste enjoyed privileges that were exceptional in the imperial lands, let alone in the rest of Europe. In 1781, however, Joseph began to extend his toleration policy towards Jews in other Habsburg territories, though the community in Trieste continued to enjoy an exceptional position.

Dubin rightly points out that the very language of 'toleration' meant something quite different from its common usage today. Far from being a signifier for the embrace of diversity, Jews in Trieste often resented the term:

> To them, toleration connoted mere sufferance rather than appreciation or recognized standing. Indeed, sufferance was the implication when the Jews of Vienna were always referred to as 'tolerated' (*tolerierte*) and when Hungarian Jews were referred to as 'only tolerated' in an official document in 1744, and it was the fundamental assumption behind the 'tax for toleration' that those Jewries had to pay.
>
> (ibid.: 56)

This careful delineation of the eighteenth-century meanings of 'toleration' in the Habsburg context highlights the dangers of casually applying terms such as 'cosmopolitanism' to the Habsburg context without specifying their definition. In Morris and McCourt, 'cosmopolitan' appears to imply ethnic and religious diversity and tolerance (combined, in the cultural realm, with a kind of worldly sophistication). In cultural theory today, cosmopolitanism as a phenomenon is often opposed to nationalism and other forms of 'essentialism' and allied with terms such as deterritorialization, diaspora and hybridity. As concept and catchword, 'cosmopolitanism' has come back into vogue as social analysts attempt to make sense of the seemingly globalized realm in which we live in which old verities of place and fixity appear to be breaking down.

All too frequently, these theorists employ the term in a manner similar to that of the scholars of Trieste considered here: as obvious and therefore needing little explication. Yet some recent work has sought to uncover the various genealogies of cosmopolitanism, usually taking as a starting point the vision of a world

community outlined in Kant's 1795 essay, 'Perpetual peace'. Pheng Cheah has shown, for example, that the idea of cosmopolitanism preceded that of nationalism and that the two need not be in opposition and, indeed, may even work in tandem (1998a: 22–30; see also Robbins 1998a: 2). Only in the nineteenth century did being cosmopolitan, at least in the English-speaking world, come to be seen as antithetical to love of one's country (Malcolmson 1998: 233).

In describing the contemporary moment, anthropologist James Clifford (1998) has urged a notion of 'discrepant cosmopolitanisms' whereas Robbins has admonished scholars to examine 'actually existing cosmopolitanisms'. Robbins contends,

> Understood as a fundamental devotion to the interests of humanity as a whole, cosmopolitanism has often seemed to claim universality by virtue of its independence, its detachment from the bonds, commitments, and affiliations that constrain ordinary nation-bound lives. It has seemed to be a luxuriously free-floating view from above. But many voices now insist, with Paul Rabinow, that the term should be extended to transnational experiences that are particular rather than universal …
>
> (1998a: 1)

Elsewhere, Robbins has stressed that particular cosmopolitanisms are grounded in particular times and, especially, *places*. He would thus scoff at Morris' description of Trieste as the 'capital of nowhere' and its inhabitants as belonging to a 'Fourth World, or a diaspora of their own. . . . They are exiles in their own communities, because they are always in a minority, but they form a mighty nation, if they only knew it' (2001: 195–6). Counters Robbins, 'No one actually is or ever can be a cosmopolitan in the sense of belonging nowhere. . . . Nor can anyone be a cosmopolitan in the sense of belonging everywhere' (1998b: 260; see also Dubin 2002: 25). Following Robbins, then, we return to the issue of exactly what the 'actually existing' cosmopolitanism of Habsburg Trieste consisted in. Dubin makes evident that it was, above all, an ideological expression of absolutist politics: Trieste's 'commercial raison d'etre and its cosmopolitan mercantile class were designed and engineered by the absolutist state' (1999: 4).

The religiously defined *nazioni* of Trieste thus bore little resemblance to the territorially uprooted, boundary-crossing cosmopolitans (intellectual or otherwise) who populate the pages of theorists like Appadurai (1996).

> Though granted a measure of self-government, each corporation was subject ultimately to governmental oversight, and increasingly to absolutist involvement and cooptation into the state apparatus. Each *nazione* became in part a state agency. . . . For all the religious minorities, however, the civil toleration and integration proffered by the Josephinian absolutist state entailed centralization and greater state involvement in communal affairs.
>
> (Dubin 1999: 204, 201)

Dubin's analysis warns against conflating the contemporary relationships

between nation and state with those prevailing in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Trieste. The imperial free port has little to do with those offshore 'free zones' of unbound sovereignty that intrigue current scholars of deterritorialization. (At the same time, Dubin reminds us of the continued if transformed power of states, a point sometimes lost from the 'globalized' view.) As we have seen, 'nation' possessed a very different meaning in the eighteenth century and only gradually acquired the ethnic understandings we associate with the term today. The rise of ethno-national identifications and demands – notably those of Italian, Slovene, Croat, South Slav and German groups – in ottocento Trieste simultaneously reinforced a long-standing tradition asserting the autonomy of Trieste (its *antica libertà*) as an independent commune prior to its 1382 'dedication' to the Habsburg rulers. Triestine scholars like Cattaruzza (1995), Filipuzzi (1988), Fölkel and Cergoly (1983) and Negrelli (1970, 1978) have laid bare the extensive degree to which the city's elite utilized a mythic vision of its autonomist past in their political struggles.

The permutations of this myth and its usages in different moments either in support of or in opposition to the imperial center point toward the mutual constitution of seemingly more narrow nationalisms/irredentisms and more inclusive 'imperial' cosmopolitanism (support for the imperial metropole). Both were ideological expressions of imperial politics as refracted through the particular lens of Triestine life. Already by 1468, an autonomist party claiming to represent the ancient tradition of a free commune (that in reality had only existed for seventy years or so) had arisen in opposition to an imperial party supporting the centralizing efforts of the Habsburg state. For the following three centuries, the city's patricians clung to a vision of the past as one of local independence (*municipalismo*) usurped by the Habsburgs. The new bourgeoisie created by the imperial expansion of the port also came to adopt this rhetoric as a weapon in their struggle against the metropole's Germanization policies (Negrelli 1978: 18–35, 63–4). This struggle was symbolized by, though not restricted to, the city's linguistic policies. Despite the mixed 'ethnic' and religious origins of Triestines, Italian (and *triestino*) served as the *lingua franca* of the port, as well as of the Austrian navy (inherited from the Venetian Republic).

In the later Habsburg period, then, the same financial elite that advanced its 'cosmopolitan' economic interests within the realm opened up by empire also frequently defended 'national' (i.e. Italian) interests, in part as a reaction to Germanization and in part as a response to the perceived threat posed by those 'Slavs', particularly Slovenes, who emigrated to the port in great numbers and increasingly asserted their national rights in the realm of education and linguistic policy (Negrelli 1978: 166–77; Dubin 2002: 34; Verginella 2000: 14–15). The 'cosmopolitanism' of the Triestine financial and political elite could thus embrace a seemingly paradoxical national/ist position. So too could its intellectuals; authors, like Italo Svevo and Scipio Slataper, often cited for their success in having captured the complex, hybrid Mitteleuropean flavor of Trieste, nonetheless supported the Italian irredentist cause.

From the other direction, the autonomist position invoked by nationalists could also be taken up by 'internationalist' socialists, like Angelo Vivante (1984), seeking regional autonomy or the supporters, communist and not, of an independent Free Territory of Trieste after World War II. (For a more extended analysis of cosmopolitanism and irredentism in the region and its contemporary articulations in terms of hybrid/pure identities and regionalism, see Ballinger 2002.) This is not to deny (as some nationalists do), however, that Trieste did not really possess a multi-ethnic past but rather to make clear the sometimes seemingly contradictory terms of that past and its ideological expressions in local politics. This 'crossroads' of peoples and cultures was the product of state engineering with the design of utility and profit, not tolerance for its own sake or a celebratory multiculturalism as we often think of it today.

The 'paradox' that Trieste's cosmopolitan and irredentist ideologies were jointly forged and mutually reinforcing (even if at some points in explicit opposition, at others in cooperation) may only seem paradoxical because we often take the claims of 'cosmopolitanism' at face value and, as in the case of Jan Morris, claim our own identity as 'citizens of nowhere' (for a spirited defense of rooted cosmopolitanism, see Appiah 1998: 91). That individuals like Svevo simultaneously embraced 'nationalist' and 'cosmopolitan' positions in different aspects of their life appears problematic only if we consider nationalism and cosmopolitanism as totalizing identities (the assumption underlying the absolute contrast usually drawn between the two ideologies) rather than as interrelated ideologies upon which individuals may draw in different realms or moments.

Dubin's study, which builds on that of an earlier generation of Italian historians of Trieste, helps us to see Austrian Trieste and its inhabitants as citizens of this very particular place and regime of identity politics. Though McCourt at times relies too much on a facile image of a cosmopolitan city as a backdrop for his protagonist, his close attention to the personalities and positions taken by Joyce's intellectual interlocutors and friends in Trieste likewise serves to clarify the vision of a city in its final flowering, what Joyce called 'la nostra bella Trieste'. Religious and ethnic diversity here proved useful, not just to the imperial rulers but also to the city's financial elite who nonetheless found a certain form of 'Italianism' (rooted in a lingua franca and an ideology of political autonomy) useful. Ultimately, the tensions created by this intersection of imperial cosmopolitanism and Italian nationalism would help destroy the rich social and cultural fabrics that made Trieste such a prosperous and vital place.

Nostalgia for Mitteleuropa and empire

In arguing that a certain image of 'cosmopolitan Trieste' is really a mythic construct, I build on the analyses of those Italian scholars (among them, Cattaruzza 1995; Negrelli 1970, 1978; Sapelli 1990; Verginella 2000) who have recognized and deconstructed the founding myths through which the city's local elite sought legitimacy. These authors have countered the 'invented

traditions' of both nationalist historiography and 'cosmopolitan' history (in its various guises of *autonomismo*, Austrian socialism and Italian and Yugoslav communism). The local field of scholarship about the city and region proves a lively and large one, though its audience also often remains fairly local and limited to readers of Italian and Slovene. Yet the publication of the three books reviewed here signals a growing interest in the English-speaking world about Trieste; Dubin's book received high praise from scholars and was awarded the American Association for the Advancement of Slavic Studies (AAASS) Barbara Jelavich book prize, McCourt's study of Joyce sparked a lively exchange in the *Times Literary Supplement*, and Morris' book has been reviewed widely (including in the *New York Times*). Although I could have cited a number of other related books (e.g. Magris 1999; Sluga 2001; Tomizza 1999) about the city or region recently published in English, I chose to focus on those that deal with Habsburg Trieste. Not coincidentally, these books have the highest profile of the relevant English-language publications.

In explaining this interest, I have already suggested that the themes of imperial Trieste (or, at least, one nostalgic view of it) resonate with contemporary concerns about identity, multiculturalism, immigration, assimilation and a world beyond (or, in the case of Habsburg Trieste, *before*) the nation state. The eventual dissolution of this supposed supranational idyll in the face of warfare and competing, narrow ethno-national claims brings to the minds of contemporary readers, of course, the events surrounding Yugoslavia's dissolution. Even before the break-up, Triestine intellectual Claudio Magris had noted, 'For some years now 1918 has come closer to us, for the end of the Hapsburg empire, formerly obliterated in the past, has returned into the present as the object of passionate disputes' (1989: 39). Central European intellectuals in the late 1980s looking back to the Habsburg era maintained that the destruction of that multi-ethnic, supranational state 'foreshadows the coming of a European crisis' (Rupnik 1990: 254).

Certainly, the attention paid to a now marginal Italian city also reflects the intense interest in things 'Balkans' fostered by the Yugoslav wars, whose atrocities led some observers (most notoriously Kaplan 1993) to claim a tragic recycling through history (whether that of the Ottoman–Christian conflict, the Balkan Wars or World War II). Dubin's book, not incidentally, won the award from a *Slavic* (rather than Italian) studies association, though admittedly the Jelavich Prize recognizes achievements in Habsburg history. Whereas the Yugoslav tragedy has often been read through tropes derived from the experience of the Holocaust of Jews (Zivkovic 2000), the destruction of Trieste's Jewry instead backshadows our sense of the city in its golden era. Rendering Trieste a metonym for all that was good about the Habsburg monarchy, we mourn its end with the *Katastrophe* of the empire's dissolution. In doing so, we also mourn the much larger catastrophe that followed and irrevocably rent the pluri-ethnic fabric of central and eastern Europe. The end of Habsburg Trieste is, in a sense, the beginning of the end.

Is this yearning a variation on the 'imperialist nostalgia' analyzed by

Renato Rosaldo? (For literary analyses of such a phenomenon, see Berger 1995; Said 1993; Wood 1998.) In *Culture and Truth*, Rosaldo identified a 'particular kind of nostalgia, often found under imperialism, where people mourn the passing of what they themselves have transformed' (1989: 69). Focusing on agents of colonialism, notably anthropologists, Rosaldo demonstrated the ways in which a stated fondness for or defense of the past (in this case, usually that of 'indigenous cultures') works to absolve the agent of blame for the destruction of that past. At first glance, the nostalgia for Trieste I have described seems something altogether different from the 'colonial' situations Rosaldo applies his concept to. (Let us leave aside here the debates as to whether empires like those of the Habsburgs can be considered akin to the overseas European empires of the British, French, Dutch, Portuguese and Spanish or whether spaces like Italy and the former Yugoslavia are postcolonial in the same way that independent African states are.) None of the authors I discuss, of course, had anything to do personally with the decline of Habsburg Trieste, though Morris may have some sense of involvement due to her participation after World War II as military occupier of the city, whose subsequent return to Italy signaled the final phase of decline.

Whereas Rosaldo focuses on the nostalgic agents of colonial suppression, in the Habsburg case many of those 'oppressed subjects' who sought the empire's dissolution later regretted their choice. Although the generation who lived through these events has largely disappeared, it appears to have left heirs among those intellectuals dedicated to the memory of Mitteleuropa. (The reader is directed to Magris 1996 for an analysis of the literary response by Austrian intellectuals to the empire's dissolution.) The very idea of Mitteleuropa dates to the early nineteenth century and the economic program designed by Friedrich List to create a customs union embracing central Europe and the German states of the *Zollverein*. In the thought of individuals like Karl Friedrich von Bruck, Minister of Commerce and later of Finance in the late 1850s, the economic idea of Mitteleuropa soon acquired political meanings, becoming associated with various federalist schemes (Kann 1974: 319; Negrelli 1978: 96–7).

As the Cold War wound down, European intellectuals on both sides of the Iron Curtain 'rediscovered' the idea of Mitteleuropa. In Italy, the concept became popular in the 1970s around the time of the bicentennial of Maria Theresa's death, for example, accompanied by enthusiasm for transnational regionalist cooperation like that of the Alpe-Adria region and the Pentagonale (Negrelli 1978: 69). Discussion of Mitteleuropa in East and West Germany in the late 1980s instead reflected concerns with the potential reunification of Germany and the future role to be played in central Europe by a reconstituted German state (Ash 1990; Betz 1990: 174). For intellectuals in central Europe, in turn, Mitteleuropa symbolized 'an increasingly intense desire to weaken their ties with the East and to re-establish Central Europe's traditionally strong ties with the West' (Betz 1990). Though this no longer appears to be the case, in the late Cold War and early post-1989 period, 'the revived concept of Central

Europe implied, in Czech and Hungarian usage, a distancing from the East, [whereas] the concept of Mitteleuropa had, in German usage, usually implied some distancing from the West' (Ash 1990: 17).

Like cosmopolitanism, then, Mitteleuropa means different things to different people. Triestine writer Claudio Magris takes the Rhine and Danube rivers to represent the two main camps of thought: 'The Danube is German-Magyar-Slavic-Romanic-Jewish Central Europe, polemically opposed to the Germanic Reich; it is a "hinternational" ecumene . . . it is a hinterworld "behind the nations"' (1989: 29). The title of Magris' book *Danube* makes clear his own allegiance and, indeed, the Mitteleuropa eulogized in Trieste is that of a 'hybrid' world, in contrast to the supposed 'purist' nationalism embodied by a Germanic Reich. Magris, an internationally renowned scholar of German literature and culture, remains one of the most eloquent of those Triestine intellectuals invoking the Habsburg world symbolized, for him, by those locales like Caffè San Marco or Caffè Tomasseo still in operation in the former Habsburg city.

In an interview dedicated to the topic of the venerable Caffè San Marco, Magris rejects the notion that such sites are merely places for nostalgia, adding that the young people who frequent the place do not necessarily sit around talking about the Habsburg empire or the *belle époque*. Yet Magris adds that when asked where he feels as if he is in Europe, he responds, 'I pretend I'm joking but in reality I'm dead serious – that, for example, I feel myself to be in Europe when I'm at the Caffè San Marco' (1995: 161). This remark proves revealing of the significance today given to the 'European' part of the Mitteleuropean formula. 'Mitteleuropa' is alive and well today, not just in memory, but as a concrete political project that simultaneously looks back to the past and forward to the future. Rosaldo's question – 'Can one speak of nostalgia for the new?' (1989: 80) – seems apt here.

In all of the states of the former socialist bloc in eastern/central Europe, the magical quality of 'Europeanness' became a key element of legitimacy in the 1990s. The leaders of those countries seeking aid from or entry into the European Union (EU), for example, frequently invoke a European (Christian, Habsburg, etc.) past. Political rivals, whether they be other states or ethnic groups, typically become portrayed as non-European and hence deserving of exclusion. This rhetoric has also figured prominently within the EU, where voters and leaders grapple with issues of who should be permitted to immigrate to the EU and which east European states deserve to join the Union.

The Yugoslav case highlights the workings, as well as perils, of this Europeanist discourse. During the 1980s, Croats and Slovenes began to describe themselves with ever greater force as Europeans, thanks to their centuries under the Habsburgs, and to depict others in Yugoslavia (Albanians, Muslims, but especially Serbs) as possessed of Balkanic mentalities owing to their long servitude under the Ottoman empire. When the wars began, Slovenes sought to distance themselves from the Croats as well. One journalist gently ridiculed Slovene pretensions to 'Europe, Europe, nothing but Europe!' (Manzin 1994–5: 29). He then

offered a typical statement made in support of this view, in this case by Zoran Thaler, head of the Slovene Parliamentary Foreign Commission. 'European public opinion perceives us through many stereotypes still linked to the past. They think the Balkan slaughterhouse starts here. . . . Slovenia is not Croatia!' (Manzin 1994–5). Following Edward Said (1979), scholars of Europe have analyzed such rhetoric as a form of Orientalism, one that contributed significantly to the breakdown of civil discourse in Yugoslavia (Bakić-Hayden 1995; Bakić-Hayden and Hayden 1992; Bracewell 1994; Razsa and Lindstrom 2002).

In my own research in Trieste and Istria over the past decade, I found that such Orientalism informed the explicitly progressivist program of the Istrian regionalist movement. This party, known as the Istrian Democratic Assembly (IDS), arose and gained popular support as a movement opposed to the centralizing Croatian nationalism of Franjo Tudjman, the first President of the independent Croatia. Seeking a transnational regional entity embracing Italy, Slovenia and Croatia, the IDS builds upon a long tradition of autonomist schemes dating back to the Habsburg period and reflects a healthy dose of nostalgia for the days of Austrian rule. The 'Istrian' identity promoted as multi-ethnic and multi-lingual nonetheless remains firmly rooted in territory, suggesting the indebtedness of this seemingly novel political project to older understandings of regional autonomy.

Across the border(s) in Trieste, local politicians and newspapers also indulge in 'prospective nostalgia' in the endless debates over how to 'revive' Trieste's stagnant port and make it the economic linchpin between east and west. Contrary to Morris' claim that something fundamental has happened to the city, such plans for revitalization prove nothing new. Ever since Italy's assumption of the city after World War I, the search for economic and political self-definition has been a regular feature of local life. Writer Enzo Bettiza's extended 1966 essay, *Mito e realtà di Trieste*, argues for Trieste's need for a 'demystified Europeanism' (1966: 45) and offers the hope that economic transformation (in this case, through oil pipelines) will render Trieste the switchpoint of an industrial network stretching between central Europe, the Middle East and North Africa. Bettiza also predicted that Trieste could become an 'ideological emporium' for democratic thought in the nearby central European countries. Bettiza's hopes were clearly not realized if, in 2003, we are still hearing of the need to reconnect Trieste with its former hinterland in central and eastern Europe. Admittedly, however, the possibilities for relinking Trieste with a 'Mitteleuropean' world have been opened up by the Cold War's end.

Like any political projects, those in Trieste and Istria that hark back, at least symbolically, to the Habsburg period, carry with them certain implications of inequality or domination that their nostalgic glosses may conceal (see Rosaldo 1989). While rejecting the nationalism of Tudjman and promoting a regional identity, for instance, the Istrian Democratic Assembly (and its supporters) nonetheless stresses Istria's European credentials in a manner that depicts all non-Istrian Croats as less European and more Balkan. As I have analyzed in

detail elsewhere (Ballinger 2002), this regionalism (which, in its embrace of a multi-ethnic politics, represents an actually existing cosmopolitanism) ultimately works at both the conceptual and everyday levels to exclude newcomers to the peninsula, notably Bosnians, in a manner not so different from the exclusive ethno-nationalisms it explicitly opposes.

The invocation of Mitteleuropa in Triestine projects to revitalize the port makes for its own select inclusions and exclusions. It shifts the focus of the city's gaze away from Italy and toward the territories with which it once shared a common fate. Such a strategy does not please Italian nationalists in the city, who in the last few years have sought to 'return' the city to its place in Italian consciousness by publicizing (some might argue, politically manipulating) both the fate of Italians from Istria after World War II and the 1945 executions of soldiers and civilians carried out by Yugoslav partisans in the karstic pits known as the *foibe*.

The 1998 public encounter held in Trieste between Gianfranco Fini, head of the reformed neofascist party Alleanza Nazionale, and Luciano Violante, part of the Center-Left coalition that ruled Italy between 1996 and 2001, made clear the ways in which Italian politicians of various stripes seek to reconnect Trieste with its Italian 'center'. Both Fini and Violante denounced the long historical silencing of the *foibe* episode and the Istrian exodus, concurring that this neglect of the (Italian) Triestine experience had isolated the city. Violante urged, 'But now Trieste has much to teach Italy about living together [*convivenza*]' (in Zeriali 1998) whereas Fini praised the city as a 'national resource'. Fini, in contrast to Violante, rejected out of hand the question of further guarantees and rights for the city's autochthonous Slovene minority, a sensitive issue that bears great weight in Italo-Slovene relations (and, presumably, in any future opening toward Yugoslavia's successor states). Such symbolic and political contests reveal the very real political stakes behind Habsburg nostalgia. They also suggest that, as Angelo Vivante (1984) argued back in 1912, the economic question and the (Italian) national question still remain incompatible almost a century later.

Conclusions

In this article, I have sought to situate the current reimaginings of Habsburg Trieste found in the work of Dubin, McCourt and Morris within a regional field of intellectual and political discussions about the city's past, as well as its future relationship to its surrounding territory. These contemporary debates draw, in turn, on a long tradition of imagining – we could even say, mythologizing – the city, whether the past envisioned is seen as cosmopolitan and hybrid or national and pure. These three authors range widely in the degree to which they accept at face value the nostalgic take of certain Mitteleuropa proponents, with only Dubin, the historian, making clear what the multi-ethnic toleration of minorities entailed and how that differs from our own era of 'global cities' and multiculturalism.

The local and regional debates that inform, if only implicitly, these three texts do not necessarily interest either their authors or the English-language consumers of their books in the same way that they do residents of contemporary Trieste or Istria. The 'imperial nostalgia', if we wish to call it that, expressed by Jan Morris differs dramatically from that of an 'indigenous' intellectual like Claudio Magris or an Istrian regionalist. (Magris simultaneously deconstructs the mythmaking process even as he himself contributes to it, participation he describes as necessary. 'Only by criticizing the Habsburg myth does one evidence that fascination which one resists' (1996: 5).) The reader drawn to books like *Trieste and the Meaning of Nowhere*, in turn, may have relatively little detailed interest in the local scene but nonetheless be interested in Trieste for what it has to say about Habsburg responses to questions of religious and ethnic difference. These broader questions of identity and difference, of the contradictions of economic expansion and ethnic particularism, preoccupy many readers far removed from the daily realities of life in Trieste. Dubin's book (see also Dubin 2002) points up the need for caution in not imposing our own assumptions about identity onto the experiences of individuals and states negotiating such issues in other times and places; at the same time, her story of statist intervention also urges us to examine our starting assumptions about the roles that states continue to play in identity politics, even in a world in which states are often said to be losing control.

The tale Dubin tells forces a more realistic assessment of the achievements, as well as limitations, of Habsburg Trieste. Diversity and tolerance coexisted there side by side with ethnic and class conflict, with individuals capable of adopting cosmopolitan and nationalist outlooks in different realms (political, economic, cultural) and moments. Those of us who lament the passing of a moment when the nation-state form was not yet hegemonic or who hope for a future world free of the nation state may identify with Joyce when he deemed himself 'Tergestis Exul', that is 'an exile returned to a land that did not exist any more' (McCourt 2000: 253) or that has yet to exist. We must, however, ask ourselves: Are we exiles from the actual cosmopolitanism that characterized Trieste or, rather, from an *idea* of the city that is a 'nowhere' (though not in the sense intended by Morris) because it existed only in literary and political imagination (on this, consult Magris 2002)? I suspect that many us who study Trieste's history are exiles from this vision of a land we would like or hope for, past and present. This should not, however, permanently banish us from the fascinating history of how actual Triestines negotiated identity in the imperial port.

Note

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