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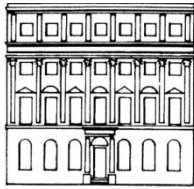
BULLETIN

REVIEW ARTICLE

NEW PERSPECTIVES ON AN OLD STORY: THE EARLY MODERN HOLY ROMAN EMPIRE REVISITED

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JASON PHILIP COY, BENJAMIN MARSCHKE, and DAVID WARREN SABEAN (eds.), *The Holy Roman Empire, Reconsidered*, Spektrum: Publications of the German Studies Association, 1 (New York: Berghahn Books, 2010), xvii + 328 pp. ISBN 978 1 84545 759 4 (hardback) US$120.00. £70.00

PETER H. WILSON, *The Holy Roman Empire, 1495–1806* (2nd edn. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), xvi + 156 pp. ISBN 978 0 230 23978 4 (paperback) £16.50

JOACHIM WHALEY, *Germany and the Holy Roman Empire*, vol. i: *Maximilian I to the Peace of Westphalia 1493–1648*, Oxford History of Early Modern Europe (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), xxii + 722 pp. ISBN 978 0 19 873101 6. £85.00; vol. ii *The Peace of Westphalia to the Dissolution of the Reich 1648–1806*, Oxford History of Early Modern Europe (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), xxiv + 747 pp. ISBN 978 0 19 969307 8. £85.00

Ten years after German reunification, the history of the Holy Roman Empire of the German Nation became a focus of European policy. Referring to the federal tradition of German history, French Minister of Defence Jean-Pierre Chevennement accused the German government of holding up the Holy Roman Empire's political system as a model for European constitutional structures in order to use a weakening of national powers to favour German interests. In reply, German Foreign Minister Joschka Fischer delivered a speech at the Humboldt University in Berlin on 12 May 2000 in which, in the context of the EU enlargement process, he called for a transition from an association of states to a European federation. In the European

Parliament, people as different as Daniel Cohn-Bendit and Otto von Habsburg came together in defence of Fischer's idea.

This political debate reflects the scholarly consensus on the Holy Roman Empire achieved in the 1980s. Historians such as Heinrich Lutz, Karl Otmar von Aretin, Volker Press, Winfried Schulze, Heinz Duchhardt, Heinz Schilling, Johannes Burkhardt, and Alfred Kohler had created an image of the Holy Roman Empire that, in the context of the French Revolution's *Bicentennaire* in 1989, emphasized a historical contrast with revolutionary France. While Western Europe underwent a revolution, Central Europe was dominated by federal structures, the participation of the Estates, the granting of legal rights (including to subjects), and corporate self-administration, even if the monarchical principle and the privileges of the aristocracy remained untouched. A research programme drawn up by Peter Moraw and Volker Press in 1974, which aimed to link the social and constitutional histories of the Holy Roman Empire, provided the foundation for research on the early modern period in Germany for more than twenty years. The findings of this middle generation of historians of the Empire were both pragmatic and abstract. The Empire was defined, as it already had been by the eighteenth-century German imperial constitutional law, as a constitutional structure *sui generis* that could not be compared with any other early modern polity in Europe.

This interpretation in German historiography was resolutely ignored by international scholars, largely because of two factors. First, German historians did not really succeed in embedding their image of the Holy Roman Empire in a European research context. And secondly, English- and French-language research hardly considered the Holy Roman Empire as a political organism. Instead, scholars in Britain and the USA studied the Reformation and confessionalization in 'Germany', that is, the social and religious history problems of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries were investigated taking the German territories as examples.

With some delay, however, changes have become apparent in German research since the start of the twenty-first century. These have sought to adapt views of the Holy Roman Empire to a changed perspective on German and European history. The interpretation of the Holy Roman Empire as the antithesis of French absolutism has declined since the late 1980s, as the concept of absolutism itself has

come under scrutiny. The special emphasis on social disciplining as a basic feature of early modern societies also disappeared, making way for views of other social and cultural practices. And the idea of seeing early modern rule as a process of negotiation and interaction between princes and subjects laid to rest widely held views of the developmental stages of state power.

Instead of this, a group of younger historians of the Empire, including, among others, Georg Schmidt, Barbara Stollberg-Rilinger, and Horst Carl, has put forward two new interpretations. First, the Jena School sees the Holy Roman Empire as a complementary *Reichs-Staat*. It argues that this was the state form typical of Germany in the early modern period, one in which statehood was divided between the Empire and the territories. The imperial state represented the federally constituted nation of the Germans, whose national awareness was no different from that of other European nations. In the discussion of these arguments, Schmidt's critics returned to the older concept of the imperial system, and pointed out that the Empire can only be described as a partially modernized, pre-national semi-state.

Over the last ten years a second movement has emerged around Barbara Stollberg-Rilinger and her research group at the University of Münster. They pursue a cultural interpretation of political rule in the Holy Roman Empire, in which symbolic acts and rituals are seen as giving rise to political community and producing a hierarchical order. This interpretation is less interested in institutions and the resources of rule than in forms of political communication among the Empire's elites. It argues that what unified the Empire was not so much political strategies as the representations, rituals, and ceremonies that celebrated solidarity between the Emperor and the imperial Estates. While the Jena School's argument, built on the complementary imperial state, aimed to bring the history of the Empire closer to what was seen as the 'normal case' of a Europe of nation-states, the second movement places greater emphasis on the unique features of the Empire's constitutional structure which, it suggests, was not comparable to any other early modern state form and was typically premodern. Both interpretations stress that long after the Holy Roman Empire came to an end in 1806, the idea of the Empire exerted a powerful influence on intellectual history as a political programme.

The three volumes under review here show that the recent debates and the newly awakened interest in the history of the Empire have

also found an echo among British and American scholars. In many places they pick up on and explain current research controversies, and take their own position, or suggest solutions for methodological problems. This welcome international response can be traced back first to a crisis in the traditional model which pitted Atlantic Europe against Central and Eastern Europe; today we tend to look more for structural comparisons. And secondly, it can be attributed to a new interest among British and American researchers in the different forms of state and society in early modern Europe, the impact of ideas such as 'law' and 'nation', and the practices of rule and cultural forms of communication. Neither old patterns of explanation nor isolated approaches built on the modern nation-state are any longer convincing. The common position of the authors of the books under review here is that the Holy Roman Empire was not static and had not become ossified in unreformable rituals; rather, it created a dynamic political framework (Coy, Introduction, pp. 2–3). All the volumes are based on a thorough knowledge of the German and international research literature, and take account of historiographical models explaining the typology and development of the Holy Roman Empire.

The authors of the three works under discussion, however, approach the problems of interpretation in different ways, have different aims, and address different readerships. Peter Wilson's textbook, published in the series Studies in European History, is a heavily revised new edition of a work originally published in 1999. In it, Wilson dispenses entirely with the history of events, concentrating instead on political structures and how they changed. To start with he provides a historiographical survey of the research discussion on the character and development of the Holy Roman Empire. In four sections in chapter two, Wilson presents the years 1495 to 1521, 1555 to 1590, 1648 to 1653, and 1740 to 1806 as periods of change in the early modern constitutional discussion. Two further chapters describe the responsibilities and functions of imperial institutions and interpret fundamental concepts such as absolutism, patriotism, communications revolution, political symbolism, and issues in the culture of remembrance.

The essays collected in the volume edited by Coy, Marschke, and Sabean were written for a conference organized by the German Studies Association in San Diego, and present the basic arguments and research practices of an approach that sees the Empire as a sys-

tem of communication. The contributions are divided into three sections: the first looks at 'physical presence, political performance and written communication' (Coy, Introduction, p. 3); the second at 'the symbolic construction of meaning, identity and memory' (Coy, Introduction, p. 4); and the third examines the role of imperial institutions, the significance of confessional aspects, and power relations. The individual contributions mostly present local, regional, or institutional case studies, and extend back to the Middle Ages.

The two volumes by Whaley, by contrast, represent an academic life's work which has grown over many years. The author, who in 1985 published an investigation of religious conditions in Hamburg in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries and has, in recent years, dealt with fundamental questions of the history of the Empire, here presents an overall account whose methodological reflection, thematic range, and wealth of detail are unparalleled. It can be assumed that these two volumes will quickly become standard works on the Holy Roman Empire in the English-speaking world, although their particular form, combining sections on historiography and methodology, structural history and the history of events, has no counterpart in the German-language historiography either. Over more than 1,500 pages, Whaley presents the development of the Holy Roman Empire from the late Middle Ages to its dissolution, debates older and more recent models of interpretation, identifies thematic priorities, and describes lines of historical development without passing over individual events. The text also presents a wealth of regional features and episodes in context which demonstrate the author's outstanding grasp of the detail of both imperial history and German regional history. The main focus, however, is clearly on the political history of the Holy Roman Empire and its member states in a European context, with its changing coalitions of power and areas of conflict.

Both volumes follow a similar pattern, opening with structural history chapters. In the first volume this chapter presents the geography of the Empire and late medieval history leading up to the imperial reform of 1495. The text is then divided into large chapters on the reigns of the various emperors, which discuss the main problems of the period, the political groupings, and the policies of the actors. Whaley does justice to the large social and economic differences in Central Europe by inserting structural history sections into chapters on political history, for example, about the different agricultural sys-

tems and the structural problems of government and society at territorial level.

The main focus for Whaley is the self-understanding and practice of government, not so much as it relates to political actions and reactions, but seen as the basic opportunities for action, the aims and means used by actors. What was regarded as politics was not always the same from the sixteenth to the eighteenth century. Similarly, ideas about the tasks of government, and who had to fulfil them, were changeable. For the emperor and the imperial Estates, therefore, 'imperial politics' and 'territorial politics' were inseparable, and neither could be separated from ideal concepts of rule. Whaley repeatedly returns to contemporary interpretations of imperial constitutional law and shows how it evolved from Johann Jakob Moser's legal positivism to Johann Stephan Pütter's adaptation of natural law. After 1750 Pütter modernized the Empire's constitutional law, emphasizing the limitations of power which the office of emperor imposed on the imperial Estates. He drew on the argument of the *systema imperii*, which was undoubtedly not a monstrosity as Pufendorf had claimed, but a composite state. In the following, examples of the problems addressed in each of the three works will be used to illustrate their methods and findings.

Definitions of the Political Space and Periodization of the Holy Roman Empire

Since the publications of Georg Schmidt, the reduction of the history of the Holy Roman Empire to its German heartlands, to *Reichstagsdeutschland*, has often been discussed. This topic is mentioned by Wilson and Whaley, but they do not expand upon it. Contributions to the volume edited by Coy, Marschke, and Sabean do not address the topic of the Empire's political space at all, and deal exclusively with the German-speaking areas. The books by Wilson and Whaley are different, however. The maps in the books already make clear that they include the Burgundian circles of the Empire, the Franche-Comté, and Imperial Italy, although Whaley does not come back to the Italian parts of the Empire in his text. Wilson's survey, by contrast, contains a brief section on 'Imperial Italy', which is also listed in the bibliography. At the beginning of his first volume, Whaley pro-

vides a geographical and political overview of the borders of the Empire and how they changed. He points out that the population of the Empire consisted of a 'multinational mixture of groups' (Whaley, vol. i, p. 20) and that borders were fluid. With the exception of Savoy, Imperial Italy sent no representatives to imperial institutions, paid no imperial taxes, was not subject to imperial jurisdiction (Whaley is mistaken here concerning the Imperial Aulic Council), and belonged to an area whose dynastic interests over time became, increasingly, purely Habsburg. Whaley sees Bohemia as an exception that was integrated into the Empire by the Habsburgs. He speculates that a dynasty which was not so strongly oriented to the east as the Habsburgs might have been able to transform the Holy Roman Empire into a more clearly national monarchy (Whaley, vol. i, p. 24).

On the general periodization of the Empire, by contrast, the three volumes are unanimous. All dispense with the older division which separates the history of the Holy Roman Empire into periods before and after the Peace of Westphalia. The solutions it provided are not presented as a dislocation, but are seen as fitting into the continuity of the constitutional discourse since the late sixteenth century, for example, in the debate about majority procedures in the Imperial Diet. Whaley follows Winfried Schulze here. After 1648, Whaley sees the consolidation of the emperor's role and the rise of territorial rule as among the basic features of the period. In line with current research he rejects the notion of 'princely absolutism', suggesting instead two specific developments as an explanation: a strengthening in the role of the courts and the court society associated with them; and an expansion in the classical areas of governmental action (Whaley, vol. i, p. 191). Rather than the internal turning point of 1648, both Whaley and Wilson stress the restructuring of the Empire achieved by the Imperial Diet of Worms in 1495, which, they point out, laid new foundations. Some of the essays in the volume edited by Coy, Marschke, and Sabean, by contrast, draw lines of continuity to the medieval Empire, which both Whaley and Wilson neglect to do.

State and Nation

There is a long historiographical tradition which sees western European history in terms of state-creation that led, via a critique of abso-

lutism, to an evolutionary (Britain) or revolutionary (France) development which produced popular sovereignty and parliamentarianism. In a parallel movement, national ideas were transformed into demands for participation and equality in order to delegitimize the older feudal social structures. This view can be found in Whaley and Wilson for the eighteenth century, although both relativize the relevance of the national idea for the political history of the Empire. The national idea is interpreted as one, but not the major, factor in imperial politics.

Whaley, along with the most recent research, sees the period of Reformation and Humanism as representing an early phase of the national idea. The rule of Maximilian I, territorial diversity, and Humanism are at the heart of his chapter on the Empire around 1500. Interest in the national question led to a brief but intense discussion of the rediscovered text of Tacitus's *Germania* and the ecclesiastical *Gravamina* which, along with the Reformation book market, are seen as characteristic of an overarching reform debate. This first national debate, however, ended in the second half of the sixteenth century, being displaced by the emergent discourses on imperial constitutional law. Whaley mentions the language societies of the seventeenth century as elements of continuity, but ultimately their significance was small. He sees a new debate about nation, Empire, and German culture as taking place in the Enlightenment societies and literary associations of the second half of the eighteenth century (vol. ii, p. 183). German national awareness, however, was by no means incompatible with regional identities and territorial affiliations, which also existed (and still do) in other European nations. Rather, as Wilson also points out, contemporaries saw the basic feature of the Empire's political system as freedoms that were typically German, as opposed to authoritarian, tyrannical Spanish and French political cultures. This sort of patriotism, which related both to the Empire and to a territory, did not change until the end of the eighteenth century, when 'a new ranking of values' (Wilson, p. 107) revitalized national ideas.

Thus neither Whaley nor Wilson see any contradiction between loyalty to the system of the Empire's political institutions and the ideology of German patriotism. The volume edited by Coy, Marschke, and Sabean takes a contrary view. André Krischer's conclusion (pp. 265–70) sums up an idea common to many authors in his provocative statement that 'the character of the Holy Roman Empire was essen-

tially fictive . . . it existed as such in the perceptions and the actions of its contemporaries' (p. 267). Questions of statehood are not posed here: the political order of the Holy Roman Empire was not early modern, but pre-modern. The symbolic representation of the Empire, according to Len Scales (pp. 73–92), began after the end of the Staufer imperial dynasty in the thirteenth century. Apart from a permanent process of negotiation between the imperial Estates and the emperor, other essays in the volume, for example, those by Elizabeth Harding and Andreas Kalipke, show that provincial diets and the Imperial Diet's Corpus Evangelicorum also established structures of communication that carried on the older, particularist discourses.

What the contributors to the edited volume have in common is that they see institutions not only in terms of their functions, responsibilities, or decision-making powers, but investigate the mechanisms of communication that worked through institutions, and see symbolic representation as an integral part of state-building. Identity-creating ideas are seen primarily as cultural and performative. Political communication in the Empire was not only structured through imperial institutions, but also created a framework for the elites to exert influence within the territories (see Trossbach in Coy et al., p. 209 n. 18).

Religious Identities

The multi-confessional nature of the Empire has attracted increasing attention in recent years. The question of religious diversity could not really be solved until 1806, although there were no more violent clashes after 1648. In none of the volumes under review here, however, is religion a central theme. Whaley sees the usual three elements as bringing about the Reformation: Humanist criticism of the church, social tensions, and the success of book printing. He casts doubt on the famous posting of the ninety-five theses, and regards the reaction of the Catholic authorities as the most probable trigger for the split in the church. The success of Protestantism under the imperial Estates went against Charles V's imperial policy, which explains his attempt to suppress it violently. When this policy failed, the way was open for the confessions to co-exist. The political basis of the Religious Peace of Augsburg (1555) fell apart in the years that followed, but

according to Whaley the cause was not new conflicts about religious policy (whose relevance he underestimates), but the crisis of the Habsburg dynasty. In general, though, he emphasizes that the period from 1555 to 1618 was one of relative political peace in central Europe compared with conditions in western and northern Europe, although it was threatened by the struggle for independence in the Netherlands.

In the edited volume, David M. Luebke looks at the relationship between religious conflicts and the 'fiction of consensus', which pervaded political communication between the provincial diets and territorial rulers (pp. 145–61). The symbolic expression of the shared values and common bonds of society, which was expected and repeatedly re-enacted by both sides, was a lever that could be used to achieve toleration for confessional deviation. Other essays pose more fundamental questions regarding the creation of confessional identities. Ralf-Peter Fuchs's essay, entitled 'The Production of Knowledge about Confessions: Witnesses and their Testimonies about Normative Years In and After the Thirty Years' War' (pp. 93–106), deals with the problem of how we can know about confessional differences and religious and church practices among rural populations in the northwest of the Empire. Witnesses had astonishingly little knowledge about confessional differences and described their membership of the church as a social group identity which was not oriented by the liturgy or confessional doctrine. Many local Protestants followed traditional community practices, even if these involved Catholic rites. This makes it difficult to define the confessional status quo at any particular time in the past (normative year 1624). Both contributions suggest that there was some leeway in the religious struggle for minds. Religious identity was not a predominant feature that allowed political and social divisions to recede into the background, but was inextricably linked to them.

Whaley also emphasizes that after 1648 political conflicts were connected with the continuing split of the imperial Estates into religious factions, especially in the disputes between Austria and Prussia from 1740. But, he argues, there was no threat of a reconfessionalization of the Empire. Confessional orientations by no means obscured political identities, he suggests. Rather, they strengthened existing loyalties to territorial authorities or to the emperor, when he assumed the role of protector of religious minorities. Whaley, however, stress-

es the continuing existence of religious–cultural boundaries, which he explains by reference to the problems of acceptance which publications from Catholic imperial territories experienced in the eighteenth century. But, to stress this again, he does not see the religious question as the cause of major political conflict.

One political issue, however, cannot be separated from the question of religion: the secularization of the ecclesiastical territories. While this process appeared to have been prevented by the Peace of Westphalia, it entered the realm of possibility in Charles VII's plans to finance his imperial rule. Until the end of the Holy Roman Empire, Whaley points out, the idea of destroying the imperial church always surfaced when fundamental imperial reforms were being planned. Wilson also recognizes this in a subsection on the imperial church (pp. 93–7).

All three books pay relatively little attention to religious minorities. Whaley deals with the Jews, Huguenots, and Protestant refugees from Catholic territories in a few paragraphs (Whaley, vol. ii. pp. 263–9). Neither of the other two works goes into this. Contemporary fascination with the conversions of princes, migrations of religious refugees, biconfessionality, and the protection of religious minorities might also have deserved greater attention.

Factors of Integration

Just as these three books have different basic arguments, they also evaluate the factors for integration that held the Empire together differently. Whaley emphasizes the institutions of the Empire, the office of emperor, the imperial circles, the imperial law courts, and the Imperial Diet. He sees them as connected with the important political movements of imperial history: national, confessional, and the enemy images associated with the Turkish threat. At times, actors considered strengthening the office of emperor as a way of integrating the Empire. For example, plans for a revolt of the Frankish–Thuringian nobility under Wilhelm von Grumbach in 1567 (Whaley, vol. i, p. 393) made provision for setting up a stronger imperial centre. Whaley also sees the Habsburg family, whose vision of rule shaped the empire for centuries, as an important factor for integration. He regards the Habsburg dynasty's significance for the Empire

as lying not only in its strong power base, but also in the model that the governmental and administrative structures of the Habsburg territories and the imperial centre provided for all the imperial territories.

Whaley repeatedly comes back to contemporary discussions of imperial constitutional law. He finds a specifically German tradition in the debates about the limits that the liberties of the Estates, corporate rights, privileges, and personal freedom placed on monarchical power. After 1648 demands for material welfare were also heard in both Protestant and Catholic areas. In the eighteenth century, 'improvement' became the ubiquitous Enlightenment catchphrase, committing governments to improving economic and living conditions, for example, by developing transport and communication infrastructure, standardizing coinage policies, and making provision for food supplies. This was achieved by cooperation at the level of imperial circles. Numerous smaller territories also took part, and a minimum of good governance became established in them as the political standard.

Overall, Whaley presents the position of the Habsburg emperors as the central element in the imperial policy of the sixteenth, seventeenth, and eighteenth centuries. Since the rule of Charles V, he sees the Habsburg understanding of politics realized in the imperial idea, which he repeatedly investigates in specific political contexts in these three centuries. The imperial dimension was often linked with dynastic claims or prospects of inheritance, for example, in the election of Maximilian II as King of Poland in 1573. An imperial strategy was also displayed by Rudolf II and Matthias in the constitutional crisis of 1600 to 1618 (Whaley, vol. i. p. 439), and later by Leopold I and Franz I Stephan.

Wilson sees the (real or imagined) danger of monarchical absolutism as the essential and lasting point of contention in relations between the emperor and the imperial Estates, but also emphasizes the old feudal relations enshrined in feudal law (pp. 11–15). Rather like Whaley, he describes the institutions and offices of the Empire essentially as factors of integration, but also briefly mentions the role of the media (Wilson, pp. 110–12). Wilson ties the symbolic representation of the Empire in signs, rituals, and ceremonies that lies at the heart of the book edited by Coy, Marschke, and Sabean, to institutions and locations. But none of the three books under review here

any longer attribute any special significance to specific ideologies of Empire or the notion of the *translatio imperii*.

These positions on factors of integration can also be found in the debate on the end of the Empire in the Napoleonic era. Whaley criticizes the 'old master-narratives' (vol. i, p. 9) of the decline of the Empire and its helplessness in the face of Napoleon's system of order. Although he also emphasizes the new international situation after 1763 and the lasting antagonism between Prussia and Austria, he, along with Rousseau and Mably, describes the Empire as 'stable' and forming 'the centre of the European order' (Whaley, vol. ii. p. 394). According to Whaley, the Empire had lived on its role as defender against the Ottoman Empire and France for two hundred years, a situation which gave way to a deceptive peace after 1763. It was not the lack of a willingness to reform, but the failure of a number of reform projects, especially under Joseph II, that created the worst possible conditions for the warding off of an external threat. Yet the Prussian–Austrian dualism created a balance of power which preserved the Empire from falling apart under the dominance of one of these parties: 'it is not inconceivable that such a Reich could have survived' even beyond 1806 (Whaley, vol. ii, p. 431). He mentions the cooperation between imperial circles in developing transport infrastructure and organizing food supplies as an example of successful progress towards integration in the eighteenth century. In addition, many regions of the Empire had managed to establish commercial contacts with the prospering Atlantic trade in the second half of the eighteenth century. Finally, after 1790, a series of reforms were implemented: 'the Reich and its institutions underwent a notable revival' (Whaley, vol. ii, p. 560). Its dissolution was more the result of an immensely difficult ten-year war against revolutionary France. Financial burdens and territorial compensation plunged the imperial order into chaos.

Wilson, by contrast, sees the War of the Austrian Succession as already weakening the Empire. The quarrel between Austria and Prussia, he suggests, turned into a dangerous new structural antagonism, which all the other powers had to accommodate; the 'internal balance' was irretrievably destroyed (Wilson, p. 57). The dissolution of the Empire, however, can be attributed to large-scale shifts in European power politics, he claims, and not to factors within the Empire.

Conclusion

In conclusion, it should be mentioned that there are themes and problems which none of the volumes under review addresses, although they are highly influential in the present-day European research landscape. Thus the books say little about the current debate on early modern political economy which, using the concept of the fiscal–military state, also discusses a type of European state and its developmental problems. Even Whaley's detailed account gives little space to the Empire as a zone of regionally diverse societies with an all-embracing corporate constitution. Proto-industrialization, literacy, and demographic shifts are hardly mentioned. A second theme of current research, cultural history, appears as an analytical tool only in the approach taken by the essays in the volume edited by Coy, Marschke, and Sabean. Whaley only briefly mentions the literary discourse and the part it played in the creation of a national consciousness, the imperial style in the palace architecture of the ruling houses, the history of universities and academies, and the court culture of the Empire's large aristocratic dynasties. Developments in intellectual history from the early Enlightenment are only touched upon in all three volumes. The Empire's special position in the contemporary production of knowledge about cultures outside Europe, human anthropology, and nature, could also have been discussed, as Alix Cooper and Emma Spary have recently demonstrated.[1] The examination of the development of natural philosophy and the philosophy of law is rather brief and concentrates too strongly on constitutional law (Whaley, vol. ii, p. 200). In general, it can also be said that too little account is taken of economic and social processes, which are connected with the new interest in questions of political culture and communication.

The various approaches taken in the three books make clear that, rather like the classic combination of constitutional and social history that dominated the 1970s and 1980s, today we need a combination of social history and research on political culture if we want to relate

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[1] Ursula Klein and Emma Spary (eds.), *Materials and Expertise in Early Modern Europe: Between Market and Laboratory* (Chicago, 2009); Alix Cooper, *Inventing the Indigenous: Local Knowledge and Natural History in Early Modern Europe* (Cambridge, 2007), both mostly dealing with Germany.

institutions, political ideas, social practices, and cultural patterns of interpretation to each other. To have worked this out is a great achievement. The remarkable renaissance in Anglo-American research on the Holy Roman Empire to which these volumes testify thus also points to problems of reception which continue to exist in international historiography and to blind spots affecting all of European history. A history of social orders in the early modern period which, for the Empire, would also have to encompass the development of feudal law, remains a gap for the whole of Europe.

Finally, these three books demonstrate that any interpretation of the statehood and constitutional character of the Empire must be measured against European comparisons. Whaley expresses this most clearly: 'The Reich was distinctive, but not unlike other European polities of its time' (Whaley, vol. ii, p. 650). Following on from this, one could ask whether a systematic investigation of the Holy Roman Empire as an empire and the embedding of its history into comparative research on empires would be fruitful. Problems of centre and periphery, competing ideologies of integration, privileged minorities close to the centre, and many others were common to other early modern empires as well. In the political culture of all early modern polities, status differentials, group-specific privileges, and political practices aiming for integration represented complex fundamental problems and were treated differently in law and in politics. The need to legitimize rule is not limited to national or feudal models of order. Early modern composite states were, as John Elliott pointed out more than twenty years ago,[2] characterized by different political spaces and an alternation of unity and difference.

[2] See J. H. Elliot, 'A Europe of Composite Monarchies', *Past and Present,* 137 (1992), 48–71.

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