

Book Review - “Beter wordt het niet – Een reis door the Habsburgse Rijk en de Europese Unie” by Caroline de Gruyter

(Translated as “It doesn’t get better – A journey through the Habsburg Empire and the European Union”)

Stephan Raab

Right after the Brexit vote the most searched question on the Internet was asking: What is the European Union? What are the goals of the process of the European Integration? Is it a transition to something or the evolution of something else? In her book “Beter wordt het niet” (It doesn’t get better”) the Dutch journalist and EU correspondent Caroline de Gruyter takes the reader on a magnificent journey through the European Union, following the old traces of the Habsburg Empire, visiting people and places of thought of the European identity today.

From Habsburgs Empire to European- From Brussels to Vienna and beyond

Between the European Union of today and the last days of the Habsburg Empire, lies a history of more than a century. However, the traces of the Habsburg’s old glories are even visible today, just passing by Brussels’ *Place Royale/Koningsplein*”. Having discovered Brussels once during a guided city tour, some Austrians in the group just cheered at this spot, stating, that they already felt like home, as here it very much resembled the royal buildings of Vienna.



Picture 1. Place Royale/Koningsplein in Brussels (picture by the reviewer)

“Each crisis is existential for the European Union, and we have enough of those crisis. Will it be, that one of those crisis will be fatal for the European Union? Will happen the same to it as has happened to the Habsburg Empire? How shall this happen?” (Gruyter, 2021, 11f.). In her book, Caroline de Gruyter takes the reader on a fantastic journey through the last century, bringing people, places, their story as the history of Europe together, comparing the influence of the Habsburg Empire in the past and the evolution of the European integration nowadays.

The author of *“Beter wordt het niet”* is an experienced EU-journalist, having reported from the pulses of European decision making during the turbulent times of 2008 to 2013. After that, Caroline de Gruyter moved to Vienna. In her book she shares her experiences and insights from her time living in the old capital of the Habsburg Empire once ranging from the border of Switzerland up to Russia, covering a multitude of cultures and peoples under one common roof.

United in Diversity! - Equal or different? - A personal comparison

“Europe needs to be explained better. [...] Because Europe can only be built if it is properly understood and thus better explained. It can only be built with the Member States, never against them” once the president of the European Commission Jean Claude Juncker emphasized in his State to the Union (Juncker, 2016, p. 64). Building upon that concept, the book argues, that: *“Understanding Europe is still mostly understanding the member states* (Gruyter, 2021, p. 24)”

During this journey de Gruyter visits many renowned personalities influenced by the times of the Habsburg, either personally or at least in a mental sense. Probably, the best history of the last century might be told best along the story of Otto von Habsburg, who served as head of the family, a family which gave an entire epoch its name – ruling over about 13 million people on a territory providing about 1/10 of the gross domestic product of Europe during that time (ibid.p.62). Being the grandson of the famous emperor Franz Josef I, in his younger years, Otto had to flee his country, losing his Austrian passport. Living in various European countries. Later, he supported the resistance against the Nazi suppression, helping people to flee the regime. After the war, he joined the Bavarian CSU, serving as member of the European Parliament. During that term, he was also responsible for the “Pan European Picnic” in 1989, when many citizens of the GDR managed to escape to the West through a hole in the Iron Curtain cut by the Hungarians (ibid p.34f.) This story is just one of many, as for instance, the author presents one of his neighbours in Vienna, who was supposed to inherit the throne of Ukraine, yet, instead of a kingdom, now owns a dancehall to be rented for balls (ibid. p.49). Many people from Norway to Italy and the numerous new states, that emerged from the demise of the Habsburg empire, have a say during the lecture, presenting the impact of the Habsburg past on the Europe of today.

In *“Die Welt von Gestern - Erinnerungen eines Europäers“* (The world of yesterday- Memories of a European) Austrian novelist Stefan Zweig, who grew up during the heydays of the Habsburg Monarchy, reminds us that things that were taken for granted can get lost quite fast. He once wrote down: *“The day I lost my passport, at the age of 58 I discovered that losing your home does mean more than losing a certain spot on earth”* (Zweig, 1978, p. 208). Travelling through Europe, this travelling diary uncovers many parallels. Once the Habsburg emperors were responsible for keeping stability within the

multitude of nationalities. Both, the European Union today, as the Habsburg emperor during his time, were built upon the principle of keeping peace (Gruyter, 2021, 106f.). Like today, many ethnic issues were transformed into legal issues to be debated in front of a court. Sometimes this procedure worked, other times not, yet the strategy was to gain time to find a peaceful solution (ibid. p.72). As in earlier times, the Hungarians especially were striving for a stronger position, and now the European Union finds itself negotiating their position, with the United Kingdom having left (ibid. p.137). Eventually, the presumed slow working speed of the European bureaucracy could also be found within Habsburg bureaucracy, which appeared to be rather relaxed, following the same somehow lethargic procedures (ibid.p.76). According to a famous legend, the last words of emperor Franz Joseph I to his servant were: “*Let’s do it as always. Wake me up at 4 a.m. I have not finished my work so far*” (Rosen, 2016). Despite many their many differences the emperor and the house of Habsburg served as common point of reference for different nations.

The present is the past of tomorrow or lessons to be learned from history

Whoever comes to the European Parliament building in Brussels will find a huge sculpture, made of different bars striving in various direction. However, the sculpture “*Confluence*” is based upon a common fundament, symbolizing the common root of all member states of the EU, meanwhile the perspectives and ideas for the future might be contradictory to each other. Most of the buildings from the imperial times are still in use today as centres of power such as the Hofburg – now the office of the Austrian head of state. The stability and evolution of a political system used to be built on exchange, best shown by the concept of masquerade balls. While noble people dressed down as ordinary people, those ordinary people were allowed to dress up as noble people on that occasion (Gruyter, 2021, p. 147). This way governors and governed could get a glimpse of the opposite perspective, maybe understanding each other a little bit better, likewise the expert bubbles of the European quarter and the European citizens on the ground. Together all parts of the European project enter a new phase to search for their identity today.

History is not about the past, but about change. The German sociologist Niklas Luhmann considered the purpose of history to bequeath a testament of your time, meanwhile giving an incentive to learn from history for the next generation (Luhmann, 2010, p. 187). Concluding this review “*Beter wordt het niet*” provides two essential lessons from the past. On the one hand, even so many are fearing a loss of identity, the European Union is still more diverse, than many might think, with each part telling its own story. On the other hand, drawing parallels to the demise of the Habsburg Empire emphasize, that something, that might have been taken for granted for a very long time, suddenly might disappear within a moment. Consequently, this book encourages the reader to start its own discovery of the European identity today, promoting exchange and dialogue about the past and the future, or to summarize with the author’s words:

“Europe is a continent full of contradiction. It has always been like that. A continent with many people, languages, and beliefs. Everybody sees things bright, or very bleak, differently. Often things went wrong during the walk of history. But often it also went well. Then people started to listen to each other. They started to debate, started to eat together, they began to chat and to practice philosophy, began to negotiate as they managed to settle down conflicts. That is why the coffeehouse is so characteristic for the European Idea” (Gruyter, 2021, p. 89)

References

- Gruyter, C. de (2021) *Beter wordt het not- Een reis door het Habsburgse Rijk en de Europeese Unie*, Amsterdam, De Geus.
- Juncker, J.-C. (2016) *State of the Union 2016* [Online], Brussels, European Commission. Available at <https://op.europa.eu/en/publication-detail/-/publication/c9ff4ff6-9a81-11e6-9bca-01aa75ed71a1/language-en/format-PDF/source-239530323>.
- Luhmann, N. (2010) 'Gesellschaftliche Struktur und semantische Tradition', in Stollberg-Rillinger, B. (ed) *Ideengeschichte*, Stuttgart, Steiner Verlag, pp. 187–223.
- Rosen, B. (2016) 'Zum 100. Todestag von Franz Joseph I. Kaiser-Dämmerung', *Tagesspiegel*, 21 November [Online]. Available at <https://www.tagesspiegel.de/gesellschaft/zum-100-todestag-von-franz-joseph-i-kaiser-daemmerung/14861730.html>.
- Zweig, S. (1978) *Die Welt von Gestern- Erinnerungen eines Europäers*, Frankfurt am Main, Fischer Verlag.