

# Book Review: Tropics of Vienna: Colonial Utopias of the Habsburg Empire by Ulrich E. Bach

J. Laurence Hare

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**Bach, Ulrich E. *Tropics of Vienna: Colonial Utopias of the Habsburg Empire*. New York: Berghahn, 2016. viii + 143 pages. Hardcover, \$80.00.**

Within the vast academic discussion of European imperialism, it is perhaps not surprising that the Austro-Hungarian Empire has received scant attention. Its representatives took part in the famed Berlin Conference of 1885 that inaugurated the so-called European ‘Scramble for Africa’ in the late nineteenth century, but the Habsburg Dual Monarchy engaged in no formal colonial ventures of its own. By and large, it preferred to exercise its waning great power status within Central and Southern Europe while seeking to cultivate a unique multi-ethnic identity amidst a rising tide of nationalism and anti-Semitism. Yet, as the title of Germanic studies scholar Ulrich E. Bach’s book, *Tropics of Vienna: Colonial Utopias of the Habsburg Empire*, suggests, colonialism was in fact an important part of the cultural imagination within the Habsburg lands.

Through a series of vignettes, Bach convincingly shows how a number of well-known contemporary writers turned the European colonialist discourse inward to the geographies and peoples of Central Europe. Specifically, they “conjure up an idealized image of Vienna projected onto vacant colonial space” (p. 5). In so doing, Bach makes a point to reject the earlier conclusions of the Germanist Russell Berman, who had argued in the 1990s that participation in the colonial culture of Europe hinged on actual experience. Of course, a number of scholars working on Germany have long since moved beyond Berman’s more limited view, which means that Bach’s departure puts him in line with recent scholarship focusing on the ways in which Germans shared a pervasive but largely imaginary colonial vision. Ultimately, it is Bach’s focus on the utopian qualities of Habsburg colonial literature that sets his study apart from the rest. Whereas much of the German scholarship focuses on the connections between colonial possessions and German national aspirations, Bach’s Austrians create colonial fantasies—even a few set in faraway lands—not to advocate for a colonial policy but to confront pressing problems closer to home. “These utopias,” he explains, “employ a notion of space as a literary device to compensate for the critical situation in Vienna by projecting blueprints for utopian societies elsewhere” (p. 128).

At first glance, Bach’s slim volume appears to be little more than a superficial treatment of the subject. He focuses solely on six figures and devotes the lion’s share of discussion to a handful of texts. Yet, with this approach, Bach manages to achieve an admirably comprehensive analysis. His subjects, Leopold von Sacher-Moser (1836-1895), Lazar von Hellenbach (1827-1887), Theodor Hertzka (1845-1924), Theodor Herzl (1860-1904), Robert Müller (1887-1924), and Joseph Roth (1894-1939), belonged to a bourgeois liberal milieu which, according to the historian Carl Schorske, was especially aggrieved by the cultural shifts within Austrian society at the turn of the century. However, although they are socially similar, their origins and concerns are much more eclectic. They include Germanic patriots, pan-Slavic enthusiasts, and, in the case of Herzl, the leading founder of the Zionist movement. Their ideas are spread across the political

spectrum, and their writings speak to concerns about both Vienna and the frontiers of Galicia. Finally, their publications treat a variety of settings and themes, from gender inversions and spiritual transcendence in the Galician frontier in Sacher-Moser's *Der Kapitulant*, to a "confrontation between civilization and nature" in East Africa in Hertzka's *Freiland* (p. 75). Through a selection of particularly utopian texts, some especially well known, like *Freiland* and Herzl's Zionist utopia *Altneuland*, and others suffering from "critical neglect," like Robert Müller's more right-wing *Tropen: Mythos der Reise*, Bach shows how a recourse to colonialist fiction provided a means of thinking through the economic anxieties, nationalist chauvinism, and anti-Semitism that threatened the multi-ethnic empire in its final years.

Readers outside the field of literary studies will find Bach's book both insightful and accessible. Although its brevity demands some important omissions, it nevertheless manages to address the major scholarship on the texts under study without being bogged down in dense discussions of theory. The most substantive engagements concern texts already familiar to a wide readership, including the aforementioned Berman and Schorske. Indeed, some readers may wish that Bach had spent a bit more time engaging the sizable literature on utopian studies, though they will find effective use of Phillip E. Wegner's *Imaginary Communities* and a touch of the work of Frederic Jameson, among a few others. In other places, the succinctness of academic discussion leaves readers with a rather annoying set of unintroduced quotes and some difficulties distinguishing the author's newer perspectives from older interpretations. Finally, it is surprising that the very strong discussion of selected authors and texts are not matched with a similarly thorough overarching analysis. The structure of the book, with separate notes and bibliographies for each chapter, give the work the feel of an essay collection, which is accompanied with only a brief introduction, an even briefer conclusion, and very little delineation of direct links among the authors.

Fortunately, Bach gives us just enough to discern the whole from its parts and to see that his study breaks some important new ground, if not on the utopian genre, then certainly on the history and literary legacy of the late Habsburg Empire. His work will thus appeal beyond the circle of literary scholarship, and will be of interest to historians, geographers, and area studies scholars concerned with Central Europe during the critical and ever-fascinating *fin de siècle*.

J. Laurence Hare, Ph.D.  
Associate Professor of History  
University of Arkansas  
Fayetteville, Arkansas