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Austro-Marxism and the Habsburg Crisis: A Non-Territorial Response to the Conflict of Governance and Class

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Abstract

This article re-examines the national theory of Austro-Marxism as a response to the dual crisis of the late Habsburg Empire: the paralysis of imperial governance and the erosion of cross-national class solidarity. Karl Renner and Otto Bauer proposed a non-territorial federal scheme based on the personal principle and cultural autonomy, reconstructing the nation as a cultural community grounded in individual registration. By severing the link between nation, sovereignty and territory, they sought to reopen space for class politics while preserving the imperial state. The article argues that this scheme was an institutional proposal shaped by the specific contradictions of the Empire's socio-economic structure. Its failure reveals a tension that recurs in contemporary discussions of non-territorial autonomy: the success or failure of institutional designs for plural societies is determined less by their internal coherence than by their capacity to respond to the material conditions of the societies they seek to govern.

Keywords: Austro-Marxism; Habsburg Empire; historical crisis; personal principle; cultural autonomy; non-territorial federalism

1. Introduction

In autumn 1897, the Imperial Council in Cisleithania fell into deadlock. German-speaking and Czech-speaking deputies obstructed each other procedurally, and the Council became almost incapable of substantive decisions (Boyer 1995, pp. 19–24). The immediate cause was the Language Ordinances of Prime Minister Count Kasimir Badeni, which required officials in Bohemia and Moravia to be proficient in both German and Czech. Because German had hitherto been the dominant language of the Bohemian administration, the ordinances effectively disempowered the previously dominant Germans in Bohemia. They provoked mass German nationalist protest in Vienna, Graz, Brno and more than a hundred other towns, followed by a Czech backlash (Beller 2018, pp. 187–91). Badeni resigned within months, though the ordinances remained in force until October 1899 (Deak 2015, pp. 223–25; Smrček 2025, pp. 1–4). The episode exposed the depth of the national dilemma in the empire's political structure (Judson 2016, p. 293).

Similar frictions occurred in the Hungarian half of the monarchy. The Magyar vision of a Hungarian empire intensified tensions with the subject nationalities (Varga 2021, p. 119). The Magyars treated the Lands of the Hungarian Crown as an indivisible sovereign entity

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and imposed strict administration on minorities in Transylvania, Croatia-Slavonia and the eastern counties (Varga 2021, p. 121; Adorjáni 2023, pp. 83–85).

The deadlock in Cisleithania was where the Austrian Social Democratic Workers' Party and the theorists who emerged from it, Karl Renner and Otto Bauer, developed their response to the national question. Hungary enters the analysis in a different capacity, as a structural constraint. The Hungarian veto over any reform of the *Gesamtstaat*, secured by the Compromise of 1867, is the strongest single explanation for why Renner's scheme remained politically unrealizable (Mommsen 1963, as reviewed in Wandruszka 1967, p. 387). Hungarian political history is therefore treated at the level of depth required by that function, while the Austrian half receives the fuller treatment.

That detail must be read with care, because the national groups whose competition the imperial crisis is usually said to express were not self-evident social facts. Recent historiography has shown that national belonging on the linguistically mixed frontiers was the product of sustained political and administrative effort (Judson 2006, pp. 2–5; King 2005, pp. 3–6; Zahra 2008, pp. 6–9). This article takes that finding as its starting point. By the 1890s, national categories had been consolidated far enough to paralyse governance and fragment class solidarity, but not so completely as to make alternative loyalties and bilingual practices disappear. That consolidation was shaped in part by the administrative and legal instruments of the imperial state (Kuzmany 2023, pp. 976–80; Stourzh 2007, pp. 157–63).

Classical Marxist theory expected the proletariat to achieve emancipation through solidarity across national boundaries. In the Habsburg Empire, national politics eroded that solidarity. German and Czech workers in Prague and Vienna laboured side by side, but they read different newspapers and joined different trade unions (Hanisch 2011, pp. 144–47). The Austrian party federalized along national lines in the 1890s, and the definitive split came only on the eve of the First World War (Löw 1984, pp. 159–65; Kuzmany 2024, pp. 51–52). The instruments that Renner and Bauer proposed were elaborated in the very years in which the party that was supposed to carry them was coming apart.

It was under this dual pressure that the Austrian Marxists developed their response. The Hainfeld Congress of 1888–1889 had unified the party under Victor Adler (Leser 1966, p. 118). Its members came mostly from German cultural backgrounds but shared "a vision of personal national autonomy consistent with the national equality of rights" (Von Busekist 2019, p. 546). Renner approached the problem from a legal–institutional perspective, while Bauer approached it from a socio-cultural one (Nimni 1999, p. 295). Together they proposed a scheme that severed the link between nation and territorial sovereignty. The national community, composed of voluntarily joining individuals, became a public-law corporation responsible for education, language and cultural affairs, while the central state retained unified governance over the economy, finance and administration (Renner 2005, pp. 31–33; Von Busekist 2019, p. 548). National belonging was not fixed to territorial boundaries (Sluga 2001, p. 211).

The scheme is best read as a socially embedded practice of political thought. Political theory does not emerge in an abstract space of ideas. It is an institutional proposal put forward by actors in specific historical situations, in response to contradictions in socio-economic structures. This stance draws on Quentin Skinner's approach to the history of political thought. Skinner treats texts as "speech acts," in which authors attempt to accomplish specific tasks within particular political controversies, and the key to understanding lies in identifying the field of debate in which the author is situated (Skinner 1969, pp. 48–49). In the Habsburg context, Renner and Bauer responded to dynamic social processes, not to a static conflict of ideas. To trace how they reconfigured concepts such as nation, autonomy and state, the article also draws on Reinhart Koselleck's conceptual

history. Koselleck emphasizes that political concepts are dynamic tools constantly redefined in social conflicts (Koselleck 1982, pp. 409–10).

This study argues that the national question in the late Habsburg Empire operated on two fronts at once. It paralyzed imperial governance. It fragmented the class solidarity that Marxist theory had identified as the engine of historical change. The non-territorial federal scheme of personal principle and cultural autonomy proposed by Renner and Bauer was a socially embedded response to this dual crisis. Its architecture, its conceptual innovations and its eventual failure together reveal a tension that recurs in contemporary discussions of non-territorial autonomy: the success or failure of institutional designs for plural societies depends less on their internal coherence than on their capacity to respond to the material conditions of the societies they seek to govern.

The argument proceeds in six sections. Section 2 examines the structural crisis, specifying the pattern of uneven economic development and reconstructing the institutional framework of governance from the dual-track administration of the 1860s to the reform efforts before 1914. Section 3 turns to the social crisis, analyzing the street politics of 1897, the fragmentation of the Social Democratic Party, and the Hungarian case. Section 4 reconstructs Renner and Bauer's theoretical response. Section 5 examines the partial institutionalization of the personal principle in the national compromises and in the Estonian Cultural Autonomy Act of 1925, before turning to the scheme's limitations. Section 6 concludes.

2. The Structural Crisis: Economy, National Categories, Governance

The national question in the late Habsburg Empire operated on two fronts at once. It paralysed imperial governance. It also fragmented the class solidarity that Marxist theory had identified as the engine of historical change. These two crises ran in parallel and fed into each other. This section examines the structural conditions behind the first of them.

The empire's pattern of uneven economic development underlay both, though the phrase requires specification before it can carry the causal weight placed upon it. The Compromise of 1867 created a dual monarchy in which the Austrian half was relatively industrialized while the Hungarian half retained a semi-feudal, nobility-dominated agrarian structure (Tihany 1969, p. 114). The two halves possessed separate constitutions and parliaments, and Article 28 of Hungarian Law XII of 1867 explicitly rejected a common parliament (Seton-Watson 1939, p. 130). Foreign affairs, war and finance were handled by joint ministers (Monticone 1968, p. 116). Each half retained its own finance ministry for domestic affairs. Tariffs between the two halves were renegotiated every ten years (Schulze and Wolf 2012, p. 655). By the mid-nineteenth century Austria had already entered industrialization. Hungary, primarily agricultural in exports, had only just begun. Some scholars believe Hungary at the time "was meant to play the... role... as a target of economic exploitation" (Kövér 2021, p. 233).

The 1867 settlement was itself a product of imperial governance failure, the result of what contemporaries called "relentless necessity" (Gray 1906, p. 200). The defeat by Prussia in 1866 allowed the economically backward Hungary to obtain a disproportionately strong political position. The agreement established the dual name of the monarchy, and Hungary insisted on the word and to emphasize its independence (Cronin 1917, p. 36). Hungarian nationalists treated the Lands of the Crown of Saint Stephen as possessing all the characteristics of a sovereign state (Varga 2021, p. 130). Renner and Bauer recognized that the preferential treatment granted to Hungary became the basis for Magyars to construct a dominant position relative to other ethnicities (Tihany 1969, p. 127). Bertrand Auerbach described the arrangement as "an anachronism... on the corpses of diverse nationalities" (Tihany 1969, p. 121, citing Auerbach 1898, pp. 331–33).

Uneven development produced structural consequences for national relations, but the inequality that mattered was not confined to the divide between the two halves. Within Cisleithania, Galicia and Bukovina were consistently the poorest crown lands, while the Bohemian lands occupied a relatively privileged position in the imperial division of labour (Kaps 2015, pp. 61–64; Kaps 2018, pp. 191–96; Kaps 2020, pp. 43–59). Within Transleithania, the welfare gap between the Hungarian core and its eastern and southern peripheries widened continuously in the four decades before the war (Kaps 2015, p. 63). The imperial economy generated a hierarchy of regions that cut across the constitutional division of the monarchy (Kaps 2015, p. 64; Komlosy 2004, pp. 1–6; Komlosy 2020, pp. 95–101). Proxy estimates of per capita GDP confirm the gradient, with the western crown lands well above the imperial average and Galicia, Bukovina and Dalmatia far below it (Good 1994, pp. 869–85). Hungarian economic development was regionally concentrated and left the eastern and southern peripheries structurally dependent (Katus 1980, pp. 270–74; Katus 1981, pp. 469–76; Katus 1983, pp. 257–58). Recent quantitative work has shown that market integration was systematically asymmetric. Price differentials between regions with similar ethno-linguistic composition were markedly smaller than those between regions with different composition, and this asymmetry cannot be explained by transport costs, geography or communication alone (Schulze and Wolf 2012, pp. 652–54, 665–71). Economic nationalism along ethno-linguistic lines was itself a mechanism of the empire's economic geography.

The language regulations, school resource allocations and competitions for administrative positions that contemporaries experienced as cultural conflict were rooted in this economic unevenness. In the Austrian half, Czech dissatisfaction stemmed largely from the denial of the Czech claim to sovereignty over the Crown Lands of Saint Wenceslas, since Czech politicians demanded for those lands the same legal status that the Hungarian Crown Lands of Saint Stephen enjoyed (Roháč 2009, pp. 167–68). In the Hungarian half, the Compromise had been led by Magyar middle nobility drawn mainly from the agricultural sector (Tihany 1969, p. 124). For this group, national differences were manifested mainly as differences "between master and servant" (Tihany 1969, p. 125). The Hungarian economy did change in this period, with the agrarian sector developing into a modern agricultural industry and an entrepreneur bourgeoisie emerging alongside it (Katus 1983, pp. 257–58). These developments were regionally concentrated and did not alter the structural position of the eastern and southern peripheries within the monarchy as a whole.

The consequences of this configuration became acute once national categories had been sufficiently institutionalized to organize political life. Recent historiography has shown that national belonging on the linguistically mixed frontiers was actively produced by nationalist activists, often against considerable indifference on the part of local populations (Judson 2006, pp. 2–5). The national categories of Czech and German were in many places the outcome of political and administrative practice (King 2005, pp. 3–6; Zahra 2008, pp. 6–9). The imperial census played a central role. The Austrian government intended to measure language of daily use rather than national identity, but nationalist activists treated the census as a critical weapon and refused to accept that it measured anything other than national belonging (Judson 2006, pp. 14–15). Bilingualism was in fact widespread in the Bohemian lands. In Prague in 1900, 16.6 percent of schoolchildren were bilingual; in Budějovice the figure reached 16.2 percent; in Most 22.4 percent of children spoke both Czech and German fluently (Zahra 2008, p. 6). These figures complicate any straightforward reading of census results as indicators of national loyalty. National registers introduced in Moravia, Bukovina and Galicia turned national belonging into an administrative category, and the question of who could determine an individual's nationality became a legal problem across the empire (Kuzmany 2023, pp. 976–80).

The same administrative instruments that hardened national categories also became the terrain on which the governance crisis unfolded. Institutions still functioned, and Judson has argued that the empire and its institutions worked astonishingly well despite the nationalities conflict (Judson 2016, pp. 4–6). At the same time, contemporary observers such as R. W. Seton-Watson, writing from a British pro-Entente position, described the situation as one in which ethnic-based politics "like a strong poison" seeped into every sub-topic and plunged it into systemic repetition and delay (Seton-Watson 1939, p. 123).

Although the constitution formally granted equal rights to the empire's nationalities, at least on the Austrian side, Seton-Watson judged that national tensions could not be accommodated within the empire's existing structures (Seton-Watson 1919, pp. 22–23).

The constitutional framework within which these conflicts unfolded was itself a product of a long state-building process that culminated in the dual-track system of administration. This system emerged from the March Constitution of 1849, was refined under Alexander Bach's neo-absolutist administration in the 1850s, and was fully institutionalized in the February Patent of 1861 and the December Constitution of 1867 (Deak 2015, pp. 83–94, 149–60). It divided administration between a political administration, staffed by imperial officials and led by district prefects appointed from Vienna, and an autonomous administration comprising elected town councils, district assemblies and provincial diets with responsibility for local property and cultural affairs (Deak 2015, pp. 86–88, 154–57). The autonomous crownland institutions became the primary arena for national political battles, particularly in mixed provinces such as Bohemia and Moravia, where competing national groups fought for control over schools, cultural institutions and administrative appointments (Deak 2015, pp. 165–66, 202–8). A parallel legal culture had developed since 1848 that treated national equality as a constitutional principle enforceable through courts, even when its administration remained uneven (Stourzh 2007, pp. 157–63; Stourzh 1985, as summarized in Kieval 1992, p. 178). The 1867 December Constitution had granted equal rights to all nationalities in Article 19, and over the following decades the administrative court applied that article in hundreds of cases (Mazohl 2014, pp. 163–82).

The language of the imperial administration became a central battleground within that framework. The Stremayr Language Ordinances of 1880 elevated Czech to official status alongside German in Bohemia and Moravia, requiring that official notices be disseminated in both languages and that the state administration communicate with Czech-speaking towns and villages in Czech (Deak 2015, pp. 203–4). They produced a major political battle between German and Czech national politicians (Deak 2015, p. 204). Their influence on the actual staffing of the administration was surprisingly limited. The Bohemian governor's office found no shortage of bilingual bureaucrats, and many imperial civil servants in the Bohemian lands spoke Czech as a matter of course (Deak 2015, pp. 204–6). When appointing politically important officials, nationality politics played an insignificant role in comparison to the qualities necessary to represent the empire, namely calm authority, competence and the command of public respect (Deak 2015, pp. 204–5). The Moravian Compromise of 1905 attempted to balance national quotas in representation, parallel administrative arrangements and national voter registration, but it created new friction in implementation. Local authorities often reinterpreted specific rules, leading to a cycle of new sense of injustice (Pokludová 2022, p. 82). The compromise became a reference point for later provincial settlements in Bukovina and Galicia (Kuzmany 2016, pp. 43–61).

The most dramatic confrontation came with Badeni's Language Ordinances of April 1897. Badeni expanded the use of Czech in the administration in Bohemia and Moravia beyond the Stremayr ordinances. While Stremayr had allowed Czech to be the language in which ordinary citizens communicated with the imperial authorities, the outer administrative language, Badeni's ordinances decreed that cases would be adjudicated in either

Czech or German, depending on how they were submitted. If a Czech speaker initiated a case, officials would have to review it internally in Czech, the inner administrative language (Deak 2015, pp. 223–24). Every member of the state administration in Bohemia and Moravia would have to be fluent in both languages, and state officials had four years to prove themselves fluent (Deak 2015, p. 224). German representatives in the Reichsrat began to obstruct the work of parliament through endless procedural delays and filibusters, and when the ordinances were eventually repealed, Czech national politicians followed suit (Deak 2015, pp. 224–25). Emperor Franz Joseph forced Badeni to resign on 28 November 1897, though the ordinances remained in force for another two years and were withdrawn only in October 1899 under Clary-Aldringen (Beller 2018, pp. 187–91). The crisis opened a new period of reform and compromise, and the bureaucracy emerged from these discussions aiming to place its officials collectively in the center of Austrian politics, as referees of the political process, adjudicators of interest-group conflict and priests of citizenship (Deak 2015, p. 226).

In the final years before the First World War, the Austrian state made a concerted effort to reform its administrative structures to accommodate mass democracy and nationality politics. The Commission for the Promotion of Administrative Reform, established in 1911 under Erwin von Schwarzenau, brought together politicians, academics and former ministerial officials to examine all facets of administration in Cisleithania (Deak 2015, pp. 249–51). The minister of the interior Guido von Haerdtl proposed reforms that would make districts more uniform, cap their population below eighty thousand people and create clearer lines of authority in order to depoliticize the work of the state, especially in terms of nationality politics (Deak 2015, pp. 257–58). The outbreak of the First World War cut short this reform effort, but it demonstrates that administrative reform was seen by contemporaries as a viable path to mitigating nationality conflicts.

One structural constraint on any programme of national autonomy in Cisleithania was the severe fiscal crisis of the crownlands. The constitutional experiments of the 1860s gave much of the responsibility for social welfare to the crownlands, but they did not turn over the central state's control over taxes (Deak 2015, p. 229). Crownlands could only levy surcharges on direct taxes collected by the central state. By 1905 provincial surcharges had reached legal and financial ceilings, with Bukovina levying a 95 percent surcharge on its citizens and Galicia's surcharge equalling 81.5 percent (Deak 2015, p. 229). National politics only exacerbated these financial difficulties, since each party sought in the period of its national hegemony to satisfy its national needs as much as possible (Deak 2015, p. 231). Nationally mixed crownlands had the most trouble covering their expenditures. By 1910 Bukovina's expenditures exceeded its budget by 46 percent, Moravia's by almost 35 percent, and Bohemia and Galicia each spent 23 percent in excess of their revenues (Deak 2015, p. 231). Any proposal for expanded national autonomy would therefore have confronted not only political opposition but also severe financial constraints.

The internal contradictions of the Hungarian part further exacerbated the governance crisis. Magyars began marginalizing Slovaks, Romanians, Serbs and Croats in the administrative domain (Monticone 1968, p. 119) and adopted a "rather harsh policy of magyarisation" in education (Roháč 2009, p. 165). The loyalty lost by these excluded groups extended beyond the Hungarian government to the entire empire.

3. The Social Crisis: Class Politics, Street Politics, and the Hungarian Constraint

The governance crisis described in the previous section had a social counterpart. National politics did not merely obstruct institutions. It also reshaped the ways in which people organized, protested and imagined their collective interests. The most dramatic

instance was the crisis of 1897, whose street-level dynamics reveal how quickly national mobilization could escape the control of the political elites who had set it in motion.

The mobilization of protest during the Badeni crisis involved multiple actors and communication channels at once. The nationalist press depicted national and political adversaries as oppressive enemies against whom action needed to be taken, and it told readers how to react, namely with public expression (Smrček 2025, p. 89). Violence itself became a tool for mobilizing further protests. The more protests and petty violence broke out, the more street politics became not only the goal but also a means of mobilization (Smrček 2025, p. 110). Each instance of street politics allowed rioters to be depicted as victims, which delegitimized state authority and encouraged further protests (Smrček 2025, p. 126). The social composition of the rioters complicates the characterization of these events as nationalist riots. In Prague during the December days of 1897, most of those arrested were young men from the lower classes, with an average age of twenty-three and nearly half under twenty. Only fourteen university students were arrested, and none for violent activity (Smrček 2025, pp. 204–5). The violence was driven less by nationalist ideology than by a combination of social frustration, peer dynamics and opportunism, overlaid with nationalist justifications provided by political leaders and the media (Smrček 2025, p. 225). The policing of the riots revealed tensions within the Habsburg state's approach to public order. Both municipal and state-controlled police forces were increasingly nationalized by nationalist narratives that assigned political or ethnic allegiance to law enforcers (Smrček 2025, pp. 258–60). The army proved a conservative institution incapable of adapting to modern policing. While gendarmerie and municipal police increasingly resorted to negotiation, the military insisted on maintaining its authority at all costs, thereby exacerbating the tensions it was deployed to quell (Smrček 2025, pp. 243–44, 264). The events of 1897 did not destroy Habsburg Austria, which survived for another two decades. They marked the end of the old neo-absolutist model, in which state questions could be addressed without regard for citizens' opinions, and the arrival of a modern participatory state in which mass politics were easier to reproduce and harder to contain within existing institutions (Smrček 2025, pp. 3–4, 347; Boyer 1995, pp. 19–24; Beller 2018, pp. 187–91). The opening of politics to broader sections of the population often went hand in hand with violence, which usually came from parts of society that felt their voices were not being heard (Smrček 2025, p. 312).

National politics also eroded the core political resource of the Austrian Social Democratic Party, namely cross-national proletarian solidarity. German and Czech workers in the factories of Prague and Vienna laboured side by side, but they gradually differentiated into parallel and opposing groups (Hanisch 2011, pp. 144–47). The party federalized in 1897, when the Wimberg congress created national party executives and turned the central committee into a body of national representatives, so that the party became, in the phrase of the time, a small International (Kuzmany 2024, p. 51). The trade unions remained unified until after 1905, and the definitive split came only in 1911, on the questions of representation and trade union organization (Löw 1984, pp. 159–65; Kuzmany 2024, pp. 51–52). The 1907 elections were in fact the party's breakthrough, with roughly 23 percent of the vote and 87 of 516 seats, making it the largest single party in the Reichsrat. The reversal and the definitive Czech split belong to 1911. The party's internal fragmentation was precisely what prompted the Austromarxists to develop their theoretical response to the nationality question.

For Czech Social Democrats, the November 1905 suffrage demonstrations transformed their relationship to the nation. The sense of emerging victorious in a contest with rival movements for political influence convinced Czech socialist workers that they had seized national leadership from bourgeois nationalism (Beneš 2017, pp. 131–35). The events of

that month convinced socialist workers, especially Czech-speaking ones, that they were taking over steerage of their respective ethnic nations, a conviction that would have lasting consequences for proletarian internationalism (Beneš 2017, pp. 240–41). The nationalization of Czech Social Democracy after 1905 proved fatal to proletarian internationalism. In the 1911 parliamentary elections, the autonomists won 96 percent of the Czech Social Democratic vote, while centralists won only 11 percent (Beneš 2017, p. 3). The ethnic-national splitting of trade unions advanced at the grass-roots level as much as among the organizational elite (Beneš 2017, p. 3). This outcome reflected a genuine conviction among ordinary workers that they were now stewards of the ethnic nation. Seizing the reins of the nation was also a retreat from proletarian internationalism (Beneš 2017, p. 241). The 1905 Moravian Compromise, and particularly the *Lex Perek*, further fuelled this process. Czech Social Democrats seized upon the *Lex Perek* to demand more diligent enforcement against German employers who bullied Czech parents into sending their children to German schools (Beneš 2017, pp. 195–96). Austrian German Social Democratic complacency toward Czech schools, interpreted by Czech Social Democrats either as insensitivity or outright collusion with German nationalists, fuelled Czech separatism (Beneš 2017, pp. 197–98). Despite this fragmentation, the working-class ethos remained robust. Social Democratic leaders converged with bourgeois parties on isolated issues, notably on the minority school question, but they shunned formal political alliances (Beneš 2017, p. 209). Even as Czech Social Democrats pursued organizational separation, their nationalism remained a left-populist variant rooted in class struggle. A strong class ethos could not heal the wounds in the internationalist Austrian workers' movement, but it did mean that working-class nationalism differed essentially from the middle-class variants that were noisiest in late Habsburg Austrian politics (Beneš 2017, p. 3).

The Hungarian Social Democratic Party (SDPH; in Hungarian *Magyarországi Szociáldemokrata Párt*, MSZDP) presents a different trajectory. The Hungarian half had its own legal framework for nationality rights. The Nationalities Law of 1868 (Act XLIV) recognized the non-Magyar peoples as equal nationalities but constructed their rights as individual rights rather than collective-territorial rights, and its provisions were unevenly implemented (Jeszenszky 2025, pp. 24–27). The Croatian-Hungarian *Nagodba* of 1868 granted Croatia-Slavonia extensive internal administrative autonomy and the use of Croatian in public life, while finance, military affairs and foreign policy remained common matters and the ban was appointed by the king on the Hungarian prime minister's nomination (Čepulo 2001, pp. 117–23). In Austria, strong non-German workers' parties such as the Czech party pushed for federalization from within. In Hungary, non-Magyar workers were organized from above by the central party leadership in Budapest (Adorjáni 2023, p. 85). Hungary's limited suffrage and the semi-legal status of party activities meant that the provincial workers' movement needed support from Budapest rather than greater autonomy (Adorjáni 2023, pp. 83–85). The MSZDP leadership believed that the nationality question should not take precedence over the goals of building a mass party and winning the electoral struggle.

Universal suffrage, in their view, could equally empower Magyar and non-Magyar workers as individuals (Adorjáni 2023, p. 123). The nationalities policy that the MSZDP eventually adopted can be understood as a form of technical autonomy. The distinction originated with the Jewish Labour Bund in 1903. Technical autonomy meant that the central party supported regional or national organizations in agitating according to their national specificities. Substantial autonomy would have empowered national representatives to decide matters of party programme and required a federal reorganization of the party along national lines (Adorjáni 2023, pp. 79–80). The party was multinational, though dominated by Magyars. The 1904 MSZDP congress created German, Romanian, Serbian

and Slovak national committees, a limited form of internal federalization. These did not form a federation like the Austrian party and did not collect membership dues separately. The 1904 programme did not create a Magyar section, which indicated that the neutral central party was in fact Magyar-dominated (Adorjáni 2023, p. 87). Three structural reasons explain why the MSZDP did not adopt the Austromarxist model: the idea of an independent Hungary was too deeply rooted in the masses; universal suffrage was seen as the precondition for the emancipation of both workers and nationalities; and Hungarian Social Democrats doubted that cultural autonomy could end the national struggle, a point Jenő Varga turned against Bauer himself (Adorjáni 2023, pp. 71–72). A further factor in the unpopularity of the Austromarxist model in Hungary was its association with the Greater Austria plans. In 1907 former Hungarian Prime Minister Baron Dezső Bánffy raised an interpellation condemning the ideas spread by the weekly newspaper *Gross-Österreich*, which envisioned a *Gesamtmonarchie* with a parliament elected on the basis of national cadasters (Adorjáni 2023, pp. 71–72). In this climate, Otto Bauer's 1907 work *Die Nationalitätenfrage und die Sozialdemokratie*, cited here from its English version *The Question of Nationalities and Social Democracy* (2000), was perceived as an attempt to abolish Hungary's separate statehood. The idea of abolishing Hungarian statehood for the sake of national cultural autonomy was not an acceptable programme, even in socialist circles (Adorjáni 2023, p. 72).

Cross-national workers' movements in Hungary developed under a semi-feudal social structure in which "the peasant remained the subject of the noble instead of. . . the state" (Deme 1988, p. 576). The transition from an agricultural to an industrial economy was late, and it left the workers' movement weak and fragmented (Marácz 2012, p. 276; Medved 2023, p. 319; Kövér 2021, p. 233). Although Romanian and Slovak workers' organizations maintained contact with the Hungarian Social Democratic Party, they often developed independently and viewed Budapest as the political center of Magyar oppression (Egry 2005, p. 101). The result was that under the banner of internationalism, "not even the Social Democratic movement was able to build a supranational sense of class consciousness" (Bruckmüller 2006, p. 2). The party's theoretical dilemma further exposed this crisis. The 1848 national revolution that nearly disintegrated the Habsburg dynasty (Monticone 1968, p. 111) was met with early evaluations by Marx and Engels of Slavic national movements as "reactionary" to German-Magyar revolution (Avineri 1991, p. 641; Martin 1968, p. 231; Nimni 1989, pp. 313, 317). The program of national self-determination passed at the Neudorf Congress in 1874 was to some extent a remedy for this deficiency. Karl Renner went further to correct Engels's misunderstanding of Magyars and South Slavic peoples, stripping away the "romantic halo" that the 1848 revolution had bestowed upon the Magyars and revealing that the essence of their rule was "the brutal rule of one nation over six others" (Wendel 1923, p. 304). The 1899 Brno Party Congress, in a sense, abandoned the 1874 program, instead calling for the establishment of a democratic federal structure (Von Busekist 2019, p. 547). Contradictions between left and right wings within the party subsequently intensified. The left wing considered maintaining the multinational Habsburg meaningless, while the right wing, including Renner, defended the positive role of the state from legal and constitutional perspectives (Leser 1966, p. 119; Reifowitz 2017, p. 148; Von Busekist 2019, p. 547). The governance crisis and the class crisis formed a vicious cycle. Imperial governance failure was interpreted by nationalist groups as national oppression, thereby strengthening national fragmentation, making it difficult for class narratives to establish cross-national common agendas, leading to governance failure. In Renner and Bauer's view, "national struggle would make it impossible for workers to fight against exploitation in the hope of success," therefore the national question had to be addressed (Egry 2005, p. 101). "Empty slogans such as 'the victory of the working class will solve the

national question' proved inadequate" (Nimni 1999, p. 294). The mutual reinforcement of governance paralysis and class disintegration constituted the structural premise for Austrian Marxist theoretical innovation.

The constitutional deadlock of Cisleithania had its own structural logic. The internal contradiction of the Ausgleich constitution was that it superimposed a system of absolute royal prerogative over two constitutional state structures, rendering genuine parliamentary resolution of national conflicts structurally impossible (Mommsen 1979, p. 149). The national conflicts in old Austria derived their sharpness from the growing misunderstanding between social emancipation and the effectively secured political power of the nationalities (Mommsen 1979, p. 155). Faced with massive Hungarian protest against solutions that favored Cisleithanian interests, the Crown and the Austrian government regularly backed down (Mommsen 1979, p. 159). Chancellor Körber captured this dynamic when he remarked that "in Austria no proper government is possible for as long as the Hungarian Ausgleich periodically calls everything into question" (*in Österreich ist so lange keine ordentliche Regierung möglich, solange von Zeit zu Zeit der ungarische Ausgleich alles in Frage stellt*) (Mommsen 1979, p. 164). All compromise attempts remained trapped in bureaucratic regulations, tending toward a fair distribution of the benefits of the welfare state among national claimants (Mommsen 1979, p. 140). From the perspective of the peoples who sought political power through participation in administration, the mediating, nationally indifferent function of the Austrian bureaucracy achieved nothing (Mommsen 1979, p. 139). National parties should be compared to modern interest groups, which tend to react all the more fiercely the lesser their actual political weight (Mommsen 1979, p. 130). Renner recognized that until economic development is balanced, all national compromises are merely preliminary treaties to peace (Mommsen 1979, p. 206). He planned a second volume of his work titled *The Nation as Economic and Social Question*, though he abandoned the project after reading Bauer's *The Question of Nationalities and Social Democracy* (Mommsen 1979, p. 206). What Renner and Bauer had to confront was how to reopen space for class politics under conditions in which the empire's material contradictions had already institutionalized national competition. The schemes they devised responded to that problem on several levels at once, and it is to those schemes that the next section turns.

4. The Austro-Marxist Response: Detaching Nation from Territory

The dual crisis analyzed in the previous two sections constituted the structural situation to which Austro-Marxist theory responded. Renner and Bauer wrote in the middle of that crisis, and their texts intervened in specific political controversies. They need to be read in that light if their conceptual innovations are to be understood.

Renner and Bauer's intervention can be read through Skinner's approach to the history of political thought. Skinner treats political theorists' texts as speech acts, in which authors attempt to accomplish specific tasks in particular political controversies, and the key to understanding lies in identifying the field of debate in which the texts were written (Skinner 1969, pp. 48–49). In the Habsburg context, the field of debate was defined by the two conflicts analyzed above. The first was the constitutional impasse. The Badeni crisis had demonstrated that language policy could paralyze the Imperial Council, and the 1867 Compromise had institutionalized Hungarian veto power over any further constitutional reform. Nationalist movements across the empire increasingly framed their demands in territorial terms, and this discourse made national conflict appear insoluble. The second was the erosion of class solidarity. The Social Democratic Party had fractured along national lines, and the party's theoretical resources, drawn from classical Marxism, proved inadequate.

Renner's *State and Nation* (*Staat und Nation*), published in 1899, cited here its English version (2005), under the pseudonym Synopticus, and his later *The Struggle of the Austrian Nations for the State* (*Der Kampf der österreichischen Nationen um den Staat*) (Springer 1902), under the pseudonym Rudolf Springer, together with Bauer's *The Question of Nationalities and Social Democracy*, published in 1907, were not written in detachment from political struggle. They were speech acts designed to persuade multiple audiences at once. They addressed Social Democratic activists who needed a theoretical framework for reconciling class and national commitments. They addressed imperial administrators who needed an institutional mechanism for managing national conflict. They addressed national leaders who needed assurance that their communities could survive without territorial sovereignty. In Skinner's terms, these texts attempted to show that an alternative institutional configuration was possible, and thereby to change the terms of political debate.

The central move was to challenge the semantic fusion of nation, sovereignty and territory that had come to dominate nineteenth-century political discourse. Nationalists across the empire argued that a nation, to be a nation, required territorial sovereignty. Renner and Bauer sought to break this semantic lock. They argued that national identity could be legally recognized and institutionally accommodated without attaching it to exclusive territorial control. This was a political intervention designed to create conceptual space for institutional compromise. Renner's contrast between territorial and personal principles, in which he characterized territorial logic as "if you live in my territory, you are subject to my domination, my law and my language," was a direct challenge to the nationalist discourse that had paralyzed imperial governance (Renner 2005, pp. 23–24). The territorial principle, he argued, "can never produce compromise and equal rights; it can only produce struggle and oppression" (Renner 2005, pp. 23–24).

The distinction between territorial and personal principles had a longer legal-historical pedigree. The territorial principle subjects individuals to legal jurisdiction defined by spatial boundaries. The personal principle organizes legal relations through personal affiliations. This was characteristic of medieval polities in general. The organization of societies on the basis of affiliation with a particular group is much older than their organization on territorial-legal foundations. Josef Lukas distinguished between the premodern personality of law, in which subjects possessed different legal statuses according to their group affiliation, and the modern principle of personality, in which citizens are fundamentally equal but the law is applied differently according to affiliation (Kuzmany 2024, p. 196, citing Lukas 1908). After the Peace of Westphalia, as the territorial state gradually became dominant, the governance model of the territorial principle gained the upper hand, though the Peace of Westphalia itself marked the beginning of the territorial state rather than the nation-state (Kuzmany 2024, p. 62). In the political grammar of the nineteenth century, national autonomy meant territorial boundaries, and territorial boundaries meant exclusive sovereignty. Renner keenly realized that the nation-state framework of the time seemed unable to respond to minority groups' demands for equal recognition and respect, to the point that "each Austrian nationality is accorded greater protection abroad than within Austria" (Renner 2005, p. 24).

The idea of non-territorial autonomy was first formulated not by Renner but by the Slovene Social Democrat Etbin Kristan. In a programmatic article published in the Czech Social Democratic forum *Akademie* in 1898, Kristan rejected both centralism and the territorial principle. He argued that "the nation cannot be measured geometrically, but only counted arithmetically" ("*die Nation nicht geometrisch gemessen, sondern nur arithmetisch gezählt werden [könne]*") (Kristan 1898, pp. 485–91). Kristan's proposal was programmatic rather than operational, and it met with little response within the party. Renner developed the idea further in his first programmatic article of 1899 and in his main work of 1902.

Kristan and Ivan Cankar subsequently brought similar proposals into the party debate at the Brünn congress of 1899 and in the years that followed (Owings 1967, pp. 333–35). The Brünn programme that emerged from the congress nonetheless established a nationalities federal state based on the territorial principle, not on Kristan's non-territorial scheme. The scheme's appeal to minority groups is further indicated by the recurrence of similar proposals in interwar European minority movements (Kuzmany 2016, pp. 59–60; Levene 2000, pp. 25–27).

Renner and Bauer reconfigured the core concepts through which the national question was understood. This reconfiguration can be analyzed through Koselleck's conceptual history, which emphasizes that political concepts are not fixed vocabulary but dynamic tools constantly redefined in social conflicts (Koselleck 1982, pp. 409–10). In the Habsburg context, three concepts underwent profound reinterpretation: nation, autonomy and state. Nineteenth-century nationalism had bound nation to territorial sovereignty and equated autonomy with nation-state independence. Renner and Bauer questioned what place the concept of the nation has in relation to the state (Kelly 2005, p. 142). They sought to sever the link between nation, sovereignty and territory (Nimni 1999, p. 292).

Bauer approached this reconfiguration from a social–theoretical perspective. He redefined the nation as a community of fate (*Schicksalsgemeinschaft*) formed through historical processes, whose essence was the product of common historical experience and will rather than biological or blood determination (Bauer 2000, p. 100; Sluga 2001, p. 211). National identity was an irreversible part of modern society (Hernandez 2014, p. 66). Since the nation was a community of will and fate rather than a product of fixed territory, national rights did not need to be realized through territorial sovereignty. They could be realized through autonomy in the cultural sphere. Bauer's originality lay in defining the nation on the basis of division of labour and communal exchange, as a community of destiny (Mommsen 1979, p. 202). Against the conservative-national politics of the bourgeoisie, he set forth the evolutionary-national politics of the working class, which sought the full realization of the national cultural community through integration of the lower strata into the nation (Mommsen 1979, p. 203).

Renner translated this social–theoretical foundation into a legal–institutional architecture. His most comprehensive formulation actually appeared in the 1902 work, which had much wider international impact and was the version translated into Russian and read by activists across Europe (Kuzmany 2024, pp. 62–68, 86–87). In the 1902 work, Renner envisioned a nationality-based federative state combining both territorial and personal elements. His core move was to reconstruct nation as a supraterritorial corporation of individuals sharing language and customs (Renner 1948, pp. 594–96). If nation is constituted by individual affiliation rather than territory, it cannot be accommodated by drawing borders. It must be recognized by constructing legal subjects. As Nimni puts it, "ethnic communities" become "juridical entities" (Nimni 1999, p. 293). The national question required empowerment, not cartography.

This conceptual reconfiguration had specific institutional implications. Constructing the nation as a public-law corporation (*öffentlich-rechtliche Körperschaft*) did not place it on the same plane as the state. The state possessed sovereign power, whereas the nation exercised a subordinate, delegated form of authority within the unified legal order (Arzoz 2020, p. 308). The state bore economic, social and administrative integration, while nations bore cultural affairs such as language, education, art and literature (Avineri 1991, p. 652; Renner 2005, pp. 31–33). Robert Adolf Kann summarized this arrangement as the population being organized twice within the state, "once nationally and once according to administrative requirement" (Kann 1950, p. II).

The concept of autonomy was correspondingly redefined. Under the nation-state framework, autonomy meant territorial self-government, ultimately pointing toward independence. Renner and Bauer limited autonomy to functional administrative domains. National communities did not obtain exclusive rule over a territory, but functional competence over language, education, culture and certain representative functions. Central state institutions retained exclusive authority over security, foreign policy and economic administration (Kelly 2005, p. 142; Shikova 2021, p. 27). This functional separation transformed autonomy from a territorial claim into an administrative arrangement.

The concept of state was similarly reconfigured. In the liberal nation-state model, the state was the political expression of a single nation. Renner and Bauer positioned the state as a unified legal order transcending nations. The national community was similar to a corporation rather than a territorially based organization (Osipov 2018, p. 638; Von Busekist 2019, p. 548). An individual's national affiliation was determined by personal free choice and registration, rather than by place of residence or administrative district (Munck 1985, p. 87). The national community was thus reconstructed as a voluntary association of individuals.

Renner's insistence on the free choice of national affiliation was itself a speech act in conversation with contemporary Habsburg legal developments. The national registers introduced in Moravia, Bukovina and Galicia were transforming national belonging into an administrative category, and the question of who could determine an individual's nationality had become a legal problem across the empire (Kuzmany 2023, pp. 975–80). Renner's proposal to base national belonging on individual consent rather than territorial residence was a direct response to this debate. Each person would have the freedom to choose the nation with which they identify (Reifowitz 2017, p. 151). As Renner himself stated: "The individual's right to self-determination constitutes the correlate of the nation's right to self-determination. What criterion can there be for the affiliation with a spiritual and cultural community other than the consciousness of this affiliation? It can only refer to the wills of persons. It is not capable of taking anything else into consideration" (Renner 2005, p. 18). Under the personal principle, the law followed the person, not the land. This portability ensured that individuals could maintain their cultural affiliation without being enclosed by a single territory's cultural power, and without any need to secede from the state in order to preserve their national identity (Bakisian 1992, p. 104; Nimni and Pavlović 2020, p. 282).

The 1902 model placed the district (*Kreis*) at the center of the institutional architecture. Renner did not reject the nation-state idea outright; what he sought was a combination of territorial and non-territorial elements, with the district as the main catalyst of both principles. He combined the territorial and personal principles at the level of district administration, because any administration is tied to a territory inhabited by people. He proposed a two-dimensional federalism, in which the population would be organized twice, once by territory and once by nationality (Kuzmany et al. 2022, pp. 850–54; Kuzmany 2024, pp. 64–74). In single-language districts, no change was needed. In mixed districts, a national district association (*nationaler Kreisverband*) would be created on the basis of the national register, with its own national district representation and national district chairman. The district captain (*Kreishauptmann*), as the carrier of state power, would be appointed by the emperor on the nomination of the interior minister, with the co-signature of the affected nation's highest representative, the national secretary of state (Kuzmany 2024, pp. 66–67).

Above the district level, each of the eight nationalities of the Austrian half would be constituted as a national association (*Nationalverband*) with its own national council (*Nationalrat*). These councils would be responsible for education, museums, national asso-

ciations, language protection and literature, and they would have the power to tax their own members. Each national council would elect a national secretary of state, who would become part of the imperial government and serve as the representative of national interests (Kuzmany 2024, pp. 68–69). Renner explicitly drew on the practice of the *Landsmannministerien*, the national ministers without portfolio who had sat in Austrian governments since 1871, first for Galicia and later for Bohemia and the German-speaking lands. These ministers had been a proto-form of non-territorial autonomy, though they lacked a legal basis in the Austrian constitution and were responsible to the emperor rather than to any national assembly (Kuzmany 2024, p. 69). In Renner's model, the national secretaries of state would be responsible to their national councils and would serve as the legal protectors and spokesmen of their nationally dispersed co-nationals, the so-called internal diaspora (Kuzmany 2024, p. 70).

The scheme's dual-layer structure was designed to reorganize the environment in which class politics operated. The state maintained unified economic and administrative governance, while national communities possessed autonomous institutions in the cultural-educational sphere (Avineri 1991, p. 652). By separating cultural factors from the realm of government administration, the scheme stripped the most visible national confrontations from daily governance. This would, in theory, allow workers of different nationalities to cooperate on economic and social issues within the unified state framework, while maintaining their distinct cultural identities through their respective national communities. The scheme thus addressed a structural vacancy in modern liberal democratic states. As Nimni points out, the mainstream political-legal picture usually recognizes only two levels, the individual and the indivisible sovereign will, with a lack of "meaningful intermediate locations" between them (Nimni 1999, p. 299). Renner's scheme inserted national communities into precisely this gap. National communities ceased to be mere objects of cultural or emotional affiliation, and became legal actors capable of claiming rights, bearing obligations and participating in decision-making (Kuzmany 2020, p. 321). In *The Institutions of Private Law and Their Social Functions*, published in 1904, Renner adopted a pluralist sociology of law position (Torrance 1976, p. 194). The national community was positioned by Renner as the meaningful intermediate location between plural individuals and the state (Nimni 2005, p. 205).

The institutional design also addressed the problem of majority rule in multi-ethnic polities. The most systematic argument on this point had been formulated long before the Austro-Marxists by Georg Jellinek. In his 1898 lecture on the rights of minorities, Jellinek demonstrated that the majority principle is far from self-evident and has a complex history. He traced its origins to the medieval church, which adopted it under the influence of Roman corporate theory. Germanic legal traditions, he noted, long favoured the principle of the wiser part over the larger part: "that two should by definition be worth more than one contradicted the powerful sense of individuality that especially distinguished the Germanic peoples" (*Dass zwei von vornherein mehr werth sein sollten als einer, widersprach dem kraftvollen Individualitätsgefühl, das namentlich die germanischen Völker auszeichnete*) (Jellinek 1898, pp. 1–3). He argued, "the entire idea of majority decision rests on the conception of thoroughgoing inner unity of the people" (*Der ganze Gedanke der Mehrheitsentscheidung beruht auf der Vorstellung durchgängiger innerer Einheit des Volkes*) (Jellinek 1898, p. 27). Where such unity is absent, particularly in multinational states, the application of simple majority rule becomes a form of domination rather than legitimate decision-making. Political parties are inherently fluid, while national groups are fixed and enduring: "the German of today cannot be the Slav of tomorrow" (*Der Deutsche von heute kann nicht der Slave von morgen sein*) (Jellinek 1898, p. 29). Where national cleavages are of considerable significance in a

legislature, "every majorization in national matters is felt as brutalization" (*da wird jede Majorisierung in nationalen Dingen als Brutalisirung empfunden*) (Jellinek 1898, pp. 29–30).

Jellinek's analysis also indicates the limits of the Austro-Marxist scheme. Cultural autonomy alone could not protect national minorities in a multinational parliament. The real protection lay in the power to block legislation that threatened their national existence. "The veto is under all circumstances the only strong weapon that can be placed in the hands of a minority" (*Das Veto ist unter allen Umständen die einzige starke Waffe, die einer Minderheit in die Hand gedrückt werden kann*), and it must be balanced against the risk of abuse (Jellinek 1898, p. 39). He observed that a *Corpus Germanorum* and a *Corpus Slavorum* had already formed in the Reichsrat, though they did not have equal rights *de iure*, and he contended that the only solution was to grant specific rights to the German minority that would be immune to majority override (Jellinek 1898, pp. 31–33).

From the history of political thought, the scheme concerned the normative interaction between individual and collective. Renner believed that the fundamental purpose of the national community should be "the respect for the right of citizens to be free moral and political actors" (Rendtorff 2021, p. 16). Bauer argued that "each individual is the product of a nation" (Bauer 2000, p. 110). Their vision of pluralist coexistence acknowledged the nation but did not grant it sovereignty (Nimni 1999, p. 289). The Austrian Marxist scheme belongs to a broader spectrum of institutional exploration at the turn of the century. It represented a reimagining of modern national politics (Von Busekist 2019, p. 544), and to some extent has paved the way for contemporary "social change within the framework of a multinational state" (Schwarzmantel 2005, p. 55). In Renner's final vision, the federalism characterized by personal principle and cultural autonomy reflects a "socialization through society itself, beyond the mechanisms of the state" (Renner 2015, p. 433).

Renner modified his model in the 1918 edition of *The Right of Self-Determination of Nations* (*Das Selbstbestimmungsrecht der Nationen in besonderer Anwendung auf Österreich*). The 1918 edition proposed a three-dimensional federal state, with four or optionally eight federal territorial units and a second chamber, a senate of nations and lands (Kuzmany 2024, pp. 74–75). From the perspective of intellectual transfer, the 1918 book played practically no role. When other actors cited Renner's concept, they always referred to the book published by Springer (1902) (Kuzmany 2024, p. 77).

Bauer's contribution to the development of the non-territorial autonomy idea lay in embedding Renner's model more firmly in Marxist argumentation, which in the long run allowed the concept to circulate further in left-wing circles and beyond. Bauer supported national self-determination, but he rejected the territorial principle as a possible basis for reorganizing a multinational state for several reasons. Scattered minorities had always existed outside national core areas. Labour migration would further increase national mixing. Administrative units drawn solely along national lines would often contradict economic needs and population distribution (Kuzmany 2024, p. 77). The personal principle, by contrast, would be the most perfect means of national defence, since it would constitute nationalities as non-territorial associations of persons and thereby encompass all co-nationals across the entire state territory (Kuzmany 2024, p. 78). Bauer believed that it was only with the publication of Renner's 1902 book that a bridge had been built between the personal and territorial principles. He endorsed Renner's conviction that a district as nationally homogeneous as possible was the best guarantee of national self-determination. Only in mixed districts was it necessary to separate political district administration from national district administration on the basis of the national register, in order to protect the respective minorities in their national affairs (Kuzmany 2024, p. 78). Bauer adopted Renner's model explicitly and sketched an improved version of the nationality programme for his party at the end of his book. Social Democrats should strive, following the Brünn resolution, to

transform Austria into a nationality federal state based on nationally defined autonomous bodies and to demand that national minorities within each of these national regions be able to form public-law corporations so that they could autonomously provide administrative and legal assistance and mother-tongue instruction for their members registered through free national declaration (Kuzmany 2024, p. 78). Bauer argued that the concept was in some respects even superior to the nation-state. Through the personal principle, all members of a nation could participate in national autonomy, so that the implementation of national self-determination would become more thorough than even within a so-called homogeneous nation-state (Kuzmany 2024, pp. 78–79). Unlike Marxist orthodoxy, Bauer did not regard the nation-state in general, and the Habsburg Monarchy in particular, as an outdated relic. Although the Russian Revolution of 1905 ultimately failed, the national and social emancipation attempts that accompanied it led him to speculate that the idea of non-territorial autonomy would eventually spread to Russia (Kuzmany 2024, p. 79).

The scheme was debated intensely within the Social Democratic movement, even though it was never formally adopted into the party programme. Two journals formed the core discussion forums: the Czech-German bilingual *Akademie*, published in Prague from 1897, and *Der Kampf*, published in Vienna from 1907 (Kuzmany 2024, pp. 79–80; Löw 1984, pp. 37–42). Czech Social Democrats such as Alfred Meissner, František Modráček and Bohumír Šmeral did not fundamentally reject Renner's proposals, but they criticized the idea of cultural self-financing through member taxation, since the Czech population was on average poorer than the German population (Kuzmany 2024, pp. 80–82). Meissner argued that if taxation were organized along national lines, the taxes of German industrialists who owed their wealth to the exploitation of Czech workers would benefit only the German national corporation, which would be fatal for the educational sphere. He regarded solidarity-based cross-financing of the less developed national school systems as indispensable (Kuzmany 2024, p. 80). Bauer defended the model. He clarified that the national register covered individuals, not enterprises, so that profit taxes would always belong to the territorial administration, while only income taxes would belong to the autonomous bodies. He conceded that this would increase the tax burden on the Czech working class, and he therefore suggested that the Reichsrat should establish a framework for equalization payments (Kuzmany 2024, p. 80). At the 1909 Prague party congress, Šmeral delivered a four-hour keynote address demanding the introduction of non-territorial autonomy on the basis of public-law national corporations, giving the national councils and governments a more important position than the national districts (Kuzmany 2024, pp. 81–82). Meissner responded at length, accusing Šmeral of treating the school and language question as ultimately a financial problem. The rejection of schools for Czech migrant workers in the predominantly German regions of northern Bohemia and Vienna, or of a second Czech university in Brno, was motivated by fear of the expansion of the Czech national movement, rather than by cost (Kuzmany 2024, pp. 82–83).

The Austro-Marxist scheme's relationship to the national compromises of Moravia, Bukovina and Galicia was ambivalent. The 1905 Moravian Compromise and the 1910 Bukovina Compromise were often evaluated negatively by Austrian Social Democrats, though opinions differed. There was agreement in rejecting the privileged franchise, the estate-based and income-based electoral curias, which failed to ensure adequate representation of the poorer classes in the provincial diets (Kuzmany 2024, p. 83). The division of voters into national curias to mitigate national conflict, by contrast, was assessed differently. Jakob Pistiner from Bukovina saw in the compromise a step in the right direction, which converged with Bauer's view. Bauer, while sharply criticizing the half-hearted implementation of national autonomy, nevertheless called it a promising beginning (Kuzmany 2024, p. 83). Renner went further. Although he rejected the Moravian compromise in its actual

form, he used it as an argument against those who considered his non-territorial autonomy model impractical. When he had proposed the personal principle six years earlier, people had also called it utopian, and by then it was already current law in Moravia (Kuzmany 2024, p. 84). Renner believed that after the successful transformation of Austria along the lines of his non-territorial autonomy model, the Hungarian half of the empire would undergo a similar development (Kuzmany 2024, p. 84). As the Hungarian case discussed in Section 3 shows, the Austro-Marxist model found little resonance among Hungarian Social Democrats; theoretical discussion of the national question was conducted more by independent socialists such as Oszkár Jászi, and only a few, such as Jenő Varga, came to regard it as a possible solution (Kuzmany 2024, pp. 84–85). The workers' movement in Austria-Hungary formed in different places and in different languages in the last third of the nineteenth century, and it developed separate party structures in the two halves of the empire. This led Cisleithania to federalize the Social Democratic Party along national lines in 1897. Within the Hungarian Social Democratic Party, the nationalities were also accommodated on a non-territorial basis from 1903 onwards through the creation of national sections (Kuzmany 2024, p. 86). The district level was the core of Renner's autonomy model, since direct administration was to take place there. Because any administration is always tied to the actual place of residence of people, Renner combined territorial and non-territorial autonomy elements at this level. In the following years, Renner's model was intensely debated within the Social Democratic Party, particularly regarding minority protection. Although Bauer basically represented Renner's autonomy model in other respects, he made concessions to critics on the question of financing the non-territorial autonomy national associations (Kuzmany 2024, p. 87).

5. Implementation, Limitations, and Tensions

The non-territorial autonomy scheme that Renner and Bauer theorized has often been treated as an intellectual experiment that was never put into practice. That characterization is inaccurate. The personal principle was institutionalized through national registers and national curias in the Moravian Compromise of 1905, the Bukovinian Compromise of 1909–1910, and the Galician Compromise of 1914. It was implemented at the municipal level in the Budweis Compromise of 1914. It appeared again after the First World War in the Estonian Cultural Autonomy Act of 1925 (Smith 2020, pp. 224–30). The scheme's historical significance lies in the specific ways in which partial implementation exposed its internal tensions.

The Moravian Compromise of 1905 was the most fully developed of the late Habsburg arrangements. It obliged Moravians to register as either Czechs or Germans in national cadasters. Heads of families could choose their nation, but it was extremely difficult to change nations once chosen (Judson 2006, pp. 13–14). The compromise was not only a national settlement but also a social one, balancing old estate-based and new bourgeois structures and protecting aristocratic interests through the large-estate curia (Pokludová and Kladiwa 2025, pp. 421–22). The compromise also introduced the *Lex Perek*, which stipulated that children could only attend a school if they were proficient in the language of instruction. This made the assessment of language proficiency a public matter and heightened the importance of schooling as a nationalist battleground (Judson 2006, p. 13; Beneš 2017, pp. 195–96). The compromise, followed by similar agreements for Bukovina in 1910 and Galicia in 1914, hastened the nationalization of local society by demanding that Moravians become Czechs or Germans, whether they wanted to or not (Judson 2006, p. 14). The Bukovinian Compromise of 1909–1910 was, in Stourzh's account, a sophisticated attempt to balance the demands of Germans, Romanians, Ukrainians, Poles and Jews through a system of ethnic electorates and cultural autonomy (Stourzh 2007, p. 184).

The Galician Compromise of 1914 extended the pattern to the largest and poorest crown land, though the war prevented its full implementation. The Budweis Compromise of 1914 divided Czech and German voters into autonomous national bodies and granted these bodies the right to levy separate national taxes and decide on separate national expenditures. It was never implemented in law, but it showed that the personal principle could be applied at the municipal level as well (King 2005, pp. 140–46; Kuzmany 2016, pp. 58–59). These compromises were not isolated experiments. They formed a broader pattern of provincial settlements that drew on the same institutional repertoire, and they became reference points for interwar minority activists across Central and Eastern Europe (Kuzmany 2016, pp. 43–61; Smith 2020, pp. 224–30).

The interwar Estonian Cultural Autonomy Act of 1925 represented the most lasting institutionalization of the personal principle outside the Habsburg framework. The law granted national minorities with at least three thousand citizens the right to establish cultural self-government and to manage their own educational and cultural affairs. In practice, only the Baltic Germans and the Jews made use of it. The Jewish minority was a marginal factor in the original legislative deliberations, and the law's threshold of three thousand citizens was set with the Baltic Germans in mind (Weiss-Wendt 2017, pp. 80–85). Once granted, Jewish cultural autonomy was implemented with genuine commitment: between 1926 and 1940, the Jewish Cultural Council ran schools, welfare organizations and cultural institutions, and the community pledged adherence to the principle of separating culture from politics (Weiss-Wendt 2017, pp. 85–86). This separation of cultural rights from political participation contributed to the marginalization of Jews within Estonian society (Weiss-Wendt 2017, p. 92). Cultural autonomy became a form of political containment, allowing the majority to acknowledge minority cultural rights while excluding minorities from political power (Weiss-Wendt 2017, p. 97). The Estonian case illuminates a central paradox in the theory of non-territorial autonomy. The 1925 law was built on a principle strikingly similar to the Austro-Marxist scheme, namely the separation of cultural identity from territorial sovereignty. But this very institutionalization of cultural identity contributed to the marginalization of Jews within Estonian society. The question the Estonian case raises for non-territorial autonomy theory is whether cultural rights can be separated from political participation without relegating minority groups to a permanently subordinate status. The Austro-Marxist scheme's attempt to remove nationality from the purview of state power (Robertson 2017, p. 406) may, in practice, have removed minority groups from the purview of political power while leaving national categories as markers of exclusion.

The scheme's dependence on conditions that did not obtain in the Habsburg Empire was a structural feature of the Empire's political economy. The successful implementation of Renner's proposal depended on a strong administrative state, mature legal institutions and national political elites' willingness to compromise. These were precisely the factors that political bodies needing this scheme often lacked. Any comprehensive reform of the imperial constitutional framework required the consent of Budapest, which was not forthcoming (Mommsen 1963, as reviewed in Wandruszka 1967, p. 387; Mommsen 1979, p. 164). The Austrian German nationalists, whose administrative and economic dominance was challenged by Czech demands for linguistic equality, had no incentive to accept a scheme that institutionalized national parity. The Hungarian nobility, whose political dominance rested on the semi-feudal structures preserved by the 1867 Compromise, would not voluntarily accept a scheme that subordinated national sovereignty to a unified legal order. The same material contradictions that made national mobilization a rational political strategy also ensured that the elites who benefited from that mobilization had no incentive to compromise. The fiscal constraints analyzed in Section 2 applied with particular force

to any proposal for expanded national autonomy, since the crownlands could only levy surcharges on direct taxes collected by the central state and had already reached legal and financial ceilings by 1905 (Deak 2015, p. 229). Nationally mixed crownlands had the most trouble covering their expenditures (Deak 2015, p. 231).

The scheme's reliance on institutional registration carried a second set of limitations. Renner's scheme required that individuals' national identities be clearly identified and recorded by institutions so as to be governable. In Rainer Bauböck's view, this would harden originally mixed, mutable and even nearly fused identities, including bilinguals, migrants, those unconscious of ethnicity and intermarried families, into administrative classifications, thereby creating new boundaries and exclusions (Bauböck 2005, p. 97). This concern was not speculative. The Habsburg experience with national registers after 1905 confirmed it. The district captain himself was to be pushed to join one cadastre or the other, or to face a loss of voting rights, a fine of up to two hundred crowns, and imprisonment for up to ten days (King 2005, p. 146). The Ministry of the Interior explicitly rejected proposals to base cadastral membership on language of daily use or other ethnic criteria, insisting instead that school enrollment and voting rights follow cadastral membership alone (King 2005, pp. 143–44). A child's nationality, and thus their educational and political future, was determined by their parents' registration rather than by their linguistic competence or cultural affiliation (King 2005, p. 144). The same dynamic is documented in interwar Czechoslovakia, where the practices of national classification built directly on legal precedents established under the Habsburg Monarchy. The 1910 decision of the Austrian Supreme Administrative Court had already stipulated that national identity could not be ascertained through the simple declaration of the parents but had to be supported with objective, concrete characteristics, including language use, reading habits, social contacts, education, census records and descent (Zahra 2008, p. 39). In interwar Czechoslovakia, this principle was expanded from contested children in Moravia to citizens of all ages and in all regions of the republic. The Czechoslovak census law of 1920 specified that statements about nationality must be made with full cognizance and strictly based on the truth, and census takers were empowered to correct declarations they deemed false (Zahra 2008, p. 121). The Austro-Marxist scheme's reliance on individual registration thus rested on an assumption that the Habsburg and Czechoslovak experiences did not support, namely that the act of registering national affiliation would remain a matter of individual choice rather than becoming an instrument of official ascription.

This paradox was not merely a design flaw. It reflected the Empire's material conditions. The very administrative practices that made national conflict governable also made national boundaries harder than they had been in social practice. The scheme could not transcend these material conditions. It could only reconfigure the institutional framework within which they operated. This tension between the scheme's emancipatory intent and its potential to reify is a recurring dilemma in institutional designs for multi-ethnic polities. As Kuzmany observes, the very institutionalization of national identity through registration risked not merely hardening existing boundaries but actively producing new ones, in much the same way that Habsburg administrative practices had done (Kuzmany 2023, pp. 983–84). Judson's imperial historical narrative repeatedly reminds us that national boundaries were often precisely manufactured through administrative, educational and mobilization practices (Judson 2016, pp. 4, 293).

Renner's model was formulated as a case study for Austria-Hungary, and its institutional features were designed to fit the specific constitutional and administrative structure of the Habsburg Monarchy (Kuzmany 2024, pp. 1–8, 86–87). This has implications for how its limitations are assessed, since much of today's discussion and implementation of non-territorial autonomy follow different institutional traditions (Smith 2020, pp. 224–30).

The Austrian variant and the Russian variant differ on the degree of institutional autonomy granted to national bodies, on the relation between cultural and political representation, and on the extent to which national affiliation is treated as a permanent or a changeable attribute. The Austro-Marxist experiment belongs to the Austrian variant, and its limitations must be assessed within that frame.

The assessment of unwillingness to compromise in late Habsburg Austria should not be too severe. As Mommsen observes, all compromise attempts remained essentially trapped in bureaucratic regulations, tending toward a fair distribution of the benefits of the welfare state among national claimants, who well knew they had to demand a multiple of what they could realistically obtain (Mommsen 1979, p. 140). The mediating, nationally indifferent function of the Austrian bureaucracy achieved nothing from the perspective of the peoples who sought political power through participation in administration (Mommsen 1979, p. 139). Renner himself recognized that until economic development is balanced, all national compromises are merely preliminary treaties to peace (Mommsen 1979, p. 206). The unwillingness to compromise was embedded in a wider structural configuration that no single actor could have overcome. The criticism that non-territorial autonomy reifies ethnic boundaries should also be placed in comparative perspective. The reification of dividing lines is a design flaw of any group rights approach, not only of non-territorial autonomy. As Kuzmany notes, the issue is hardly better in a nation-state, unless one belongs to the majority or one does not care about the persistence of national and linguistic diversity (Kuzmany 2024, pp. 22–23). The choice is between different ways of institutionalizing the relation between cultural identity and political power, each with its own costs. The Austro-Marxist scheme belongs to a broader family of institutional designs that seek to accommodate national diversity without fragmenting sovereignty. Its limitations are shared, to varying degrees, by all members of that family.

Despite these limitations, the Austrian Marxist experiment retains its significance. At the turn of the twentieth century, the concept of empire was constructed through its territorial definition and by the ruling dynasty (Horel 2020, p. 275). Nation, autonomy and sovereignty were highly bound to territory. Linguistic and cultural rights were placed within the categories of peoples (*Völker*) or national groups (*Volksstamm*), rather than individual rights. The Austrian Marxist scheme was a unique adaptation to multi-ethnic polities in the age of imperialism. It challenged the inevitability of the liberal nation-state teleology, differed from the radical path of Leninist territorial self-determination, and proposed an alternative imagination that functionalized ethnic differences and combined cultural autonomy with political unity. Even in its failure, it demonstrated something important about the relationship between political theory and social conflict. Theory does not emerge from abstract reflection but from the pressure of contradictions that existing institutional frameworks cannot resolve. The scheme's limitations, which are no less than its innovations, are evidence of its embeddedness in the social conditions it sought to transform.

6. Conclusions

This study has re-examined the theory of Austrian Marxism from the perspective of socially embedded political thought. By situating Renner and Bauer's ideas within the institutional environment of the late nineteenth-century Habsburg Empire, it has argued that their non-territorial federal scheme was a response to the Empire's dual crisis. On the one hand, national politics penetrated state institutions and led to governance deadlock. On the other hand, national mobilization eroded the cross-national class solidarity that the Social Democratic Party attempted to establish. These two crises were parallel, and the

same national politics that brought imperial governance to a standstill also fragmented the organizational foundation of the workers' movement.

The analysis has also shown that the national categories whose competition the imperial crisis is usually said to express were not self-evident social facts. They were actively produced by nationalist activists and institutionalized through census-taking, language regulations, school policies and electoral practice (Judson 2006, pp. 2–5; King 2005, pp. 3–6; Zahra 2008, pp. 6–9). The scheme responded to a situation in which national categories were already deeply institutionalized, but alternative loyalties and bilingual practices had not disappeared. The scheme's attempt to institutionalize national affiliation through individual registration therefore operated on terrain that was itself shaped by earlier administrative and legal instruments.

Renner and Bauer's response operated on multiple levels simultaneously. As a speech act, their theoretical intervention challenged the nationalist discourse that had paralyzed imperial politics. As a conceptual reconfiguration, their work redefined the core terms of political debate. The nation became a cultural community based on individual choice rather than territorial control. Autonomy was limited to functional administrative domains rather than pointing toward independence. The state was re-positioned as a neutral legal order transcending national divisions. As an institutional design, their scheme sought to restructure the conditions under which class politics operated, separating cultural identity from economic governance.

The scheme was not purely theoretical. The personal principle was institutionalized through national registers and national curias in the Moravian Compromise of 1905, the Bukovinian Compromise of 1909–1910, the Galician Compromise of 1914 and the Budweis Compromise of 1914 (King 2005, pp. 140–46; Kuzmany 2016, pp. 58–59; Stourzh 2007, pp. 177–89). It appeared again after the First World War in the Estonian Cultural Autonomy Act of 1925, which was implemented with genuine commitment by the Jewish minority and contributed to the marginalization of that minority within Estonian society (Weiss-Wendt 2017, pp. 85–92). The scheme's limitations are evidence of its embeddedness in the social conditions it sought to transform. Its dependence on a strong administrative state and elite willingness to compromise reflected the very material conditions it sought to overcome. Its reliance on institutionalized registration risked hardening the national boundaries it aimed to render politically irrelevant.

These limitations are not grounds for dismissing the scheme. Political theory often emerges from concrete social conflicts and continuously explores its possible forms between institutional innovation and practical constraints. The assessment of unwillingness to compromise in late Habsburg Austria should not be too severe. As Mommsen observes, all compromise attempts remained essentially trapped in bureaucratic regulations, and the bureaucracy did exercise a mediating, nationally indifferent function that persisted until the empire's collapse (Mommsen 1979, pp. 139–40, 206). The unwillingness to compromise was embedded in a wider structural configuration that no single actor could have overcome.

The criticism that non-territorial autonomy reifies ethnic boundaries should also be placed in comparative perspective. The reification of dividing lines is a design flaw of any group rights approach, not only of non-territorial autonomy. The issue is hardly better in a nation-state, unless one belongs to the majority or one does not care about the persistence of national and linguistic diversity. The choice is between different ways of institutionalizing the relation between cultural identity and political power, each with its own costs. The Austro-Marxist scheme belongs to a broader family of institutional designs that seek to accommodate national diversity without fragmenting sovereignty. Its limitations are shared, to varying degrees, by all members of that family.

For contemporary discussions of non-territorial autonomy and multicultural governance, Renner and Bauer's scheme remains a provocative resource. It suggests that the tension between territorial and personal principles of legal organization is a recurring dilemma that multi-ethnic polities must continually negotiate. The question they posed, whether collective identities can be accommodated within a unified state without fragmenting sovereignty, remains open. The answer depends on the social conditions under which those models are implemented. This is perhaps the lesson of the Austro-Marxist experiment: the success or failure of institutional designs for plural societies is determined less by their internal coherence than by their capacity to respond to the material contradictions of the societies they seek to govern.

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