

Arenbergprijs 2018

Last month, the regional Parliament of Valencia celebrated the foundation, 600 years ago, of the *Generalitat*, or, to quote the venerable institution's full name, the *Diputacion de la Generalitat*, freely translated: the Permanent Deputation of the Kingdom's General Cortes. The jury's pick for this year's Prize of European History, the book by Doctor William Godsey's, , shows that exactly the same type of Institution had been introduced in the core lands of the Habsburg composite monarchy. Though the Austrian Estates created their own executive centuries later, in the mid-seventeenth century, after the Thirty Years War, under the Holy Roman Emperor Leopold I, this Habsburg version lasted until 1848. The Valencian and the even older Catalan predecessors had both been abolished in 1707 through the superior military power of King Louis XIV who had his grandson Philip installed on the Spanish throne. One of the first acts of the new King Philip V was to abolish the centuries-old laws, *fueros*, of Valencia and Catalonia, replacing them by the more authoritarian Castilian legal and institutional system. Some of the resentment against this repression can still be observed today.

In contrast, under the Habsburg monarchy – which lost the Spanish Succession War – the Assemblies of Estates and the *Landrecht* of their many and diverse territories were not just maintained, but they

even proved vital for the functioning of the state. That power waged no less than 24 wars during the 170 years studied by William Godsey; the size of its standing armies rose from some 24,500 men in 1650, to 100,000 in 1700, 200,000 around 1730, more than 300,000 in 1780, and over half a million at the end of the Napoleonic wars. As William Godsey puts it: *'Meeting the spiralling outlays associated with the armed forces was a prime and lasting concern of the Habsburg authorities.'* While assemblies became inactive in most territories of the Holy Roman Empire, William Godsey demonstrates in detail how the Estates of Lower Austria and the other Habsburg core lands continued to play a vital role, sometimes in conflict, sometimes in cooperation with the monarchy. Just as the Deputations in Catalonia and Valencia, the Estates developed an autonomous receivership general, that managed the levy of the taxes and serviced the public debt, in the government's interest, as well as in that of the elites. The Estates were needed not only because of their fiscal potency, but because they facilitated the levying of ever-increasing quantities of money and other resources. Thanks to their good reputation, the representatives of the landed elites could raise credit at relatively favourable rates of interest, which provided the government with quick money without much popular resistance, while the creditors enjoyed a secure profit on their capital. The Estates' agency even proved capable to reform the fiscal system in order to broaden the taxable basis and extract more money from the elites. They

succeeded in doubling their income in nine years, from 1751 to 1759 – many governments nowadays might appreciate your advice, mr Godsey. The Habsburg composite and mediated model remained intact until the 1848 revolutions; it offers a sharp contrast with the inability to reform the state finances of 18th-century France, where the link between the government and the propertied subjects was much less effective.

Dr Godsey wrote an innovative book dealing with a central issue in European history: how could monarchies bring their subjects to pay ever more for the wars from which most of them only suffered? This excellent research is clearly presented in a carefully edited book. One may hope that its message will reach a broad audience.