EPILOGUE

INTERNATIONAL SYSTEM AND IMPERIAL SYSTEM IN THE ‘SHORT’ EIGHTEENTH CENTURY: TWO WORLDS?

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In the last two or three decades research dealing with international relations in pre-modern times and historiography focused on the early modern Holy Roman Empire have alike acquired the habit of approaching their respective objects of interest through the concept of ‘system’. By system I mean a set of mutual relations which involve a series of participants, political units in a geographic sphere, acting side by side or against each other, led by different interests, different as far as the ability to pursue a policy is concerned. The one thing these units did not want was to bring the system to collapse. The notion of system is always linked fundamentally with the idea of conservation; the units which formed part of a system brought their system into line with changing circumstances if need be, but never thought of destroying it.

At least two milestones of modern research which bear on the eighteenth century should be mentioned here: Volker Press’ structural analysis of the Holy Roman Empire as a system, which was first published, not by chance, in an Austrian journal; and Paul Schroeder’s historical and political analysis and interpretation of international politics in Europe und its transformation around 1815.1 Schroeder, in some respects more a political scientist than a historian, goes far afield, starting his analysis with the peace of Paris of 1763 in order to contrast very sharply the thinking and actions of old European political leaders and elites, governed by the balance of power, limited pacifications and the dominance of a small number of great powers, with the new political thinking which seized the cabinets at the Vienna Congress and after. To reduce Schroeder’s thesis to its core: between the system of mere great power politics, in the last instance a

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dishonest policy, just looking for selfish benefit, and the changed attitudes of post-Vienna politics, subsumed under the headline of restoration, there was a tremendous difference. The revolutionary and Napoleonic wars had a so-to-say cathartic effect on the political elites between Moscow and London and brought about the realization that the traditional political-military behaviour, namely to risk a conflict even for very small geographic or economic advantages, should not be allowed to continue. The main reason of that change of political thinking was the insight that wars could no longer be limited merely to military exchanges: the revolutionary wars with their slogans and keywords of freedom or brotherhood had influenced the mentalities of a wide audience and become strong elements of a society which was no longer that of the ancien régime. That was why—a revolutionary process—a kind of consensus developed in Vienna that a very stable post-war order had to be established, resting on the fundament of a common political philosophy.

The question to be raised here is whether there are interfaces between the two systems and, if so, where they might be found. In some respects it was only at Vienna that, as far as international relations were concerned, the point was reached which for the Reich system had already throughout the eighteenth century had a kind of canonical importance: the prevention of conflict, a politics of no change, on the basis of a common political philosophy, that of excluding aggressive conduct or an active role for the Holy Roman Empire in international politics. In the short eighteenth century, i.e. the time between the end of the age of Louis XIV and the outbreak of the French Revolution, in principle two systems which could not have been more different stood side by side: on the one hand the static and conservatory system of the Reich, to which military conflicts were alien in nature and which saw its main goal in keeping tradition and in inertia; on the other hand the dynamic system dominated by a small group of great powers which aimed at change within certain accepted rules of the game. Let me just add that there was never a full and general consensus which states belonged to the circle of the great powers, and after Louis XIV’s death the membership of Sweden, Spain and even the Netherlands was still disputed; nor was there any consensus whether and from what moment Russia belonged to this exclusive circle of states which thought that they alone had the right to change things. Moreover, among the main spheres for these quarrels were the fields of ceremony and, as it is called today, symbolic acting.²

² On which see now, for the Empire, Barbara Stollberg-Rilinger Des Kaisers alte Kleider: Verfassungsgeschichte und Symbolsprache im Alten Reich (Munich, 2008).