

## Fin-de-Siecle Vienna

*C.E.Schorske*

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The turn of the century Habsburg empire fascinates. The source of this fascination may be the way an old-fashioned civilization of high culture and archaic institutions survived until the breaking of the modern 20th century (as effectuated by the cataclysm of the First World War), while in many ways acting as the avantguard of our ahistorical modernism from whose vantage point it itself appears such an anachronism. And the trappings of its luxuriant not to say sensual culture still survive in the art of performance, nostalgically evoked in films, documented in contemporary novels, and until fairly recently still accessible through personal recollections. Schorske appears to be the Anglo-Saxon authority on the subject of the late Habsburg empire, and the book is a collection of essays on various specialized topics, meant to refract the times as prisms. The prefatorial beginning of the works does not augur well. A prose both elaborate and oblique, combining the worst aspects of academese, namely excessive self-consciousness with intellectual pretension resulting in a stubborn reluctance to offer any firm hold of purchase. Thus it is not easy to ascertain the thesis and the point of the general flow, but let us try.

Vienna, held in siege by the Ottoman Empire as late as 1688, may in retrospect be somewhat fancifully thought of as the last stronghold of Christianity, stemming the Muslim tide. The 18th century brought an expansion of its own, partaking into the parcelling out of Central Europe by the three eastern players. The result of a purely dynastic expansion found itself a century later, due to the fashionable liberal and nationalistic ideas introduced in the early 19th century, to be a multi-cultural realm beset with centrifugal tensions. The empire, always powerful, but never more than second-rate, suffered defeats, splits and compromises but limped on. Its late age, and most interesting age, was brought about by the revolution of 1848 (also bringing with it the reign of Francis Joseph II to last until the very end) and the defeat under Bismarck, cutting short all its realistic pan-German ambitions. This minor disaster brought about the triumph of the liberals, admittedly a very narrow section of the population, but steeped in the progressive enlightened ideas of the time set to dethrone the feudal powers. Its supreme manifestation was the creation of 'die Ringstrasse' a wide avenue leading nowhere, polygonally enclosing the old center of the city, set apart from its suburban developments by the bastion of city walls still lingering on. The construction of die Ringstrasse gave the liberals an opportunity to incarnate the institutions expressing their ideals and values in monumental stone. Vienna as a capital of an empire thus owes such an image to that rather late development which may be compared to Hausmanns reconstruction of Paris during the second republic. The main essay of Schorske deals with the issues of architecture and urban planning relating to this circular avenue, and its influence on the development of modern architecture. The original buildings, like the House of Parliament, the Town Hall, the Theatre and the Opera, as well as the museums of Art and Natural History and eventually the University, were conceived by masters of the older school (one of them incidentally a displaced Dane), whose attitude

were eclectic, the 19th century having not yet developed an idiom of its own, but had chosen instead to resurrect suitable styles from the past, as exercises in archeological architecture in the words of the architect Otto Wagner. To the task of the newer generation came the construction of apartment buildings, of which the aforementioned Wagner, the main protagonist of Schorske's essay, was one of the prime players, gradually developing a more functional style to prefigure the latter Bauhaus movement.

According to Schorske the aristocratic culture of the Austrian empire was above all sensual, and it was to that refined goal restless middle-class ambitions aimed. Thus probably never before, and certainly not after, has a society been so identified with its art. Unlike most western civilizations, where the artist was in opposition to the bourgeois establishment, in Vienna the bohemian was in cohorts with that very establishment. (As a proud father of four once remarked about his sons. Two howl and two heal. Implying that a singer had the same status as a physician.) Thus the Secession movement, of which the painter Klimt is the most noteworthy representative, had the blessings from highest authorities. Klimt himself started out his career as a most successful painter of Ringstrasse murals, and it was thus not surprising that he was given the task to execute the murals corresponding to various faculties of the newly built University. An assignment that might elsewhere have raised a few eyebrows given the overt sensuality of his nudes. The sexual preoccupation of the Victorians, with its tantalizing mixture of repressive inhibition and hedonistic exhibition, which has come in for so much censure in a later, supposedly more liberal and enlightened age, may have found its epitome in Viennese circles. Klimt may not only be compared to his younger contemporary compatriot Schiele but maybe also with Munch both exploring the torment of sex, but while Munch concentrated on secondary emotions like jealousy and loneliness, Klimt purified the sexual desire itself presenting woman as endowed with an insatiable capacity of carnal enjoyment striking terror in man. (Where did he meet such women, or were they only wishful demons of his imagination?) And with Schiele the 'prettiness' that may after all be the most striking of Klimt's paintings was ripped asunder to reveal the raw ugliness. (Neither Schiele nor of course Munch is mentioned in Schorske, but the subject of Kokoschka presents a parallel to Schiele, if of course not given to such single-minded explicitness.) Klimt's visions of science, medicine and jurisprudence were not exactly in accord with the professors, not that they were prudes and artistically insensitive. Protests were written, but the authorities did not pay any heed to the professors (when is it ever done?) especially as they made the blunder of invoking arguments of aesthetics, but when Klimt started to become a political liability in view of the populous political outcry, the Ecclesiastical minister abandoned his principles of commitment to art, and unlike Freud Klimt never got a professorship, although in contradistinction from Freud he was elected to one, while Freud applied and pulled strings.

Freud is of course the name that comes to the fore whenever Sex and Vienna is mentioned, not Klimt nor Schnitzler, although the intellectual fascination he still exerted at the time Schorske wrote his essay, has now considerably waned, for reasons too complex to be elucidated now. Schorske concentrates on his 'Interpretation of Dreams' in which he sees as a code-book not just of its ostensible subject but for the life and ambitions of Freud himself, within whose covers a hidden autobiography is there to be disclosed.

The overthrow of ossified power structures is one thing, but the relinquishing of the

power to the masses is quite another. Restricted access to political action is nowadays seen as a reactionary obstruction to democracy, but at the time it certainly was conceived as a strategy of responsibility not necessarily primarily as a preservation of privilege. The interpretation of the will of the populace is a subtle thing, too subtle to be left to the masses as testified by the rise of Communism. At the end of the Habsburg empire, those who had warned of the dangers certainly were vindicated as populism came to the fore, populism as exercised and exploited by Karl Lueger, many times elected to the mayorship of Vienna, yet until impossible prevented from appropriating what he had been democratically won, by imperial intervention. Lueger combined concern for the little man with anti-semitism based on Catholicism, although in retrospect a much more pragmatic one than of a fanatical variety ('Wer Jude ist bestimme ich'). Adolf Hitler was certainly a child of the Austrian mixture of aesthetics and politics. Drunk on the Ringstrasse (on which he actually, according to Schorske had some interesting and perceptive things to say) he certainly were not lacking in opportunities for inspiration growing up in the last populist stage of the empire, with even far more rabid models than Lueger to feast his imagination upon, and who he was fated to outdo particularly in action. But that is an entirely different chapter.

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