



Fin-de-Siècle Vienna: Politics and Culture

Carl E. Schorske

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A landmark book from one of the original scholars of our time: a magnificent revelation of turn-of-the-century Vienna where out of a crisis of political & social disintegration so much of modern art & thought was born.

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This edition contains:

Illustrations

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The Ringstrasse, its critics & the birth of urban modernism

Politics in a new key: an Austrian trio

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Fin-de-Siècle Vienna: Politics and Culture Details

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From Reader Review Fin-de-Siècle Vienna: Politics and Culture for online ebook

Phil Gates says

Moderately interesting

Enough information to warrant reading, but not so much as to be wonderful. Moreover, a rather slow and uncomfortable read.

Miriam says

This reads more like a collection of topical essays than a book -- because, in fact, it was precisely that. The chapters were written as individual studies, not all at the same time, and later compiled into this book. As a result it is not always intellectually smooth, but many of the chapters are brilliant and Schorske has unusually vivid prose for an academic.

In the twentieth century Europe tried to assert independence from its past, self-defining "Modern" as the antithesis of "ancient"; in this sense modernity is characterized as a sense of one's time/history/life as different from all that has gone before. Hence, one of the tropes of this period was the search for new self-definitions. Individuals and groups alike sought for new identities and systems of belief. The weakening authority of history sped up the process of change as it liberated people to create new forms. The social and political disintegration of Vienna created a particularly fertile and ahistorical culture.

Laila Krause says

Of course this book is about the turn of the century and the early years of the 20th. But I found the social and intellectual history of this book and its political consequences to be significant and relevant to today, particularly in the US. I was struck by the the depiction of optimism when the intellectual elite were one with the bourgeoisie and of alienation and pessimism when they were not. And what it means to a nation when the highly educated do not respect the thinking and the voices of the less fortunate. And the rise of nationalist populism. I read this book in Prague and on a cruise down the Danube from Nuremberg to Budapest and during another stay in Vienna. I visited the WW II sites and the ghettos. I promised myself to never forget the result of exclusion and lack of diversity.

James says

I read this as part of the Literary Cityscapes course "Fin-De-Siecle Vienna" in The Basic Program at the U of C. Schorske provides a thorough overview of the culture of the Fin-de-Siecle with entries on literature, art, politics, the importance of the Ringstrasse, and the impact of Freud. The importance of culture for literature and the rest of art is brilliantly propounded in this influential book. My favorite discussion is that of the "coffeehouse culture" which was a veritable hothouse for new ideas. This book is the place to start for an

understanding of the culture of this era.

Scott says

Very entertaining, beautifully written base-to-superstructure account of late-century Vienna, a culture that prefigured our own preoccupation with the personal over the political. Surveys the careers of Klimt, Freud, Koshkoscha, etc., as well as developments in city planning as well as politics.

Manuel Durazo says

Fin-de-Siècle es un texto para entender la situación cultural y política en Vienna a finales del siglo XIX, durante el período secesionista.

En él, el autor destaca el papel que tuvieron figuras como Sigmund Freud, Gustav Klimt, Otto Wagner y Von Hoffmanstal en la configuración de la sociedad vienesa. Cada uno de ellos convirtió el psicoanálisis, el arte, la arquitectura y la literatura respectivamente en un refugio frente a el imperante racionalismo liberal de la época.

Vienna en el fin-de-siècle era un lugar donde se ponía en duda el orden hasta entonces establecido. En Vienna, las inquietudes intelectuales giraban en torno a conceptos tan abstractos como la vida y la muerte, la banalidad y futilidad de la existencia así como el cuestionamiento de valores tan fundamentales como la justicia. Vienna significó una revolución en el pensamiento, para la intelligentsia las obras del momento fueron tan perturbadoras que fueron censuradas. La actividad artística y literaria abrió paso a nuevas ideas que posteriormente serían retomadas por la corriente modernista y posmodernista.

La excepcionalidad del libro de Schorske recae en su capacidad para retratar la sociedad de la época, pues lo hace bajo una mirada cultural, política, arquitectónica y literaria; la integralidad con la que el autor expone los temas es la bondad principal de este texto. Recomendado para quienes planean visitar la ciudad o simplemente desean conocer más sobre las revoluciones en la historia del pensamiento.

Evan says

I am still trying to pin down what to think of Schorske's Fin-de-Siècle Vienna. It was a very readable book, particularly for one that was assembled from various scholarly publications. The political chapters stood out for me personally, but I can imagine the art and architecture chapters finding favor with other audiences. I also feel better for having read it--more culturally literate and well-rounded. There are a couple of problems, though. The first is that the work falls in an awkward grey region between survey and targeted study. It cannot be the former, since it leaves too many areas untouched. There is no real engagement with turn of the century Viennese philosophy (Ernst Mach) or economics (Bohm-Bawerk), for example. At the same time, chapters are a bit too varied to count as a focused investigation. They include everything from architecture to psychoanalysis to antisemitism. The second and more troubling problem is that, at times, Schorske goes completely off the rails. For instance, in writing on Klimt's *Medicine*, a painting the features the Greek goddess Hygeia holding a snake (as is traditional), he notes:

Hygeia is ambiguity par excellence; accordingly, she is associated with the snake, the most ambiguous of creatures...The snake, amphibious creature, phallic symbol with bisexual associations, is the great dissolver of boundaries: between land and sea, man and woman, life and death. This character accords well with the concern with androgyny and the homosexual reawakening of the fin de siècle: expressions of erotic liberation on the one hand and male fear of impotence on the other (242)

Is this a general claim about the significance of snakes tout court? If so, it hardly seems obvious. Is it supposed to reflect how Klimt's contemporaries would have seen it? This is more plausible, but would still require more historical support than he gives it. The reader doesn't even get a citation. Passages like this really hurt my reading experience.

mdme X? says

Before I turned my focus towards Gauguin, I began with a survey of Gustav Klimt's artwork. Carl Schorske is most likely the ultimate scholar on fin-de-siecle Vienna and provides excellent background, intimate details regarding daily life, city buildings, and analyzes Klimts work, as well as Egon Schiele and Oscar Kokoshka in excellent intricacy.

Rock says

During a test for a sociology 101 class I took at Truman Community College in Chicago, I encountered a question that asked whether and how the contemporary United States was comparable to the Roman Empire as it collapsed. After reading this book, I see more similarities to the collapse of the Austro-Hungarian Empire: both composed of a multitude of ethnic groups, many of which have a history of violent conflict and with a wide economic disparity; both suffered humiliating losses in wars; both have a prominent middle class that steeped in decadence and withdrawal (the chapter on the Secession movement is an excellent account of its rapid about-face from idealism to escapism). While I confess to a fixation on Vienna, I think that anyone interested in history, art, or cities would enjoy this book, or at least part of it.

Jevana says

gustav klimt haunts my dreams. in the moistest of ways.

AC says

I found this book quite off-putting, and though the author is enormously learned, I feel the book is somewhat overrated. I ended up skimming vast tracts of it (hence the category: i-get-the-picture instead of 'read')... and this, after several failed attempts even at starting it.

Part of the problem is me - I know very little about this period -as fascinating as it obviously is - and have had difficulty reading the few literary works I've tried -- though that clearly is something I plan to continue working on. German is a VERY difficult language for me; literary german is incomprehensible; and to

approach authors like Musil and Broch in translation is especially challenging.

But as to Schorske, he himself is neither fish nor fowl. He is not an historian or (by his own admission) an expert on Austria; he is not an art historian or literary historian or literary critic - he is a "cultural historian" and that, I'm afraid to say, means that he has only a mish-mash of a method. It is quite erudite and rotund (rhetorical, lots of adjectives - many of them signifying little or nothing) - but I never felt I came away having been given analytical insight into any of the figures I was reading about. In other words, for all the work at reading this, I got little nourishment, and effectively decided to move on.

I know that my views on this book will either strike others as foolish - or even MARK me and my limitations for all to see -- and I accept that. This IS one of the biggest gaps in my knowledge, and possibly I'd have a more favorable view of this book if I knew more about it.

I've got two more on deck - and would welcome any further suggestions.

Alex Zakharov says

Books like these tend to fail, and fail quite badly. Fusing politics, art and history without overplaying one of the areas, superficially brushing over another or stitching together a flavorless vignette of second-rate ideas is surprisingly hard to do. And yet Schorske succeeds quite nicely and in eight related but essentially standalone essays he paints a portrait of the Austro-Hungarian empire from its optimistic classical liberal inspired beginnings to a rather inglorious decline.

As points of stability were eroded in the areas of politics, art and culture the psyche of the nation was disintegrating along with the rest of it. Ironically and perhaps intentionally Schorkse doesn't mention the obvious impact of the Great War, and instead shows us the empire that was ultimately doomed with or without 1914 events.

Rest are notes to self:

?? o Reading about classic liberalism being torn apart by nationalism, socialism, anarchism, anti-Semitism and Zionism made me wonder if it is fundamentally unstable. Once you open up the democratic franchise it is difficult to impose constraints that would keep the nation well-governable. Sure, Fukuyama keeps finding examples which exhibit a balance of accountability, law and competent bureaucracy but they all seem transient. Taleb's localism is perhaps the best hope here.

?? o In Vienna: the old right got expressed as christian socialism (Karl Lueger), the new left got expressed as nationalism (Georg von Schoenerer). Both brought about anti-Semitism which beget Zionism through a pretty interesting path of Theodore Herzl. Nationalists were threatening the unity of the empire through disintegration, Zionists through secession. All in conflict with paleo-liberals.

?? o Ringstrasse through history-preserving communitarian Otto Wagner and history-rejecting functionalist Smitte. Both left their marks on architecture early, and luckily neither one took his vision to its full fruition as most their later and more radical designs never made it past proposal state.

?? o Klimt and Kokoschka transitions are covered brilliantly. Klimt, the Secession – soft conflation of subject and object, passion when depicted is depersonalized. Kokoschka, and Expressionism - rejects

‘traditional’ cult of beauty in favor of truth. The ‘truth’ is a fully subjective expression of author’s emotional inner-self which has little to do with objective reality. And so Klimt is confused about reality, while Kokoschka refuses to deal with it. Of course today our world is full of Kokoschkas who are convinced that the vision of their subjective inner-self IS in fact reality.

?? o Essay on Freud was the weakest part of the book. The metaphor of the garden in the last 2 chapters was fine for the most part but crumbling badly at the edges. On the other hand, nice finish with Arnold Schoenberg freeing music from the oppressive hierarchy of diatonic scale by introducing democracy of tonalities. And through the absence of hierarchy at the bottom he gives us a meta, emergent order on top. Is he seeding the roots for Ludwig von Mises and Austrian economics here?

Mark Feltskog says

Simply first rate--an exhaustive and lively history of a fascinating period in Central European cultural history.

Lobstergirl says

Schorske unites here seven previously published or written essays, linked thematically by political and cultural developments in late 19th century Vienna: the failures of liberalism, the burgeoning of anti-Semitism, the creation of psychoanalysis, the oedipal rebellions of later artists (such as Oskar Kokoschka and Arnold Schoenberg) against the previous rebels (Gustav Klimt, architect Otto Wagner, Hugo von Hofmannsthal) whose art had arrived at a comfortable compromise with bourgeois aesthetics. This 1981 paperback edition contains both white and white illustrations, and color plates.

Luke says

I don't yet know what to make of this book, except that I loved it. I'm going to have to think about it a bit more.

Kendall says

Sigmund Freud carries much more currency today with social scientists than among actual scientists. Analysis and talk therapy and “tell me about your mother” are no longer “a thing” among psychiatrists, not least because HMOs won’t pay for it. Pharmaceuticals exist to address physiological problems in the brain.

Sigmund Freud’s continued purchase upon historians constitutes an insurmountable defect in Carl Schorske’s treatise on “Fin-de-Siecle Vienna.”

Schorske attempts to weigh down almost every discussion of art, literature, politics, and music in Vienna at the end of the 19th Century with a Freudian veneer. The structure does not bear the weight, and not just because I lacked sufficient background in 19th Century Viennese playwrights.

The only thing worse than writing too much about music and art instead of looking at art or listening to music is writing too much and trying to make it all Freud's doing. Schorske tries and fails.

Getting past Schorske's Freud fetish, two chapters were worth the time and effort. The story of Gustav Klimt's lifetime of artistic development contained many visual examples to support and illustrate the all-too-Freudian discussion. (V. Gustav Klimt: Painting and the Crisis of the Liberal Ego).

Best of all was the chapter on how the changing political fortunes of the clergy, the imperial throne, the army, and the liberal democracy impacted the development of the Ringstrasse, both in terms of land use and architectural design. (II. The Ringstrasse, Its Critics, and the Birth of Urban Modernism).

Schorske shows very effectively how political power was directly reflected in who received space on the land formerly occupied by Vienna's City walls, when they received the land, and what they erected upon it. The result is today's Ringstrasse, which runs from early development by the Kaiser and the Clerics (the Votive Kirche), to the city (Rathaus), to the Greek revival parliament building, to the renaissance University, to the private dwelling houses, and finally to business concerns.

But if those things interest you, read those and skim or skip the rest.

Jon says

Since this book consists of seven more-or-less independent essays, I'll review them as I read them.

I. Politics and the Psyche: Schnitzler and Hofmannsthal

Schorske introduces the basic crisis that constitutes the decadence discussed in the other essays, namely the conflict between rational, capitalist Classical Liberalism, the ruling ideology of Viennese politics from the 1860s to the end of the century, and a more irrational, instinctual "psychological man" who would come to constitute the mass movements of the 20th century. He suggests the salience of this conflict through the works of both Arthur Schnitzler, whose works explored the consequences of replacing rational politics with instinctual politics, and Hugo von Hofmannsthal, whose works expressed his desire to harmonize irrational instinct with politics through art. Given that he's exploring turn of the century Vienna, it's almost inevitable that Schorske's analysis of the psyche relies to some extent on a Freudian interpretation of the mind, but the general concepts he presents are still valid and intriguing.

II. The Ringstrasse, Its Critics, and the Birth of Urban Modernism

The Ringstrasse was a district developed in Vienna, beginning in the 1860s, out of what were previously the city walls and surrounding earthworks. Schorske discusses the influence of Classical Liberalism on the early form of the buildings in the district, and the reactions by Camillo Sitte and Otto Wagner. Sitte had a literally pedestrian critique of the Ringstrasse; he would have preferred a district designed to resemble the ancient street grid of the city center, one more pedestrian-oriented than movement-oriented, resembling Jane Jacob's critiques of modernist planning several decades later. Unlike Jacobs, however, Sitte's critique was rooted in an artistic and historic ideology, rather than one based on personal experience with modernist planning. Wagner took the opposite view, one associated with ascendent modernism; he advocated for (and indeed built) buildings that clearly delineated commercial and residential functions, and even created plans for the

infinite, rational expansion of Vienna. Schorske subtly frames the reaction to the bourgeois style of the early Ringstrasse as a conflict between rational modernism and intuitive historicism.

III. Politics in a New Key: An Austrian Trio

Schorske details the political evolution of Georg von Schönerer, Karl Lueger, and Theodore Herzl, all from the classical Liberal tradition to Pan-Germanism, Christian Socialism, and Zionism, respectively. In all three cases, presented one after the other, he identifies the reaction against rational politics as a shift away from the classical political spectrum, and towards one that reflects a mass psychology, one that paradoxically reflected the values of what Schorske calls a "pre-rationalist order."

IV. Politics and Patricide in Freud's *Interpretation of Dreams*

Schorske works through Freud's dreams, as detailed in his eponymous interpretation thereof, to suggest that Freud viewed politics as ultimately the conflict between father and son, and that repressed sexual force mirrors the repressed force of a revolutionary people. I take slight issue with a Freudian interpretation of politics, but the section is nonetheless an interesting read.

V. Gustav Klimt: Painting and the Crisis of the Liberal Ego

This essay is a review of the artistic evolution of Klimt in light of the conflict between rationality, as identified through a representational, Classic mode, and sensuality, shown through various levels of abstraction and identification with Freudian sexuality. Schorske begins with his murals for various Ringstrasse buildings, done in an entirely representational, Classical style, and then discusses Klimt's relationship with the Secession movement, in the context of his paintings for the University of Vienna and the political backlash they generated.

VI. The Transformation of the Garden

VII. Explosion in the Garden: Kokoschka and Schoenberg

Erik says

I keep on coming back to this book as source of my fascination with the birth of Modernism. Schorske's book is a series of interconnected essays that can be read as stand alone essays, though best if read in order. The prose is a dense, though Schorske seems to cover every applicable topic - politics, art, social movements, high culture, low culture, etc. Everytime I read an essay in this book I have to get my graduate school mind back. Not for the beach.

Joshua Buhs says

As this book becomes older, it becomes harder to see what once made it so exciting.

This is my second read through Schorske's book. The first was after reading Richard Candida Smith's *Utopia and Dissent*. He cited it in a way that made me think it would discuss the way ideas developed in Venice

transferred to the culture at large--Venice of the time, after all, was the city that, inter alia, gave us Freud and psychoanalysis, as well as the early glimmerings of the so-called Austrian school of economics. I came to the book again after reading *Rebel Souls*, which suggested these ideas were developed more specifically in a Bohemian context.

I suppose it is possible to get those ideas out of the book, but it is not obvious; for me, the reads have been disappointing, the mechanisms and community sketches obscure. But that may just be me.

"*Fien de Siècle Vienna*" is an intellectual history that was conceived as a series of independent articles. Schorske's reach is wide--he looks at Freud and Klimt and architecture and political theories and ideas about the garden in Austrian culture at the time. One can see how this approach would develop, in later decades, into what is now considered cultural history. He seems to know his stuff and be incredibly versed in the minutiae of the topics. But because the book originated as a series of studies, it never coheres, and the parallels are either suggestive or vague, which can be frustrating.

For me, as someone who is not an expert in turn-of-the-century German or Hapsburg history, a lot of the references are obscure. He drops in names as references to the ideas he means to develop, but I have no idea who the people are, nor really why I should care. I mean, I know Klimt and Freud, but beyond that . . . And the chapter on Freud displays Schorske's close and creative reading of Freud, but does not really develop any insight into him or why the reading is important to understanding his ideas. Schorske's main interest is obviously with architecture and art, as these are the longest, most developed chapters, though I am not sure I can say what, if anything, I took away from them.

to the degree that he did seek out parallels in the various stories, these were presented at the beginning of the book, in the introduction and first chapter, and assumed a process that I wanted explicated. Schorske makes the point that in England and France the bourgeoisie succeeded in destroying--his word--or fusing with the aristocracy; in Austria, by contrast, the bourgeoisie assimilated aristocratic values through culture--and especially the arts. In particular, it borrowed from the aristocracy's conservatism, as response to the liberalism earlier in the century. (This conservatism was in stark contrast to America's progressive Bohemianism.) This assimilation by culture, Schorske argues in a suggestive--but never developed--few lines, meant that art for arts sake took a different meaning in Venice than anywhere else: "the life of art became a substitute for the life of action."

There was, though, a contravening social ideal beyond the aesthetic. This was what he calls the moralistic-scientific. So on the one hand there was art as essence, transformed into a kind of narcissism and sensitivity--what would have been called neurasthenia, in an American context. On the other were the holdovers from the collapsed liberal program, a commitment to action and moral rectitude and the ability of the mind to master matter, what Schorske sees as common to Victorian culture throughout Europe.

Schorske means to trace out this interplay throughout the century in the various people he studies. Which is fine. But what is interesting to me, some forty years after the book came out, and fifty since the earliest essays were written, is not the play of these two traditions in the work of various intellectuals, but the process by which the ideas precipitated out of Viennese culture. That's what I miss.

It is not a fair critique, I admit, to complain that Schorske did not provide what I wanted. But after two readings it is still my take away: the focus on a few individuals takes too much time, while the most interesting ideas are suggested, hinted at, assumed, or asserted.

Justin says

I have this thing for late 19th century Vienna, I mean who doesn't? In any case I couldn't resist this one. Parts of it are actually very interesting especially the essays on the transformation of Austrian politics from a liberal democracy to populist demagoguery at the end of the century. It sort of ruins the concept of a progression towards tolerance and enlightenment in human society that was sometimes envisioned. There's also a great essay on Gustav Klimt and his development from a straightforward artist to the avant-garde. It does make you appreciate the explosion of artistic ideas immediately prior to World War I as the classical style burned itself out. The last few essays drag, however.
