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Fin-de-Siecle Vienna: Politics and Culture – Book Review

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Fin-de-Siècle Vienna: Politics and Culture by Carl E. Schorske

Review by: Harry Ritter

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of so many Roman-German emperors, looked toward the west for an alternative to the *Dreibund* in which his father's empire played the role of a junior partner after the defeat of 1866 and Austria's exclusion from Germany.

In his writings the crown prince criticized the very often idle "high life" of the aristocracy and pointed to various weaknesses in the Habsburg empire's constitutional and administrative structure. His wordings occasionally were so acrid that they had to be mitigated by his friend, the newspaper editor M. Szepe. This friendship with a Jewish journalist was quite openly attacked in the clerical press and by various anti-Semitic politicians. It should be noted that the anti-Semitism became a growing force in Rudolf's last years of life, but the archduke just as his imperial father despised that new political trend.

The very last years of his life were extremely unhappy: he neglected his wife and destroyed himself through alcohol. On the morning of 30 January 1889, his corpse and that of young Baroness Mary Vetsera were discovered in his bedroom at the royal hunting lodge of Mayerling, south of Vienna.

ROBERT RIE, *State University College, Fredonia, NY*

Carl E. Schorske. *Fin-de-Siècle Vienna: Politics and Culture*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1980. Pp. 378. \$15.95.

For the past two decades, Carl Schorske has been one of the most interesting writers in the field of late nineteenth-century Austrian history. The appearance of this handsomely illustrated collection of his essays — most of which originally appeared in historical journals — provides an opportunity to reflect on the nature of his contribution. The book consists of seven studies on topics ranging from the *Ringstraßenstil* in urban planning to Kokoschka's expressionism and Schönberg's musical explorations. The finest, entitled "Politics in a New Key," is an examination of the irrational "sharper key" in political rhetoric and deportment which arose in Austria in the 1880s. Here the qualities of Schorske's craft are exhibited at their best: a perceptive eye for the prevailing imagery of the day, the ability to weave a tight fabric of analysis around a few central themes, and an often deft (though occasionally overwrought) prose style. The essays are held together by a few well-chosen motifs: e.g., generational conflict between liberal fathers and rebellious sons, the sense of undirected flux which preoccupied the intelligentsia, upper middle-class aestheticism and status envy for the aristocracy, and the notion of threatened masculinity which surfaced so often in the arts. These are not unfamiliar themes in Austrian cultural history and literary criticism, but Schorske develops them with uncommon skill.

Schorske's work is undeniably important — already it is being cited by scholars in a number of disciplines — so it is essential to highlight some of the shortcomings of his approach. In his introduction, a frank confession concerning his own intellectual *Via Dolorosa*, Schorske reveals that he was attracted to Vienna not primarily by an interest in Habsburg history per se, but by the rise of American interest in Freud following World War II, when the "historical and social optimism that had been associated with the New Deal and the struggle with the Nazis finally broke down." Every work of history is to a large degree a reflection of its author; in this case, however, the reader often feels he is seeing too much of an American academic's agony over the mid-century "crisis" of American culture. The problem is especially obvious in the way the subject of liberalism is handled. Schorske accepts the long popular idea of the eclipse of liberalism at the end of the nineteenth century, a

half-truth originated by disillusioned European liberals themselves, but strongly reinforced by culture critics in America after 1945.

The choice of "fin-de-siècle" as the main adjective to describe pre-1914 Vienna, with its apocalyptic overtones, is a clue to another important difficulty. For all their sophistication, Schorske's essays are still in large measure contributions to a well-worn genre — the literature of late nineteenth-century European "decadence." His analysis is filled with references to the "ancient [Austrian] Empire" as it "approached disintegration," Vienna's "disintegrating moral-aesthetic culture," the "social jetsam" of "decaying Europe," etc. Behind this is a pseudo-tragic emplotment of central European history, built on the metahistorical notion of a dialectical process of social decay which culminates in Hitler (see p. 133). It is true that Schorske usually places the term "decadence" between quotation marks, and sympathizes with the Viennese art historian Franz Wickhoff, who fought "for a new history beyond the ideas of progress and decadence." The surface texture and poetic structure of his writing, however, belie the idea that he has made a contribution to Wickhoff's cause.

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Geoff Eley. *Reshaping the German Right: Radical Nationalism and Political Change after Bismarck*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1980. Pp. 387. Cloth \$30.00.

Reshaping the German Right is not one book, but two. Although mixed together, there are two distinct theses, and rather than offering mutual support they stand in partial contradiction. The first argues that the concentration on a search for themes that link together the various periods of modern German history is fundamentally wrong, for German history, indeed all history, is mostly discontinuous. Specifically, the Wilhelmine era should not be viewed primarily as a breeding ground for National Socialism. With regard to the Right, Eley denies, then, that there is an obvious connection between either the old conservatives or the new nationalists and Hitler's fascism. The unique problems of the prewar decades produced unique efforts at solution, and there are few conclusions that can be drawn that have relevance for what came after. In the grip of this mood, Eley goes so far as to plea that he has written a "history without a conclusion" (p. 360).

But there is a conclusion. It is contained in the second and competing thesis, that a reshaping of the Wilhelmine Right resulted in the creation of "a vital condition of future possibility for the emergence of a German fascism" (p. 361). However cautious the language, Eley clearly believes that there are, after all, significant connections. A new Right, he suggests, grew up next to the old one. It was based on radical, populist nationalism and was originally effectively excluded from the *Honoratio-renpolitik* of the dominant agrarian-industrial establishment. But as the old Right found itself in trouble, it was forced to admit the newcomers into its ranks and even to follow their lead in opposing a government that, especially after the Socialist electoral victory of 1912, was slipping leftward. Thus the reformation of the German Right along the lines of an oppositional radicalism with ties to the masses unknowingly prepared the way for an even more radical rejection of the old order.

The difficulty here is that Wilhelmine radical nationalism remained basically unsuccessful, and Eley's documentation of its failures is, to his credit, meticulous. In its reaching out to the *Mittelstand*, it never got beyond the formulation of an ineffective ideology. And if it was not the tool of *Sammlungspolitik*, as Eley claims,