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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 constitu-
tional and administrative structure. His wordings occasionally were so acrid that
they had to be mitigated by his friend, the newspaper editor M. Szeps. This friend-
ship 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
dadisposed 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


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:
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 occasion-
ally 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
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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 metaphistorical 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.

HARRY RITTER, Western Washington University


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 Honoratiorenpolitik 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,