

REVIEW ESSAY

Sex, Coffee, Madness: New Studies on the History of Fin-de-Siècle and Interwar Vienna

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The Viennese Café and Fin-de-siècle Culture. Edited by CHARLOTTE ASHBY, TAG

GRONBERG and SIMON SHAW-MILLER. Pp. xii + 244. Illustrations. Bibliography. Index. New York and Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2013. Austrian and Habsburg Studies 16. ISBN 9780857457646

Journeys into Madness: Mapping Mental Illness in the Austro-Hungarian Empire.

Edited by GEMMA BLACKSHAW and SABINE WIEBER. Pp. vii + 213. Select Bibliography. Index. New York and Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2012. Austrian and Habsburg Studies 14. ISBN 9780857454584

Sexual Knowledge: Feeling, Fact and Social Knowledge in Vienna, 1900–1934. By

BRITTA MCEWEN. Pp. viii + 232. Bibliography. Index. New York and Oxford: Berghahn Books. 2012. Austrian and Habsburg Studies 13. ISBN 9780857453372

Black Vienna: The Radical Right in the Red City, 1918–1938. By JANEK WASSERMAN. Pp.

254. Bibliography. Index. Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press. 2014. ISBN 9780801452871

Unterwegs in Wien: Kulturhistorische Streifzüge. By PETER PAYER. Foreword Peter Patzak. Pp. 260. Illustrations. Vienna: Czernin. 2013. ISBN 9783707604665

MUCH OF THE HISTORIOGRAPHY OF MODERN VIENNA during the fin-de-siècle and the interwar period is written in the shadow of Carl E. Schorske's *Fin-de-Siècle Vienna: Politics and Culture*. Since the publication of this Pulitzer-Prize winning study in 1979, 'Vienna 1900' has attracted scholars from a range of disciplines fascinated by the cultural history of this unlikely 'cradle' of modernity, a place where some of the main political ideologies and artistic movements of the twentieth century originated. Schorske tried to make sense of the coincidence of political crisis and cultural creativity around the turn of the century, and chose the Austrian capital as a case study to demonstrate the cultural consequences of the decline of liberalism in central Europe (which reminded him of American academic and intellectual culture of the 1950s). He did not provide a comprehensive history of Vienna and contributed little to its 'urban history', thus leaving many opportunities for scholars to follow in his wake and fill in gaps in our knowledge. Charlotte Ashby, Tag Gronberg and Simon Shaw-Miller have done so by assembling scholars of, as their title announces, *The Viennese Café and Fin-de-siècle Culture*. In her introduction to the volume, Ashby links the theme of the volume to Schorskean questions: she argues that coffeehouses were not merely a characteristic feature of Viennese hospitality, but, as semi-public spaces that facilitated sociability and networking, were instrumental in the creation of modernist culture. Gilbert Carr looks at two of Vienna's most famous literary coffeehouses, the 'Café Griensteidl' and the 'Café Central', often referred to as evidence for the close relationship between coffeehouse culture and literary modernism. The Griensteidl had already played an important role during the revolution of 1848 in Vienna, then became the preferred meeting place of the literary circle *Jung-Wien*, which included Hermann Bahr, Hugo von Hoffmansthal, Arthur Schnitzler, Felix Salten and

Richard Beer-Hofmann. As such, it was satirized with typical venom by the young Karl Kraus in his early essay on ‘Demolished Literature’ (*Die demolirte Literatur*, 1897), written on the occasion of the closing of the Griensteidl in 1897. At that time, the Café Central became the favourite meeting place of literary Vienna, with the excentric Peter Altenberg its most famous regular customer. Carr is far from naively celebrating the cultural significance of coffeehouses. Instead, he reminds us that references to ‘Viennese coffeehouse culture’ form an integral part of the legend of the ‘world of yesterday’, which was a by-product of the turmoil of the interwar years when intellectuals began reminiscing about the good old days of the late Habsburg Empire. The standard sources for the history of the Viennese coffeehouse are Stefan Zweig’s autobiography *Die Welt von Gestern* and Friedrich Torberg’s memoir *Tante Jolesch*, first published in the 1970s, both major contributions to the nostalgic memory of the Viennese fin-de-siècle. Both books, while sometimes entertaining to read, show the typical shortcomings of autobiographical texts: they present personal views as historical fact, which makes them difficult to use as historical ‘sources’. Hence Zweig’s and Torberg’s memories tell us more about the legacy of *The World of Yesterday* after its collapse than about social realities in Vienna before the First World War.

Other chapters of the volume deal with cafés and coffeehouse culture outside Vienna, namely in the provincial cities of Lemberg, Krakow and Zagreb, and thus provide a welcome comparative perspective that shows the influence of the Viennese ‘model’ throughout the Habsburg empire – needless to say, a pattern that can be observed in fields other than gastronomy. Despite national and linguistic differences, coffeehouses were part of a common central European culture and provided a bond between the capital city and other urban centres of the empire. According to Ines Sabotic (‘The Coffeehouse in Zagreb at the Turn of the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries’), ‘this common café culture across Austria-Hungary reflected the existence of a German-speaking bourgeois society that linked urban centres

across the region' (p. 123). It might have been even more convincing to compare Vienna to the more obvious cases, i.e. Prague and Budapest, in order to draw conclusions about the characteristics of Viennese coffeehouse culture and its significance.¹ In this light, the sceptical conclusion by Shachar Pinsker ('The Central European Café as a Site for Hebrew and Yiddish Modernism') applies to the volume as a whole: 'Vienna was certainly important but far from unique. The Viennese coffeehouse served perhaps as a paradigm, but it was also, like the East European Jewish migrants and like modernism, a transnational phenomenon that moved from one city to another' (p. 94). A comprehensive cultural history of Vienna would certainly need to pay attention to coffeehouses, not least because of their importance for the self-image of the Viennese (and the tourist industry of the city). It must remain doubtful, however, if coffeehouses played a 'defining role' for Viennese culture around 1900, as Edward Timms maintains (p. 202). For scholars of Viennese history, coffeehouses might provide a link between 'traditional' cultural history, with its focus on literature, fine arts and high culture, and a 'new' cultural history interested in the history of everyday life, leisure and pleasure. Still, it is not surprising that Carl Schorske did not focus on the Viennese coffeehouses: there is little evidence to suggest that modernist culture, from Freud's psychoanalysis to Klimt's paintings or Mahler's music, was a 'product' of the coffeehouse.

The editors of the volume on *Journeys into Madness: Mapping Mental Illness in the Austro-Hungarian Empire*, another volume in the series of the Center for Austrian Studies at the University of Minnesota, have set themselves an ambitious aim, i.e. to rediscover a 'lost

¹ On Budapest see Gábor Gyáni, 'Middle-Class Socialbility: At the Café', in idem, *Identity and the Urban Experience: Fin-de-siècle Budapest* (Boulder, 2004), pp. 97-109; Mary Gluck, 'The Budapest Coffee House and the Making of "Jewish Modernity" at the Fin de Siècle', *Journal of the History of Ideas* 74.2 (2013), 289–306. Karl-Heinz Jähn (ed.), *Das Prager Kaffeehaus: Literarische Tischgesellschaften* (Berlin, 1988) assembles first-hand accounts, while Torberg's *Tante Jolesch* provides anecdotes mainly from Prague's coffeehouses during the inter-war period.

context’ for works of art of the Austro-Hungarian fin-de-siècle at a time ‘when radical and crucially related changes occurred in the fields of psychiatry, the visual arts and culture more broadly’. Madness and mental illness, they claim, were ‘utterly central’ to the ‘articulation of Austro-Hungarian identity, touching the lives of so many’ (p. 4). The volume tries to move beyond Schorske’s interpretation of the fin-de siècle—duly acknowledged it as a ‘pioneering interdisciplinary study of Viennese modernism’—and instead proposes to continue the ‘rethinking’ of the ‘Schorskean paradigm’ along the lines suggested by Steven Beller.² In particular, they are keen to show that the ‘complex and contested territory of psychiatry in Austria-Hungary’ cannot be reduced to Vienna or even to Sigmund Freud’s psychoanalysis—a point with which the majority of scholars would agree.

Surprisingly, one of the most convincing contributions to this volume, by Steven Beller, provides a concise evaluation of Freudian psychoanalysis that deals strictly with the ‘master’ himself (‘Solving Riddles: Freud, Vienna and the Historiography of Madness’). In contrast to other historians of Vienna 1900, Beller is not a ‘card-carrying’ member of the psychoanalytic movement, but neither does he indulge in the kind of Freud-bashing typical of many critics of psychoanalysis. Rather, he tries to explain Freudian psychoanalysis from its Viennese contexts: following Michael Worbs’s studies, Beller stresses the early reception of Freudian ideas in Viennese literature, in particular by Schnitzler and Hofmannsthal, a pattern that was followed in Berlin during the 1920s.³ Beller stresses the importance of antisemitism for Freud, in particular the latter stages of his life, and defends psychoanalysis as ‘one of a number of *open* systems of thought’. According to Beller, ‘despite some elements of

² Steven Beller, ed., *Rethinking Vienna 1900* (New York and Oxford, 2001).

³ Michael Worbs, *Nervenkunst: Literatur und Psychoanalyse im Wien der Jahrhundertwende* (Frankfurt am Main, 1988); on Berlin see Veronika Fuechtner, *Berlin Psychoanalytic: Psychoanalysis and Culture in Weimar Republic Berlin and Beyond* (Berkeley, 2011).

dogmatism (and the famous banishings into exile of various heretics by Freud) psychoanalysis was inherently an open system, for there was never an end of interpretation (one of the problems of its cost-effectiveness), and tendentially anti-authoritarian – precisely in its undermining of the certainty of consciousness.’ Freud, then, appears as ‘an authoritarian anti-authoritarian’ who ‘always guarded against the closure of thought’ (p. 38).

Other contributions to the volume remain centred on Freud, too. Gavin Plumley for instance (‘Symphonies and Psychosis in Mahler’s Vienna’) looks at the therapy Gustav Mahler had with Freud in 1910 after he had found out that his wife Alma was having an affair ‘with a glamorous young architect’ (p. 43). Other chapters deal with topics as varied as spas and health tourism in the Habsburg Empire, the architecture of the psychiatric clinic *Am Steinhof*, Peter Altenberg as a prominent neurotic, or Empress ‘Sissi’s’ mental illness. On the whole, the volume is a typically mixed bag: it includes some valuable contributions to the literature, but remains too incoherent to fulfill the high expectations raised by the editors.

Britta McEwen’s study on ‘Sexual Knowledge’ takes the history of the city to the inter-war period and focuses on public discourses about sexuality in ‘Red Vienna’. On the basis of a vast and varied amount of published texts, ranging from popular guidebooks and political pamphlets to the daily press and academic literature, she argues that ‘the production and distribution of sexual knowledge underwent a dramatic shift during the years 1900 to 1934: from a form of scientific inquiry practiced largely by medical specialists to a social reform issue engaged by and intended for a wide audience’ (p. 2). This ‘practical turn’ of Viennese sexology was embodied by Julius Tandler, one of the main players in Red Vienna’s sex reform regime and the subject of McEwen’s first chapter. From a powerful position as physician, professor at the university and politician, Tandler took advantage of the Socialists’ reign and set an ambitious agenda for reforming Vienna’s municipal public health system, centred around sexual education and reform. Tandler represented a form of socialist eugenics:

he subscribed to the hereditarian beliefs that most eugenicists shared, but decoupled these from right-wing racism: to him, eugenics was intimately linked with sexual reform and thus provided the solution to the ‘social question’. McEwen’s second and third chapters present guidebooks on sexual education (*Aufklärung*) aimed at teenagers, adolescents and women. There was little ‘Viennese’ about this popular literature, which rather belonged to ‘German’ culture more generally. Similarly, the sex clinics and ‘Marriage Advice Centers’ that opened in the interwar period to alleviate the ‘sexual misery’ (‘Sexualnot’) of the working class were not unique to Vienna, but could be found throughout the Weimar Republic. In a chapter on the public scandal caused by Hugo Bettauer’s popular but short-lived magazine *Er und Sie: Wochenschrift für Lebenskultur und Erotik* (‘He and She: A Weekly for Lifestyle and the Erotic’), McEwen shows the limits to the dissemination of ‘sexual knowledge’ in ‘Red Vienna’: at the behest of Julius Tandler, but supported by Ignaz Seipel, chairman of the Christian-Social Party, *Er und Sie* was confiscated as a pornographic publication. Even though Bettauer was cleared of the charge of violating public morality or modesty through images or lewd stories in court, *Er und Sie* ceased publication and was replaced with *Bettauers Wochenschrift* (Bettauer’s Weekly). Bettauer’s tragic death—he was assassinated while holding a public ‘office hour’—cannot be seen simply as an act of antisemitic violence, McEwen argues, but was mainly due to his celebrity status as a ‘sex educator’ who came in conflict with public morale and decency. In 1930, the fourth conference of the World League for Sexual Reform was held in Vienna, a major event that brought together speakers from Europe and the Americas and was attended by 2000 participants. The foremost experts in sexology were present, from Magnus Hirschfeld to Julius Tandler and Wilhelm Reich; they used the occasion as a platform to advertise sexual reform as social reform, and thus they provide McEwen with a fitting conclusion to her study. Overall, the book provides a concise picture of ‘sexual knowledge’ in inter-war Vienna, its dissemination and the attempts to

implement it; it demonstrates how central sexuality was for the reform programme of Red Vienna. Even though the book opens with Freud's infamous 'Dora' (Ida Bauer) case, McEwen does not concentrate on Freud, the Freudians and the psychoanalytic movement, and thus shows—in a more systematic and convincing way than the collection *Journeys into Madness*—that it is not only possible, but necessary to study the history of the 'sexual question' in Vienna without an exclusive focus on psychoanalysis.

Whereas for McEwen, the 'remarkably turbulent political events' that troubled Austria in the early twentieth century provide merely the context for her study, Janek Wasserman focuses on the central political conflicts of inter-war Austria, i.e. the political and ideological divide between 'Black' and 'Red' Vienna. His main argument is as simple as it is convincing: 'Red Vienna', which has attracted considerable scholarly attention, needs to be assessed via its opposite, 'Black Vienna', i.e. the conservative, Catholic, nationalistic and antisemitic circles that deeply influenced the political climate of the city, despite the Socialist municipal government that tried to turn Vienna into a showcase of reform socialism. Similar to the 'conservative revolution' in the Weimar Republic, Wasserman's Black Vienna describes an intellectual milieu, not an organized party or 'movement'. The representatives and sympathizers of Black Vienna were united in their hatred of a common enemy: the Austrian republic, which they associated variously with liberalism, Marxism, socialism, capitalism or the Jews. Contrary to the post-war Austrian 'victim-myth', Wasserman argues, the Christian Socials and the German Nationalists had more in common than they would later admit: they were united in their opposition to 'Red Vienna', shot through with open or latent antisemitism, and only differed by the degree to which they were willing to accept and work within the framework of the unloved Republic. Regardless of the differences between the many factions and circles that made up Black Vienna—often due to personal rivalries, degrees of radicalism and their general attitude towards the First Republic—by spreading

authoritarian and antisemitic ideologies, it prepared the ground for Austro-Fascism and the seamless integration of Austria into the Third Reich after the *Anschluß*.

Wasserman gives detailed accounts of various circles, associations, journals and parties that he describes as ‘Black Vienna’. An important forerunner of interwar right-wing radicalism was the *Leo-Gesellschaft*, founded in 1892 by the professor of theology Franz Schindler, a member of the Christian Social Party. It was named after Pope Leo XIII and intended to act as a counterpart of the German *Görres-Gesellschaft*; as such, it formed an integral part of the organizational network of the Christian Socials. In 1903, the jurist Richard Kralik, a former member of the Pernerstorfer circle of radical students (other members included Gustav Mahler, Heinrich Friedjung and Victor Adler)⁴, became the leading figure of the *Leo-Gesellschaft*. After the First World War, Kralik went on to become one of the main contributors to the journal *Das Neue Reich*, edited by Joseph Eberle, which by 1925 had become the largest German-language journal in Europe in terms of circulation (a point repeatedly made by Wasserman). Kralik thus personally represented a link between the fin-de-siècle and the radicalized interwar period. *Das Neue Reich* put forward an antisemitic and *völkisch* ideology that differed little from the Nazis’ views; the title of the publication gives a clue. Central to Wasserman’s argument are sections on Othmar Spann and his circle, and on the *Österreichische Aktion*, ‘a pivot for understanding Black Vienna’. Best known as the theorist of the *Ständestaat*, Spann is presented as the central figure of Black Vienna (and beyond) who provided a comprehensive, radically anti-Marxist and anti-capitalist ideology. Spann’s ideology inspired the Sudeten-German leaders Konrad Henlein and Heinz Rutha, but also the future emigré political scientist Erich Voegelin and Eugen Kogon, author of one of the first studies of the SS-system, who after 1945 became a famous public intellectual and

⁴ See William McGrath, ‘Student Radicalism in Vienna’, in *Journal of Contemporary History* 2 (1967), 183–201.

champion of a united, Christian Europe in West Germany. Spann's academic position ensured that the University of Vienna remained a bastion of conservative and right-wing thinking; at the same time, he was keen to ensure the 'impact' of his ideas beyond academia. Spann and his disciples tried to connect to almost any right-wing movement in the interwar period, from the Austrian *Heimwehr* to the Italian Fascists, the *Sudetendeutsche* Party, the Hungarian Arrow Cross and the German National Socialists. The Spann circle overlapped and cooperated with Eberle's journal *Die Schönerer Zukunft* (The brighter future); after 1932 Spann wooed the Nazis publicly in his own journal *Ständisches Leben* (Estates life) and criticised the Dollfuss regime, despite its affinities to his own doctrine. This decision proved fatal and turned Spann into a 'tragic' figure, who, despite his sympathies for and advances towards the Nazi party, was perceived as a dangerous rival of the Nazis and became one of their first victims after the Anschluss in 1938. The *Österreichische Aktion* was the leading monarchist organization in interwar Austria and aimed for the restoration of the Habsburg empire in the guise of a federated central Europe under Austrian leadership. Inspired by the French *Action Française*, the *Aktion* both modernized and radicalized political Catholicism in Austria. While trying to appeal to and accommodate left-wing sympathizers, it refused to take part in parliamentary elections of the detested Republic, in contrast to the Christian Socials. In terms of ideology, the *Aktion* shared the rabid antisemitism and anti-liberalism of other Black Vienna-circles and was most vocal in its rejection of the Paris peace treaties. Some of its central figures were former students of Spann at the University of Vienna, but opposed Nazism from the mid-1930s and were consequently persecuted after the Anschluss.

Wasserman deals not only with 'Black Vienna', but has included several chapters on its counterpart, i.e. intellectual circles that belonged to or sympathised with 'Red Vienna'. He shows how Austro-Marxists attempted to enlist intellectuals to their cause, but failed to gain 'a dominant position in Viennese institutions of knowledge and culture' (p. 50). He presents

the Ernst Mach Society, the Monists or the Freethinkers as attempts to organize and institutionalize left-wing intellectuals beyond the academy and thus provide a counterforce to University circles dominated by conservatives and right-wingers. Finally he deals with ‘politically engaged scholarship during the crisis years from 1927 to 1934’, which saw the emergence of the Freudo-Marxist synthesis which, when it was rediscovered in the 1960s, became an integral part of the ‘new left’. Wasserman’s main argument, however, concerns the radicalism of the Austrian (and Viennese) right in the inter-war years, and its relation to the ‘Austrian victim narrative’ after 1945: ‘Black Vienna, it turns out, was not so much an impediment to the Nazi takeover of Austria as facilitator. Their debates in favor of authoritarianism, fascism, and anti-Semitism paved the way for Hitler—an inconvenient truth that was lost when the conservatives themselves became victims’ (p. 220).

Unperturbed by the mainly anglophone fascination with fin-de-siècle Vienna—Schorske’s book is available in German translation and was well received in Austria and Germany, but did not have a lasting impact comparable to his success in the USA and the United Kingdom—Peter Payer has provided a follow-up to his *Blick auf Wien*, published in 2006.⁵ As in this earlier collection, Payer provides short essays, most of which were originally published in Austrian newspapers and magazines. He follows his now by now well-tested approach: Payer usually takes an event such as the World Exhibition in 1873, an individual such as the journalist Eduard Pötzl, or peculiar items such as public scales, clocks or other ‘urban furniture’, and explains their significance for the cultural history of the city. His favourite topic is the ‘sensual’ history of the city, the history of urban noise and pollution, and the ways these were created, experienced and abated. There is some overlap with his earlier book, and some repetitions occur even within the volume under review. But despite the

⁵ See my review of Payer’s *Blick auf Wien* in ‘Anarchy and Noise: New Perspectives on the History of Fin-de-siècle Vienna’, *Central Europe* 7 (2009), 161-168.

limitations of some of his texts, aimed for a general audience, the ever-curious Payer presents a wealth of ideas and insights that few other publications on the history of modern Vienna can provide. His impressionistic–essayistic approach turns out to be a real strength, because it allows him to capture the cultural wealth and diversity of a modern city. Schorske's *Fin-de-siecle Vienna* has reached the status of a true classic, in the truest sense of the term: everyone knows it, refers to it and even praises it, but few take the time to deal with his specific arguments in detail. Despite its critics and attempts to move 'beyond Schorske', it will remain a standard reference for the foreseeable future. However, no historian of modern Vienna should ignore Payer's contributions, if only for inspiration.