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Outcast Vienna 1900: The Politics of Transgression

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Abstract
On September 17, 1911 a hunger revolt broke out in Ottakring, a proletarian suburb in northwest Vienna. But hunger and deteriorating living conditions were not the only causes of broad public unrest. The revolt was, to a greater extent, a spontaneous political articulation of a new social formation at the periphery of the metropolis composed of “old” underclasses and recently arrived migrants. Both faced miserable conditions of work, consumption, and family life, and the migrants lost their dream of a better life in the city. Mentally still rooted in the rural environments, the “lifeworlds” from which they had come, they experienced a fragmented urban topography driven by a chaotic mixture of sharp-cut urban planning and rationalization, and brutish Manchester-style capitalism. Instead of finding a new “Heimat” in the city, the new immigrants suffered from pauperization and collective estrangement. Their location in the new industrial quarters of the city brought them into misery and—in the perception of the elite—transformed them into the dangerous, amorphous “Other” of urban society. Their material poverty and cultural stigmatization allowed only a minimum of freedom and self-realization within the emerging formation of mass culture. Symbolic discrimination and economic marginality configured a specific suburban lifestyle modeled along the trajectories of assimilation and defiance, lethargy and revolt, power, impotence and emerging mass politics.

This article has a twofold objective: first, to elaborate the transformation of divergent lifeworlds and their respective representations in late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century modernity in Vienna; and second, to reread Carl Schorske’s seminal contribution in order to open up and thus illuminate modernity’s mostly marginalized “Other,” which means the dirty, dark, and disorderly proletarian suburbs, that enclosed, like an iron ring, the inner, more fashionable districts of the city. This has two more implications: to identify as formative structures the reconstruction of the city during the “Gründerzeit” (which meant a booming, late-coming liberal capitalism in the 1880s) until World War One, while in parallel deciphering the city as a “social text.” In other words, we intend an analysis of the interaction between the imaginary city existing in the minds of its inhabitants, and the city’s formative social-economic structures. Thus the focus is on outcast Vienna, the culture of the masses, their real and imaginative colonization by the center, and the simultaneous social and cultural exclusion of the urban pariah by the elite.

The Vienna of 1900 has been mythologized in recent decades. It has become a historical signifier, a highly successful trademark recognized around the world. Its posthumous success has been promoted by masterpieces of historiography.
such as Carl E. Schorske’s *Fin de Siècle Vienna*\(^1\) and Allan Janik’s and Stephen Toulmin’s *Wittgenstein’s Vienna*,\(^2\) as well as by a series of spectacular exhibitions at the Vienna Künstlerhaus, the Centre Georges Pompidou in Paris, and the Museum of Modern Art in New York.\(^3\) Nikolaus Sombart, in one example among many, has attributed to the Vienna of 1900 paradigmatic significance for the twentieth century as a whole.\(^4\) According to Sombart, central problems of modernity were articulated here more precisely and radically than elsewhere; they were perceived and conceptualized in a more intelligent and original way as they took on the form and the attitude of cultural innovations such as Arnold Schönberg’s anti-music, Karl Kraus’s linguistic criticism, Arthur Schnitzler’s fictional psychology, Wittgenstein’s dismantling of metaphysics, Ernst Mach’s empirical criticism, and Sigmund Freud’s psychoanalysis.

Vienna 1900 was indeed a peculiar and somehow solitary conglomerate of some of the most divergent yet mutually dependent social, political, and cultural developments of the time. While a liberal bourgeoisie was favoring the monarchy, democratic movements were afflicted with a traditional bureaucracy, populism was associated with Catholicism, and the late Enlightenment was occupied with the conditions of the human soul and the basic psychological conditions of the individual.

In the heart of the city, the Hofburg, the aging emperor Franz Joseph sought desperately to uphold his autocratic regime as well as the myth of the old German *Reich*. On the gorgeous newly erected Ringstrasse boulevard an economically potent bourgeoisie showcased the success of a late-coming capitalism in the form of magnificent, historicist architecture. In the lower-middle-class districts a petite bourgeoisie suspicious of modernity mourned the loss of the “Old Vienna” that had epitomized premodern contentment and clarity. In the industrial suburbs which surrounded the inner districts like an iron ring of workers’ quarters, serious housing misery, social squalor, mass immigration, and potential political upheavals gathered.

Vienna’s symbolic body was distorted in many ways. It was socially segregated and yet contradictorily homogenized by the aesthetic standards and facades of the Ringstrasse that dominated the outer appearance of the tenement blocks even in the proletarian outskirts. While the nobility had long passed the zenith of its political power, its cultural heritage dominated the fantasies and longings of a bourgeoisie still striving for social recognition. The liberal and predominantly Jewish bourgeoisie that only recently had acquired political power was almost immediately challenged (and finally defeated) by an anti-Semitic, lower-middle-class populism that proved able to combine cultural reaction and municipal modernity. At the same time, an egalitarian utopianism, promoted by progressive Jewish upper-class intellectuals, was unfolding among the masses of suburban proletarians as a reaction to the unfulfilled humanitarian promises of liberalism.

In the city’s coffeehouses and salons, writers, artists, and scientists searched for a common denominator to all these contradictions and seemed to detect it in psychoanalysis, psychophysics, expressionism, and an aesthetically sophisti-
cated nervousness. Here the late Enlightenment involved a profound skepticism as well as a radical search for the liberating potentialities of the self.5

The Vienna of 1900 was at once a laboratory of the Apocalypse and the birthplace of epoch-making modern trends and achievements. It was the place of the last of the Habsburgs as well as that of the young Adolf Hitler, and of Theodor Herzl, the founder of modern Zionism. It was the place of the patriarchal mayor Karl Lueger, who shaped modern anti-Semitism into a political mass movement, and it was the place of one of the founding fathers of democratic socialism, the Jewish poor man's doctor, psychologist and social reformer Victor Adler. It was the first metropolis in which organized anti-Semitism was able to seize power and it was to become, after the municipal franchise had been democratized, the first city with over one million inhabitants under a social-democratic administration. In Robert Musil's words, Vienna 1900 resembled a boiling blister of initiations and innovations, one gigantic beat and the eternal dissonance and cacophony of all rhythms against each other:

“No one knew exactly what was in the making; nobody could have said whether it was to be a new art, a new humanity, a new morality, or perhaps a reshuffling of society. ( . . . ) There were those who loved the overman and those who loved the underman; there were health cults and sun cults and the cults of consumptive maidens; there was enthusiasm for the hero worshipers and for the believers in the Common Man; people were devout and skeptical, naturalistic and mannered, robust and morbid; they dreamed of old tree-lined avenues in palace parks, autumnal gardens, glassy ponds, gems, hashish, disease, and demonism, but also of prairies, immense horizons, forges and rolling mills, naked wrestlers, slave uprisings, early man, and the smashing of society. These were certainly opposing and widely varying cries, but uttered in the same breath.”6

Since the 1980s a specific practice of cultural analysis and discourse on “Vienna Modern” has been established. This practice has been exclusively concerned with the culture of the elites, and has served in its popularized version as a basis for marketing Vienna to tourists. In this embellished image of Vienna in 1900 which has congealed into the icon of an innovative multiculturalism, discussion of the artistic and intellectual avant-garde dominates. The extreme disparities between the social classes and the spatial and cultural segregation that resulted, as well as the nascent anti-Semitism and populist mass politics, are mentioned, if at all, only marginally. This romanticized picture, by focusing on singularities instead of processes, thus obscures an understanding of that long-term logic that led from fin-de-siècle Vienna with the posthumously admired creativity of its assimilated Jewish community to the brutal persecution of Jews during the Nazi dictatorship.

Instead of making Carl Schorske’s perspective ever more dynamic, fin de siècle was ontologically conceptualized as the sum of its intellectual and artistic achievements, and was thus stylized into a kind of precious treasury of high culture. The everyday cultures of the suburbs, the worlds of the immigrants, prole-
tarians, and urban pariahs, were persistently ignored in high modern Viennese literature. If the suburbs were mentioned at all they came to be, according to respective ideological dispositions, either places of divergence and disorder, misery and immorality, or a terrain of utopian prospect, the forthcoming social basis of the interwar municipal experiment that was “Red Vienna.”

In light of this, a research project initiated in the mid-1990s attempted to examine the inscription of modernity into the body of the city and the differentiation of a new plateau of politics, culture, and social stratification. This differentiation, however, was preceded by a process of transgression, characterized by a mutual amplification of the most disparate levels of social, technical, and economic development. The new does not simply replace the old; it is produced out of the continuity of traditions as well as through the spatio-social and technological expansion of the city. The logic of the new is not linear but rather is defined by an array of contradictions and countercurrents: The wealth of the center stands in stark opposition to the misery of the masses in the suburbs; the identity crisis of the elites and their urban social order confronts the new “collective subjects” of emerging mass politics; the skeptical discourse of reason from the late bourgeois enlightenment contrasts with the irrational ferment of a “politics of feeling” which found expression in (German) nationalism and anti-Semitism; an aesthetically highly differentiated elite culture opposed a culture of the masses, stigmatized as profane and vulgar.

Our approach to these issues in this article was motivated by our desire to write neither an exclusively social or economic history nor an exclusively cultural history of Vienna. Rather, we were interested in investigating the “construction” of a modern metropolis characterized by its contradictions and countercurrents, and specifically with regard to the “translation” of social trajectories into cultural forms. We were interested in the interlacing of symbolic spheres and the material configuration of the city, in the linearities and contingencies of the social, in the acceleration and cessation of ways of life, and in the reification of social relations and references in specifically urban forms. This meant inquiring into what new signatures modernity had inscribed into the body of the city and what ways human perceptions and values had changed so that the metropolis could be read as a social text.

Our intention, based on the example of Vienna, has been to show that discourses (scientific, medical, criminological, etc.) as well as texts (essayistic, literary, journalistic), as a project of the symbolic representation of the city, are constitutive of a middle-class, liberal era. This project creates a dynamic relationship between center and periphery, between downtown and suburb, which places the elite culture in conflict with the popular cultures of the suburbs. It also creates new forms of social, cultural, and economic inequality and schism, which divide the city as a whole as they simultaneously amalgamate into fractured relations of exchange pervaded by a kind of hegemony. The tense and conflict-laden interaction between division and homogeneity initiates a social dynamic characteristic of the development of early forms of mass culture. The distance between the popular and the elite transferred through the historical memory of
the lower classes, the concomitant instances of resistance in suburban life, and the continued existence or transformation of contradictory subcultures, permeate the politics of order expressed by the middle-class representation of the city. They create counter- and cross-movements and undermine the all-pervading enforcement of this hegemony of the center. The subcultures, acting as the “Other” to the middle-class representation and symbolization of the city, remain present in their contingency and indistinctiveness as dissonant voices in the public sphere. It is their ambiguity, their blatant lack of discipline and their alleged “barbarism,” their existence in opposition to middle-class notions of progress and civilization, that allows them to be seen from that middle-class point of view as course, crude, and indeed amorphous. Such a view denies them both a respectable origin and a rational future, which is to say they have no future at all. And yet, their lack of a history does not only imply powerlessness and unconditional submission to their circumstances, but also represents a barrier against their entire symbolic subjugation and “inner-colonial” domination. They can be read as the picture puzzle of modernity and the modern city, or, in a conventional sense, as invisible modernity.

The enforcement of the hegemony of the center by scientific, executive, medical, and educational means is not opposed by a passive object at its disposal, but rather its constitutive “Other,” a culture of resistance that derives from the long, historical memory of urban lower classes which serves to undermine the elites’ agenda. In this resistance, which is perceived by the middle classes as a sheer lack of discipline or as social deviance—the “Other” of civilization—what is articulated is not only an aimless obstinacy arising from misery, but rather a life-worldly orientation which looks for the best in the worst and resists the daily experience of complete economic and symbolic subjugation. Counter-directional vectors of mass culture and mass politics developed out of the contrast between elite and popular cultures in cities in which the majority of the population was not able to enjoy the benefits of material progress and middle-class culture. These vectors were to mark decisively the fate of Vienna in the twentieth century.

The suburbs and outskirts had always been present as a central trope of a popular discourse about the essence of Viennese nature. They had been present in traditional popular songs (Wienerlied) and above all in an oral canon of legends and myths. There were rumors about extensive and violent hunger revolts, about a dissipated, lustful joie de vivre even under the most miserable living conditions, about frightening and simultaneously idolized juvenile gangs, about grand gangsters or small-time crooks posing as social rebels, supported without reservation by their local neighborhoods. There are numerous reports of the legendary lower-class soirées of the washer-girls, the so-called “Freakers’ balls” (Lumpenbälle), notorious orgiastic feasts at run-down pubs and low dives. And we are told about self-contained territories of insubordination, which were not to be disciplined by any regime.

To decipher and decode these popular myths or, to be more precise, to decipher their marginalization by contemporary as well as retrospective elitist cul-
tural discourses, turns out to be an intriguing perspective. This becomes even more fascinating if we take into account one specific feature of Vienna’s urban form; poverty and social squalor is, and always has been, hidden behind a facade of impressive beauty that suggests a homogenous urban body inspired by the classical architectural standards of the Ringstrasse. Judged from their outward appearance, the proletarian tenement blocks of the suburbs were (and are) indeed magnificent buildings, in some cases hardly second to the famous palaces along the Ringstrasse. Thus they did not constitute an obvious contrast with the center, but rather obscured a characteristic double-folded social and spatial segregation. Vienna’s topography unfolded along a concentric pattern by which inner and outer suburbs were clustered around the center according to their respective social status. The actual demarcations were not defined as clearly by architectural or aesthetic differences, but by the social signification of urban territories. Cultural practices, as much as material urban forms, served to locate different social classes and determine the divergent perceptions and appropriations of the urban terrain as well as the extent of communication or separation between these classes.

Against this background it seems promising to focus on the outskirts of Vienna 1900. The “Other” of suburban culture manifests itself in the popular landscapes of pleasure (such as the Prater or the Neulerchenfeld), in beer gardens, saloons, and other sites of indulgence. It becomes manifest in the urban no-man’s-land of small crime, gangs, and prostitution—a no-man’s-land that does not only signify social and cultural deviance but indeed is part of a more comprehensive spectrum of life in suburbia. This spectrum combines miserable living conditions with strategies of material and ideal survival, industrial and disciplined work with punctual, short-lived diversions, and rebelliously veiled criminality with politically articulated insubordination. The tensions inscribed in the town’s body between high and popular culture, hegemony and social difference, its mass identity prescribed, and the disobedience of these very masses, are key to developing an understanding of the modern metropolis. To decipher these concepts means attempting to read the metropolis as a social text.

In approaching the literary artifacts of high Viennese modernism as a starting point for such a reading, it soon becomes clear that the misery and scantiness of proletarian, suburban life is neither noticed nor reflected upon, very much in contrast to the literary production in comparable modern metropolises. In this respect Arthur Schnitzler’s Traumnovelle can be taken as a paradigm. The protagonist undertakes a nightly, mysterious trip to a noble villa situated in the outskirts of the city where members of the nobility meet in masks for erotic trysts. The track of his coach leads along the Alserstrasse next to the center and heads for an elegant villa at the edge of the forest. Between these there is a terra incognita: the proletarian quarter of Ottakring. Schnitzler comments on Ottakring with only one laconic sentence: “They drove along the Alserstrasse, then underneath a viaduct towards the suburbs and on through badly-lit small side-lanes.”
We can detect from Schnitzler’s fictions of the urban—and this is the case with an overwhelming majority of his contemporary writers—an urban segregation of territories intimate and territories forbidden. The mental maps underlying those fictions seem to have constituted an *imaginaire* of the urban that was not only characteristic for the authors but for middle-class patterns of perception as a whole. The other Vienna of the poor and downgraded proletarians, day laborers, servants, and outcasts was obviously beyond that perception and removed from the world it created. Notions oriented along the standards of courtly and bourgeois culture definitively excluded the suburbs from city life, constructing them merely as places best avoided: places of crime, indecency, deviance, and unpredictability. It was left to the new genre of urban reportage by figures such as Emil Kläger or Max Winter to record the details of outcast Vienna, thus introducing it to public awareness.

In those records, or in the literary artifacts of writers for whom the outskirts formed the background of a personal experience as a migrant or social outsider, the magnificent Middle European metropolis is portrayed as a broken and distorted urban space. Ivan Cankar, now generally deemed the founder of modern Slovenian literature, lived in Ottakring during the first decade of the twentieth century. This bohemian and boozer without means found accommodation at the flat of a seamstress, and made his suburban everyday experience the substance of his novels and short stories. We could not conceive of a greater contrast than that of Cankar’s world to the splendor and shine of the inner city. Cankar’s suburbia is a world of darkness and dirt, a dungeon that cannot be escaped from, as depicted in his 1900 short story *Mimi*:

“The heavenly sun never shines here. There is smoke from the industrial plants around the roofs and if you stroll along the lanes soot will fall into your face. The tenement blocks are high and boring; the people you meet are badly dressed, with hollow cheeks, their glances expressing discontent. This dreary suburb is extending over a huge area, no end to the east, no end to the west. I knew a man with a gray beard and a crooked back that had not once in his life reached the end of that seemingly endless street that leads into a world more lucid. The suburbs are a gigantic penitentiary; not one single free man does live there. Every now and then I was reflecting on what crimes these prisoners had committed. One morning I was crossing that street and watched them coming up in long rows, with heavy, tired steps and sleepy eyes; I thought I could hear iron chains jangling under their clothes. They got lost in large, gray buildings without windows, and the doors were closing heavily behind them . . .”

Cankar’s emphatic and personally affected view is paralleled very specifically by the social text inscribed onto suburbia by the medical, distanced, objectified diagnosis of the municipal government. Thus expressed, the instrumentality of the Modern reveals a total archeology of desperate housing and living conditions, social deviance, and pathology. Victor Adler first directed, in a very spectacular
way, attention to those conditions. In December 1888 Adler published the results of hidden inquiries he had undertaken at the grounds of the Wienerberger brickworks.13 The series of articles under the title The Situation of the Brick Layers in his weekly Gleichheit came as a sensation and a scandal. It disclosed a genuine glance into a hitherto inconceivable social abyss and revealed a counter-world: the hidden, filthy, other side of the fin de siècle coin, the ousted, repressed, forgotten “Other” of a widely praised metropolis, a world of exploitation, estrangement, and dulling apathy.

Adler reported on the “poorest slaves the sun has ever shed its light upon.” Tied to a complex system of hierarchies and dependencies, bricklayers were totally subject to the Company and a carefully conceived truck system. Their wages, scandalously low to begin with, were not paid in “normal money” but given out in the form of metal coupons. These coupons were accepted as a means of payment exclusively by the canteen keepers of the Company. The quality of the goods offered was poor, the prices excessively high, and each worker was assigned to one of the canteen keepers as an object of exploitation. “Well aware of his power”, Adler wrote, “such a keeper responded to a complaining worker: ‘Even if I was going to shit into your dishes you ought to eat it up.’ And the guy is right, they would have to.”

While the workers were forbidden to purchase anything outside the works premises, they were nonetheless allowed to beg. Adler writes about hordes of people who would flock to the nearby Inzersdorfer cannery every evening, scrounging for waste products. Whoever could arrange it undertook a one-and-a-half hour’s walk to get hold of one of the eighty portions of vegetable soup the hangman of Vienna distributed daily: “There is more mercy with the hangman than with the Company and its paid slave-drivers.”

As if this weren’t enough, the bricklayers were forced to live on the company’s premises. In every single room of the workers’ houses up to ten families lived, “men, women, children wildly mixed up.” There were so-called sleeping halls for others where fifty to seventy persons would be herded together on old straw, body next to body. In one of these halls a woman gave birth to her child “in the presence of fifty half-naked, dirty men. We should not talk about modesty, however, as this is luxury reserved for property owners only. The life of a mother is actually threatened under those circumstances. But who cares about a poor broad.” The main factory grounds at the Laerberg were even more distinguished in that respect. Whole bunches of mainly single workers had to sleep on top of the huge industrial brick ovens, partly exposed to the night freeze, partly almost burnt from below, and covered only meagerly by filthy rags. The prisoners in Siberia, Adler summed up, were better off than these poor sods whose only crime was to work for the profits of the Company.

Adler’s sensational revelations led to an epilogue in Parliament without any consequences, while his journal Die Gleichheit was confiscated and Adler himself was fined for non-licensed distribution of a periodical. Yet he was to produce further sensational pieces of investigative journalism. For his most important
one, an April 1889 article on the living and working conditions of the tramway drivers, he was sentenced to four months’ imprisonment.¹⁴

In spite of these revealing indicators it would be misleading to regard the urban periphery and the suburbs only as zones of enduring misery or as mere function of the new and rigid industrial paradigm of production. Such a view would ignore essential dimensions of the social and cultural configurations of these areas. The following two scenarios present suburban environments as emblematic examples of social contradiction and cultural antagonism.

On September 17, 1911 a hunger revolt took place in the proletarian district of Ottakring. Entire quarters and most houses, windows, and streetlamps were damaged. A state of emergency was proclaimed, barricades were erected, streetcars were burned, and street fights with rapidly deployed army units took place. Young men and women, central agents of this revolt, seized and devastated school buildings and set fire to books and papers. For the first time since the revolutionary upheavals of 1848 army units fired on the civilian population, killing four, and the sub-proletariat looted shops and pubs. The young Austro-Marxist librarian of Parliament, Karl Renner, who later became chancellor and president of the Austrian Republic, stated that the most desperate, alienated, and seedy people had left their homes to demonstrate and thereby to protest the conditions held in place by the social order.¹⁵

The Vienna Police Department stated in its report that the police units were unable to stop devastation and pillage since the looters and plunderers were anywhere and nowhere and disappeared quickly when confronted by force. According to the department it would have taken all army units stationed in Vienna in order to secure public order and to control the undisciplined crowds in the streets. It took many hours to restore order due to the fact that the revolting crowds were supported and egged on by large segments of the civilian population. From windows and houses stones, glasses, iron pieces and the like were thrown at police and army units.¹⁶ On the side of the young mob, women and mothers, whose objective according to the Arbeiterzeitung should have been to think clearly and rigorously, took part in street fighting and provided the young mob with stones.¹⁷

This short day of anarchy revealed more than the harsh political economy of suburban life and more than a battle about power and the hegemony over public space. The “grotesque” character of the hunger revolt, frequently diagnosed by police and media reports, refers to a cultural articulation of difference and antagonism, and to a comprehensive uprising of crowds of marginalized suburbanites. Those crowds were not only composed of the old urban underclass but also of the many new migrants who brought with them their desire for a better life in the city—something not to be fulfilled in the contemporary urban context of devastating work and poor consumption.

These migrants had left their oral, premodern, and rural cultures of origin in order to find a new perspective and better life chances in the metropolis. Still
mentally attached to an imaginary village of the past, they searched for a home in a different urban geography that was increasingly linearly and fragmentarily configured by technology, science, and rational conduct. Pushed towards the social margins, they were unable to find a new habitat but ended up in poverty and collective alienation. The seemingly irrational and grotesque character of the hunger revolt and the anarchic strength of its violence, however, reveal an obscure, ambivalent logic and rationality of its own: A largely hopeless venture to challenge the new symbolic order of modernity, modernization, and the metropolis.18

One-and-a-half years after the hunger revolt the same crowd showed up in the same Ottakring location but expressed itself in a different way: disciplined and with dignity. But before examining this event, a small excursion into the urban development of this proletarian district is necessary. During the so-called “Grün- derzeit” in the 1860s and its capitalist restructuring, the preindustrial villages of Ottakring were turned into industrial suburbs, and a hard texture of factories, tenement blocks, traffic, and communication lines was imposed which rationalized and disciplined everyday life. At the same time, the suburb became a projection screen of power in which economic interests blended with fantasies about the alien “Other” into a fantasized double of modernity. The self-celebrating glamour of the center, the splendid facades of Ringstrasse Vienna, corresponded with the uncanny double of suburban anti-civilization and imagined threat.

The speculative building boom as well as a massive influx of migrants condensed the suburbs into zones of social and spatial density. While the facades of the hastily built tenements imitated the neo-baroque architecture of the center, their interior was characterized by pure capitalist rationality of minimal space sheltering a maximum of tenants. In his 1894 investigation of housing conditions in the Viennese suburbs, the famous Austrian social reformer Eugen von Philippovich concluded that tenants live under spatial circumstances which do not even meet the basic standards of army barracks.19

A prototypical example of the capitalist mode of suburban urban development was the so-called “Schmelz,” a former army training ground. In one of the most spectacular undertakings in Vienna’s architectural history the northern part of the Schmelz was turned into a drawing-board structure of “Americanized” urban housing characterized by standardized tenement blocks. In spite of the fact that this urban no man’s land appeared like a final disposal site of the low classes, it became the location of the largest mass demonstration ever held in Vienna. This happened on the occasion of Franz Schuhmeier’s funeral on February 16, 1913. Schuhmeier, a popular leader of the workers’ movement, had been assassinated shortly before. The social-democratic workers’ party had mobilized its already significant organizational apparatus, which covered all the suburbs, but the turnout surpassed all expectations and was to prove almost uncontrollable. Nearly half-a-million people came, literally every fourth inhabitant of Vienna. The funeral service assembled high-ranking representatives of the political, bureaucratic, military, and diplomatic elite. A large choir composed of court opera and workers’ singers intoned Franz von Suppe’s “Ruhe, Müder

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Wanderer" when the coffin was closed, and the end of the service was marked by Richard Wagner’s pilgrim chorus of “Tannhäuser.” A horse-drawn carriage and horsemen in old Spanish costume brought the corpse to its final place of rest, where ten thousands of mourners covered the grave with a sea of red carnations.

This grandiose funeral was no accident since Franz Schuhmeier was not only the most popular social democrat in Vienna at the turn of the century, but also a mass politician of the new style, an agitator as talented as he was populist and a stirring speaker, a man of the people who had risen from the poorest background into the highest levels of politics. Schuhmeier had managed like none before him to lead the politically and socially deprived of the suburbs out of their isolation to form an organized, politically aware, and thus identity-shaping mass movement. With this funeral it was not only a hero of the people who was paid homage according to tradition, the “people” in their new social organization and political expression were made a public force. The funeral thus became the exposition of a political counterculture, which opposed the dominance of the petty-bourgeois radicalism that the Christian-Social mayor Karl Lueger had two decades before formed into the dominant local political force and brought to municipal power.

Lueger’s great political achievement was the creation of an antiliberal middle-class bloc which reunited the groups that had been split following the Revolution of 1848, the petty bourgeois on the one hand and the wealthy middle classes on the other, into a clerical, antisocialist and anti-Semitic citizens’ group. Lueger was to prove to be a master of rewriting political history. He created the idea of the “true” Viennese as a new phenomenon in political life and thus gave the city its own new tradition. He contrasted the ostensibly true and real Vienna of the lower middle class with the alienation, hardship, and labor that defined the workers’ experience of modernity. Lueger created an image of Vienna as a “Vaterstadt,” an imagined community of the petite bourgeoisie. Therein he forged an image of the capital city as the paragon of a preindustrial, middle class, familial, and “evangelized” city based on authority, paternalism, patrimony, and Christian-Catholic values. Lueger recognized Schuhmeier as a worthy opponent, his congenial popular counterpart. Their clashes in the municipal council were legendary. With both, repartee, wit, sarcasm, and scorn could suddenly turn into profound enmity. But their shouting matches and invectives ended just as often in theatrical gestures of reconciliation, and in such cases Lueger especially would always allude to the “Vienna-ness” so innately a part of the both of them.

Franz Schuhmeier and Karl Lueger, both literally “children of the suburbs,” were prototypical exponents, actors and at the same time directors of a period of transition that followed the end of the liberal era in Vienna and of the reformation of political power relations. The period between 1890 and 1910 initiated the politics of the masses, reacting to the unfulfilled social promises of liberalism and at the same time signaling its end. Though social democracy, by creating a modern mass party, successfully managed to take up the unfulfilled political agenda of liberalism, it was largely excluded, on account of a municipal
electoral law in force until 1919, from any real political influence in the city. Lueger and his party of Christian Socials, however, destroyed the political power of the liberals, primarily via their municipalization projects and by building up a loyal power-base among the municipal civil servants, while leaving the social and political structures intact. Lueger enthroned the lower-middle-class citizen as the new political ruler on a local level; in place of liberal ideology his own ideas became the basis for a policy agenda.22

By contrast, Social democracy as a mass movement was restricted to proclaiming the city as the site of a different politics, a different society, and a different culture. In this way it developed the idea of a utopia of equality, one that was to take on concrete form after World War One in “Red Vienna.” Lueger, by contrast, relied on a policy of xenophobia and anti-Semitism. Instead of addressing the welfare of the city as a whole, he reinforced social tensions and divisions. His policy was one of “evangelizing” the poor and excluding those who had recently migrated to the city. If Franz Schuhmeier also played on an anti-Semitic resentment that was already deeply embedded in the attitudes of all the various social groups comprising Viennese society at the turn of the century, this remained fundamentally distinct from Lueger’s outright hatred of Jews.23

Lueger’s marginalization and defamation of Jews as a group was aimed at covering up the problems inherited from liberalism and making the social tensions it had left behind the basis for a xenophobic populism. In this way, his anti-Semitism became not only an instrument of mass mobilization but also an integral component of a new kind of political culture, one that incited the masses against the old elites, and the “integrated” populations against “outsiders.” Schuhmeier and the social democrats, by contrast, made the social tensions and contradictions their point of departure; overcoming them became the basis of their political agenda. Lueger used the “Others,” Jews and foreigners as outsiders, to satisfy symbolically the disparate interests of his clientele and thus to remain in power. The social democrats aimed at integration in order to come to power and to create, via an alliance of the working class and the assimilated intellectual Jewish community, a social order in which both would be citizens instead of outsiders, in the center instead of on the periphery.

Modernity inscribes the transformation of Viennese society of 1900 into the city as a social text. This process makes use of oral and premodern cultures even as it brings them to their end. It appropriates those aspects of modernity that can be conceived as objects of writing, science, and pedagogy, reasoning, and planning, while marginalizing the rest in two ways: first as an arbitrary past excluded from written memory, and second as an exotic construct nostalgically branded as the primordial and “pure” Viennese, timelessly popular. The latter is addressed as a mythological dimension of popular and populist politics and so forged into the foundation of Lueger’s rewriting the history of the city as well as the social democrats’ ennobling of the proletariat. This can be understood as an experiment to claim the “Other,” marginalized by modernity, as one of the central features of identity politics, in order thus to compensate for the shock of modernity and to symbolize the new society. The “Other” marginalized by and
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written into the history of modernity thus returns as a populist dimension of mass politics. It returns as a dream of cultural identity and authenticity. However differently these new forms of mass politics were articulated, in their collective dimension they reflected Robert Musil’s “common breath.”

NOTES

8. Stanley Kubrik transferred this framework to the New York of the late twentieth century for his last movie Eyes Wide Shut.
11. Max Winter, Im dunkelsten Wien. Wiener Schilderung aus der Luegerzeit (Vienna, 1925); Das goldene Wienerherz (Berlin,1905); Im unterirdischen Wien (Leipzig/Berlin,1905