



INTRODUCTION

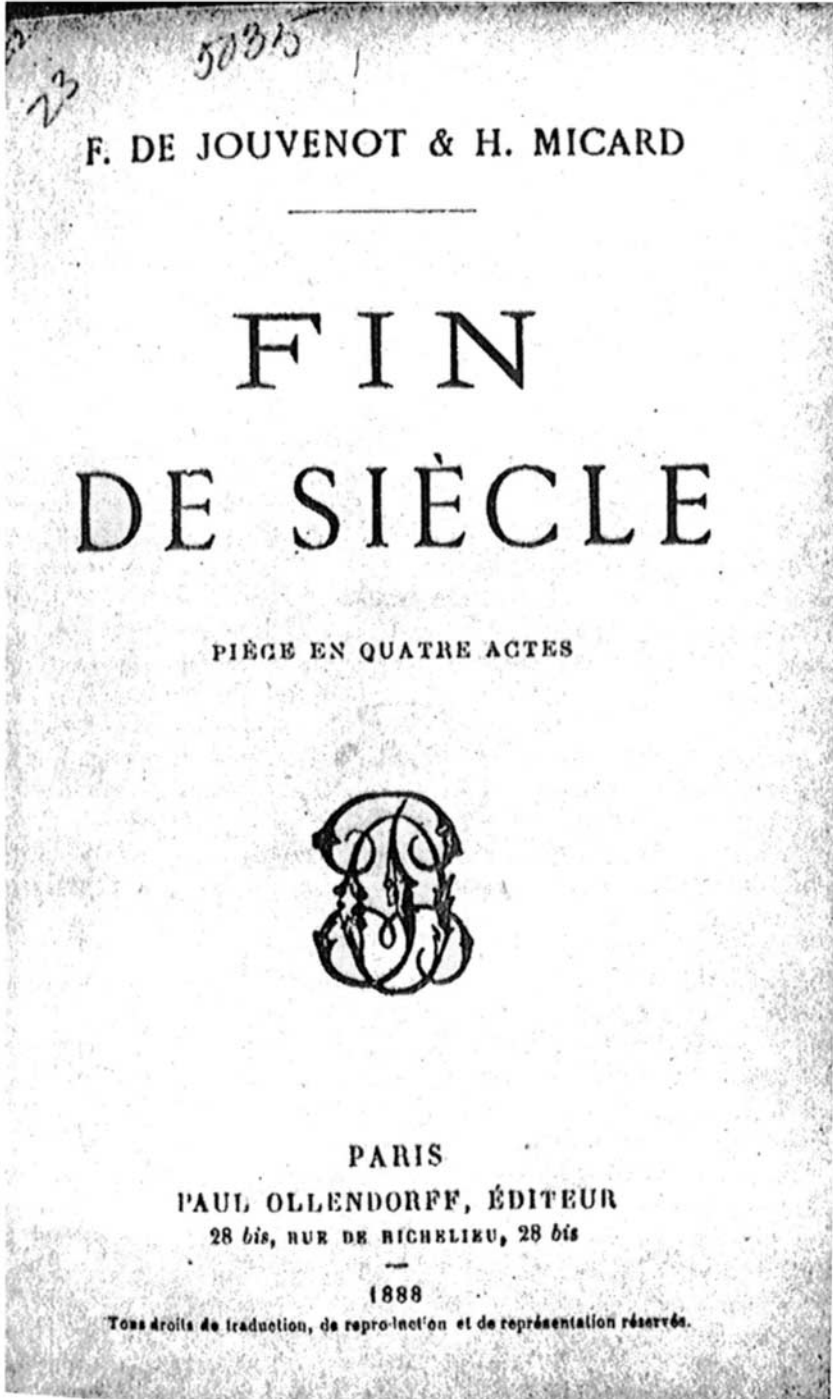
MIKULÁŠ TEICH AND ROY PORTER

It appears that the expression *fin de siècle* was launched upon the world when the play with the same title by two French authors, F. de Jouvenot and H. Micard, was performed first in Paris on 17 April 1888. Whereas the Brockhaus Encyclopaedia describes the play as a comedy, Eugene Weber in a highly informative work on *fin-de-siècle* France points out that it 'turns around shady deals, adultery and murder'.¹ The play certainly is not a comedy if by this genre is meant a dramatic work of amusing character possibly with a happy ending.² As to E. Weber's description, it is too brief to convey the message of the play though it is true that shady deals and adultery run through it ending with the murder of the main character, the corrupt and adulterous Richard Trévor. Trévor is shot by his brother-in-law Roger Bridière, who takes personal and family revenge for having been by Trévor first deluded, then falsely declared insane and put into an asylum from which he manages to escape.

The play is Schnitzleresque but badly crafted and hence miles away from the brilliant critical artistry with which Arthur Schnitzler dissected the duplicity of morals and the part it played in the bourgeois-aristocratic world of the Austrian *fin de siècle*. Nevertheless, what emerges from the French play is a chronicle of shallow and rotten morality permeating the pores of a society in which, as the broker Filagand states, 'in order to succeed, it is better to be a *canaille* than an unknown honest man'.

For decades *fin de siècle* implied a 'go to the dogs' feeling that was thought to pervade European 'civilized' society in the years around 1900. This mood of malaise certainly affected individuals and sections of aristocratic as well as bourgeois social background towards the end of the nineteenth century. Underlying it was a cocktail of lamentations for the past and fears of the future, countenancing the notion that human progress was being brought to a halt, if not to an end. This evaluation now, as we ourselves approach another turn of the century and look back, appears distinctly simplistic.

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x Title page of *Fin de Siècle: Pièce en Quatre Actes* by F. de Jouvenot and H. Micard, 1888

Indeed, there are several good reasons for treating the later years of the nineteenth century and the early years of the twentieth century as a watershed in many areas. They are the period of the rise of the giant corporation, mass production and mass consumption. They are the period of the development of generation and distribution of electrical energy, of the spread of motor vehicles and aviation. They are the period of the emergence of novel social features such as mass politics, mass media and mass sport, by way of which the body of ordinary people, denoted as 'the masses', was growing into a major participant in public affairs, popular culture and leisure activities. They are the period which engendered in the arts, literature, aesthetics and philosophy complex reactions to contemporary social reality. Last but not least they are the period which has given birth to quantum mechanics and relativity physics, when the exploration of mental processes was given fresh impulses, and the systematic study of genetical processes began. The purpose of this volume is to consider these aspects of the *fin de siècle*, broadly and interpretatively, in separate historical essays.

The *fin-de-siècle* phenomenon has, of course, received considerable attention from historians in the recent past – a testament to its appeal. On the whole treatments, however, give privileged consideration to its cultural – literary and artistic – manifestations, to the relative neglect of other elements. They also tend to concentrate on individual as well as social alienation as particularly characteristic of the *fin-de-siècle* feeling. This volume aims to break new ground by surveying in parallel a diversity of fields while taking into account their historical, social and geographical dimensions.

Perhaps the first thing to note is that most contributors acknowledge explicitly that the matters they deal with are in some way related to changes in the system of capitalism, industrial and liberal, since the close of the nineteenth century.

In the economic sphere these are associated with transition of the free market economy to one regulated and dominated by large corporations. Its business, social, organizational and technological contexts are discussed by Alice Teichova and Alfred Chandler in the first two essays. What emerges from their pages is how vital to this process was the materialization of the mass market, as its factor and outcome. Commensurate to altered scale and scope of economic activity, the mass market supplied by tolerably cheap mass-produced goods was indicative of industrialism entering a new phase by 1900.

Advancing and sustaining it were electrification and the internal combustion engine – technological developments taken up in the essays by Roman Sandgruber and Richard Overly respectively. The *fin-de-siècle* theme has largely turned into one of the relationship between culture and society in which it arises and operates. That this has become so has much to do with

Carl Schorske's influential account of politics and culture in the capital of the Habsburg Empire at the turn of the century.³ Sandgruber's contribution points to an overlooked aspect of the *fin-de-siècle* phenomenon in Austria by highlighting electrification as being just as much a part of technological, social and economic history as of cultural history. Austria is not generally thought of as a country with a long aviation past. Yet, as Overy records, in Vienna the world's first aeronautical institute was founded in 1880 and the first international air-exhibition took place in 1912. It is neither intended nor appropriate to follow here in detail what the authors say in their particular essays. Even so, in Overy's contribution there is one item regarding the social consequences of the mass-produced internal combustion engine on wheels⁴ which merits attention at this point. He believes that 'the democratization of motor-car ownership and motor transport matched the corresponding political shifts towards mass politics and greater equality'.

Behind the evolution of twentieth-century mass politics lay major social and economic changes, associated with the nineteenth-century industrialization of Europe and America and the recession known as the 'Great Depression' (1873–96). This is the starting point of Enzo Collotti's wide-ranging examination of four forms of politicization of the masses: nationalism, anti-Semitic racism, socialism and political Catholicism. He has a good deal to say on the issue of what it was that turned these movements, after 1900, into powerful forces of politics – in terms of numbers and influence. Thus with respect to nationalism Collotti identifies its wellspring with the mythos that 'Nation' and 'strong State' constitute, in effect, supra-class societal entities in which social conflict and democracy have no place. This kind of nationalism flowed not only into fascism but 'facilitated the penetration of racism into the European political world' of which the anti-Semitic variant became fateful. As to the socialist movement, Collotti stresses all its programmes 'were reacting to conditions of real exploitation, of real attempts to isolate the masses, of real opposition between classes, even when conflicts were spirited away or denied outright'. Lastly, Collotti considers political Catholicism as a move – historically strongly indebted to Leo XIII's encyclical *Rerum novarum* (1891) – brought into play in order to counteract socialism.

Underlying these movements, it is well to remember, were the political aspirations and hopes of diverse sections of the lower middle class and working class, and the new ways and means to channel them. Here is the historical connection, since the close of the nineteenth century, with the changes in the cultural life of the lower income groups of the population. They have been taking place under the pervasive impact of developments in communications of which the popular press, the cinema, radio and television are the most potent components. This problematic, encapsulated in the terms 'mass culture' and 'mass media', is dealt with in the essay by Patrick

Brantlinger. Brantlinger juxtaposes mass culture and the artistic avant-garde and sees in these two phenomena dialectical opposites, historically originating in, and bound up with, what he describes as ‘advanced capitalism between the 1880s and 1914’. Brantlinger’s unease with the negative influences of the mass media upon society is challenging when he writes: ‘The extent to which journalism, film, radio and television can or cannot promote social intelligence and democracy is perhaps the central unanswered question of modern history.’

No less challenging is that the growth of sport during the last hundred years – historically significant for its social, commercial and political repercussions – has received little attention. This development is most poignantly symbolized by the Olympic Games, first held in their modern and international form in Athens in 1896. Thus Henning Eichberg’s essay in this volume on their history, albeit a critical one, is a ‘natural’. A point made by Eichberg is that ever since Athens ‘race’ – in the sense of a contest of timed speed – has moved into the centre of the games and sporting scene where traditionally activities undertaken rather in a spirit of light-heartedness used to prevail. Part of the interest of this approach lies in the fact that Eichberg pinpoints the historically common socio-economic context in which the stopwatch emerges as the principal instrument for timing performance both in sports and production. Of no less interest are the passages which deal with those elements in the history of Olympics rooted in colonialism and racism.

It is now time to move on to four contributions looking into cultural aspects which, as mentioned, have been the main focus of *fin-de-siècle* historiography. Here it is worth referring to an observation made by Norman Stone in a perceptive review of Schorske’s book some time ago: ‘Cultural history is probably impossible to do satisfactorily because, except perhaps in architecture and the cinema, links between society and individual cannot be made clear.’⁵ Behind this sceptical position really looms the large question of precisely how the turn-of-the-century artists and writers perceived the world around them and their own place in it. There is no simple answer because society, nature, individuals – which make up the world – are complex phenomena and so are the relations between them. Yet, for all that, in the four ‘cultural’ contributions to this volume something of these links is revealed. This is an issue to which their authors are sensitive although they may differ in their approaches and concerns.

Before coming to the first of the contributions concerned with specific fields of artistic activity mention has to be made that an essay on architecture was planned but has, very much to our regret, not materialized – the prospective author was taken seriously ill while he was preparing it. But the cinema, apart from Brantlinger, receives attention from Barbara Lesák in her essay exploring the historical relationship between photography, film and the theatre.

One way of summing it up is to say – rather banally – that what united them was that they were after ‘mirroring reality’. Here, as Lesák stresses, photography and its progeny, cinematography, set new standards which eventually left the theatre behind as a social, cultural and economic force. ‘Along with photography’, wrote S. Krakauer in a major study, ‘film is the only art which leaves its raw material more or less intact.’⁶ This throws considerable light on why millions the world over have taken to them as their favourite pastimes offering unmatched accessibilities to and possibilities of interpreting reality. Indeed, in this century photography and film have become the mass art forms *par excellence*.

In contrast, a considerably lesser number of people had been reached by the visual arts, literature and music. Nevertheless, also here the situation had begun to change since the 1870s and 1880s, not least because the introduction of zincography and photography into printing made all types of illustration cheaper. Already before 1900 a market for reproductions of paintings was developing though it was hardly capable of keeping the artist’s body and soul together. ‘[He] had to sell to the wealthy’, writes Jennifer Birkett, ‘before he reached the masses.’ In probing the complexities of *fin-de-siècle* painting Birkett affirms interrelationships between the painters’ creations and their political and social ideas and ideals, including their sexist and patriarchal attitudes which she exemplifies chiefly through the works of Moreau, Redon and Rops. She also follows up the intricate passage from *fin-de-siècle* painting to the surrealist canvas and screen of the twentieth century.

Some of the themes and personalities around which Jennifer Birkett’s survey of the painting scene in *fin-de-siècle* France is organized can also be found in Alison Hennegan’s scrutiny of the literary setting in *fin-de-siècle* England. This should not be surprising in view of the then lively cultural toing and froing across the waters of what in Dover is called the English Channel and in Calais La Manche. ‘London’s sulphurous yellow fogs’, writes Hennegan, ‘acquired for French eyes a glamour as potent as any Englishman’s wistful fantasies of sinful Paris.’ This certainly was not what attracted Oscar Wilde, the key figure in Hennegan’s account, to take refuge there after his release from jail, only to die three years later (1900). Wilde emerges from her essay as a man of abiding stature – ‘of writers produced by the British Isles only Shakespeare has been more written about’ – whose imprisonment (1895) signals that ‘[i]n England the *fin de siècle* all but ends’. Hennegan points out that Wilde’s ‘trials became a very public debate on the nature of the morality of art, the relations between art and life, the social obligation of artists and the nature of society’s claims upon them . . . The examination . . . in effect put Wilde on trial for aesthetic, philosophical and moral ideas painfully elaborated over half a century by artists and writers on both sides of the Channel.’

Widely acknowledged, the subject of the social relations of music is most

controversial. In the fourth and last essay dealing with an artistic topic Fritz Weber grapples with the problem through a nuanced approach which he describes as 'a socio-historical approximation' and brings to bear on a wide range of music's specifics: compositions, composers, orchestras, conductors, tonality, instrumentation and so forth. Thus regarding 'classical' *fin-de-siècle* music he has this to say:

We do not know in detail which and how many of the new social challenges the composers of the time consciously recognized (and whether they did at all). However, we can assume that they grasped the new phenomena in society by intuition. And although music was not part of any political movement, it was – in general – 'critical': hostile to the world of money-making, of commercial, technological and scientific rationality.

But Weber stresses that this kind of music forms only a small part of *fin-de-siècle* music. Discussing other elements of *fin-de-siècle* music he discovers closer relations between them and technology, economics and other factors of social life. To take two examples: electrical bright light as a prerequisite of the revue; the revue girl as the factory girl of the theatre whose synchronized movements recall Taylor's thinking regarding the precise manner in which work in the factory is to be performed.

Finally, there are four contributions in which the authors address some historically substantive scientific issues and topics which came to the fore around 1900. Of these Erwin Hiebert's essay is on the transformation of physics often described as 'a revolution in physics', set off by the trinity of discoveries – X-rays (1895), radioactivity (1896) and the electron (1897) – which 'paved the way for the study and theoretical interpretation of radiation and spectra, atomic and molecular theory, quantum theory and relativity'. While Hiebert uses terms such as 'abrupt' or 'genuine and brisk' to characterize the transformation from 'classical' to 'new physics', he also states with respect to the latter's 'decisive anchor points' that 'most if not all . . . can be linked with components embedded in late nineteenth-century classical theory and practice'. Hiebert discounts the influence of backward-looking thinking associated with *fin-de-siècle* mentality, on the transformation of physics at the turn of the century. It took place 'in a relatively unbroken and tranquil but reformist and spirited manner'.

Hiebert broadly concentrates on 'internal' developments in physics as they affected it as a 'scientific discipline' after 1895. Anne Harrington's contribution, on the other hand, is concerned with the 'external' influence of a philosophical trend, holism, on a branch of medicine – clinical neurology. Harrington traces the holistic reaction of neurologists since the 1890s to their growing dissatisfaction with the inadequacy of mechanistic cerebral localization thinking to explain 'the simple fact that brain-damaged people can get

better over time – can regain lost speech and movement’. Beyond that she thinks that the rise of the influence of holism has to be viewed in socio-economic, cultural and geographical contexts. It was part of the

concern with the fatal loss of humanity caused by the mechanization, industrialization and super-compartmentalization of modern living. Once this is understood, one sees too how it is hardly coincidental that a so-called ‘holistic biology’ should have taken root in the German-speaking countries during a period when these elites had turned references to ‘wholeness’, ‘oneness’, the ‘whole’ . . . into slogans for their fight against the shallow individualism of modern life and their effort to reclaim the essential spiritual values of German *Kultur*.

A rarely discussed topic of *fin-de-siècle* cross-border relations is the challenge to aesthetics posed by the nineteenth-century growth of science and its institutionalization. The problem was how to reconcile aesthetic and scientific criteria regarding truth about nature which Friedrich Nietzsche, for one, viewed as incompatible with each other. This is the general term of reference of Kurt Bayertz’s essay in which he discusses ‘evolutionary aesthetics’, a theory of art variously indebted to the theory of evolution, as part of wider social history. Bayertz’s analysis involves a critical look on monistic pantheism subscribed to by Ernst Haeckel – a great name in late nineteenth-century biology – through which he erected a construct in which Evolution and Beauty co-existed peacefully. In this context Bayertz puts forward the view that Haeckel’s monistic pantheism ‘can be taken as a “philosophical *Jugendstil*” above all because it expresses conceptually the artistic practice of the *Jugendstil*’.

In the concluding essay on a scientific topic Mikuláš Teich addresses human genetics as an historiographical issue that has been neglected. In particular, he attempts to explore the hitherto overlooked methodological elements within human genetics. They grew, since the rediscovery of Mendel’s work in 1900, out of the amalgam of Weismannian and Mendelian approaches to heredity. It was this latter, Teich believes, that was at the root of validating scientifically the control of human heredity in desired racial and mental directions.

It goes without saying that such a volume as this cannot include everything that could be said on the *fin-de-siècle* phenomenon. Even so the contributions make abundantly clear that it is more complex than it appears from presentations of the subject. The issue becomes one of the evaluation of the common framework of developments in the particular spheres which the authors discuss. They can now be seen as interrelated and interacting manifestations as well as factors of a major change affecting broadly all facets of life and thought that had evolved under the conditions of industrial and liberal capitalism during the nineteenth century. The understanding of this

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process, different from anything man previously knew, carries reverberating implications for the comprehension of the tangled and turbulent transformations which the twentieth century has been passing through.

NOTES

- 1 E. Weber, *France, Fin de Siècle* (Cambridge, Mass. and London, 1986), p. 10.
- 2 *Oxford Dictionary of Current English*, repr. (Oxford, 1985); *Brockhaus Enzyklopaedie* (Wiesbaden, 1968), vol. VI, pp. 266–7.
- 3 C. E. Schorske, *Fin-de-siècle Vienna: Politics and Culture*, repr. (Cambridge, 1985).
- 4 This expressive term appears in the title of J. B. Rae's article 'The internal-combustion engine on wheels', in M. Kranzberg and C. W. Pursell, Jr (eds.), *Technology in Western Civilization* (New York, 1967), vol. II, pp. 119–37.
- 5 See N. Stone, 'Depression over Austria', *The Times Literary Supplement*, 16 May 1980, 545–6.
- 6 S. Krakauer, *Nature of Film: The Redemption of Physical Reality* (London, 1961), p. x.

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ONE



A LEGACY OF *FIN-DE-SIÈCLE*
 CAPITALISM: THE GIANT COMPANY

ALICE TEICHOVA

I

As the end of the twentieth century is approaching giant companies spreading their business interests all over the world and operating in a global market are a legacy of the growth in the size of enterprises set in motion at the end of the last century and the early years of this one.

Fortune's annual compilation of the fifty biggest industrial companies shows that in 1987 they employed 8.8 million people, more than the population of Sweden; their sales totalled \$1.5 trillion and their profits \$56 billion, involving sums greater than the national income of many an industrial state. At the head of this roll-call of industrial giants have been producers of cars, oil and chemicals – General Motors, Royal Dutch/Shell, Exxon, Ford, Toyota, DuPont, Unilever – year after year roughly in the same order. Close on their heels follow electronics companies which, in the 1980s, advanced into the list of the 'Top 50'. Of these fifty companies, twenty were domiciled in the USA, twenty were West European-based and eight were Japanese. 'These companies set the styles, invest the money, build the plants – sometimes altering the economies and ecologies of vast regions.'¹ When one surveys the world's leading companies since the 1960s, the rising impact of science-based technology in their international production programmes embracing atomic energy, microelectronics and genetic engineering is striking² and is, at the same time, part of a development in our age which can be called the scientific-technical revolution.³

In this context practically insurmountable difficulties appear at the present time by the demands to fulfil the aims of the much propagated 'enterprise culture' destined to revive the 'competitive spirit' in entrepreneurship which is expected to make the Western capitalist economy even more prosperous. However, the historical reality of contemporary capitalism, far from giving a multitude of independent entrepreneurs a chance of competing in the market to satisfy consumers, confers advantages on the strongest, most forceful