

Introduction

‘*Fin-de-siècle*’ Vienna and the Jewish question

In 1948 Hermann Broch produced one of the great interpretative essays on modern culture, *Hofmannsthal und seine Zeit*.¹ In this study he identified the city of Vienna as the centre of what he termed the *Wertvakuum*.² As such Broch was one of the first to see Vienna as the source of the problems and attitudes which have characterized the modern world. At the time he wrote Vienna was widely regarded as more or less a cultural backwater. It was only with the articles of Carl Schorske from the early 1960s on that the idea of Vienna as a major, if not the major, cultural centre in Europe around 1900 emerged.³

Since then interest in what has come to be known as *fin-de-siècle* Vienna has reached remarkable heights. Whereas once the art of Klimt and the music of Mahler were largely ignored, their popularity is now almost commonplace. Conferences and exhibitions on the cultural history of Vienna around 1900 abound; the literature on the same subject has increased exponentially.⁴ Vienna is talked about as if everything that we do

¹ This essay is reproduced in Herman Broch, *Schriften zur Literatur* 1, ed. P. M. Lützeler (Frankfurt-on-Main 1975) pp.111–284. (This is vol. 9, part 1 of the annotated edition of Broch's work.) There is an English translation by Michael Steinberg, *Hugo von Hofmannsthal and his Times: the European Imagination 1860–1920* (Chicago 1984).

² Broch, *Hofmannsthal und seine Zeit*, pp.135ff.

³ Schorske's first article to appear on this subject was 'Politics and the Psyche in *Fin-de-Siècle* Vienna: Schnitzler and Hofmannsthal' in *American Historical Review* vol. 66 (July 1961) pp. 930–46. Among the major works on the subject which have appeared since then are: Ilsa Barea, *Vienna* (London 1966); Frank Field, *The Last Days of Mankind* (London 1967); William M. Johnston, *The Austrian Mind: an Intellectual and Social History 1848–1938* (Berkeley 1972); Allan Janik and Stephen Toulmin, *Wittgenstein's Vienna* (New York 1973); William McGrath, *Dionysian Art and Populist Politics in Austria* (New Haven 1974); Peter Vergo, *Art in Vienna 1898–1918* (London 1975); Frederic Morton, *A Nervous Splendour: Vienna 1888–9* (London 1979); Carl E. Schorske, *Fin-de-Siècle Vienna: Politics and Culture* (London 1980); Michael Pollak, *Vienne 1900: Une identité blessée* (Paris 1984); *The Viennese Enlightenment*, ed. Mark Francis (Beckenham, Kent 1985); Kirk Varnedoe, *Vienna 1900: Art, Architecture and Design* (New York 1986); and Hilde Spiel, *Vienna's Golden Autumn* (London 1987).

⁴ There have been at least five major exhibitions on the arts in Vienna in the last few years. In 1983 there was *Vienna 1900* in Edinburgh, in 1984 *Le arti a Vienna* in Venice, in 1985

and think somehow originated in that one city between the years 1867 and 1938.

There are many reservations to be expressed about the idea of Vienna as the birthplace of the modern world. If one looks at what was happening in Europe and the United States of America at the turn of the century, then it becomes fairly clear that there was a cultural explosion in many centres, and that, therefore, it appears a large exaggeration to claim that Vienna was anything more than *one* of several centres which were creating the new culture. It is, for instance, very difficult to see how Vienna was any more important than Paris in a whole host of cultural disciplines.⁵ Similarly, the modern world is unthinkable without Darwin, Nietzsche or Einstein. Weberian sociology, Max Planck's quantum theory, the novels of Tolstoy and Dostoevsky, Munch's art, Marinetti's Futurism, New York's skyscrapers – all are a part of the modern age and none of them have much to do with Vienna. The emergence of 'the modern world' was a Europe-wide, even world-wide phenomenon of the turn of the century, and it would seem to require an unwarranted parochialism to put Vienna at the centre of it all.

It might be argued that cultural movements in other cities, such as French art and music, were not as 'modern' as the Viennese. In that case one would have to ask, how does one define 'modern'? When Schorske, for instance, talks of Vienna as the origin of the concept of 'psychological man', which in turn he claims to be the denominator of 'modern', such claims are open to doubt and refutation.⁶ What about Charcot, Bourget or Proust? And why should 'psychological man' be the ruling concept of our world? What about the claims of a concept such as George Steiner's 'language turn', or, indeed, Broch's idea of the 'value vacuum'?⁷ These

Traum und Wirklichkeit: Wien 1870-1930 in Vienna itself, in 1986 *Vienne 1880-1938: l'apocalypse joyeuse* in Paris, and in the same year, *Vienna 1900: Art, Architecture and Design* in New York. Two 1985 conferences have since had their proceedings published: see Alfred Pfabigan, ed., *Ornament und Askese im Zeitgeist des Wien der Jahrhundertwende* (Vienna 1985), and P. Berner, E. Brix and W. Mantl, eds., *Wien um 1900: Aufbruch in die Moderne* (Vienna 1986). The latest major conference on the subject was held in the University of London in September 1985 on *The Habsburg Monarchy in Transition 1890-1914: Decay and Innovation*.

⁵ For claims of Vienna's central place in cultural innovation around 1900, see Norman Stone, *Europe Transformed 1878-1919* (Glasgow 1983) pp.406-7; Johnston, *The Austrian Mind*; Schorske, *Fin-de-Siècle Vienna*, p.xviii. It should be added that these authors are more guarded in print about Vienna's pre-eminence than the current vogue for Vienna might suggest. For the opposite view see Peter Gay, *Freud, Jews and Other Germans* (Oxford 1978) pp.33-5.

⁶ For Schorske's claim, see *Fin-de-Siècle Vienna*, pp.4-5.

⁷ George Steiner, 'Le langage et l'inhumain' in *Revue d'esthétique*, new series, no. 9, 1985: *Vienne 1880-1938* (Toulouse 1985) pp.65-6. The article was originally given as a lecture at the conference *Vienne 1880-1938: Fin de Siècle et Modernisme*, at the Georges Pompidou Centre, Paris on 10 October 1984.

are but two of the many attempts to characterize the modern world. Indeed there are so many contradictory definitions of 'modern' that the usefulness of the word is questionable; the current popularity of the term 'post-modernism' only adds insult to injury.

On the other hand, there can be little doubt that there is something to the idea of Vienna being so significant to our culture, to the modern world. When we look at the list of major cultural figures who were in and around Vienna from roughly 1890 until 1938 it must be clear to anyone that Vienna did make an immense contribution to European intellectual and cultural history at that time.⁸ What perhaps leads historians to overvalue Vienna's importance is the fact that whereas Paris has, for the last two hundred years at least, been the leading cultural centre in Europe, for a time it was rivalled for that position by Vienna, a city never before, nor since, known for its intellectual brilliance, except in the realm of music. Is it not the exceptional nature of Vienna's cultural importance at the turn of the century that is the topic which should actually be under discussion? It is not so much that Vienna was, dubiously, the source of modernity in 1900, but rather that in 1900 and until the 1930s it was a major centre of intellectual and cultural thought which should most intrigue the cultural historian.

Current explanations of why Vienna was the birthplace of the modern world do provide some sort of an answer to this rather different, alternative approach to Vienna around 1900. The leading theory is, at the moment, that of Carl Schorske. Put briefly, his explanation of Vienna's seminal rôle in modern culture hinges on the idea that Vienna was the first place in Europe where bourgeois rationalism met its demise, and that therefore the figures of that culture were in a better position to express the problems of the forthcoming age. Schorske claims that Vienna's liberal bourgeoisie found in the city an aristocratic and amoral *Gefühlkultur* which contradicted their moral-scientific liberalism (a northern Protestant approach) and was never successfully overcome by them. To an extent uncommon elsewhere in Europe, the bourgeoisie ended up imitating the aristocracy, not vice versa. When, therefore, in the 1890s this bourgeoisie was alienated from power by the success of Lueger's 'politics of the new key', its sons retreated into the aesthetic temple of art for which their parents had schooled them in their imitation of the aristocratic lifestyle. Hence 'the Austrian aesthetes were alienated not *from* their class, but *with* it, from a society that defeated its expectations and rejected its values'.⁹

⁸ Such a list would include: Sigmund Freud, Ludwig Wittgenstein, Mahler, Schoenberg, Klimt, Schiele, Otto Wagner, Adolf Loos, Ernst Mach, Ludwig Boltzmann, Kurt Gödel, the Austrian School of Economics, the Vienna Circle of Logical Positivists, Karl Popper, Hans Kelsen, Karl Kraus, Schnitzler, Hofmannsthal, Broch, Musil, to name but a few.

⁹ Schorske, *Fin-de-siècle Vienna*, p.304; for the general argument *Ibid.* pp.5–10, 302–11.

This Schorskean approach has one very attractive feature. In its use of political and social determinants of cultural attitudes, it allows, or seems to allow, for easy comparisons and integration with the general European experience of the time. The universal applicability of terms such as ‘liberal’ and ‘bourgeois’ promises a similarly universal explanation for the emergence of ‘modernity’ in Europe. Schorske himself suggests this universal aspect when he states that his model for Vienna 1900 is the United States of America 1950.¹⁰

If, however, we come down from the level of universality and look at the specific case of Vienna around 1900, we begin to see that the advantages of generality offered by terms such as ‘liberal bourgeoisie’ are countered by the most awkward sort of particular facts. As will be discussed in more detail later, Vienna had a rather odd ‘liberal bourgeoisie’. The reason for the political collapse of liberalism in 1895, as John Boyer has shown, was that large parts of what should have been the ‘liberal bourgeoisie’ were actually voting for the other side, for the antisemitic Christian Socials.¹¹ This complication, which boils down to the fact that the applicability of the term ‘liberal bourgeoisie’ is limited by the specific Viennese context, is closely connected to another aspect of Vienna’s cultural life around 1900 which is in many respects the most troubling of all for those seeking a universally applicable scheme of cultural development. That is the fact that a very large number, indeed most, of the best known names in Viennese *fin-de-siècle* culture, with the exception of art and architecture, are of people of Jewish descent.

Whether it be Freud, Schoenberg, Schnitzler or Wittgenstein, the number of individuals at the top level of Viennese culture – or rather that type of culture for which Vienna is today so famous – who are of at least partly Jewish descent is so large that it cannot be ignored. The answer to this problem from those who take the Schorskean approach is usually to claim that the Jewish element in Vienna, regardless of its size, was irrelevant to the general cultural history. This is so, they argue, because, though of Jewish descent, these figures were assimilated and thus just like any others in the liberal bourgeoisie in Vienna, not all of whom could have been Jewish. A further implication is that the Jewish element has been in any case exaggerated, and that, for instance, Lueger was not so important for his antisemitism, as for his rôle of harbinger of a new political style.¹² In other words, the flowering of Viennese culture at the turn of the century was the response of a class rather than primarily that of a religious or ethnic minority.

¹⁰ *Ibid.* pp.xxiii–xv.

¹¹ John W. Boyer, *Political Radicalism in Late Imperial Vienna* (Chicago 1981) pp.307–57.

¹² Schorske, *Fin-de-Siècle Vienna*, pp.133–46.

Schorske has thus made the following statements: 'The failure to acquire a monopoly of power left the bourgeois always something of an outsider, seeking integration with the aristocracy. The numerous and prosperous Jewish element in Vienna, with its strong assimilationist thrust, only strengthened this trend.'¹³ Then again, when discussing Herzl: 'Assimilation through culture as a second stage in Jewish assimilation was but a special case of the middle-class phaseology [sic!] of upward mobility from economic to intellectual vocations.'¹⁴ To be fair, when it comes to Freud, Schorske does recognize some sort of effect from antisemitism and Jewish consciousness, but generally in his collection of essays he is at pains to dismiss the Jewish question in Viennese culture as a marginal one and largely irrelevant. In this he is followed by the bulk of present researchers in the field, the latest being Mark Francis with a stereotypical refutation of any Jewish aspect at all.¹⁵

The considerations behind such an approach are, in many respects, praiseworthy. After all, it was the dearest wish of most of the Viennese Jewish bourgeoisie themselves that they should not be treated as Jews. Is it not vaguely racist, one might ask, to insist on some kind of Jewish influence, picking the Jews out for special attention? Is this not what the Nazis did? There is also the feeling that the Jewish question is just too sensitive an issue with which to deal. And it is very awkward to deal with particular ethnic problems when what appears to be needed is a universal explanation of culture. Yet it is, as people such as William Johnston and Allan Janik have recognized, so plain that Jews played an immense rôle in the cultural life of Vienna that the subject, as Ivar Oxaal among others has insisted, is still of great relevance.¹⁶

The Schorskean approach to the culture of *fin-de-siècle* Vienna is not the only one. There is a long tradition, kept alive today by people such as George Steiner, that Viennese modern culture was essentially a product of

¹³ *Ibid.* p.7.¹⁴ *Ibid.* p.149.

¹⁵ On Freud, see Schorske, *Fin-de-Siècle Vienna*, pp.181–207; various works have dismissed any Jewish aspect of their subject: W. W. Bartley III attempts to do this in his biography, *Wittgenstein* (Philadelphia 1973) pp.65–6; William J. McGrath avoids the subject in discussing the background of Victor Adler and his circle in *Dionysian Art and Populist Politics*, p.6; for the same attitude in the parallel case of Germany, see Peter Gay, 'Encounter with Modernism: German Jews in German Culture 1888–1914' in *Midstream*, February 1975, vol. xxi, no.2, pp.23–65. Another version of the same essay appears as 'Encounter with Modernism: German Jews in Wilhelminian Culture' in Gay, *Freud, Jews and Other Germans*, pp.93–168. Also Francis, *The Viennese Enlightenment*, p.8.

¹⁶ Johnston, *The Austrian Mind*, pp.23–9; Allan Janik, 'Creative Milieux: the Case of Vienna' in Janik, *How not to Interpret a Culture* (Bergen 1986) p.117: for the most sensible discussion of the methodological problems raised by this question, see Ivar Oxaal, *The Jews of Pre-1914 Vienna: Two working Papers* (Hull 1981) pp.1–53. See also I. Oxaal, M. Pollak and G. Botz, eds., *Jews, Antisemitism and Culture in Vienna* (London 1987) which contains the latest research on the subject.

the Jewish bourgeoisie.¹⁷ The most humorous account of the overwhelming importance of the Jews in Vienna was Hugo Bettauer's cutting, but all too perceptive, description of what Vienna would be without the Jews, *Die Stadt ohne Juden* (1922). In this prophetic novel Bettauer envisaged what would happen if the antisemitic government of Austria were to expel all its Jews, including converts (who could not be trusted). Socially and economically everything falls apart. The banks have to be taken over by foreigners, the politicians have no ready scapegoat, the high-fashion shops cannot sell anymore for it was Jewish women who led fashion. Instead, prophesied Bettauer, the fashion shops go over to selling *Loden* clothes to suit the now peasant population of the city. The most elegant spas go out of business, as do other forms of therapy such as the prostitutes and the 'süße Mädels' of the suburbs. The only people really happy with the situation are the socialist workers who have their Jewish leadership taken from around their necks.¹⁸

Culturally Bettauer made some remarkably perceptive points, considering he was writing in 1922 and not in 1988. In the cultural world, he said, the theatres were abysmal, because all the talent had gone, except that is for the opera, which maintained its high standard. The operetta world disappeared, because there were no Jews to write the music and the libretti. The central coffee-houses of Vienna were deserted, for only Jews had had the impetus to go there and get involved in the circles of the coffee-house intellectuals. The rest were quite happy to visit their local, whether it be a Heuriger or a coffee-house. The arts were not patronized. As an old antisemite says: 'Vienna is stagnant without the Jews.'¹⁹

Bettauer was making a polemical point rather than a serious prophecy; nevertheless, for anyone who has been to Vienna in the 1980s, there are remarkable similarities between what Bettauer foresaw and what the present city is like, even though he got it wrong economically, and exaggerated the cultural decline. Certainly his views on the cultural rôle of Jews were confirmed by a whole host of contemporary witnesses such as the novelist Jakob Wassermann, the architect Paul Engelmann, Stefan Zweig, Julius Braunthal, Käthe Leichter and Ernst Lothar; George Clare is but the latest witness of the period to stress a specifically Jewish definition of the social base of Viennese culture.²⁰

¹⁷ Steiner, *Le langage et l'inhumain*, pp.67-9.

¹⁸ Hugo Bettauer, *Die Stadt ohne Juden* (Vienna 1922, repr. 1980) pp.37-46, 75, 113-14.

¹⁹ 'Wein versumpert ohne Juden.' *Ibid.* pp.71-2, 81-2, 113-4.

²⁰ For instance, Jakob Wassermann, *My life as German and Jew* (London 1934) pp.144-5; Paul Engelmann, *Letters from Wittgenstein; with a Memoir* (Oxford 1967) p.119; Stefan Zweig, *Die Welt von Gestern* (Frankfurt-on-Main 1944, repr. 1982) pp.37-8; Julius Braunthal, *Auf der Suche nach dem Millennium* (Vienna 1964) pp.20-1; Käthe Leichter: *Leben und Werk*, ed. Herbert Steiner (Vienna 1973) p.238; Ernst Lothar, *Der Engel mit der Posaune* (Salzburg 1947) p.644; George Clare, speech at the Austrian Institute, Paris, on 27 March 1985.

Often such witnesses will state that there was no particularly Jewish character to the culture that Jews in Vienna produced, and in this respect their evidence does not contradict the Schorskean approach.²¹ Yet, in their insistence on the idea of a *Jewish*, as opposed to merely liberal, bourgeoisie, these witnesses contradict Schorske's basic assumption: that the Jews can be subsumed in the bourgeoisie at large. As far as these people are concerned, there was either no other bourgeoisie, or it played no rôle in modern culture, or, to put it more judiciously, anyone who was not Jewish in the culture had to go to the Jews to find support. As Stefan Zweig put it: 'whoever wished to put through something in Vienna, or came to Vienna as a guest from abroad and sought appreciation as well as an audience, was dependent on the Jewish bourgeoisie'.²² These witnesses seem to be saying that, despite a total assimilation, or rather because of it, Jews were the people who dominated the cultural life of Vienna, and, as a *Jewish* bourgeoisie, influenced it – though in what way they rarely say. Instead of putting the Jewish component to one side, as Schorske does, as *merely* a special case in a general Viennese phenomenon, these contemporary reports suggest that the reverse is the case, that any non-Jewish bourgeois contribution is the exception, rather than the rule, that the Jews were so dominant in this class that they merit special attention on their own. The impression given is that, while others played a part, the cultural flowering in Vienna was an essentially *Jewish* phenomenon.

The aim of this study is to clarify this question about the Jewish influence *on* Viennese culture and *in* Viennese culture. The aim is to see the Jewish question in the light of the work done over the last few years on Viennese culture as a whole, and to reach some kind of understanding about how the Jewishness of many of the main figures can be set in the context of the cultural movements. In other words it is an attempt to test the Schorskean approach against the tradition of the Jewish dominance of Viennese culture, and from the result, suggest ways in which the Jewish question and the history of the culture of the Viennese *fin de siècle* should be related.

Two main aspects of the problem are studied. The first, with which section I deals, concerns the extent to which, in personal terms, the culture of *fin-de-siècle* Vienna was 'Jewish'. Section I is thus a statistical survey of the effect of the assimilation of the Jews on the personal composition of the cultural élite of Vienna and its social base in the educated, liberal bourgeoisie: in terms of numbers, how Jewish was Schorske's *fin de siècle*?

²¹ For instance, Zweig, *Die Welt von Gestern*, p.38.

²² 'Wer in Wien etwas Neues durchsetzen wollte, wer als Gast von aussen in Wien Verständnis und ein Publikum suchte, war auf die jüdische Bourgeoisie angewiesen...' *Ibid.* p.37. English quotation taken from the translation, *The World of Yesterday*, London, 1943.

This section also attempts to suggest reasons for the fact that Jews were so prominent in Vienna's modern cultural movements.

The second aspect studied is far more complicated and much less amenable to any truly empirical approach, but it is, in the end, the central question to be faced in this area: how are we to approach the thorny topic of the 'Jewish' element in Viennese culture at the turn of the century? Section II, which attempts some sort of an answer to this, does not set out to provide a definitive statement, but tries to develop a conceptual framework for looking at the social and cultural context of Vienna at the turn of the century through the eyes of the assimilated Jews in Vienna who made up such a substantial part of the cultural élite. The section tries to develop a method of looking at the notorious 'Jewish element' in the thought and work of these individuals which avoids the usual pitfalls associated with studies of the 'Jewish mind'. By concentrating on the individual experiences of the cultural élite, and only then trying to draw these isolated histories together, it is hoped that the ramifications of the Jewish heritage, and what it meant to be Jewish, are made clearer and more understandable in the Viennese context. Having thus attempted to outline the ways in which the Jewish background might indeed have been a powerful influence in various ways on much that is most important in Viennese culture, the study concludes with a summary attempt to put what has been discussed of the Jewish influence into the context of Viennese culture as a whole, and in turn put Vienna – and the Jewish influence on its culture – in the greater context of the emergence of modernism in Europe at that time.

As will soon become apparent, this study is far from being the last word on the subject of the Jewish influence in Viennese culture, nor does it wish to be seen as such. However, it is hoped that it will effectively reopen the debate on how to approach the problem, and moreover will direct that discussion along more productive paths than has hitherto been the case. Before this can be claimed, and before disappearing into the vast jungle of Jewish aspects of the life and work of the Viennese cultural élite, we first need to study the question of numbers. Before the speculation on the 'Jewish element' can begin, we need a good base of facts. The following chapter attempts to provide this.

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Excerpt

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PART I

*Jews in Viennese culture and society:
the statistical perspective*



Who was a Jew in Vienna at the turn of the century?

The object of this section is to ascertain the 'Jewish' presence in modern high culture in Vienna, and then to offer some sort of context in which that presence is understandable. This might appear straightforward enough, and indeed, for the Viennese Jewish community as a whole, the number of converts was never particularly large as a proportion of the whole; but there is the awkward fact that many of the most famous 'Jewish' figures in Vienna were either baptized at birth, or later converted; even someone such as Freud was certainly not a religious Jew, and hence, by one definition, not Jewish. If such a narrow, religious definition of Jewishness were to be made, then the 'Jewish' presence in Viennese culture would be small indeed.¹

The criterion of who is a Jew and who is not a Jew which I have chosen here is the widest, that of descent. Where it is known, I have included those figures who were of at least partially Jewish descent in the category of Jews. This criterion is not one which has been universally adopted in defining Jewish identity. Indeed it might be thought by some to have racial (and racist) connotations, harking back to the Holocaust. Objectively viewed, however, it should not be a controversial criterion: interest in someone's descent of itself need not be seen as racist. It is true that many people take offense at someone being termed 'half Jewish', yet one often hears references to someone being 'half American', 'half Austrian' or even 'a quarter Czech' without any offense being given or indeed taken. Such statements, after all, usually refer to a cultural heritage, and are the result of indulgence in a curiosity about someone's antecedents which is common to most people, and which the nobility made into a profession. Or should one regard genealogists as racists?

Surely it is only when particularly strong value judgements (usually

¹ Among those who were converts, the children of converts or of mixed marriages, were: Alfred Adler, Hugo Bettauer, Hermann Broch, Egon Friedell, Hans Hahn, Hans Kelsen, Karl Kraus, Gustav Mahler, Otto Neurath, Arnold Schoenberg and Ludwig Wittgenstein. Both Otto Bauer and Sigmund Freud were professed atheists.