

REVIEW ARTICLE

Anarchy and Noise: New Perspectives on the History of Fin-de-Siècle Vienna

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Unruly Masses: The Other Side of Fin-de-Siècle Vienna. By WOLFGANG MADERTHANER and LUTZ MUSNER. Pp. 184. Oxford and New York: Berghahn, 2008. Hardback £45.00, \$90.00. ISBN 978-1-84545-345-9. Paperback £15.00, \$27.95. ISBN 978-1-84545-446-3.

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‘The Age of Noise. Early Reactions in Vienna, 1870-1914’. By PETER PAYER. *Journal of Urban History*, 33, 2007, 5, pp. 773-793.

The publication of Carl Schorske’s study on culture and politics in fin-de-siècle Vienna in 1980 provided a ‘paradigm’ for the study of the capital of the Habsburg Empire; it soon found followers and popularizers, and even critics such as Steven Beller accepted Schorske’s general approach, which focused on the ‘high’ culture of the middle classes. For Schorske, the history of the city of Vienna, however, provided merely the background for case studies in intellectual history; even his chapter on the Ringstraße, presented as the embodiment of the ideas of the liberal bourgeoisie, made no exception. This conventional variety of cultural history was soon enough criticized by social historians who opposed the ‘elitism’ of the Schorskean approach and argued that it idealized everyday life in the Habsburg capital and provided a partial, distorted view of the realities of social life in turn-of-the-century Vienna.¹ Schorskean cultural history, it was claimed, ignored the living-conditions of the majority of the Viennese population. As Maureen Healy has put it in her study of Vienna during the First World War, ‘Vienna was a city of two million residents,

¹ Hubert C. Ehalt, Gernot Heiß and Hannes Stekl (eds), *Glücklich ist, wer vergißt –? Das andere Wien um 1900*, Vienna, 1986.

the vast majority of whom did not read Hofmannsthal and were not patients of Freud.’² This critique has been taken up in Wolfgang Maderthaner and Lutz Musner’s study on the ‘unruly masses’ of the Viennese suburbs, which was originally published in German in 1999 and has now been translated into English.

The starting point of Maderthaner and Musner’s study is their discontent with a ‘particular practice in the discourse of Viennese modernism’. It is not so much Schorske’s study itself – referred to as a ‘masterpiece’ – which Maderthaner and Musner are targeting, but the popularizers who followed in his wake. Maderthaner and Musner’s aim is to turn the Schorskean approach on its head and study ‘Vienna around 1900’ from the margins of urban life. They object to a ‘tendency to ontologize the *fin-de-siècle* as the sum of its intellectual and artistic achievements’, which ignores the ‘world of the suburbs, the lives of immigrants, proletarians, and urban pariahs’ (p. 1), and remind us of the specific character of Viennese topography. Social and spatial divisions coincided in Vienna: the suburbs were inhabited by the poor working-class and remained out of sight of the upper echelons of society, who lived in the city centre and the inner districts.

The main body of Maderthaner and Musner’s study consists of case studies, for example of a ‘hunger revolt’ that broke out in the working-class district of Ottakring in 1911 or a railway strike in 1888. In 1911, high levels of inflation had caused a severe food and housing crisis, leading to public protests that turned into open violence. Groups of marauding teenagers vandalized ten school buildings in the course of the riots, which could only be stopped by the combined forces of the police and the army. According to Maderthaner and Musner, more than just frustration and despair was expressed in these riots: in their view, the young protesters targeted school buildings as the symbols of ‘discipline and control’ that ‘modernity’ had imposed on them (p. 18).

The rapidly industrializing city of Vienna was the main centre for immigration in the multi-national Habsburg empire, and Maderthaner and Musner remind us of the ‘rural’ character of the Viennese working class, which consisted to a large degree of recent immigrants. The suburbs thus became ‘a transitional space’, characterized by ‘the successive integration of the countryside into urban structures, a grey zone of diffuse passage from agrarian to urban culture’. The immigrants brought with them ‘time-honored rural and agrarian forms of life and thought, which were then adapted, modified and

² Maureen Healy, *Vienna and the Fall of the Habsburg Empire. Total War and Everyday Life in World War I*, Cambridge, 2004, p. 21.

transformed'. Expanding on Schorske, Maderthaner and Musner stress the segregating quality of the Ringstraße which functioned as a barrier between completely different social worlds: 'The complex differentiation between center, inner suburbs, and outer suburbs corresponded to a hierarchical arrangement of the social space that was more evident and well-defined than in either London or Paris' (pp. 22, 25, 34). The pompous facades of the suburban rental houses hid the overcrowding and misery of the people who had to make a living in the suburbs. In Maderthaner and Musner's interpretation, the facades of these houses, which pretended respectable living conditions lay within, were part of a cunning strategy by the bourgeoisie to prevent the proletarians from developing the right consciousness: 'The appearance of the suburban facades is thus not just a lie; it cheats their inhabitants of the political awareness that the social differences of capitalism penetrate from the street into the very interior of the building'. Attempts to improve the miserable living conditions of the workers through social policies are dismissed by Maderthaner and Musner with a standard argument that itself dates back to the nineteenth century: 'It was not so much humanitarian considerations, but rather demographic, industrial, and instrumental ones that led the state administration to describe, measure, and medicalize the misery, and make it the object of socio-technically motivated discourse of planning' (p. 56). Even though Maderthaner and Musner fail to conceal their preconceived ideas about class struggle and class consciousness, in describing the appalling living conditions of the Viennese suburbs, based on a vast number of contemporary publications, they provide the most valuable part of their study.

Even in the slums of outer Vienna, protest, strikes, and riots were the exception, not the rule. Maderthaner and Musner look at the normality of suburban life and the places of recreation of the workers: the inns, taverns, and cabarets where a peculiar form of culture and entertainment developed. Crime and prostitution were an integral part of the everyday life of the 'other world' of Vienna and added to the segregation between centre and periphery: 'Prostitutes thus combined much of what the center feared most about the suburb: vagrancy, rootlessness, ambivalent female sexuality, and the threatening loss of spatial and social distance between inner and outer city.' The Prater and other amusement parks, according to Maderthaner and Musner, were another device introduced by the ruling class to distract the masses from their misery and prevent them from developing the right 'consciousness': 'Mass culture compensates for the shock of modernity by a wealth of material and technological devices, designed to facilitate these escapes from the misery of work and the time dictates of industrialization.' The fact that even some of the poorest

inhabitants of Vienna's working class districts kept pictures of saints and the royal family in their slum apartments is beyond the authors' analytical scope and swiftly explained away: 'The banal is made sacred, the valueless valuable, with kitsch as a surrogate for the possible, its traumatic empty place.' (pp. 88, 89)

Instead of a conclusion, the last chapters of the study introduce remarkable individuals: the Viennese 'Robin Hood' Johann Breitwieser, a self-educated master-thief who became a popular hero because of his philanthropy and thus defied the contemporary stereotype of the criminal as an 'evil degenerate'. Franz Schuhmeier, the local leader of the Social Democrats and popular tribune is presented as the congenial counterpart to Karl Lueger, the Christian Social mayor of Vienna at the turn of the century. Only in passing do Maderthaler and Musner mention that Schuhmeier supported the municipal policies of the anti-semitic Lueger. On the last three pages of their study, Maderthaler and Musner give a brief account of anti-semitism in fin-de-siècle Vienna, and one senses that they were not comfortable with the fact that not only Lueger, but also the Social Democrat Schuhmeier used anti-semitic remarks and arguments in their attempts to appeal to the public.

Maderthaler and Musner provide important perspectives on the social reality of fin-de-siècle Vienna that are too easily ignored in the 'Schorskean' literature. They have compiled much source material, mainly from newspapers and contemporary publications, that broadens our knowledge. These include the reports by Max Winter, Emil Kläger, and Ivan Cankar that should be read alongside the well-known autobiographies of Stefan Zweig and Arthur Schnitzler.³ However, Maderthaler and Musner still manage to paint a simplistic picture of fin-de-siècle Vienna. The main problem of their study is the crude class model they employ, which explains Viennese society exclusively in terms of the antagonism between bourgeoisie and proletariat. Evidently, the 'ruling classes' play a central role in this history: they seem to have conspired to manipulate, control, and exploit the working class with ever more subtle and cunning methods. The whole city thus appears as a tool of bourgeois domination. The workers who did not conform to the historic role assigned to them by the authors, but preferred to decorate their humble flats with 'bourgeois' kitsch instead of marching on the street, are accused of false consciousness. Thus we are not presented with a 'phenomenology of the suburban' (p. 21), but with a

³ Emil Kläger, *Durch die Wiener Quartiere des Elends und des Verbrechens: Ein Wanderbuch aus dem Jenseits*, Vienna, 1908. Max Winter, *Im unterirdischen Wien*, Berlin and Leipzig, 1905. Ivan Cankar, *Vor dem Ziel: Literarische Skizzen aus Wien*, Klagenfurt, 1994.

binary view of history that simplifies social reality and separates it neatly into moral categories, into good and bad. Where ‘explanations’ of this kind do not help, Maderthaner and Musner employ fashionable jargon to cover up analytical weaknesses; and we are left with statements that never reach the analytical level of Schorske: ‘Modernity as social text inscribed the transgression of Viennese society onto the city’ (p. 148).

A different way of studying modern Vienna, including the fin-de-siècle, can be found in the works of Peter Payer. A trained museologist, Payer has an eye for the significance and the analytical potential of everyday objects, and is not restricted by political-moral concerns in his explorations of Viennese history. He looks at aspects of urban life that have been neglected both by social and cultural historians, such as the role of the *Hausmeister* (the porters of apartment blocks) as a peculiar social character (pp. 25-32), particular institutions such as cinemas (pp. 193-99), and even public toilets (pp. 75-90). Combining the roles of local historian and urban anthropologist with an unprejudiced curiosity, the best parts of Payer’s studies show how the built environment, social practice, perceptions, and ideologies were intertwined, depended on each other and thus need to be studied in a comprehensive way in order to understand the complex dynamics that operate in a large city. The different ‘worlds’ of workers and bourgeoisie of Vienna, during the fin-de-siècle and beyond, thus appear much more connected than in Maderthaner and Musner’s view.

The short essays collected in Payer’s volume *Blick auf Wien* have previously appeared in the cultural pages of Viennese newspapers and magazines, but Payer also regularly produces academic versions of his texts. His approach deserves closer attention. Some of its most striking examples are his studies on the history of the ‘urban soundscape’ of fin-de-siècle Vienna.⁴ There he shows how the ‘auditive structure’ of the city had changed significantly with its expansion and modernization, and how the steady increase in noises of all kinds made its impact on public discourse. It was mainly sensitive artists and intellectuals who became increasingly agitated about the disturbance that excessive noise levels in Vienna caused. In the course of the debates, activists for the reduction of noise levels invented the term ‘noise pollution’, established associations that lobbied for noise abatement, and called for a stop to ‘excessive and unnecessary noise’. The noise abatement

⁴ See Payer, ‘Age of Noise’, also id., ‘Der Klang von Wien. Zur akustischen Neuordnung des öffentlichen Raumes’ *Österreichische Zeitschrift für Geschichtswissenschaft* 15, 2004, 4, pp. 105-131; id., *Blick auf Wien*, pp. 115-138.

movement campaigned for the introduction of ‘auditive hygiene’ and ‘urban eugenetics’, and ultimately contributed to the reorganization of public space in fin-de-siècle Vienna.

The reactions toward urban ‘noise’ can be taken as a prism through which several facets of the emergence of a specifically modern urban culture can be studied. The discourse of the noise abatement movement was part of a more general debate about the cultural consequences of industrialization and modernization, and it reflected social conflicts in the rapidly expanding cities of fin-de-siècle Central Europe. Payer reminds us of the process of rapid modernization the city of Vienna underwent between circa 1860 and circa 1930. From the 1860s onwards, the city grew exponentially, both in its geographical extent and in population (from 431,000 in 1850 to more than two million in 1910). As a result, the city of Vienna had to build a modern infrastructure that could cope with these large numbers of people. High priority was given to a network of public transport; from the mid-nineteenth century, coaches, tramways, and trains were introduced to move the urban masses around the city. However, in contrast to other major European and American cities, Vienna’s traffic system was not of the highest possible standard, and this fact contributed to the ‘noise problem’ in the city. Vienna did not build an underground rail network (at least not until the 1960s), and the electrification of the tramways was also delayed (it was slowly introduced after 1897; even then, Emperor Franz Joseph personally intervened to prevent the building of overhead contact lines on the Ringstraße, for aesthetic reasons). As a consequence, horse and steam trams were still much in use well into the twentieth century, instead of the quieter and more efficient electrical trams; also a number of simple horse coaches were still in use after 1900. In addition, most Viennese streets were still cobbled at the turn of the century, so that old-fashioned carts and coaches without proper spring suspension produced much unnecessary noise.

Payer has unearthed a number of contemporary pamphlets and newspaper articles in which the ‘noise problem’ was heatedly debated. Some authors argued that the lack of an adequate infrastructure and bad urban planning, combined with the clamour of the urban proletariat, had made Vienna the loudest city in Europe, far worse than London, Paris, or Berlin. Vienna produced, they claimed, a typical stream of noise, which was essentially different from other European capitals. Robert Musil confesses to this view on the opening page of his novel *The Man without Qualities*: ‘Automobiles shot out of deep, narrow streets into the shallows of bright squares. Dark clusters of pedestrians formed cloudlike strings. Where more powerful lines of speed cut across their casual haste they clotted up, then trickled on faster and, after a few oscillations, resumed their steady rhythm. Hundreds

of noises wove themselves into a wiry texture of sound with barbs protruding here and there, smart edges running along it and subsiding again, with clear notes splintering off and dissipating. By this noise alone, whose special quality cannot be captured in words, a man returning after years of absence would have been able to tell with his eyes shut that he was back in the Imperial Capital and Royal City of Vienna.’⁵

In response to the growing urban noise, and modelled after the successful Noise Abatement Movement in the United States led by Julia Barker Rice, associations for noise abatement were set up in Europe early in the twentieth century. In Germany, the philosopher Theodor Lessing became the movement’s vociferous leader. For Lessing, increasing noise pollution was one of the fatal diseases of modern culture. Noise, he claimed, served as a narcotic for modern man to forget the vanity and pointlessness of his existence. Lessing established the German Association for the Abatement of Noise, and in 1909, a local branch of this lobby-group was founded in Vienna. A number of physicians, lawyers, writers, artists, architects and engineers joined the club in the Austrian capital; its most famous member was the hyper-sensitive writer Hugo von Hofmannsthal. The association published a journal entitled ‘The Anti-rowdy/The right to quiet. Monthly for the fight against noise, brutishness and *Unkultur*’, and lobbied for anti-noise legislation. Already in 1900, the Viennese ethnologist Michael Haberlandt had made the case for noise abatement. Similarly to Lessing, he interpreted the amount of noise that a society produced as a yardstick to judge its culture, or lack thereof: ‘The more noise that is being tolerated, the greater the barbarity. A refined culture is the sworn enemy of every impurity, of that loud smell [*lauter Gestank*] which is called noise.’ As a consequence, Haberlandt suggested that Austrian schools introduced an eleventh commandment: ‘Thou shall not make noise.’ Both Haberlandt and Lessing used arguments by Arthur Schopenhauer, who had complained about excessive noise without having been exposed to the din of an industrialized metropolis.⁶

The association for noise abatement was only partly concerned with the clamour produced by modern traffic and industry. It was more the influx of migrants and the overcrowding of the city as such – perceived or real – that lead to complaints about the

⁵ Robert Musil, *The Man without Qualities*, London, 1955, p. 3.

⁶ Michael Haberlandt, ‘Vom Lärm’, in *Cultur im Alltag: Gesammelte Aufsätze*, Vienna, 1900, pp. 177, 182; Arthur Schopenhauer, ‘Über Lärm und Geräusch’, *Parerga und Paralipomena. Kleine philosophische Schriften II. Sämtliche Werke, Band V.* ed. by Wolfgang Frhr. Von Löhneysen, Frankfurt am Main, 1986, pp. 753-57.

intolerable levels of noise in the city. The targets of these complaints were the 'loud, brutish masses' that disturbed and irritated the Viennese middle-classes. It was sudden, shrill noises that upset more than the regular, almost rhythmic sounds of machines and trains. The shouting and clamouring of hawkers and market salesmen, the jingling of street musicians (so-called '*Werkelmänner*'), the clamour of drunken crowds were as much detested by members of the noise abatement movement as the cracking of whips, the shouting of coachmen, the barking of dogs, or the beating-out of carpets. According to intellectuals such as Haberlandt or Lessing, this kind of urban noise represented the degeneration of modern culture. Their attitude reveals the heavy class bias of the noise abatement movement: boisterous behaviour was considered uncivilized, a sign for a fatal lack of refinement, characteristic of the lower classes and the proletariat; and thus had to be outlawed.

Payer does not stop at an intellectual history of noise abatement in Vienna, but manages to show the impact of such views and debates on the social reality of the city. The members of the Viennese association for noise abatement did not confine themselves to moaning about the urban din, they also made practical suggestions to solve the problem. They favoured technological improvements that would reduce the level of noise, such as the replacement of cobbled streets with modern pavements, the electrification of the tramways, or the introduction of properly sprung carts and coaches. But much of the noise that the campaigners complained about was rather traditional, not the result of modern traffic and technology. The main targets of their complaints were not automobiles or trams, but the proletarian coachmen who continuously cracked their whips. In general, the campaigners for noise abatement were not opposed to modern technology, but asked for better, more perfect technology that would create a 'quiet city'. This ambitious goal was, naturally, not achieved completely, but the lobbying of the noise abatement movement did have an impact on the social reality of Vienna. In the early twentieth century, legislation was introduced in order to reduce the noise level in the city. Anti-noise ordinances were issued that made the unnecessary cracking of whips, the ringing of bicycle bells and the hooting of horns illegal. Traffic was reorganized with the introduction of Driving- and Walking regulations (*Fahr- und Gehordnungen*), which separated pedestrians from vehicles to reduce loud warning signals. The activities of hawkers and peddlers were heavily restricted, street musicians now needed licenses to perform in public, and 'Regulations for public silence' were issued that outlawed music and excessive noise in residential areas before 9 a.m., between 1.00 and 3.00 p.m., and after 10.00 p.m. Thus, the

urban subject was 'educated' and disciplined to conform to the middle-class ideals of peace and quiet. The freedom to behave, perform, and act in public spaces was restricted; instead, a meticulous new regulation of the public space was introduced.

The fight against unnecessary noise thus served as a vehicle to impose bourgeois cultural norms on the city as a whole. Silence was presented as a sign for culture and civilization, and therefore as a civic duty. The movement for noise abatement represented views of a typically modern social stratum, that is, urban intellectuals who at the same time despised and depended on the modern metropolis. They were not wealthy enough to retreat to rural estates but were tied to the city where they found work and employment. Hence they tried to discipline the 'brutish hordes' who disturbed them in their creative work and teach them their cultural norms. The proletarian masses had to learn the standards of cleanliness and audio-hygiene and behave according to bourgeois etiquette to make urban life tolerable. Payer is driven by his interest in seemingly remote topics that are not short of comical aspects – in addition to urban noise, he is an expert on urban smells and waste. He thus provides a much subtler interpretation of the interaction between the working and middle classes in fin-de-siècle Vienna than that proffered by Maderthaner and Musner.

The champions of noise abatement did not represent the views of bourgeois Vienna as a whole, and the public reaction to their campaign was divided. Some commentators applauded them and praised their suggestions for technological improvements to reduce the level of noise, others ridiculed them as neurotic, oversensitive fanatics who were opposed to progress, or as effeminate 'wimps', who lacked the strength for life. The measures introduced to reduce urban noise had a profound impact on the urban landscape of modern Vienna. The focus of Payer's studies are often the same liberal middle classes that Carl Schorske had studied, but his curiosity and serendipity opens perspectives on fin-de-siècle Vienna that go beyond traditional cultural history. Thus a more complex picture of the mentality of the Viennese bourgeoisie emerges: the proponents of noise abatement, for instance, did not choose a romantic, anti-modern return to an idealized past or the retreat to rural areas that were supposedly untouched by the ugly face of modernity, but advocated the further modernization of Vienna, as a response to specifically modern problems of urban development, and contributed to the creation of a highly regulated and disciplined public space in the city of Vienna.