Jews and Queers in a Postmodern Vienna

“Postmodernity” has a staggering number of definitions, but most would include some notion that contemporary society is more openly pluralist than it was a half-century ago. Matti Bunzl makes his own contribution to this literature by bringing this take on postmodernity together with those of several authors who connect the “normalizing” process of modernity with the rise of the modern nation state.[1] The heart of modernity, Bunzl proposes, is the fiction of the coherent nation-state, imagined as an “ethnically homogenous and inherently masculinist” entity (p. 13). The demise of this “nationalizing project” can consequently be traced by examining the social and state treatment of two key groups, Jews and homosexuals. Bunzl argues that their integration into the symbolic space of the nation, along with the radical reassessment of their importance for the life of the nation, serves as a chief gauge for the emergence of postmodernity.

While agreeing with Zygmunt Bauman that the Holocaust represented the apogee and inevitable conclusion of the exclusionary nation-state, Bunzl shows that the nation-building project in Austria did not end in 1945. If anything, the destruction of the Nazi state and the recreation of an independent Austria only gave a renewed urgency to the project. The main difference after 1945 was that a new narrative emerged as central to the Austrian nation, namely one that defined Austria as ”Nazi Germany’s first victim” (p. 31). Ironically, such a narrative did not create a sense of solidarity with other (more plausible) victims of Nazism. In fact, by distancing itself from the German Nazis who had committed the Holocaust, Austria’s citizenry evaded a confrontation with its own role in the horrors of the Third Reich. The inevitable result was that both Jews and homosexuals continued to be treated as social outsiders for decades after World War II, as documented by the historic and ethnographic work of the book’s first section.

In part 2, Bunzl shows that the persistent homophobia and antisemitism embedded in the exclusionary model of the nation began to break down in the 1970s and the 1980s. For both Jews and the gay and lesbian population, the crucial factor was the political criticisms and protests organized by activists. Jewish youth organizations such as HaSchomer Hazair provided a context for debate and reflection among the children of Holocaust survivors. By the early 1980s, several articulate intellectuals had emerged from this generation who were very critical of both Austrian attitudes towards Jews and the Jewish community itself for its resignation and submission. The result was not simply a radicalization of existing Jewish organizations such as HaSchomer Hazair, but the proliferation of new Jewish institutions (schools and sport clubs) and public events (the Jewish Cultural Festival and the Jewish Street Fair).

A remarkably similar process occurred among gays and lesbians. Beginning with the organization of the Homosexuelle Iniative Wien (HOSI) at the end of the 1970s, a gay and lesbian movement emerged that generated more public visibility through spectacular politi-
cal actions, marches, protests and the annual Christopher Street Parade. The Rosa Lila Villa, occupied by squatters in the early 1980s, provided a focus for political activism and space for a café and social activities. Then, at the very beginning of the 1990s came a proliferation of new institutions, ranging from safe-sex advocacy groups, legal organizations and religious associations to sports clubs. These new institutions put a premium on openness, utterly transforming Vienna's gay scene and, at the same time, Austrian public spaces.

Although the power of social activism and the creation of an increasingly diverse institutional framework was certainly important for the emergence of a more pluralist society, by the 1990s international pressure also played a significant role, as Bunzl shows in part 3. The nomination of Kurt Waldheim by the Christian Conservative People’s Party for presidential candidacy became an international affair in 1986 when Waldheim’s membership in the Nazi party was uncovered. “Under the intense glare of worldwide media attention” (p. 159), the Austrian government increasingly came to see Vienna’s Jewish community as an asset that could enhance the country’s reputation. The end of the Cold War also pushed Austria in this direction. Joining the European Union in 1995, Austria increasingly showed off its Jewish community through museums and public events in order to show the country’s commitment to the new “European values” of tolerance and pluralism (p. 160). The values of the EU were equally important for the gay and lesbian community. Gradually, in the course of the 1990s, the Austrian government fundamentally altered its stance towards homosexuality. Gay and lesbian survivors of Nazi crimes were finally recognized officially; remaining laws discriminating against homosexuals were repealed. By the end of the 1990s, Vienna’s city government learned that events like the AIDS-charity Life Ball and the annual Regenbogen Parade could serve as “effective vehicle[s] for the performance and advertisement of Vienna’s cosmopolitanism” (p. 199).

Bunzl presents a number of interesting arguments about Austria in particular, but a fairly large problem in his analysis appears at the comparative level. While developments in West Germany seem like the natural touchstone for any comparative work with Austria, the author instead tends to cite trends in the United States or western Europe more generally. The result is that some potentially interesting questions are left unaddressed. For example, Bunzl’s discussion of Austria’s development of a postwar identity around the “victim nation” fails to mention that West Germany also developed such an identity in the course of the 1950s, as much recent work has shown.[2] Such a comparison would beg the question—why did West Germany confront its Nazi past in the 1960s, while Austria apparently was able to avoid it until the Waldheim affair?

A more thorough comparison between the gay and lesbian movements of West Germany and Austria would also force Bunzl to reevaluate an argument made in the introduction of his work. As he explains it, the social-political development of Vienna’s gay and lesbian movement should “destabilize an analytic logic that equates ‘Western’ sexualities with their specifically North American articulations” (p. 9). From his point of view, the “gay ghettos” of San Francisco and several other American cities have served as the implicit model for understanding the development of all gay and lesbian movements, despite the fact that they do not fit many western European realities. While such connections have certainly been made, given the importance of gay and lesbian neighborhoods in Berlin, one may not be able to call this model “North American.” I applaud Bunzl’s effort to pluralize the models of community and political development, but some other terminology needs to be worked up that does not imply that Vienna is representative of western Europe. Bunzl never claims that Vienna is representative; in fact, when it comes to the development of the gay and lesbian movement, he is careful to note that Austria trailed slightly behind many other countries. But this delay raises two final questions that are never fully addressed: why did the Austrian gay and lesbian movement fail to launch successfully between 1969 and 1972, in comparison with many other areas of the West? And could this failure have been linked somehow to Austria’s inability to deal with its Nazi past in the 1960s?

So, the book leaves some unanswered questions that might have been raised more explicitly (and therefore answered with greater clarity) had the author more consciously compared Austria with West Germany. All in all, though, the interesting histories and ethnographies of these two communities at the end of the twentieth century are a welcome contribution. Austria is tremendously under-researched when it comes to gay and lesbian history, especially in comparison to Germany, Britain or the United States. The prominent roles that Jewish figures have played in Austrian history means that this area is not as neglected; here too, however, Bunzl makes a noteworthy contribution by avoiding the “nostalgia trap.” Instead of focusing on the void left by the Holocaust, the author draws attention to the life and creativity that persisted after 1945—as he puts it, “the very social hybrid-
ity and cultural inventiveness of the European Jewish present” (p. 6). The result is a book that hopefully will be read by anyone interested in Jewish life, gay and lesbian history or simply in the development of pluralist society in the West.

Notes

[1]. Bunzl himself uses three books as touchstones for his work, though others could have been mentioned: Michel Foucault, The History of Sexuality: An Introduction (New York: Vantage Books, 1978); George Mosse, Nationalism and Sexuality: Middle-Class Morality and Sexual Norms in Modern Europe (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1978); and Zygmunt Bauman, Modernity and the Holocaust (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1989).


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