

MEMORIAL

Carl E. Schorske (1915–2015)

CARL E. Schorske (1915–2015) was one of the most distinguished historians of Central Europe of his generation, and an impressive generation it was indeed.¹ Born in New York City in 1915, he pursued undergraduate studies at Columbia University and, beginning in 1936, undertook graduate work with William L. Langer at Harvard University. After war service he taught at Wesleyan University from 1946 to 1960, when he accepted an offer from the University of California at Berkeley. Schorske's years at Berkeley coincided with the student-cultural upheavals that typified the experience of that campus during a longer era of distress. These years brought to an apprehensive end the optimism and complacency of the so-called Golden Age of American higher education after 1945. Schorske was deeply involved with the struggles for free speech at Berkeley, protesting restrictive university policies and seeking to accommodate student rights. He later recalled that his ardent commitment to free speech reflected larger concerns about the fundamental values that a university should espouse in the face of political authority or social orthodoxies: "It was a continuous problem, and one of the things that it led me to was really thinking through the relation between the life of the university—what it is as an institution—and public life."² But, by the late 1960s, he found the campus turmoil at Berkeley increasingly distracting from his life as a scholar. He would later describe his feelings of being "eaten up" by the crisis, observing that "the psychic cost for one not temperamentally suited to conflict was very high."³ In 1969 Schorske accepted an offer from Princeton University, where he remained for the rest of his career, achieving the honor of the Dayton–Stockton Chair in History.

In the autobiographical reflections on his career that he presented in his lecture, "A Life of Learning," given at the American Council of Learned Societies in April 1987, Schorske described his intellectual odyssey as a young scholar in the throes of a world cracked open by political and moral contingencies, when "the coming of the Cold War—and with it,

¹For the general context, among a very large literature on the scholars who belonged to what has been called the "second generation," see Catherine Epstein, "The Second Generation: Émigré Historians of Modern Germany in Postwar America," in *The Second Generation: Émigrés from Nazi Germany as Historians*, ed. Andreas W. Daum, Hartmut Lehmann, and James J. Sheehan (New York: Berghahn, 2016), 143–51. Although the phrase is usually deployed to refer to the second-generation refugees, Epstein notes that American-born historians like Carl Schorske and Leonard Krieger assumed intellectually prominent and parallel roles in this cohort as well.

²See Carl E. Schorske, "Intellectual Life, Civil Libertarian Issues, and the Student Movement at the University of California, Berkeley, 1960–1969" (part of an oral history conducted in 1996–97 by Ann Lage, Regional Oral History Office, The Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley, 2000, here p. 33). I owe this document to the generous assistance of Gary B. Cohen.

³Ibid., 133.

McCarthyism—forced a shift in the optimistic social and philosophic outlook in which liberal and radical political positions alike had been embedded.”⁴ Like his contemporary Peter Gay, Schorske was profoundly influenced by the political-ideological “gang wars” of the late 1940s and early 1950s, and especially by what Helmut Walser Smith has recently called (in discussing McCarthyism) their “corrosive effect on intellectuals inside and outside the university.”⁵ Yet, the pressures faced by the American academy in the turbulent 1960s would prove even more disorienting and unsettling, in their blurring of the appropriate boundaries between social responsibility and scholarly independence, than had the bullying wrought by the Cold War paranoia of the 1950s.⁶ Whereas liberals of Schorske’s generation could frame the earlier conflict as an unambiguous offense to values of academic freedom and independent scholarship, the student protests of the 1960s made competing and equally powerful claims on their sympathies, while offering no such ethical and moral clarity.

Carl Schorske was the author of two major books, as well as numerous essays, reports, and occasional pieces. He saw himself as a cultural and intellectual historian, propelled by conceptual problems rather than by conventional concerns about institutional or political periodization. Yet, both of his books expressed a profound understanding of German and Austrian political, social, and even diplomatic history. His theoretical and methodological range was spacious, and his talent in executing that range was equally impressive.

At a time when Schorske’s reputation has become almost exclusively bound up with his brilliant book on Vienna (discussed later), a careful look at the first book enhances our understanding of this master historian by showing that the two books participate in a common intellectual project. Schorske’s first study was a searching analysis of the fate of the German Social Democratic Party (SPD) from its inception in the 1870s up to the great schism of 1917. His portrait of the prewar SPD, published in 1955, was that of a party born under critical and unusual circumstances, emerging simultaneously with a new bourgeoisie in Germany affected by the moral temptations and defensive political inclinations of high capitalism.⁷ These circumstances had profound implications for the state, once Liberals finally congealed into a formidable political tradition in the 1860s and 1870s. Because liberalism had no deep tradition of governance before 1848, Liberals came to political power not only with the mere sufferance of an authoritarian state but also facing the noteworthy aggressiveness of mass socialism, both of which found fault with the Liberals in visceral ways. Otto von Bismarck’s attack on the SPD in the 1880s simply made that party stronger, whereas Liberalism became more diffuse and weaker in its inclination to challenge the state.

A dualism defined the nature and logic of the working-class party, which, on the one hand, engaged with and fostered an incipient democratic society, while, on the other, sought to replace and overcome that order. Because the SPD was violently anti-liberal in its revolutionizing—but simultaneously an alternative for what should or could have been

⁴Carl E. Schorske, “A Life of Learning,” American Council of Learned Societies, Occasional Paper No. 1 (April 23, 1987), 11.

⁵Helmut Walser Smith, “Reluctant Return: Peter Gay and the Cosmopolitan Work of a Historian,” in Daum, Lehmann, and Sheehan, eds., *The Second Generation*, 217. Also see George S. Williamson, “Memorial: Peter Gay (1923–2015),” *Central European History* 49, no. 1 (2016): 4–18.

⁶See Carl E. Schorske, “Professional Ethos and Public Crisis: A Historian’s Reflections,” *Publications of the Modern Language Association* 83, no. 4 (1968): 979–84.

⁷Carl E. Schorske, *German Social Democracy 1905–1917: The Development of the Great Schism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1955).

a true liberal movement in its own right—it had a twin fate and a double liability. Yet, at the same time, the compelling urge on the part of many elements of German labor not only to seek tangible improvements and gains, but also to disparage attempts to play with (in their view) dangerous or otherwise utopian projects, such as the general strike or open denunciations of colonialism or militarism, led to deep structural rifts in the party as the twentieth century opened. The result was a neither-nor existential crisis in which the radical Left in the party mused about the realization of catastrophe, but never dared move from theoretical ruminations to concrete deeds, and in which the revisionist Right sought to fulfill what Schorske called the “unique characteristic” of German socialism, namely, to act “as protagonist of the uncompleted bourgeois revolution.”⁸ This logic informed the entire book and gave it a rondo-like structure that carried the reader through the various twists and turns of sundry internal Socialist party politics.

A central turning point came in 1909–1911, when the party found itself caught in the dilemma of allying with Liberal bourgeois parties against the Blue-Black Bloc of Conservatives and members of the Catholic Center Party on the issues of tax reform and suffrage. These were desirable ends, Schorske reflected, but forging such an alliance would have required the party to abandon the aggressive tactics that could have possibly forced Conservatives to make more substantive concessions. In a bow to his invocations about 1848 at the very beginning of the book, Schorske now argued that “the tragic legacy of Germany’s uncompleted bourgeois revolution came to the surface once again. There was in fact no one right tactic for Social Democracy to pursue in terms of the constitutional issue alone. The constitutional issue was one which, in the long run, was solved only by revolution.”⁹ For Schorske, the vise that the party found itself in—powerless to effect meaningful structural change in the deepest environs of the German state, but unwilling to provoke such change using extra-constitutional means—was ultimately resolvable only via a revolution, even though few had a plausible understanding of how such an upheaval would occur. Yet, many in the party knew what their fellows should *not* do—whether moderates in Baden voting for a regional budget, or radicals in Berlin dreaming avidly of wildcat strikes—and, by 1911, a profound split had opened within the party’s top- and second-level cadres over both tactics and long-term goals, leading to “the poison of dissension” by 1914.¹⁰ The secession of the Social Democratic Left from the majority party in 1917 had, for all intents, already been in place three years earlier.

The book was filled with wonderful biographical portraits of Socialist intellectuals seeking to play the role of men of action, such as Kurt Eisner and Hugo Haase. The frequent and urgent discords among the party’s intelligentsia testified to a fascinating spectrum within the SPD’s discursive culture, however intolerant or impatient individuals might act in specific cases. Schorske’s special talent for anchoring ideas in distinctive cultural and social environments, and for showing the natural interplay between text and context in individual lives, was evident here. But he also demonstrated a keen polymathic quality in producing excellent institutional history: his discussions of the onset of bureaucratic top heaviness and the gradual move to the right of the majority of the party’s leaders remain excellent in their own right—and contributed to his evident agreement with Max Weber’s judgment that the real threat

⁸Ibid., 210.

⁹Ibid., 168.

¹⁰Ibid., 257.

faced by the party was not how it would attack the state, but rather how it would prevent itself from being taken over by the state.

After completing his first book in 1955, Carl Schorske set out to launch a second major research project, which culminated in a magnificent study of late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century culture in Vienna under the Habsburgs.¹¹ The book consisted of a series of four beautifully crafted articles, first published in the *American Historical Review* and the *Journal of Modern History* from 1961 to 1973, along with an introduction and three additional chapters on the Ringstrasse, Gustav Klimt, as well as Oskar Kokoschka and Arnold Schoenberg. Schorske later recalled that he chose Vienna because “it was indisputably a generative center in many important branches of twentieth-century culture, with a close and well-defined intellectual elite that was yet open to the larger currents of European thought.”¹²

When he turned to Vienna, Schorske encountered a set of issues that paralleled many of those with which he had grappled in his first book, emphasizing the idea of an incomplete bourgeois revolution, but with significant structural differences. The book’s main anchor point was a long chapter on Austrian Liberalism and its bourgeois sponsors, which focused on the Viennese Ringstrasse as a kind of aesthetic and urban-planning crucible of the cultural mores, political ideas, and social apprehensions of the liberal upper-middle classes. A later chapter on the “New Key” politics of Georg von Schönerer, Karl Lueger, and Theodor Herzl provided a pendant to the Ringstrasse essay, arguing that a new style of anti-liberal, petty-bourgeois radicalism hollowed out the political space that had been occupied by the Liberals. These actors responded by retreating into an inner-looking aestheticism under the protective mantle of the neo-Josephinist Crown, leading to an ever closer “bourgeois-aristocratic rapprochement” with the cultural prestige of the high aristocracy.¹³

Schorske’s most important story was thus the fate of the Austrian liberal bourgeoisie in the face of a series of challenges not touched upon in his book on German Social Democracy, namely, the rising tide of what he presented as political and cultural irrationalism after 1880, grounded not only in vicious nationalisms but also in new kinds of mass-political, middle-class action groups, such as Christian Socialism and Pan-Germanism. Here, in contrast to Germany, the threat was not from the conservative authoritarian state or its militarist proxies, but rather from the deepest reaches of civil society itself. The middle classes with whom the German Social Democrats coquetted now turned out in Austria to be the social bases for irrational and illiberal “new key” politics.

The chapters that preceded and followed the ones on the Ringstrasse and the New Key included incisive discussions of the ways in which liberal writers, artists, musicians, and scientists reacted to this cultural hotbed of political irrationalism, i.e., by postulating the existence of what Schorske deemed “psychological man,” who emerged from the “wreckage” of the older, liberal-rational culture. The chapter on Sigmund Freud (whose work had a deep influence on Schorske’s historical thought more generally) was particularly delightful, a stunning exercise that combined shrewd intellectual detective work on Freud’s familial and social location with illuminating close readings of one of his most familiar texts, *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1899). Freud’s view of the instinctual human mind, Schorske argued, could be read as part of a larger, scientific response to the illusions of Liberal

¹¹ Carl E. Schorske, *Fin-de-siècle Vienna: Politics and Culture* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1980).

¹² Schorske, “A Life of Learning,” 13.

¹³ Schorske, *Fin-de-siècle Vienna*, 49.

rationalism, whereby Freud “neutralize[d] politics by reducing it to psychological categories.”¹⁴ This chapter embedded Freud’s emphasis on the instinctual within a broader array of generational processes in the arts and politics that provided refuge from the failure of an “extruded” liberalism.

One of the surprising omissions in the book was the absence of a serious engagement with Victor Adler and Austrian Socialism, a gap filled by one of Schorske’s most prominent students, William J. McGrath.¹⁵ Yet, the absence of socialism was not surprising within the general architecture of the book, given that, for Schorske, the real problem facing the Austrian high bourgeoisie was not the threat they faced from the proletarian streets but rather the crisis of confidence they endured as a result of deeply painful intra-bourgeois struggles. Lueger’s and Schönere’s *kleinbürgerliche* devotees hated Schorske’s Social Democrats, but they hated his Ringstrasse Liberals even more.

Among scholars of Vienna and the Habsburg Empire, Schorske’s arguments met both respectful allegiance and assertive criticism, including a slightly critical but still admiring review by the present author.¹⁶ For a book as broad and differentiated as this one, it was inevitable that specialists in each of the subfields touched upon by the book might challenge this or that interpretation—or the absence of such. Still, the book was and remains a masterpiece of elegant writing, careful and shrewd judgments, and arresting interpretive connectivity among different genres of history, all the while focusing on significant, bold, and large-bore problems. It was also a literary *Gesamtkunstwerk* that scrupulously avoided jargon and stylistic egocentrism of any kind. Finally, Schorske’s fair-minded book prized clarity of expression and cogency of analysis. I often commend *Fin-de-siècle Vienna* to my undergraduate and graduate students as a model of sagacious and deeply professional connoisseurship, written with a larger, historically educated public in mind rather than catering only to a tiny crew of hyper-specialists.

Carl Schorske was a remarkably passionate and gifted historian with an equally fascinating historical mind, a humanist of many qualities, and a teacher who had a tremendous impact on the legions of students privileged to study with him. He was a true professional who had strong views about the flaws of the political world of postwar America and the condition of its universities, but did not allow those views to bias or impede his scholarly balance and objectivity.

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¹⁴Ibid., 22, 186.

¹⁵William J. McGrath, *Dionysian Art and Populist Politics in Austria* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1974). Schorske would have likely agreed with Hans Mommsen’s argument about the linkage between older German-Liberal cultural values pertaining to nationalism and the ideals of the first two generations of Socialist leadership in Austria. See Hans Mommsen, *Die Sozialdemokratie und die Nationalitätenfrage im habsburgischen Vielvölkerstaat. Das Ringen um die supranationale Integration der zisleithanischen Arbeiterbewegung (1867–1907)* (Vienna: Europa-Verlag, 1963), 317–18.

¹⁶See the review in *Journal of Modern History* 52, no. 4 (1980): 725–30. For a still influential critique, see Steven Beller, *Vienna and the Jews, 1867–1938: A Cultural History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), and, more recently, idem, “Fin de Fin-de-Siècle Vienna? A Letter of Remembrance,” *Contemporary Austrian Studies* 20 (2011): 46–80. For thoughtful overviews of the some of the most relevant issues, see Michael S. Roth, “Performing History: Modernist Contextualism in Carl Schorske’s *Fin-de-Siècle Vienna*,” *American Historical Review* 99, no. 3 (1994): 729–45; Allan Janik, “Vienna 1900 Revisited: Paradigms and Problems,” in *Rethinking Vienna 1900*, ed. Steven Beller (New York: Berghahn, 2001), 27–56; Michael Gubser, “A Cozy Little World: Reflections on Context in Austrian Intellectual History,” *Austrian History Yearbook* 40 (2009): 202–14.