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Arthur Schnitzler, Political Identity Formation, and First-Republic Austria

On the evening of 16 February 1921, organized demonstrators disrupted a performance of Arthur Schnitzler's *Reigen* at the *Kammerspiele* of the *Deutsches Volkstheater* in Vienna. Schnitzler experienced that evening first-hand when he attended the performance, much to the surprise of some of the ensemble, who were well acquainted with the rumors that such a demonstration was being planned by operatives connected to the Christian Social party and the Catholic Church. After passing through the extraordinary security detail called out by the chief of police, Schnitzler spent time backstage. This was soon interrupted by an organized attempt from within the theater to stop the play; the audience was attacked and forced onto the stage, chairs were thrown from the balcony into the lower seats, the actors retreated, and the police used water cannons to disperse the crowd. Chaos prevailed, and the evening's final performance was cancelled. Schnitzler summed up the events in a terse diary entry: "Der ganze Abend ein Unicum in der Theatergeschichte."¹

What was all the fuss about? If one were to have predicted what events would precipitate the first constitutional test of the new republic's government, Schnitzler's *Reigen* would not leap to mind. Given the more immediate concerns in February 1921 of stabilizing the currency, feeding the hungry, and sorting out jurisdictional questions arising from the newly decentralized federal system, it does seem on the surface odd that the Austrian republic's first flirtation with civil war would be precipitated by the production of a play. Schnitzler, to be sure, had predicted much of the uproar already in 1919, when he remarked in his diary: "Wies [...] auf die Schwierigkeiten hin; und besonders auf die voraussichtlich schlechte Haltung der Presse. Schimpferei der Antisemiten – und Lauheit der anderen – Skandale, die schädigen könnten."² In spite of such prescient skepticism, Schnitzler's eventual decision to agree to the Viennese production attests to his optimism that the political climate had improved, or,

1 Arthur Schnitzler, *Tagebuch 1920–1922*, Vienna 1993, p. 144.

2 Idem, *Tagebuch 1917–1919*, Vienna 1985, p. 246.

perhaps more to the point, that financial concerns and need outweighed the risks involved with proceeding.

Still, this does not answer the question: why *Reigen*? The demonstration on 16 February 1921 was part of a larger political calculation by the Christian Socials and the Catholic Church, in which the production of *Reigen* represented a safe site to mobilize their own disillusioned constituency with an appeal to traditional virtues such as honor and morality while casting the play as a threat to such values. An additional element of this calculation was that the Social Democrats would be reluctant to oppose them vociferously because of the play's apparent lack of class consciousness and obsolescence with regard to contemporary social problems. Critics in the press would also fall into line by proving reluctant to go to the barricades in defense of artistic freedom when the work of art in question seemed of a piece with the *versunkene Welt* of the monarchy. Such a political calculation rested on certain assumptions based on the stability of meaning the play's contents might represent, and it was here that the calculation was flawed, for the closer one examines what is going on in *Reigen*, vis-à-vis power relationships, gender roles and performance, and class difference, the less safe it appears as a site to stage such a *Kulturkampf*.

One unifying aspect of Schnitzler's series of ten dialogues is the regulation and control of desire through language. After each couple glides towards the precipice of total abandonment to the other, they rescue themselves through language in idioms that are typical of their social standing and the preserve the veneer of social relations based on class hierarchy and gender roles. Far from being a relic of a bygone age, *Reigen*'s dialogues provided a telling analogy to the domestic political situation of the Austrian republic in 1921: the institutional mechanisms set up to mediate social and political conflict were flirting with chaos, and the new republican political culture was not yet mature enough to accept such a mediating role without recourse to demonization and demagoguery in the public debates. In examining the immediate reception of the 1921 production of *Reigen*, the rhetoric employed by the Christian Socials, and, to a lesser extent the Social Democrats, merits special attention. This rhetoric is remarkably consistent in its invocation of stereotypical images and appeals to lost honor, particularly the appeal to protect women's honor. Yet, if we are to follow the language employed in the political debate, one sees more at work in the demagoguery surrounding the play's public reception than merely the demonization of one's opponent. Rather, the drive to disrupt the free exchange of ideas in the context of an artistic product provided its followers with the opportunity to unburden deep-seated resentments towards modernity in general and the institutions of the new Austrian republic in particular. Viewed in this

light, the organized demonstrations of 16 February 1921 form a paradoxical parallel to the actions depicted in the play, by providing the demonstrators with an opportunity for an ecstatic experience of their own power and simultaneously re-inscribing traditional values onto republican governance. Perhaps it was no accident, then, that the staging of Schnitzler's *Reigen* would become the site of such a *Kulturkampf*; many of Schnitzler's works draw an even more specific parallel between the erotics of the private sphere and the politics of the public sphere, ultimately showing such an arbitrary division into public and private domains to be illusory.³

In the elections of October 1920, the Christian Socials prevailed at the national level while Vienna's provincial and city governments remained under Socialist control. The newly enacted Republican constitution guaranteed such basic freedoms as those of assembly, press, religion, and artistic expression. Nevertheless, there was still a confusion of legal precedent and jurisdiction, and the staging of *Reigen* and its attendant controversy brought many of these questions into starker relief. Whereas the posturing and rhetoric of the political parties had proceeded with more accountability in the context of the Monarchy's paternalistic organization, in the Republic the parties were faced with a newfound responsibility to the voters and to democratic institutional organization. Such a transition is never easy, but given the massive social dislocation and pressing material problems, there was an added incentive to have recourse to more modes of conflict resolution than had obtained under the monarchy. Hence, the temptation among the political parties to emphasize issues and events that would actually distract the voting population from the more immediate tasks facing the society. Ironically, Schnitzler's *Reigen* was hardly an empty vessel, but rather demonstrated the disjuncture between rhetoric and instinct, something that was reenacted with a vengeance in the public debate surrounding the play's staging.

For the Christian Socials, *Reigen* provided an ideal symbolic site in their battle with the Social Democrats. Given the far-reaching education reform of the public schools instituted by the Socialist Otto Glöckel in 1920, which set strict limits on the role of the Church in public education, it was only natural that the Christian Socials and Catholic Church would frame the issues surrounding *Reigen*'s staging in terms of moral education.⁴ The most organized protest against the production of the play came from this alliance: riots were

3 See A. Clive Roberts, *Arthur Schnitzler and Politics*, Riverside 1989, p. 121.

4 On Glöckel, see Richard Olechowski, *Schulpolitik*, in: Erika Weinzierl / Kurt Skalník (eds.), *Österreich 1918–1938*, Graz 1983, p. 595.

staged at selected performances, and the journalistic organs of the Right fanned the flames with numerous articles that attributed all manner of social evils and decadence to the play.

The constitutional crisis itself was precipitated by the refusal of Vienna's provisional governor and mayor Jakob Reumann, a Socialist, to enforce a national policy directive from the interior minister Egon Glanz that the production of *Reigen* be prohibited. The matter was then brought to the Constitutional Court by Glanz, which eventually annulled Glanz's order on a technicality, but did not address the underlying principle of the freedom of artistic expression. A third player in the scandal was the local police force, under the leadership of Johannes Schober, a man with strong monarchical credentials and with the reputation of being above the fray of party politics; Schober's force would have the task of making sure the play proceeded without incident and of ensuring the audience's safety, yet its commitment to this was at times ambivalent: the force deployed on 16 February 1921 was small, given the widespread rumors of organized demonstrations that were to occur within the theater, and its decision to cancel the production following the demonstrations seemed to acquiesce in the protesters' demands.

In the ensuing parliamentary debates, the loudest voices by far were those of the protesters; these well-organized groups demanded the immediate banning of the production, based on a perceived threat to the welfare of the community.⁵ The specific grounds of these groups' objections were that the play endangered the country's children and undermined any remaining feelings of shame among a 'healthy' citizenry, and the alleged threat that the play posed to women's honor.⁶ In the parliamentary debates, women played prominent roles in arguing precisely this point. Dr. Alma Seitz-Mosko, for instance:

“Wir erheben flammenden Protest gegen dieses Vorgehen, das die Würde und die Ehre deutscher Frauen auf das tiefste verletzt.”⁷

As part of their attempt to justify the use of violence, the Christian Socials coupled calls for order with a concern to reinstate traditional gender roles.

That the production of the play became a political issue disappointed Schnitzler to such a degree that he ultimately withdrew the play from sub-

5 See Alfred Pfoser / Kristina Pfoser-Schewig / Gerhard Renner, *Schnitzlers Reigen: Zehn Dialoge und ihre Skandalgeschichte*, Frankfurt/M. 1993; Gerd Schneider, *Die Rezeption von Schnitzler's Reigen*, Riverside 1995.

6 Untitled editorial, in: *Die Reichspost*, 1 February 1921.

7 Untitled editorial, in: *Die Reichspost*, 12 February 1921.

sequent production during his lifetime. The authorities' ominous capitulation before the dictates of well-organized pressure groups would become a characteristic of political life during the First Republic. Increasingly, cultural issues became the battleground for political argument; anti-democratic forces tended to stress the need for art to be affirming and non-threatening, that is, to protect individuals from the upheavals of modern life, while pro-democratic forces tended to emphasize the freedom of the artist as a fundamental tenet of a democratic order. In any case, it was ironic that those involved were distracted from addressing the very social ills depicted in such texts as *Reigen*.

What made the situation doubly ironic was the fact that the play's principal advocates in the public debate, isolated literary critics and Social Democrats, found themselves defending a work of art dismissed by many of their colleagues or comrades as antiquated or bourgeois. Because it was not formally innovative in the sense of, e.g., Expressionist drama, critics found it difficult to justify going to the barricades in defense of the freedom of the artist when the work apparently did not deal with contemporary issues. By the same token, the Social Democrats' arguments in favor of the play were muted because of its oversight of the more overtly political dimensions of the Empire.

The historian Alfred Pfoser has aptly summed up the situation of mid-February 1921 in Vienna when almost all of Austria's leading politicians, the newspapers' political columnists, the church's representatives, many writers, prominent jurists, and naturally the person on the street, busied themselves with the topic of literature. The city was divided, alliances formed; it was all about power, influence, coalitions, morality, and the condition of a recently born republic. The threat of civil war was all too real. Violence was not confined to verbal attacks: in Parliament members even came to blows.⁸

In the comments that he committed to his diary, Schnitzler was equally disgusted by both sides of the debate; accused all the politicians who got involved of opportunism and of appealing to the lowest common denominator. On 10 February 1921, for instance, one reads:

“Die Zeitungen erfüllt von Reigen. Welches Spiel der Verlogenheiten. Politicum, unaufrichtig Feind wie Freund.”⁹

He was particularly disappointed with his supporters in the press, whom he accused of cowardice in the defence of a principle:

8 Pfoser / Pfoser-Schewig / Renner, Schnitzlers *Reigen*, p. 81.

9 Schnitzler, *Tagebuch 1920–1922*, p. 141.

“Die Zeitungen, die liberalen, Tagblatt und Neue Freie Presse, vorbildlich in ihrer feigen Objektivität. Eigentlich finden sie [...] das Gesindel habe wohl Unrecht aber [...] ich, immerhin, habe doch den Reigen aufführen lassen.”¹⁰

The primary objection articulated here is that the institutions set up to guarantee a free exchange of ideas and the rule of law had instead resumed the same repression of democratic impulses that had obtained under the monarchy, only without the benign umbrella of the Habsburg bureaucracy.

Two relatively isolated voices in the press reception stand out, mainly because they were able to bypass the rhetoric to address more fundamental questions of art in a democracy: these were to be found in the newspaper columns of Robert Musil and Bertha Zuckerkandl. Musil resisted the temptation to discuss the content of the play, instead focusing his attention on the role of official government agencies with respect to works of art:

“Der Staat hat zur Kunst nur ein einziges Verhältnis zu haben: dass er Einrichtungen schafft, welche sie garantieren. Die Bühne ist eine moralische Anstalt, er hat die Anstalt zu schützen und ihr die Moral zu überlassen.”¹¹

Musil’s sober emphasis on this basic principle was apparently lost in the heat of the debate. Zuckerkandl’s review of the scandal both drew a parallel between the play’s contents and its reception and registered with sadness the capitulation of democratic institutions in the face of an organized mob: “Ist denn das Gefühl verlorengegangen, dass es sich in Wahrheit bei diesem ganzen Reigen-Rummel weder um Theaterfragen, noch um Sittlichkeitsbedenken, noch um Machtkompetenzen zu handeln hat, wenn ein Eingriff in die Rechte künstlerischer Unabhängigkeit und geistiger Freiheit überhaupt erfolgt?” and further “dass allmählich aus solcher Moralriecherei eine allumfassende Unterjochung jeder Wahrheit sich kristallisiert. Darin liegt die Bedeutung der Auseinandersetzung, welche in der Nationalversammlung so dramatische Formen annahm.”¹² Zuckerkandl was the only member of Schnitzler’s social circle to stand up for him publicly and for the basic principle of freedom of artistic expression in the democratic context.

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 146.

¹¹ Robert Musil, Prager Presse, 30 March 1921.

¹² Bertha Zuckerkandl, Wiener Allgemeine Zeitung, 14 February 1921.

While Schnitzler recognized the First Republic to be the first real opportunity to put the liberal program of 1867 into practice, he stressed that little had been done to prepare the individual citizen for the responsibility of more active participation in political life, both public and private. This, in turn, reinforced old habits of deference to authority and exclusion of those deemed inferior within the social fabric. In his response to Jakob Wassermann's criticism that such concerns were no longer valid in a new age, Schnitzler's response is instructive and ominously prescient:

“In den einzelnen Menschen hat sich nicht die geringste Veränderung vollzogen, nichts anderes ist geschehen, als dass verschiedene Hemmungen weggeräumt sind und dass allerlei Bübereien und Schurkereien mit einem verhältnismäßig geringeren Risiko in jeder Hinsicht, sowohl materiell als ethisch genommen, verübt werden können, als es früher der Fall war. Eine gewisse soziale Umschichtung – bei uns in Österreich in höchst bescheidenem Maße – hat sich vielleicht vollzogen; aber wo ist in Wirklichkeit ein Zusammenbruch, wo andererseits eine Einkehr, wo die geringste Wandlung im ideellen Sinn zu bemerken?”¹³

Though this letter has at times been interpreted as a nostalgic lament for a bygone age, I would argue that it is a manifestly political argument concerning the continuity in Austrian society in the First Republic; the *Reigen* affair demonstrated that established power still prevailed against more democratic impulses and interests.

The *Reigen* affair proved a watershed in the cultural politics of the new Republic by showing that extra-political means, including violence, could be employed against the basic freedoms inscribed in the Constitution. It also reinforced Schnitzler's disillusionment with the institutions of democratic reform as exemplified in Austria. It does not follow, however, that he was not interested in the phenomenon of political behavior or the ultimate reform of these institutions. Since Schnitzler was reluctant to comment publicly on the controversy, instead referring interlocutors to his literary works, I would like to turn briefly to the work that Schnitzler was working on at the time of the *Reigen* affair, the novella *Die Frau des Richters*, which was published in 1923.

The central theme of *Die Frau des Richters*, the struggle of the forces of revolution and change against those of reaction and continuity, was one of the

13 Arthur Schnitzler, *Briefe 1913–1931*, Frankfurt/M. 1984, p. 370.

defining political debates of the Austrian First Republic. The *Reigen* affair had had a profound effect on Schnitzler's assessment of the viability of Republican institutions. One of the conclusions he drew was that the social forces that had an interest in preserved the status quo were not necessarily only those that had protested against the production. Rather, it was the bureaucratic apparatus, especially the police and city government who shared the main responsibility with a press that had not been rigorous in the defense of freedom of the artist. The ease with which the fledgling Republican institutions capitulated cannot be explained by the political power of the protesters, since this was relatively small. In his novella, Schnitzler paints a picture of a society that all-too-easily abandons the impetus to reform institutions or to act on principle.

It is particularly on this point that the novella works by analogy as a commentary on the Austrian transition from monarchy to democratic republic. The text suggests that the institutions of hierarchical power are based on an ideology of subservience perpetuated the very subjects they control, and that such ideology is far more tenacious than the institutional apparatus that can be dismantled – at least in name – in the transition from one regime to another. Schnitzler thus implies that the Republic is republican in name only, adopting a self-image of emancipatory ideals which mask the more nefarious aspects of the ideological legacy of the monarchy. The necessary counterpart of arbitrary state authority is the individual citizen who forfeits emancipatory potential in order to maintain or advance his or her social position. The step to countenancing barbarism, or even engaging in it, becomes a short one.

Schnitzler's *Die Frau des Richters* illustrates, by its depiction of parallel, yet conventionally unfathomable, tragic fates, the cost to society of ignoring its emancipatory potential. To be sure, the historical setting is far removed in space and time from that of the First Austrian Republic, but this is no reason to discount its specific relevance as a commentary on the purported building of democratic institutions in Austria. The rapprochement between state power and individual citizens, and the resulting continuity over time of political and social organizations, were central aspects of the First Republic's failure to adhere to democratic principles and build robust democratic institutions. Schnitzler here confronts a contemporary political phenomenon with a suggestive return to history's downtrodden.

The play *Reigen* and the novella *Die Frau des Richters* have in common their conflation of public and private spheres. In particular, Schnitzler exposes the degree to which sex is perceived as potential liberation from oppression, social expectation, or class prejudice, but that it is simultaneously capable of being instrumentalized in the service of political ends. The titular heroine

Agnes's emancipatory impulses do not find a corresponding social echo, since they are easily co-opted by those in the society who wield power. The libidinous liberation enacted by Agnes indirectly perpetuates institutional continuity in their respective social contexts; it is not followed by a corresponding liberation from those who hold power. The public reception of *Reigen* in the 1920s provides a suggestive parallel.

Büste von Arthur Schnitzler im Wiener Türkenschanzpark, in der Nähe seiner Villa in der Sternwartestraße

Claudia Kuretsidis-Haider
privat

