

The Need for a Demystified Past: Remarks on Austria's Vergangenheitsbewältigung

Robert Rotenberg, DePaul University

Hermine G. De Soto, University of Wisconsin-Madison

Robert Rotenberg's article, "Anti-Semitism and Victimhood in Waldheim's Vienna," points toward a post World War II Austria in which unresolved, hidden and traumatic dimensions of the Nazi regime were somewhat exposed through the tragic and bizarre behavior of Waldheim during 1988. The year 1988 was marked not only by celebrations of the centennial of the Burgtheater but also by the fiftieth anniversary of the Austrians' Anschluss with Hitler regime. To borrow Charles S. Maier's terms (1988) (having West Germany in mind), what became public with Waldheim and the year of 1988 was "the unmasterable past" of Austria. Rotenberg's recent observations and descriptions of Vienna show that many contemporary Austrians are eager to perceive themselves as victims of Hitler's dictatorship. This prolonged mythology has developed into an inability for many Austrians to come to terms with the Nazi past and its incomprehensible and horrendous human suffering. The possibility to express a moral awareness, a sense of responsibility, sensitivity, truthfulness, and civil courage in regard to Austria's position and involvement with the Nazi regime has, thus, been nearly denied to the Austrian people.

Rotenberg points out that many Austrian citizens, some of the political leaders, and several members of the media firmly support Waldheim's untruthful statements about his involvement with the criminal past of the Hitler regime. Accompanying this public support, according to Rotenberg is a new form of anti-Semitism that is explicitly being exposed by the powerful and conservative Kronenzeitung. This linguistic pattern of anti-Semitism, however, is not limited to reproduction in the daily newspapers; this symbolic representation can be heard in daily conversations in the Austrian metropolis.

In what follows, I will further explore the problems of anti-Semitism and victim in Austria that were observed by Rotenberg. In light of rising developments, it is important to ask continually why ever so many Austrians today do not break through the mythologized past and examine historical facts instead of continuing to escape into the myth of victimhood.

The Austrians, as well as the Germans, need to remember, work through, and face up to the Nazi past since that past caused terrible suffering, insults, moral denigration, physical torment, and human losses for the Jewish Austrian population, the Gypsies, incurably ill people, and many others who were classified and degraded as being Untermenschen in Austria's and Germany's Hitler dictatorship (Botz 1987:148). According to Botz, the ahistorical awareness of today in Austria finally became internationally exposed through the Waldheim affair. Similarly, Rotenberg observed such an ahistorical view among the Viennese in 1988. However, these unreflective perspectives were produced and based on a social scientific learning process, one which transmitted these perspectives long before Waldheim's behavior became a scandal and an embarrassment. For Botz (1987), the cultural educational transmission in Austria after World War II was virtually ineffective in developing a democratic political culture, instead, what the education process had developed was an ahistorical freezing-up not only of the intellect but, worse than that, of morals.

For Botz, there was one important issue which was brought to the surface and clarified in the Waldheim case, namely that a reflective, critical, rational, and open liberalism still is rare in many parts of Austria. What seems to appear, instead, are conservative and provincial forces that are quite successful in passing on ideological practices within the recent political and cultural scenarios of Austrian society (Botz 1987:141).

The Austrian politician Peter Jankowitch, for example, began to publicly delegitimize foreign historians such as Robert Knight and Gordon Craig for writing and reminding Austria of its participation with the regime of the Nazis. In short, Jankowitch called upon Austrian historians to write Austria's history in a perspective "in which our country and its people are representatives who a long time ago had successfully set themselves free from the past" [my translation] (Botz 1987:142). As can be seen by this example the German Historikerstreit, (2) or the historians', dispute, had raised similar problematic issues. Such questions developed there into new and necessary problematizations, focusing on the West German context: today there is a need for a similar rigorous inquiry regarding the Austrian Nazi past. How should Austrians morally and intellectually come to terms with the distorted Nazi past? How should the suffering of millions of people caused by Hitler's regime be passed on and be remembered by the new Austrians' generations?

In Austria such a remembrance of the past is equally necessary and must be transmitted through the educational process. It is this process about which Jurgen Habermas (1988: 7987:137) wrote so forcefully and which is generally being ignored in Austria. Habermas reminded us that Hitler's Nazi past could not be relativized or, even worse, politically rewritten, as Jankowitch suggests (above), without accounting for a time in which a society participated in such a regime.

In light of Austria's past, historical facts must always be remembered in the specific context in which they occurred, especially in a context in which, as Simon Wiesenthal reminds us, many Austrians supported the murdering of three million Jewish people, and where it was planned that more than 500 thousand Austrians of Slavic descent should be deported (Botz 1987:150). In that Austria, more than 120 thousand Jewish people were forcefully driven out of their country (Knight 1987:9 in Frankfurter Rundschau). What must also be remembered is that more than 600 thousand Austrians (almost 10 percent of the population) were active National Socialists then (Der Spiegel, 1988:164).

In light of these horrendous human sufferings, how can a myriad of Austrians continue to live with "a myth of victimhood," as Rotenberg calls it? How can the Waldheim lies be supported? How can some Austrian politicians claim that the Nazi past has been mastered? It is abstruse that Austrians themselves can believe that a bureaucratically prevented war guilt would help them individually and collectively to work through a painful and difficult past.

The fact that such a public and individual rethinking is of utmost importance, especially today, is also supported by Walter Oswald's (1989:10) report that approximately 25 percent of Austria's citizens are radical anti-Semites, and that only a small minority shows no anti-Semitic prejudice. But more than that, presently, some social groups seem to seek what the Freedom Party of Austria (FPO) and its leader Jorg Haider are pushing toward, that is, a modern form of an Austrian pan-German movement, which in itself is not a new ideology in Austria. Already some years ago, Hannah Arendt (1968) outlined the basic social structure of an earlier Austrian version of such a movement. She wrote:

This Austrian movement aimed at more than rise to power as a party, more than the possession of the state machinery. It wanted a revolutionary reorganization of Central Europe in which the Germans of Austria, together with and strengthened by the Germans of Germany

would become the ruling people, in which all other peoples of the area would be kept in the same kind of semiservitude as the Slavonic nationalities in Austria (1968:45).

The right wing and radical demands of Jorg Haider resemble a new form of a pan-German movement. For instance, the rhetoric of Haider emphasizes a *Kulturkampf* in which Austrians are called upon to endorse the idea that South Tyrol (Italy) belongs culturally to Austria, and that language education in schools needs to be taught separately, a demand that is also voiced by other Austrian parties such as the OVP, the SPO, and the FPÖ (3) (Oswald 1989:10; *The Economist* 1989:9-17). Similarly, Rotenberg writes in his article that he observed new forms of anti-Semitism in Vienna, and that several Viennese find it attractive to listen to imperialistic ideologies.

All of this indicates that Austria perseverely needs to demystify perceptions of victimhood in order to develop a historical consciousness that will allow for what Jurgen Habermas (1988) recently called a development toward a post-traditional identity. A demystification of the past within such a perspective would mean that the past would have to be problematized. However, a deeper understanding of this specific past, according to Habermas, cannot be gained as long as such an analysis is based on a view of relativization of crimes of the Nazi past, because the real danger is that the new generation would be deprived of the "historical truth [which] could get lost in this kind of historiographical position" (Habermas 1988:4).

Concurring with Habermas, we of the new generation "need an unclouded consciousness of a break with the ugly traditions for an unreserved opening to the political culture of the West." Such an opening for a development of a post-traditional identity first of all means to critically question particularistic values, such as those put forward by the pan-Germanists, because such values support stereotypical opinions of all forms of racism (e.g., anti-Semitism, cultural discrimination, gender disempowerment, and other chauvinistic provocations). Pan-Germanist values need to be directly challenged on all levels of social interactions, and they call for replacement and transformation toward universalistic values such as freedom, self-determination, equal rights, and solidarity with oppressed groups nationally and internationally. We must always remember that under the Nationalist Socialist regime, the latter values were destroyed and the former ones were declared sacred (i.e., national egoism, racism, and scapegoatism). Rotenberg's article reminds us that subjectively, as Habermas calls it (1988), we are liable for the past, and we are in need of an individual repentance, "a melancholy on account of the victims

whose suffering cannot be made good, a melancholy that places us under an obligation" (1988:10).

Similarly, Ferenc Feher, having Hungary in mind (1980), outlined and elaborated on conceptualizations developed from Istvan Bibó's methodology of a nonuniversalistic or "ritual community" and a more universalistically oriented world epoch. Clinging to values of the former for Feher means a reproduction of values and needs based on exclusion, rigidity, separateness, intolerance, nonreciprocal norms, projective and social images of otherness, alienness, and finally, racism. In such an environment, the anti-Semite develops a passion for hate, anger, and fear of truth (Feher 1980:3-46).

According to Jean Paul Sartre (1973), the anti-Semite receives his false empowerment in a "negative religion" (i.e., anti-Semitism), which he uses for a total disempowerment of other human beings. Rotenberg's article described a new form of anti-Semitism in Vienna today. Jean Paul Sartre in 1948 gave us a modern definition of an anti-Semite:

If a man attributes all or part of his own misfortunes and those of his country to the presence of Jewish elements in the community, if he proposes to remedy this state of affairs by depriving the Jews of certain of their rights, by keeping them out of certain economic and social activities, by expelling them from the country, by exterminating all of them, we say that he has anti-Semitic opinions (Sartre 1973:7).

If, as Rotenberg wrote, the Waldheim presidency forced Austrians to re-examine their past, the time is also at hand to change subjectively to reciprocity (Feher) and to work toward a process of a political culture of liberalism, allowing us a painful remembrance of an unforgettable and ugly past (Habermas).

Notes

1. English translation, coming to terms with the recent past.
2. It is not possible to discuss the complex debate of the historians' dispute here. The interested reader, however, will find the problematic discussed in detail in the following books: Ernst Nolte, *Das Vergehen der Vergangenheit, Antwort an meine Kritiker im sogenannten Historikerstreit*, (1987), Frankfurt: Verlag Ullstein GmbH; *Historiker* (Texts by 27 authors), (1987), München: R. Piper Verlag GmbH; Hans-Ulrich Wehler, *Entsorgung der deutschen Vergangenheit? Ein polemischer Essay zum 'Historikerstreit'* (1988), München: Verlag C. H. Beck; Dan Diner (Herausgeber) *Ist der Nationalsozialismus Geschichte? Zu Historisierung und Historikerstreit* (1987), Frankfurt, Fischer Verlag; Eike Hennig, *Zum Historikerstreit: was heisst*

und zu welchem Ende studiert man Faschismus? (1988), Frankfurt: Verlag Athenäum; an excellent English addition to this problematic is presented by Charles S. Maier, *The Unmasterable Past: History, Holocaust, and German National Identity* (1988), Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press; and Charles S. Maier, Stanley Hoffmann, and Andrew Gould (eds.), *The Rise of the Nazi Regime: Historical Reassessments* (1986), Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press.

3. The OVP stands for Volkspartei Österreich, the SPÖ for Sozialistische Partei Österreich, and the FPÖ for Freiheitliche Partei Österreich.

References

Arendt, Hannah 1968 *Antisemitism. Part One of the Origins of Totalitarianism*. New York. A Harvest/HBJ Book.

Botz, Gerhard 1987 "Österreich und die NS-Vergangenheit Verdrängung, Pflichterfüllung & Geschichtsklitterung" in Dan Diner (Hrsg.), *Ist der Nationalsozialismus Geschichte?* Frankfurt: Fischer Verlag GmbH.

Der Spiegel 1988 "Dieses Volk bekam, was es verdient." Nr. 6, pp. 164-177.

The Economist 1989 "Austria the shadow of the past," February 25, pp. 4-18.

Ferenc, Feher 1980 "Istvan Bibó and the Jewish Question in Hungary." *New German Critique* Nr. 21 (Special Issue III), Fall 1980, pp. 3-46.

Frankfurter Rundschau 1987 "Österreich war nicht Hitler's erstes Opfer." 10, 3, Nr. 58, p. 9.

Habermas, Jürgen 1988 "Historical Consciousness and Post-Traditional Identity: Remarks on the Federal Republic's Orientation to the West." *Acta Sociologica* (31)1:3-13.

Maier, Charles S. 1988 *The Unmasterable Past*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press.

Oswald, Walter 1989 "Dollfuß, Waldheim und ihr Nachwuchs." In *taz*, 11, 1, 89, p. 9.

Rotenberg, Robert 1989 *Anti-Semitism and Victimhood in Waldheim's Vienna*. The *Anthropology of East Europe Review*. 8 (1 & 2).

Sartre, Jean Paul 1968 *Anti-Semite and Jew*. New York: Schocken Books.

Wehler, Hans-Ulrich 1988 *Entsorgung der deutschen Vergangenheit?* München: C. H. Beck Verlag.

Acknowledgment

I am very grateful to Brigitte Young, Department of Political Science, University of Wisconsin-Madison, for letting me research her files of accumulated articles on the media coverage of the Waldheim affair.