Exclusive Revolutionaries: Liberal Politics, Social Experience, And National Identity In The Austrian Empire, 1848-1914

Pieter M. Judson, '78  
Swarthmore College, pjudson1@swarthmore.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://works.swarthmore.edu/fac-history

Part of the History Commons

Let us know how access to these works benefits you

Recommended Citation
https://works.swarthmore.edu/fac-history/157

This work is brought to you for free by Swarthmore College Libraries' Works. It has been accepted for inclusion in History Faculty Works by an authorized administrator of Works. For more information, please contact myworks@swarthmore.edu.
Introduction

This book traces the emergence and transformation of a German liberal movement in the Habsburg monarchy. In mid-nineteenth-century Austria men and women, largely of Bürger social origins, forged a political movement that challenged the legitimacy of the reigning systems of government. Calling themselves “liberals,” they mounted a revolutionary campaign in 1848 to establish their own rule over Austrian society. The ensuing struggles between liberalism and its various opponents were political in the broadest sense of the word. They were as much about establishing an alternative system of values and cultural practices in Austrian society as they were about mastering specific political institutions.

The liberals fought their battles using two strategies. The first of these produced an interregional political culture meant to serve as an alternative to the stifling rule of bureaucratic absolutism during the Vormärz. Organized through independent voluntary associations, this political culture became a means for building, coordinating, and controlling participation in politics by the Volk. The other strategy involved the deployment of a powerful public rhetoric developed by liberals to justify their revolution. Starting in 1848 with an explosion in print culture and the proliferation of voluntary associations, the values and perceptions associated with liberalism gradually came to dominate public discourse in the Habsburg monarchy. They remained a cultural force to be reckoned with long after the official liberal parties had declined in the 1890s.

Despite severe setbacks in the years following 1848, their strategies paid off in the 1860s as Austrian liberals enjoyed some success in their efforts to transform social and government institutions. In 1867 they imposed a constitution largely of their own making on an unwilling emperor, thereby ending the historic dominance of local politics by the bureaucracy, the nobility, and the Catholic Church. They established a system of compulsory education for Austrian youth, substantially reducing the influence of the church over curriculum and instruction. Already in the 1870s it was apparent that these victories had brought enormous changes to Austrian social and political life. Liberal political parties came to dominate local and state institutions in many parts of the
monarchy, while their economic and social reform projects often transformed sleepy provincial landscapes into booming centers of industrial production.

At the same time, liberal cultural values gradually gained broad acceptance in urban Austrian society. Most of these—ideas about market competition, individual self-improvement, personal respectability, and a confident rationalism—rested on the fundamental belief that the economically independent individual was the productive cornerstone of public life. It was this individual’s financial and intellectual independence that gained for him the rights of active citizenship. The logic behind this concept of active public citizenship implied the existence of a complementary realm as well, however, one inhabited by passive, dependent individuals who lacked the vision that supposedly derived from intellectual maturity and financial independence. Despite the equal status assigned to all people by a liberal rhetoric of universal citizenship, active citizens maintained implicitly hierarchic relationships with the women and children, as well as racial and class inferiors. The presumed inability of the latter to use reason consigned them to passive rights of citizenship. The ideological and juridical distance separating the denizens of these two spheres was simultaneously profound and insignificant, according to the liberal worldview. It was profound because passive citizens could never, as such, enjoy active rights of participation. Yet this gulf was also insignificant since basic human nature gave at least some of these passive citizens the tools for eventually earning the rights of active citizenship.

Starting with revolutionary events in 1848, liberal rhetoric about society reconciled any apparent contradiction between fundamental human equality and the political necessity of retaining distinctions between active and passive forms of citizenship. The success of this rhetoric reflected the liberals’ ability to connect the social practices with the beliefs of a politically frustrated urban Bürgertum inside their new political organizational structures. Common practice in local voluntary associations shaped the new liberal rhetoric, thereby ensuring the increasing popularity of such rhetoric throughout much of the socially and regionally diverse Habsburg monarchy. The combination of liberal ideology with an emerging liberal political culture provided both rhetorical and real spaces for the mediation of liberalism’s two powerful yet often contradictory urges in nineteenth-century Austria: between egalitarian demands for individual empowerment and the property owner’s desire to prevent potentially dangerous social change.

Another enduring legacy of liberal discourse about society, one that continues to dominate the political cultures of Central Europe today, was the creation of a nationalist identity politics among German bourgeois activists.¹

¹. I do not wish to imply here that German nationalism developed outside the context of other earlier and aggressive forms of nationalism like that of the Czechs. Nevertheless, I want to
Introduction

Since its appearance, scholars have framed German nationalism in nineteenth-century Austria, particularly its more radical varieties, as fundamentally opposed to liberal principles and practices. Contemporary observers and later historians alike attributed the very decline of political liberalism in the 1880s to the simultaneous political mobilization brought about by German nationalist activism. This book challenges that view, arguing that liberal rhetoric and organizational practice actually determined the shape and content of nationalist mass politics well into the twentieth century. The liberals themselves created a powerful new politics organized around nationalist identity in order to repulse the growing threats to their local hegemony, threats that were increasingly couched in nation-based (the Czechs), class-based (socialism), or race-based (anti-Semitism) discourse. Liberal rhetoric about society provided a crucial ideological foundation for the later explosion of German nationalist politics at the end of the nineteenth century, as activists transformed their ideas about the social differences that separated the spheres of active and passive citizenship into beliefs about national differences. The liberal belief in separate spheres of active and passive citizenship itself was transformed by 1900 into a discourse about cultural and, later, often racial difference. Even the German radical and anti-Semitic groups that challenged liberal hegemony in the 1880s and 1890s simply promised to carry out liberal nationalist commitments more effectively.

Historians have generally ignored these proofs of liberalism's underlying vitality to focus more narrowly on the Liberal Party's apparent inability to survive in an age of mass-based suffrage and political mobilization. Dwelling on Austrian liberalism's brief parliamentary history, they have treated liberalism largely as an unchanging ideological phenomenon with few natural constituents beyond an elitist upper bourgeoisie. Certainly the liberal parties faltered at the parliamentary level after 1880, and the uncritical acceptance of several traditional liberal values declined. A decade of harsh economic depression and the growing perceptions of a corrupt opportunism within the liberal parties weakened popular belief in liberalism's utopian promises and suggested that liberal rhetoric did not always match liberal actions. By 1900, the once powerful liberal movement seemed curiously spent as a political force in Austria. The liberal parties, once the largest bloc in parliament, all but disappeared, to be replaced by regional and nationalist interest groups. Unlike other liberal parties in Europe that managed to maintain some parliamentary presence well into the twentieth century, the Austrian liberals seem to have been completely eclipsed by the rise of mass socialist, Catholic, and nationalist populist parties on the left and right of the political spectrum.

stress the ways in which liberal and radical forms of German nationalism derived both their organizational style and their ideological content from liberalism and its traditions.
This parliamentary decline, however, represents only a small part of the story and one that was played out primarily in the imperial metropole Vienna. If one approaches liberalism from the perspective of the regional political cultures it created, the narrative looks very different. Liberal political culture seems to have reinvented itself frequently, adapting its influential social rhetoric and organizational practices to dramatically changing circumstances as it tried to maintain its power to order local society. From this viewpoint, the central drama of Austrian liberalism becomes the challenge to alter its practices in order to maintain its social hegemony, not its parliamentary defeat at the hands of the populist parties. Outside Vienna it was the liberals, not their populist opponents, who politicized ethnic and gender differences most successfully in the 1880s by forging a new mass politics organized around nationalism. In Austria, German nationalism came to serve a political function closely resembling that of early liberalism, namely to consolidate Bürger hegemony in local politics by demanding social unity at all costs. Nationalism helped to mediate an attempted *trasformismo* from traditionally elite liberal politics to a controlled form of mass politics under the watchful eye of Bürger elites. By the late nineteenth century, German nationalism often augmented liberalism as a worldview that promoted social harmony and the protection of property among a Bürgertum whose social parameters were increasingly more broadly defined.

Starting in the 1880s the few historians who wrote about Austrian liberalism approached it from the vantage point of its spectacular parliamentary decline. Reacting with bitterness to their loss of parliamentary power, nineteenth-century liberal observers criticized the apparent short-sightedness of their leaders, citing factionalism as the major reason for the movement’s downfall. These accounts dwelt on the excessive personal pride and greed displayed by party leaders, as well as their noticeable want of political acumen.

2. This is one problem, for example, with John Boyer’s observations about liberalism in *Political Radicalism in Late Imperial Vienna: Origins of the Christian Social Movement, 1848–1897* (Chicago, 1981).

Other historians with liberal sympathies blamed the movement's decline on the rapid rise of political nationalism at the end of the century. These observers believed that the rise of nationalism in the ethnically diverse monarchy eventually robbed political liberalism of its core urban constituencies. In both the First and Second Republics, the handful of nationalist voters who refused to support either the socialist or Catholic parties are still viewed as the missing constituents of liberalism.4

After the Second World War and particularly in the 1960s, Austrian liberalism fell victim to another powerful historical interpretation, the Sonderweg, or "exceptional route," theory of German development.5 Although this interpretation has been adequately criticized on both theoretical and empirical grounds by several historians of Germany, it is worth briefly pointing out how it has come to influence Austrian historiography. In the 1960s, several historians of Germany began looking explicitly to nineteenth-century political culture for keys to understanding the rise of authoritarianism in the 1930s. The "exceptional route" model explained twentieth-century fascism by charting the ways in which so-called preindustrial social and cultural patterns of behavior in the spheres of society and politics survived well into the "modern" era. An unusually weak bourgeoisie, unable to promote its own "modern" ways of doing business against the force of traditional elites, supposedly adapted itself to the melding, "semifeudal" structures of public life.6 Historians who promoted this view based it on several kinds of decontextualized sociological evidence, such as, for example, the authoritarian behavior of German industrial employers

Altösterreich: Geistesaltung, Politik, und Kultur (Munich: 1955) takes an unsympathetic, Catholic political approach.

4. This interpretation accorded well with a larger theory of political continuity that has served, since the 1950s, as the privileged explanation for past and present conflict in Austrian political life. That theory views the Austrian electorate as historically divided into three, generally unchanging voting blocs: Catholic, socialist and liberal/nationalist. Adam Wandruszka, "Österreichs politische Struktur; die Entwicklung der Parteien und politischen Bewegungen," Geschichte der Republik Österreich, ed. Heinrich Benedikt (Vienna, 1954), 291-485. It is important to note that while this theory appears to describe political behavior in the first and second Austrian Republics adequately, it completely ignores the political behavior of German speakers in other parts of the monarchy such as Bohemia and Moravia, which had been important centers of Liberal Party strength.


toward their workers, which they attributed to the survival of feudal traditions. In this example as with so many others, historians overlooked the possibility that such workplace behaviors may have had quite modern origins and may have suited the particular needs of German capital, particularly given the strength of organized labor in Germany.7

_Sonderweg_ historians also held up the achievement of fully democratic parliamentary political institutions as a critical standard by which the success or failure of nineteenth-century liberal movements ought to be measured. This anachronistic reading misrepresented the political philosophy and social goals of nineteenth-century liberals and misunderstood the critical distinction between public civic equality and private hierarchy that underlay liberal beliefs about political democratization. Few liberals, whether British, French, German, or Austrian, felt comfortable enough with the idea of political democracy to support the immediate extension of unrestricted suffrage to the working classes. Liberals could not even agree on extending the suffrage to middle-class women. And as several historians have repeatedly pointed out, Britain, that paragon of liberal development, introduced universal manhood suffrage long after Germany had done so.8

Comparative analysis in the last decade has at least relativized the more ahistorical claims of the _Sonderweg_ approach. Yet troublesome questions remain regarding the assumed links between twentieth-century authoritarianism and earlier forms of social organization. Those links may be well worth pursuing precisely because they indicate phenomena too complex to be explained away simply in terms of the survival of traditional elites. If elements of Austrian corporatism or fascism developed from nineteenth-century antecedents, those antecedents may reflect modern responses to nineteenth-century conditions and not the remnants of feudal culture. Blind to this possibility, however, most _Sonderweg_ historians attributed fascism’s appeal to the survival in Central Europe of traditional authoritarian social elites who had supposedly vanquished a weak nascent liberalism in the nineteenth century. Often taking fascism at its own word, they stressed its conservative ideological critique of liberal, individualist capitalism while playing down its strong anti-trade unionist policies and its obsession with the protection of individual property rights and bourgeois family norms. The label totalitarianism, popularized during the 1950s, aided this fiction by lumping German fascism together with Soviet communism in a general category clearly opposed to the more advanced liberal individualism upheld by

7. For an elaboration of this point, see, for example, Dick Geary, “The Industrial Bourgeoisie and Labour Relations in Germany 1871–1933,” in _The German Bourgeoisie: Essays on the Social History of the German Middle Class from the Late Eighteenth to the Early Twentieth Century_, ed. David Blackbourn and Richard Evans (London and New York, 1991).
the United States and Western Europe. Both fascism and communism, it was claimed, developed in backward societies with politically weak middle classes and surviving traditions of authoritarian rule.9

Most historians located liberalism’s specific failure in its inability to forge democratic change from the revolutions that raged across Central Europe in 1848–49. This was the critical moment at which, in the words of A. J. P. Taylor, history reached its turning point and then, in Germany and Austria, “failed to turn.”10 The liberals ought to have destroyed the power of the traditional elites (or at least badly damaged it), as had their British and French counterparts. Instead, the story goes, their failure to impose more democratic political institutions on the Austrian monarchy proved that they lacked the robust dynamism of their British or French counterparts. This apparent failure and the resilience of the dynasty, aristocracy and army held serious consequences for Austria’s later development. Small wonder that Austrian liberalism, beset by nationalist and class conflict and with little apparent popular support, failed in the tasks historians (if not history) set for it.11

The picture of a backward and doomed Habsburg monarchy has been reinforced by a teleological view of national conflict in Austria-Hungary. In its final years, nationalist strife appears to have overwhelmed the empire and posed a serious obstacle to the kind of reasoned political discourse favored by liberal middle-class groups. The sheer inevitability of ethnic conflagration, it is argued, made the question of liberal options or achievements largely irrelevant. Noting the power of this line of thought, one historian has recently observed that “Ideas of what was possible for nineteenth-century Austrian liberalism are colored by conventional ideas about what was possible for the old empire. If we believe the empire was ‘destined’ to collapse, this is likely to affect our approach to liberalism and its fate.”12

The fact that so many national groups seem to have coexisted uneasily in a single state makes the monarchy appear qualitatively different from its neighbors to the north and west. Nationalist conflict, it is imagined, had to ex-


11. The pervasive influence of Carl Schorske’s brilliant Fin de siècle Vienna: Politics and Culture (New York, 1980), which relies on several of these assumptions about Austrian liberalism, testifies to their continuing ability to persuade.

12. Ritter, “Austro-German Liberalism,” 232. Despite the laudable efforts of several historians to challenge this approach, it remains powerful, partially due to the contemporary importance
plode because this state was not a true nation state organized around a single national group. Yet if anything, recent scholarship has taught us to view the traditional nationalist claims of France, Germany, or Italy with some skepticism and to ask how nineteenth-century state policy actually created national citizens out of radically diverse local populations. Is it not finally time to see the Habsburg monarchy in the same terms as those other states?

In the last fifteen years, new historical work on state, economy, and society in Austria and Germany has helped substantially to modify these rather extreme views. Studies of regional economies and markets have revealed the underlying strength of capitalist transformation and industrial development in many parts of the monarchy, placing regions like Bohemia and Lower Austria within the context of Western European trends. Comparative analyses have also demonstrated the rather obvious point that capitalist economic systems do not necessarily require a British or American political model in order to flourish. Ironically, some historians now suggest that the survival of traditional elites was stronger in Britain than usually admitted, while in Central Europe a thriving bourgeois class exercised a variety of powers in unexpected ways. Scholarship on Austria has especially benefited from new approaches to the study of social groups loosely defined as Bürger and their often hidden but nonetheless effective means of defining their interests and exerting influence. Regional social histories have revealed the complex associational networks that structured middle-class social life in the nineteenth century. Traditionally viewed as a source of social division in Central Europe, the voluntary association actually helped middle-class Austrians to formulate and disseminate common social and cultural norms. The associations constituted a middle-class public sphere where interregional issues could be recast in terms of local identities and struggles.

Austrian scholars themselves have recently initiated a series of ambitious international projects designed to study the social origins and developing cultures of various Bürger and Mittelstand groups in all parts of the former monarchy. Yet relatively little of this excellent new work has yielded a discussion of Bürger political culture. Instead, most historians of this highly variegated Bürgertum focus on regional class formation without class politics. The student of the period is left with carefully nuanced insights into an emerging bourgeois world, insights that coexist uncomfortably with more rudimen-

mentary knowledge of that world’s various means of political expression. It is not as if good models were not available for the kind of work that would connect class formation to class politics. Fifteen years ago, groundbreaking books by American scholars Gary B. Cohen and John W. Boyer had already presented superb local studies of Bürger political culture in Prague and Vienna.

My own approach challenges several common interpretations of liberalism in Central Europe, particularly the importance it assigns to the culture of the voluntary association. This focus should redress the exaggerated orientation of the literature toward the atypical experience of liberals in Vienna and develop a more nuanced view of liberalism’s relation to German political nationalism in the late nineteenth century. A standard explanation for the apparent political failure of Austrian liberalism is that it lacked indigenous roots and was established by a socially isolated group of intellectuals and ideologues who imported it from France and Britain. Austrian liberals were never such dry theorists whose ideas had no practical application to Austrian conditions. On the contrary, and this is perhaps the most important point, their liberalism expressed the powerful yearnings of Austrian Bürger for institutional legitimation of their contributions to society, for control over their local polity, and for the security necessary to pursue their economic goals. An examination of the political culture that emerged from associational life demonstrates the ways in which the liberals’ worldview originated largely in their particular organizational experience.

This book’s focus on political culture also helps to address larger questions about the extent of the collective social and political power exercised by the Bürgertum in the nineteenth-century Habsburg monarchy. The urban middle-class battle to legitimate and institutionalize its hitherto informal influence in local social relations constituted the most successful element of an ongoing bourgeois revolution in Austrian society in the 1860s and 1870s. Liberals of all varieties, from conservative to radical, may have suffered political defeat in 1848, but their particular notions of public virtue, their myths of community, their visions of economic development gradually came to dominate Austrian public life, even in the darkest years of the post-1848 reaction. Historians of Austrian liberalism have typically pointed to the success or failure of specific political reforms as a standard by which to evaluate this revolution. Rather than view the bourgeois revolution in such narrow terms, however, I


believe it makes far more sense to approach nineteenth-century European societies in terms of ongoing contested relations of political and social power fought at several different levels. In Austria as elsewhere in Europe, few of the struggles that pitted the middle classes against the crown, nobility, military, and bureaucracy were limited to the arena of formal politics, and very few of these struggles resulted in absolute victory or defeat for any one group. Nevertheless, if the particular strengths or weaknesses of the Austro-German Bürgertum must be understood in a context of unresolved struggles for mastery in nineteenth-century Austrian society, it was a liberal discourse about society that persistently set the terms for these contests.

15. David Blackbourn, “The Discrete Charm of the German Bourgeoisie,” in his Populists and Patricians: Essays in Modern German History (London, 1987), 73. For an extreme and problematic statement of bourgeois weakness throughout Europe, which nevertheless helps to correct ideas about Central European exceptionalism, see Arno Mayer’s provocative The Persistence of the Old Regime. Europe to the Great War (New York, 1981). David Blackbourn has noted with regard to the German example, “one should be wary of assuming that the bourgeoisie simply succumbed to the aristocratic embrace. What matters is the terms on which this symbiosis of old and new took place. This is not easy to determine. But at least we should not confuse the form with the substance: much of its behavior illustrated the buoyancy as much as the capitulation of the German bourgeoisie.”