

### Explaining Austria

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Veröffentlichungsversion / Published Version

Zeitschriftenartikel / journal article

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#### **Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:**

Fleck, C. (2001). Explaining Austria. *Society*, 38(2), 61-67. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12115-001-1042-5>

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# EXPLAINING AUSTRIA

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*Christian Fleck*

Reading papers like the *New York Times*, one seldom comes across news about a country like Austria in the opening pages, perhaps a little more often in the Travel, Arts and Cooking sections. I have not done serious fact checking but I am confident that in the last fifteen or so years Austria captured remarkable shares of space in the politics section only around the so-called Waldheim affair, when the Nazi affiliation of the former United Nations secretary general earned worldwide publicity, and more recently when the Freedom Party of Jörg Haider finished second in national elections and after months of negotiation between the two other parties finally entered the Austrian government.

It seems reasonable therefore to assume that most Americans will not know much more about a country as small as Austria, but they will base their opinions as everyone else on these few particles of information available in such places as the *Times*. Repeated reports of similar shape establish national stereotypes, and they influence the decisions about what is worth covering. This is not specific to Austria but more or less true for all knowledge about foreign countries. I would assume that ordinary Austrians will remember President Clinton only in connection with "Monica" because this was what the media overseas covered at too long a length in past years.

Unbalanced perception is a particular type of misunderstandings in international relations. It is a necessary consequence of the global village of which Marshall McLuhan spoke. His terminology is one-dimensional and therefore misleading because he recognized only the narrowing of space, but did not pay tribute to that which can be loosely identified as the time dimension. Emphasizing this distinction I mean the following: Today it is indeed very easy to visit practically every part of the world within hours but it is for most of us still impossible to live in more than one society simultaneously.

Opera stars and sports celebrities are the exception. Consequentially we dwellers of the modern or postmodern era are as provincial as all previous generations with regard to the stream of everyday experiences that is responsible for our detailed knowledge of the world around us. We are only familiar with ourselves. Anthropologists describe the story of becoming familiar with a strange society regularly and immigrants went through the same experience not so well prepared.

Given this difference between our own society and the others it requires one step more to recognize that we follow in our judgments about strangers an asymmetric pattern the sociologist Norbert Elias identified first. Analyzing the relationship between the "established" and the "outsiders" he distinguished between judgments based on the image of the "minority of the worst" which the established apply to all outsiders and conversely claiming the "minority of the best" for all the established. "Hitler was a German, but Beethoven an Austrian" is a telling saying.

Since mass media subscribe to the proverbial notion that "only bad news is good news" in their coverage of international affairs, even heavier misunderstandings between nations increase necessarily. Speaking about the astonishing difference between the self-image of the Austrians and the reactions of the foreign governments, media, and intellectuals, the pattern of the minority of the worst provides hints for this understanding. I will regularly make use of this mechanism in what follows.

## **An Austrian Upbringing**

I have neither met Jörg Haider, the one Austrian whose name was most often quoted outside Austria in the recent past, nor am I trained psychologically to diagnose him. But to understand Austria it is necessary to explain the behavior of people like him. To make use of a concept invented by Karl

Mannheim one could distinguish members of the same age group by referring to "generation units." Each birth cohort could be seen as an ensemble of different generation units because people react to the same factual stream of events according to their group affiliations, family traditions and sub-cultures. The generation unit to which Haider belongs did not ask their parents the notorious question of the sixties "And what did you do ... ?" They did not quarrel with their fathers and grandfathers about Nazism, the unjust war and their knowledge about the extermination camps. They grew up in complete agreement with the older generation, accepted their recollections of how hard it had been to be an ordinary soldier, read devotedly the magazine of the veterans' organization and received sometimes as a birthday present Nazi memorabilia like a soldier's knife. Finally, they joined the same circles, voluntary organizations like the high school and college fraternities, and later in their life the Freedom Party.

The world of the fraternities was one of the few where members of different generations interact regularly. Two differences between Austrian and German *Burschenschaften* and American fraternities have to be recognized. First, the *Burschenschaften* are much stronger in their political commitments and second, they assemble regularly active and former members. The "old masters" of the fraternities act as patrons, advisors, and tutors for the youngsters. This particular constellation provided ample space for disseminating the true story about the past, forbidden by the winners of World War II to which these circles referred as occupation forces.

According to the tradition of the German nationalistic but at the same time unruly student fraternities, which can trace back their history much further than the Nazi movement, their members saw themselves often in opposition to the state which did not meet their ideological requirements. As members of a particular stratum of the middle class which could be characterized as having some academic background, earning incomes above the average, being civil servants or professionals and above all as being in opposition to the dominant Catholic Church, these people formed from the late eighties of the 19th century through the 20th century something what you could call right wing mavericks. In post-WWII Austria only members of this particular subculture could claim to be anti-establishment and not be part of the ruling circles.

Haider's membership in one of the fraternities offered him very early in his life a rationale for the suffering of his parents. It sat, so to speak, as a silent guest at the family's table. The suffering happened after the defeat of the Nazis when one-tenth of Austria's population who were card-carrying members of the Nazi party lost their jobs for shorter or longer times, and their voting rights. Much more important, they were stigmatized for a significant period during their lives and the lives of their children. Only a minority of them mourned the loss of the *Führer*, but everyone was irritated and shaken after the defeat. The narrative provided by the fraternities linked the bombing of Dresden, the expulsion of the German-speaking minorities from East and Central European countries, the supposed injustice of the Nürnberg trial against the war criminals to the silent suffering of the ordinary party members like Haider's parents after the end of the Third Reich.

This mixture of self-righteousness with smart-aleck and rebel attitudes enter center stage with the rise of Haider who more than once praised his parents' generation as the one that rebuilt Austria. A movement which promised to put things straight could gain acclaim only after the successful reconstruction of Austrian society. (Let me add incidentally that the present chancellor of Germany is driven by a similar attitude, but his attempt to overcome the burden of the dark past is expressed in a much more civilized language, which could be traced back to the very different policies of coming to terms with the past in the two countries).

And additionally a man free of any scruples, one who is proud of his notorious outspokenness, was needed to fulfill the duty. "He's the one who dares" was one of Haider's telling slogans during one of the campaigns. In a recent interview with the British *Sunday Telegraph* he expressed this view again, speaking as he regularly does about himself in the third person eventually: "It is hard to make a comparison between my case and that of Mr. Waldheim because Mr. Waldheim was a former soldier in the German army and I was born after the end of the war and am the leader of a democratic movement. No, the point is that the political establishment is a little bit afraid in Europe, because here is a politician and a political party which does not belong to their political establishment. It comes up from the people" (February 13, 2000).

Doubtless Haider is a gifted demagogue and a capable politician, much better than his competitors. In saying this I have to suppress my own po-

litical sentiments, but as a detached observer I have to ignore my feelings. Haider's authoritarian personality could be illustrated by his attempt to find at least one Jewish hand abroad that he could shake. As someone who constantly wants to please everyone with some power at the expense of those who lack power, according to his background he is convinced of the alleged world dominating role of the Jews and therefore tries to get their approval. Proudly his party made public the letter of one fringe rabbi on its homepage recently—but only on the English language site. He successfully courted an Austrian writer of Jewish origins, made him a member of the European parliament and finally promoted him to the post of the Freedom Party's general secretary for international relations. In exchange, this strange fellow tries to open Jewish doors for his master. Last spring he sneaked into the Knesset and came back triumphantly with photos showing him and some members of parliament not yet shaking hands, but at least talking at each other. So far some hints to understand the personality. Now, let me turn to more structural levels of explanation.

#### Consociational Mode of Governance

Societies deal differently with rebels, some nurture them in restricted quarters, in others they fight them violently, and some ignore them altogether. Austria offers ample illustration of each of these patterns. According to Carl Schorske, Vienna's modernists on the eve of the 19th century had been frustrated politicians. During the First Republic in the years between the end of World War I and the end of democracy in 1934, rebellious personalities found room for development in deadly fights between Conservatives, Social Democrats, and National Socialists respectively. After the defeat of Nazism, Austria's exhausted politicians changed to more peaceful interactions not least because the country was occupied and divided for ten years. Protest voting took the place of street fighting and supported from time to time the Freedom Party, which succeeded the banned Nazi party. The translation of the party's name is a bit misleading because in German it is an adjective and its meaning is closer to "being independent." During nearly forty years of reconciliation, economic recovery, and boring public life, this tiny party functioned as a kind of relief valve. It attracted those who were outraged and angry about the domination of nearly every corner of the society by one of the two parties. But the bipartisan government did not totter and the separation of the society in

spheres of influence of one of the two main parties lasted.

This system consisted of three patterns: partition, mutual control and patronage, and added a new word to the Austrian branch of German *Parteibuchwirtschaft*, literally "economy based on party cards." Partition means the compartmentalization of the whole society in spheres under the control of one of the two leading parties. The nationalized industry belonged to the Social Democrats and the educational system including the state universities to the Conservatives. Peasants, small businesses and the white collar employees in the huge bureaucracy are the domain of the Conservatives; employees at the nationalized railroads, in municipalities and the postal monopoly were not only heavily unionized and therefore belonged to the Social Democrats, but the management was also selected by this party.

Mutual control took place where a single party domination seemed to be too dangerous for social and economic stability or out of sheer fear of one side. Accordingly the still *de facto* monopolistic television and broadcast company, the until recently nationalized bank system and all the other agencies of some similar relevance were directed by a CEO nominated by one party and accompanied by a deputy from the other. Again, the Austrians invented a new word for this pattern: *Proporz*, or proportional assignment.

Finally a sophisticated patronage system captured nearly every citizen. Access to the housing market, which still is to a large degree in the hands of the municipalities, to the job market (where in the nationalized industries the unions had a strong say until recently), and in the public service where access was more or less restricted to party members. Hence Austria has one of the highest rates of political participation, at least if you measure it by counting party membership.

I could elaborate on this story further, but want to stress only that this consociational mode of governance, as the Dutch sociologist Arend Lijphart called it, was more or less successful. It pacified the former enemies, it contributed to the establishment of a welfare system of incredible size of service and coverage, it provided an increase in opportunities for formerly disadvantaged people, and surprisingly it made Austria into one of the richest countries of the world. Austria has one of the lowest unemployment rates in Europe, virtually no strikes, and one of the lowest crime rates in the developed world. (Austria's per capita GNP in pur-

chasing power parity is higher than Germany's: \$22,700 in 1999.)

### A Nation-Building Process

The corporatistic system of mutual control and partition of society at least accomplished one of the aims of its founding fathers. It helped to establish something like an Austrian nation, which is, contrary to ready-made assumptions, a product of the last four decades. True, Austria is much older but this name was for a very long period only the designation of the ruling Habsburg dynasty. Beginning in the last quarter of the 19th century the German-speaking people of the old Austro-Hungarian Empire tried out different modes of establishing a state. In the multi-ethnic Empire the German-speaking minority failed to establish themselves as superior to the emerging new nations. After World War I most of the remainder would have preferred to become part of a single German nation-state, but the peace treaties of St. Germain and Versailles forbade this option, unwisely and contrary to the principles that Woodrow Wilson formulated.

After the turmoil of the First Austrian Republic, Austria's experiment in democracy ended in an authoritarian regime devoted to an anti-democratic Catholic ideology of *Ständestaat*. This is the idea that society is like a biological organism with organs—each one being different but necessary. According to *Ständestaat* philosophy, those differences are expressed in modern societies through different *Stände*, or occupations. This view also argues against the "one man, one vote" mode of democracy and favors an Apartheid-like society and state. The majority of the Austrians entered the Third Reich enthusiastically. Its shape and fate marked the end of pan-Germanic ambitions. The plan to re-establish an independent Austria in the borders of 1937 happened only accidentally as the result of a gridlock between the three Allies assembled in Moscow in 1943. After the defeat of the Nazi dictatorship, Austria had to handle two main political problems: To survive as an undivided entity and to find a treatment for its three-quarters of a million National Socialists. Surprisingly the re-established state earned respectability and gained support from the West immediately because of the emerging Cold War. An election held as early as the fall of 1945 resulted in an eighty-five percent anti-Communist majority for the two parties and they have governed Austria since then. From this very moment it seems, at least to me, that the three Western Allies turned themselves away from the other crucial problem—

the handling of the former Nazi party members. The way the Austrians handled the matter was not very different from the West German attempt. Step-by-step reintegration ensued, accompanied by silence about the much too well-known past. The major difference between the de-Nazification campaigns in Austria and West Germany was Austria's lack of a re-education program. Re-education was first forced on the Germans by the victors and later adopted by them with astonishing courage and success.

In comparing the coming to terms with the past in the three societies succeeding the Nazi state (East and West Germany and Austria), the German sociologist M. Rainer Lepsius made the point that the West Germans internalized it ("we are responsible for our past") whereas the two other societies used two different versions of externalization. The East Germans proposed, according to the Marxist-Leninist interpretation of fascism, that only the ruling class was responsible and the Austrians took the easy road offered them by Churchill and suggested that they had been occupied by complete strangers and remained more or less guiltless. Remarkably, the Austrian Communists, who paid a tremendous toll of lives fighting against the Nazis, also joined in.

As always, the inventors of an ideology knew better, but frequent repetitions without protest could even persuade some opponents. Teaching gave the younger generations an understanding of the nation's founding myth and established the conventional wisdom. It lasted years until the sham was challenged. The decomposition began in 1965 when socialist students rallied against one of their professors, a pan-Germanic and anti-Semitic historian, but not a typical Nazi. During one of these demonstrations an old man, himself a Communist resistance fighter, was hit by an opponent and died some days later. He was the first victim of politically motivated violence in post-WWII Austria; the perpetrator belonged to one of the student fraternities I mentioned earlier.

In 1994 another politically motivated attack resulted in the death of four Gypsies. The murderer, later convicted, terrorized Austria for more than three years by sending letter bombs to people who he thought would be in favor of foreigners. Neither the police nor the court found evidence linking this loner to Haider's party—but beyond any doubt the anti-immigration proclamations of the Freedom Party contributed to, or at least expounded, his insane worldview. Compared to other European nations however the politically motivated number of lethal

incidents in Austria is as low as the number of hate crimes.

### Votes for Haider

The successful effort of the Austrians to establish themselves as a nation seems irreversible to me. The threats to its political system and to its stability as a nation-state come from elsewhere, and they have emerged at least partly as unintended consequences of a successful nation-building process at or near the peak of national wealth. Foremost one has to mention the decline of the consociational mode of governance which is rooted primarily in the accomplishment of satisfying the population's basic needs like housing, jobs, and so on. Second, the two former big parties are no longer attractive to large numbers of citizens. Whenever they capture a new part of the electorate they frustrate another one. Up to the 1980s, both parties' membership amounted to three-quarters of a million each. Both parties have lost members tremendously since.

The social bonding in political parties and their affiliated organizations ranging from kindergarten to burial societies came to an end on the one side because of the parties' inability to continue to supply patronage benefits, and on the other side because of the socio-structural changes which took place in Austria. The rising service sector makes it increasingly difficult to herd employees into unions and similar organizations. The increasing number of better educated youngsters led to more individualistic attitudes and to some degree to higher political self-confidence and finally to a loss of integrative ability of the two former big parties toward large groups of former undivided followers.

The first to vote for the Freedom Party under Haider's leadership have been young people, generally apolitical who saw themselves as yuppies. They supported Haider because of his boyishness, his hanging out in discos, his athleticism and to a certain degree they admired his impudence. At this time Haider proposed policies for this particular clientele, in particular the easing of restrictions on opening one's own business. To understand this proposal you need to know that in Austria the influence of the Chamber of Commerce with a mandatory membership for every self-employed person is unbelievably strong. Up to 1995 when Austria entered the European Union, established businessmen could forbid a competitor to open his shop because of a "lack of demand." Some of these voters stick to their party, partly because they now earn patronage benefits from this camp, and partly because

the Austrians oppose change in general in public as well as in private life. Several of these early voters are now elected representatives of the Freedom Party.

A second group of more or less stable supporters of the Freedom Party under Haider are resentful people. To dislike something or someone is one of the most popular stages of consciousness especially in Austria's capital, Vienna. The grumbler is a proverbial social character there. Plays, satires, and TV series make use of this type and in reality he or she gets ammunition in reading the daily complaint written by a particular columnist in the largest tabloid in the world. The pseudonym of this writer, *Staberl*, means "little rod" and refers to an instrument of punishment used for a very long time by teachers to hit unruly pupils. The diminutive form of the columnist's pseudonym expresses splendidly the social meaning of his sermons: grudging, prejudiced, unruly, but harmless. The paper to which he contributed for over thirty years is of tremendous power, not least because Austria's politicians do not use it like Tony Blair uses *The Sun*—but rather they believe in it, its message, its influence, and its policy advice.

The third and last required sector of the electorate is the blue-collar worker. To explain this behavior one could make use of techniques of sociometry to illustrate that the average blue-collar worker in Austria's heavy industry has traditionally held hostile attitudes towards the Conservatives because of their friendly and close cooperation with the Catholic Church and the repression produced by their combined efforts in the past. Blue-collar workers reacted much more favorably towards advances made to them by the Nazi party and its followers. In addition, one has to emphasize the rising inability of the leading Social Democrats to communicate with its constituency which is partly rooted in their different social backgrounds and the loss of regular meetings between officials and ordinary party members.

The erosion of the institutions of the old working class culture and the loneliness of the workers in their neighborhoods, particularly in Vienna, contributed to the slide of their votes to Haider. He addresses their worries and fears about the influx of a foreign workforce. Indeed, the unskilled workers are the first victims of an increase in the supply of workers, and unskilled jobs are what legal and illegal immigrants seek first. In addition, Austria's, and particularly Vienna's, relationship to immigration is a very complex affair. Most present-day Viennese are grandchildren of immigrants from Bohemia and more remote regions of the old Em-

pire. Immigrants have had to abandon their past ethnic identities in order to enter the higher strata of the German-speaking part of the population. And the efforts to build an unmistakable Austrian nation have left them and their descendants with a shaky identity. To strengthen their own self-image they heavily employed the easier mode to develop self-consciousness: To distinguish themselves from weaker groups.

The common ground of Haider's voters lies in the resentment against something or someone. The overall stability of Austria's political and social system offered another invitation for Austrians to try the unusual. Austrians, like all traditionally Catholic people, love a spectacle—whenever they get one without much cost. And Haider offers a lot of spectacle every time he enters a TV studio, a marketplace, or a pavilion. This pleasure in unsophisticated entertainment in cooperation with a specific kind of irresponsibility—which, at least to my judgment, rests on the Catholic culture too, where everyone could find forgiveness after a secret confession for his sins the next Sunday—brought Haider additional votes. Resentment and irresponsible lust for spectacles are fertile soils for demagogues.

### Some Ironies

The rise of Haider's Freedom Party is not a very pleasant thing, but it is nevertheless comprehensible. From a strictly internal Austrian point of view, one might add that the coalition between the Freedom and the Conservative parties made some sense. At least I see no danger, given the strength of Austria's institutions and the generally secure situation. Why then did the other members of the European Union, the U.S. administration, and the international press react so intensely? I hope my initial argument about international misunderstandings and the "Minority of the Worst" mechanism may give some hints toward an answer.

The driving forces behind the resolution to freeze European Union (EU) relations with Austria and to boycott its diplomats developed primarily out of self-interest for internal reasons. In that same Union, we find Jean-Marie Le Pen in France, a similar right-wing party in Belgium, the danger of an increase in far right-wing movements in Germany, and Italy's unease with its own separatist and far right parties. Politicians from these countries sought to make an example of Austria. Besides all its hypocritical padding the fourteen other members of the EU reached a new level of European politics, perhaps reluctantly. They sealed the end of national sovereignty

of its members because the wide resonance that the Austrian case found will not disappear immediately. Therefore in the next couple of years this case will act as a precedent. But as in former controversies, the European Union does not have an exit strategy. Obviously it thought (and I did, too) that the Austrians would surrender. Surprisingly the ambition of the leading man in the Conservative Party to become chancellor by the grace of Haider was stronger than any patriotic reasoning. Since then some ironies have emerged.

The European Union cannot bomb Vienna to force Austria to surrender as it and NATO did with Serbia. This sounds like a strong exaggeration, but the fact that some Austrians compared the situation of their country with the one of Serbia supports this comparison. In Austria the parties who argued in favor of the NATO and EU stance against Serbia find themselves now on the side where the European outlaws have to live.

Some former anti-EU politicians (not only in Austria) who opposed the undemocratic shape of the European Union because of its lack of a constitution, find themselves in the position of defending at least the attitudes behind the boycott resolution. The heavily pro-EU Conservatives in Austria became victims of a new European policy, as was the case of Waldheim some fifteen years earlier when the strongly pro-American Conservatives were banished by their formerly admired teachers of freedom and democracy.

Voters who supported Haider without strongly held beliefs or commitments to a common cause have to realize that they voted for an ideological monster, at least according to foreign commentators. The xenophobic Austrians who voted for Haider were taken to task by superior and normally admired foreigners. To lecture a xenophobe from abroad seldom works. And finally the anti-Haiderites fought over an interpretation of Austria's history instead of developing policies for the future.

### Haider's Legacy

Austria disappeared from the pages of the newspapers abroad within a very short period. *The New York Times Magazine's* lengthy portrait of Haider (April 30, 2000) functioned as a punchline. At this time Haider had resigned from the leadership of the Freedom Party and since then has been the world's most influential ordinary member of a political party. Ministers of the Freedom Party regularly make visits to his provincial hometown to get approval of their political proposals.



The foreign relations between Austria and the rest of the European Union reached a miraculous equilibrium over the summer. Since the so-called sanctions against Austria have been nothing more than a symbolic act (according to the original statement, the rest of Europe cut some diplomatic exchanges and promised not to promote any Austrians to higher positions inside the European Commission, knowing that the Austrians were not heavily interested in jobs in Brussels) nearly no one outside Austria cared any longer. The initial statement of disagreement with Austria's new government was a strong political announcement but did not indicate any action. Therefore nothing has to be done, besides answering questions of Austrian journalists now and again. On the other hand, the parties in Austria's government gain support from ordinary people, and the yellow press, by emphasizing the injustice of the "measures of the Fourteen."

Attempts to normalize the relationship were turned down by the Austrians because the prolongation of the imagined pressure from abroad had the effect of strengthening the bonds between the government and the people. Once again the Austrians could express their resentments against foreigners, fortunately this time not against weak asylum seekers but against Europe.

Nevertheless the affair became uncomfortable for the European Union when the Austrians indicated they would use their veto during the crucial negotiations about the future shape of Europe's institution. Both sides finally reached an agreement to nominate a group of "three wise men" to examine the human rights situation, the position of the minorities in Austria, and the political nature of the Freedom Party. The report published in September was a balanced evaluation of the situation in Austria with which all sides could live. It seemed that the case was to be closed.

Naturally the political environment in Austria has evolved since then: The Freedom Party is losing not only in polls but lost nearly half of its votes in a provincial election in October. The Haiderites became nervous and two ministers quit their jobs. The nervousness was reinforced when a former member of the Freedom Party published a book claiming that leading members of the party had bribed policemen to hand over internal documents to them during the last couple of years. The accusation was not really new, but for the first time an insider named

names and provided details. Public prosecutors and the police started a serious investigation—putting Haider himself and some of his closest allies under serious scrutiny.

Two things are revealing: An extremist far right party too was going to have to face all the troubles of a ruling party when it became part of the government. In the Austrian case, this common pattern was only reinforced by the difficulties of the Freedom Party in handling allegations. Far right parties are well prepared to act as the accuser but they are not so well prepared to defend themselves against accusations. This trivial working of political institutions, however, is seldom worth a report in newspapers abroad. It does not fit in with the media's interest in reporting on the minority that is the worst—rather than the majority that is good.

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#### SUGGESTED FURTHER READINGS

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