

TransAct

**Interventionen zur Lage
in Österreich**

**Transnational Activities
in the Cultural Field**

museum in progress

Habituation has turned the socio-political upheaval that occurred ten years ago, when a right-leaning ‘bourgeois majority’, as it is often called, briefly governed Austria, into an accepted matter of fact. The perfidious dalliance with racist provocation and Nazi reminiscences in the public space has assumed a life of its own, even under other power constellations. Election results show that up to a quarter of the population are susceptible to emotional and resentment-filled messages, which defy serious discussion and are imperious to negative external effects and have also dragged down other parties to their level. Politics has been reduced to a domestic affair, with opposition left to minorities. The cynical observation that this is simply how the country functions has been borne out in practice. At all events, Austria’s schizophrenic attitude to foreigners is clear: on the one hand, it welcomes and is reliant on tourists, but on the other hand it tries to prevent foreigners from working or settling here. It is as if the government is being run by the minister responsible for the police – regardless of which party he or she belongs to – since the inflamed political mood reflected in the media has made a rigorous approach to unwelcome foreigners into a decisive election issue. With an attitude that is anything but cosmopolitan, isolationism is seen as a way of making Austria into the “safest country in the world”, without it occurring to anyone how similar this slogan is to those used by dictatorships. This climate of opinion is reflected in any number of headlines in September 2009: “Government seeks to clamp down on asylum-seekers”, “Detention prior to deportation: sense, function, criticism”. Above all, according to a study on changing values from 1990 to 2008, “xenophobia has a stronger and more enduring influence than was thought hitherto, not only on day-to-day political discussion but also on the fundamental political attitude of people.”

According to recent findings reported by *Der Standard*, beliefs that were thought to have been long buried are regularly manifesting themselves again in a general mood of "xenophobia and nostalgia for an authoritarian leader". "Whereas the supporters of an 'authoritarian' leadership style have grown 'steadily and clearly' in the last few years, there are now fewer 'liberal idealists' than there were." Criticism by civil society, be it from cultural milieu, Amnesty, Caritas or private initiatives, is regularly dismissed as being superfluous and destructive. Amplified by the powerful tabloid press and by trash and talk shows, populism is taking on monstrous proportions. The number of people with a favourable attitude to the EU has halved.

The annual report by ZARA, a meritorious NGO that promotes civil courage and antiracist activities, has acid words to say about the current situation: "The mood is not good. It is not good on the streets, in public transport, on the internet, in the media and on building walls. Everywhere there are coarse and malicious comments aimed at people who were not born in this country. They are maligned, humiliated and ostracised in word and deed. The message is clear: 'You are not welcome.'" Talking in May 2009 about this critical threat to democracy, Barbara Coudenhove-Kalergi, a highly reputed journalist who writes calmly and without exaggeration, described this development as an oppressively ingenuous form of isolationism: "Many people continue to regard the Union not as a larger homeland but as an occupying power of sorts and their Eastern neighbours, including the Turks, as menacing enemies. In principle, they yearn for the good old days of Austria as an isolated allotment garden. This basic mood is encouraged by both the right-wing parties and the *Kronen Zeitung*. Simple answers to complex questions are effective in a simple way. In our case the facile answer is that

foreigners and the EU are to blame for all evils. Without them life on our blessed island would be better. The government parties have helped to bring about this state of affairs inasmuch as that they have never offered a consistent counter-argument to these appallingly simplified slogans. The ÖVP/FPÖ coalition has once and for all made xenophobia, racism and aggressive provincialism socially respectable." It used to be possible to write off this attitude as a milieu-specific marginal phenomenon. Since the political upheaval in the year 2000, despite the massive protests at the time, it has become an enduring state of affairs. The standards for acceptable public opinion have been drastically lowered and long-established pretensions to internationality have fallen by the wayside.

The academic and cultural contributions contained in this volume offer access to a multifaceted set of ideas by citizens who clearly do not belong to the populist camp that uncritically embraces right-wing elements and regards nuanced differences of opinion as irrelevant. The articles have in common most notably the fact that they occupy a space that recognises threats and seeks insistently to provide enlightenment as its basic social outlook, even if this position tends to be regarded as being primarily ornamental. This sets the contributors apart from a political landscape made up, in spite of Austria's pretensions to being a civilised society, of alienated citizens who in addition stereotypically regard critics as remnants of a left-wing movement and, like foreigners, barely deserving *citizenship*. It also sets them apart from the weakly protesting, diffuse and bourgeois Social Democrats, who attempt to win back voters who are drifting to the right through adjustment rather than persuasion.

The historian Reinhart Koselleck has defined this confused commitment. He said that it is vital to consider the

change in meaning of the word 'Bürger' [citizen, bourgeois] from a member of an urban community at the start of the eighteenth century to a member of a nation in the nineteenth and finally to a bourgeois (i.e. non-proletarian) in the early twentieth. This non-proletarian, anti-leftist and often anti-liberal identity has survived, even if the 'enemy landscape' has changed considerably. As Jürgen Osterhammel, for example, clearly points out in *Die Verwandlung der Welt*, the resultant nationalism, colonialism and racism have produced the "radical debourgeoisification" of entire societies, however bourgeois their living standards have become. To illustrate these perspectives, the French philosopher Étienne Balibar in *We, the People of Europe?* emphatically calls for cosmopolitan "European citizenship" constructed on "building sites of (and for) democracy" that is "more advanced than the national communities" or mere lobbying, because it could function in the framework of "genuinely European parties" – which in view of the established power structures and xenophobic tendencies would need to be fully aware of the fact, as Balibar puts it, that "human rights" do not have *primacy* and are not *superior* to "civil rights", but rather that they are *parallel* and mutually dependent.

This is a long way from the FPÖ member elected by 60 percent of parliamentarians as the third president of the National Council despite his extreme right-wing views, who recently commented blithely: "I don't see any reason to resign, since I represent the views of the majority of the population." Moreover, the montage from its poster collection by the Austrian National Library shows a filtered view of modern history. Josef Klaus ("A real Austrian") and Jörg Haider and Wolfgang Schüssel ("Austria. Stays better.") are singled out as major politicians. The business world is represented by the traditional companies Meindl and Palmers, despite the fact

that one of them, having switched from food retailing to banking, is deeply entangled in financial scandals, and the other has already been sold to global players. The poster for Fritz Lang's 1927 film *Metropolis* suggests a fear of modernity. Women do not play a visible role. This provides material for endless analysis as to the sensitivities of those distinctive and different groups in society that develop parallel to all the milieu characterisation. There is little room any more for self-mockery: just one-dimensional 'neoliberal' pragmatism that has nothing to do with classic liberalism as a basis. According to Richard Rorty, liberal democracy needs rather to continue to work hard to achieve equality of opportunity, to permanently question personal sensitivity to the pain and humiliation of others, and to try to expand our understanding of "we" as far as possible.

The complicitly critical and questioning TransAct project initiated by Cathrin Pichler and museum in progress represented by Joseph Ortner, Kathrin Messner, Roman Berka and Sabine Dreher makes an important contribution to such cosmopolitan openness – and to *Edition Transfer*, which I publish – precisely because of the different approaches, which defy hasty categorisation on party political or national grounds. The entire compendium of illustrated articles by Lawrence Weiner, Walter Obholzer, Christian Boltanski, Anna und Bernhard Blume, Jochen Gerz, Harun Farocki, John Baldessari, Oswald Oberhuber, Nancy Spero, Heimo Zobernig, Ferdinand Schmatz, Franz Graf, Lisl Ponger, Günter Brus, Doron Rabinovici, Johanna Kandl, Walter Schmögner, Pierre Bourdieu, Slavoj Žižek, Hermann Beil, Werner Hofmann, Kasper König, Harald Szeemann, Artur C. Danto, August Ruhs, Sabine Breitwieser, Roger M. Buergel, Alexander Kluge, Martin Prinzhorn, Emmerich Tálos, Daniela Hammer-Tugendhat, Ernst Strouhal, Wolf Singer, Sylvère Lotringer,

Douglas Gordon, Christian Marclay, Neal Ascherson and others has already been published by *Der Standard*. It offers an internationally minded readership a selection of opinions by members of civil society who cannot be fobbed off as an irrelevant 'cultural element' in society. They refuse to accept what has happened and to align themselves with mainstream palaver but offer different visions.

The sanctions imposed by the EU on Austria as a warning – even if it has not repeated in other countries with similar developments – were just one of a number of diverse reactions. If all that had not happened, it would have deprived critical voices of any solid support, particularly in the country itself, which had drawn attention to itself in the rest of the world most notably on account of Waldheim and Haider. For Austrians who were not members of the suddenly hyper-patriotic front, this evident lack of any understanding was depressing enough. Politically the country has been divided since then into three rather than two potentially cooperative spheres of influence. More and more details of corruption in connection with privatisation are coming to light. Control mechanisms, including co-determination by trade unionists on supervisory boards, have been a spectacular failure, particularly in the banking sector. Although these processes are defended with reference to similar situations in other countries, coordination at the EU level has nevertheless tended to be blocked in many areas. Those who attain power find that they can get on quite well with one another, whereas the rest are estranged, like unintegrated ethnic groups. Structural deficits, a lack of transparency and the form of discussion undermine latent democratic standards. This can be covered up by blaming conflicts stereotypically on external threats, the EU and immigrants – which permanently clouds prospects for becoming citizens of Europe one day. Because of

the escalating global context, however, a simple pro and contra argumentation is no longer productive. For this reason it is all the more important for different subjective opinions to be made publicly accessible in book form.

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