

The Role of *Kultur* in the Austrian Freedom Party's Political Strategy under Jörg Haider

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This paper arises out of an ongoing research project focussing on the cultural policies and rhetoric of the Austrian Freedom Party (FPÖ) under Jörg Haider.

Initially, my thesis sought a socio-political 'explanation' for the remarkable rise of the far-right in Austria. However, most academic sources have very little to say about the FPÖ's *kulturpolitik*. I took the opportunity of getting a different insight into this Austrian political phenomenon with the aim of shedding light on the *character* of Haider's FPÖ which emerges from a cultural analysis.

The sources for this paper are numerous and very scattered, they fall mostly into two categories - texts from the Freedom Party itself and responses to the FPÖ's cultural stance from artists, writers and political activists.

Introduction

This study will analyse and interpret a particular 'phase' in the FPÖ's *Kulturpolitik* from 1986 to 2000. It was in these years that the FPÖ left its mark on the Austrian cultural arena by attacking individual artists, experimental art and the state policy of subsidising artists. An energetic response came from cultural quarters. Some of the main points arising out of this work are as follows:

- the FPÖ's *kulturpolitik* is based on an overall strategy of gaining votes through a series of 'populistic' policies. For Haider, writers and artists in Austria exploit over-generous and politically motivated government subsidies - a system which favours a '*Linkerkulturmafia*'.
- Haider has 'singled out' the cultural scene as a political enemy. This is almost certainly due to writers and artists being almost unanimous in their opposition to the FPÖ.
- By attacking artists and cultural figures Haider takes an 'anti-intellectual' stance - appealing to apathetic or disillusioned voters who admire his tenacity while ignoring his far-right political ideology.
- an anti-modernist, moralistic and traditionalist stance on culture comes to the surface in the FPÖ's cultural rhetoric. It echoes historically with national socialism and reactionary catholicism.
- an alliance of previously opposing political camps, the anti-clerical FPÖ and the catholic ÖVP, has been played out particularly in the cultural arena.

- the FPÖ '*kulturkampf*' since 1986 arose partly out of a revised, rather suspect interpretation of Antonio Gramsci's political writings on cultural hegemony by some FPÖ 'intellectuals'. It entailed a conspiracy-type theory that the Left is gaining social and political dominance by 'occupying' the cultural space within Austria (and elsewhere). For Haider, 'regaining' this cultural space has become a crucial part of his political strategy.
- parallel to its critique of 'avant-garde' culture, an equally important tenet of the FPÖ's political strategy in the field of culture is to influence *mass* culture. I shall not expand on this here - apart from mentioning the crucial emphasis Haider puts on his 'image'. In order to be accepted as 'the man of the people' he visits discos, ski-resorts, beer-tents and many other popular venues.

A Cultural Context

'Culture' has a special role in Austria. Art, theatre, literature etc are more subsidised in Austria than almost any other country in the world. In the post-war construction of Austrian identity, *kultur* played a crucial role in projecting an image of Austria as a country of beautiful landscapes, brimming with high-culture. This use of culture was an attempt to salvage a new identity which would be separate from Germany and expunge the association of Austria with Nazi socialism. Icons such as Mozart, Loos, Schiele, Wittgenstein etc were re-packaged for modern consumption.

However - something was missing. The extermination or forced exile of Austria's Jewish population during the nazi period meant that a substantial number of the producers and consumers of Austrian art and culture were simply gone. Jews had been targeted by Hitler not only on racial (inferiority) and political (bolshevik) grounds but also for 'poisoning German culture' and producing 'entartete' (degenerate) works of art. The post-war Austrian establishment made little effort to encourage Jewish artists back to Austria and focussed on a cultural policy of glorifying the past and ignoring the legacy of nazism. In this atmosphere contemporary/avant-garde art had little room to flourish.

Underpinning the promotion of 'high-culture' was a political system set up in Austria after 1955 called 'Pro-porz'. This entailed the main social-democrat (SPÖ) and conservativ (ÖVP) political parties governing Austria in grand coalitions and carving up institutions and interest-groups according to political affiliation. Culture was 'given' to the ÖVP, assuring an emphasis and specific policy of promoting traditional and classical art rather than contemporary experimental art.

This stifling and repressive atmosphere reached a crisis in 1968. At this time, Austria did not have the civil unrest and political activism which was evident in other European countries such as Germany and France. However there was a significant protest movement that manifested itself in art. This was the Viennese Actionists, who performed a notorious 'happening' in Vienna University involving singing the Austrian national anthem while urinating, defecating and shouting obscenities. This radical artistic expression ended up with the artists involved getting prison sentences or escaping Austria. The extreme nature of this art movement seems to reflect the oppressive cultural climate of post-war Austria - a bit like a pressure cooker suddenly exploding. In fact, up to 1986, most criticism of the Austrian post-war cover up of complicity with national socialism came from cultural quarters - the political parties were silent.

After the Waldheim crisis and Haider's leadership coup of the FPÖ in 1986 Austria shifted from the stability and political stalemate of Pro-porz towards the conflictual political climate of contemporary Austria. Haider quickly realised the opportunity of showing up the boring and stuffy aspects of the main parties by constructing and sustaining an image of a virile, charismatic and 'caring' politician - willing to stand up for and formulate the wishes of the 'little man'. His critique of the 'cronyist' Pro-porz political system resonated significantly with many Austrians.

In addition, Haider understood that if the FPÖ was to achieve political success it would be necessary to include *kultur* in its political strategy. This was due to the central and peculiarly Austrian role of *kultur* in politics as well as a recognition of how an effective political *use* and *instrumentalisation* of culture would give the FPÖ a political edge on opponents.

As already mentioned, this paper will focus on one aspect of Haider's *kulturpolitik*, namely that of attacking specific Austrian artists and cultural figures. To do this I shall analyse this political strategy in terms of the content, protagonists and response of those attacked.

Kulturkampf 1986-2000

a) Content

The notorious election poster plastered around Vienna for the 1995 general election campaign was a 'climax' in an aggressive campaign by the FPÖ to attack certain artists and cultural figures who they regard as wasting 'hard-earned' tax payers' money by producing and promoting art which they variously described as 'rubbish', 'pornographic', 'unwanted' or even 'un-patriotic'.

The poster was a public manifestation of a *Kulturkampf* by Haider's FPÖ which had two main aims. Firstly there was the 'policy' aim of de-coupling state involvement in culture by promoting a policy of less subsidies, more scrutiny of what is acceptable to fund and the encouragement of an art 'market' with less state involvement. Secondly, the aim of appealing to 'mass' (negative) opinions on modern art and positioning the FPÖ as a defender of 'Austrian' moral values and common sense. Haider also felt relatively safe in the knowledge that by attacking 'avant-garde' culture he was dealing with a group in society that was not kept in particular 'regard' by ordinary people and was comprised of individuals who were united in opposition to Haider and the FPÖ.

Rather than detailing the numerous actions of the FPÖ in the cultural arena I shall give a 'flavour' of this 'Freedomite' *kulturpolitik* by looking at the 1995 poster in more detail. This election poster contains three basic elements. Firstly, the FPÖ 'name' certain individuals who they have singled out as representing all that is wrong with present-day Austrian culture.

Rudolf Scholten was the acting Minister of Art and Science. Scholten is included as typical of a high ranking socialist politician who *encourages* and *subsidises* art which is either blatantly 'left-wing' or simply morally repugnant (or both!). Scholten symbolises for Haider how politicians have 'lost touch' with ordinary people's views by promoting art that no-one identifies with except for a cultural elite.

Elfriede Jelinek is a contemporary Austrian author. Jelinek is an example of a progressive artist who not only produces work of a perceived obscene content but represents artists that are in effect *anti-Austrian*. These artists are intent on eroding and deriding the values and traditions which are adhered to by the majority of Austrians.

Claus Peymann was (up to 1999) the director of the famous *Burgtheater* in Vienna - the most prestigious theatre in Austria. Peymann was always despised by the FPÖ ever since his appointment as theatre director in 1988. He was responsible for the controversial showing of Bernhard's *Heldenplatz* in 1988 - a play satirising and uncovering the Austrian complicity with national socialism. Peymann is a typical 'leftie' intent on pushing a radical-left agenda through a state-cultural institution and thereby 'radicalising' the political climate. He has also been a very vocal critic of Haider and the FPÖ. Too boot, Peymann is not even Austrian but a foreigner...a German.

Herbert Haupt (former SPÖ Mayor of Vienna) and **Ursula Pasterk** (former SPÖ Viennese Cultural Minister) are included as 'Viennese' representatives of the *Linkerkulturmafia*. They are included because the poster only appeared in Vienna, aimed at a specific electorate of mostly SPÖ voters.

The second element of this poster is contained in the slogan: 'DO YOU LIKE.....Scholten etc.....OR ART AND CULTURE?' This indicates the Freedom Party stance on the question of what actually can we define as 'art and culture'. In their opinion it is certainly not the art produced or supported by figures such as Scholten, Jelinek or Peymann. Implicit here is a dismissal of most experimental, avant-garde art, especially if it contains a 'radical' or 'social' message. They prefer another type of art, one which does not disturb one's sense of decency and is rooted in the values and traditions of 'Austrian' culture. This is not being given proper state support. The culture represented by those 'named' is disconnected from people and has much more to do with a shadowy political agenda rather than being 'high culture'. The implication here is that Haider is trying to construct a kind of 'acceptable' aesthetic that is worthy of state funding.

Finally the poster states in the bottom corner 'Artistic Freedom instead of Socialist 'State' Artists'. Here, the FPÖ wishes to position itself as being fully supportive of free artistic expression - it does not wish to 'impose' a certain type of art. However it will not sanction the abuse of artistic freedom which is currently in practice with various artists working in Austria working in a similar vein to the 'state' of former Soviet Union. The message that Haider wishes to get across is that the FPÖ simply wants to 'liberate' art from the restrictive and narrow *Kulturpolitik* of the SPÖ and give the public the art it likes and more value for its money.

b) The Protagonists

There are two main protagonists of FPÖ *Kulturpolitik* in this period (in addition to Jörg Haider) called Walter Marinovic and Andreas Mölzer. They have given a political context and ideological underpinning to the cultural stance taken by the FPÖ. A review of their rhetoric will give a good indication of political function of Haider's cultural policies.

Jörg Haider Haider has not been overtly 'pushing' the agenda of this particular type of *Kulturpolitik* (ie that of attacking modern artists). He does, however, indicate in his books and speeches that he approves of the state supporting and preserving a particular type of 'culture' - namely:

„Recognising that Austria forms part of the German cultural region, the cultivation of German culture and language is of special importance to us. We consider it our duty to provide an Austrian contribution to the development of German culture“ (1)

In addition to Haider's political intention of 'preserving' and 'nourishing' a German-Austrian cultural identity (as opposed to *multi-culturalism*) he states clearly a desire to square up with the cultural 'elite':

„This chapter is concerned with culture, intellectuals and the media.....who in the past pursued a cult that saw itself as part of an elite - separate from others, above all from the Freedom Party“ (2)

The aggressive and unusual step of ‘targeting’ individual artists and cultural figures is rooted in the inability of the FPÖ to recruit or make political inroads into this societal group.

On a final note - as stated earlier - the main focus of Haider’s personal involvement in ‘cultural’ politics is in recruitment at discos, speeches in beer-tents, and gaining a significant media profile.

Andreas Mölzer Mölzer is a right-wing intellectual and has been a close political advisor to Haider for many years. He is currently editor of the magazine ‘Zur Zeit’ which represents (in its own description), „everything that is intelligent and *not* left-wing“. Mölzer, amongst others, was part of the ‘new right’ in Austria that introduced the theories of the French intellectual Alain de Benoist. This entailed a revision of the theories of Antonio Gramsci which outline the importance of culture in achieving political hegemony. In the Austrian context, Mölzer identified a strategy of the Left to gain political hegemony by control of cultural and media outlets and institutions:

„It is simply this, during the march and occupation by the New Left of state institutions since 1968 culture, cultural dominance and cultural hegemony has simply become a *fact*. This cannot be overlooked and Gramsci’s name is inevitably attached to this process“ (3)

Walter Marinovic Marinovic is the most energetic *Kulturkämpfer* associated with the FPÖ. He has been on the front line of the campaign against Austrian artists and cultural figures who he claims have set up a ‘Dictatorship of Ugliness’. He represents a distinct faction within the FPÖ that views modern art in a similar context to the national socialists. Although he uses a different vocabulary, his message is unambiguous - most contemporary art in Austria is ‘ugly’, ‘obscene’ and ‘degenerate’. He even points to the notorious ‘Entartete Kunst’ of the 1930s as at least being ‘art’ whereas most contemporary art:

„has nothing to do with art, its not even a degeneration but in the best cases an indication of mental or psychological disturbance“ (4)

Marinovic has set up an organisation in Austria called *Österreichischen Kulturwerk* which aims at supporting artists that want to distance themselves from the *Linkerkulturmafia*. He claims that there are many artists who are ‘forced’ to produce ‘politically ideological’ (ie left-wing) art under threat of losing funding.

c) The Response

The dramatic election result of October 1999 in which the Haider's FPÖ achieved 27% of the vote made them Austria's second largest party. By February 2000 a coalition was formed with the ÖVP with Wolfgang Schüssel (ÖVP) as Chancellor. There was an immediate international reaction in the form of the unprecedented step by the EU of imposing sanctions and putting Austria into diplomatic isolation. In Austria itself there were huge protests by a coalition of groups united in their hatred and rejection of the new regime and its accommodation of 'nazis'.

One group in particular was at the forefront of resistance to the new government - artists and writers. Within weeks of the new coalition being formed artists, cultural figures and intellectuals wrote articles, joined demonstrations and made 'declarations' of opposition to the new regime. Some even called for all artists to leave and go into exile or for an 'artistic boycott' of Austria. There was a fear that once in power the FPÖ would engage in an aggressive campaign of cost-cutting, withdrawing subsidies and promoting traditional, 'Volkskunst'. Some artists reacted as follows:

Andre Heller (Installation Artist) „We have arrived at a sad juncture in the Second Republic. Whatever we do for aiding the political re-socialisation of Haider will have catastrophic consequences for Austria in the long run“ (5)

Hermann Nitsch (Actionist) „My political position is one of distance....But there are emergency situations. Haider is someone who is fishing for votes by defaming artists“ (6)

Elfriede Jelinek (Author) „It would be useless to do a boycott. It would only be useful if prominent artists like the 'three tenors' would stay away. That would hurt them. If we would go in exile or boycott they (the FPÖ etc) would say: 'Thank God they are gone at last!'“ (7)

A declaration signed on 8th February 2000 by many writers and artists summed up their disgust and abhorrence of the new government. It was titled *Kulturnation Österreich Deklaration* (Declaration of the Austrian Cultural Nation). The first paragraph states:

„We declare the professed inability of the newly formed Austrian coalition government between the FPÖ and ÖVP to speak or legislate in any artistic or cultural matters, it cannot represent the interests or goals of culture in Austria. This is not just due to having little specialist knowledge but due to its lack of moral qualifications“ (8)

Since 2000 the *Kulturpolitik* of FPÖ/ÖVP has not brought in the dramatic changes feared by artists. The best example of the *praxis* of FPÖ cultural politics is in Carinthia, where Haider is regional governor. On a national level there have

certainly been funding cuts but not as big as feared by many in 2000. In fact, the FPÖ have virtually *withdrawn* from *Kulturpolitik*. The campaign against individual artists, as outlined in this paper, is not on their political agenda anymore. In terms of 'culture' their main political strategy is in exerting influence over the media, in particular the state television ORF. The instrumentalisation of *Kultur* for political purposes by the FPÖ from 1986 to 2000 can be seen as part of this political party's striving for executive power based on a conglomerate of populist policies and rhetoric. The defamation and condemnation of contemporary art and artists formed an integral part of this populism and helped the FPÖ in the process of forming a distinct political identity.

Conclusion

Robert Menasse has been one of the few contemporary Austrian writers to applaud the new coalition - not out of support for Haider (!) - but due to the dynamic effects that this new political phase will have. He hopes for a disintegration and collapse of the *old* system of *Kulturpolitik* which has strangled Austrian culture since 1945. He bemoans the overarching role of the state, which interferes with culture and distorts cultural debate and production. Art in Austria is for him politicised and polarised, there is no 'art market' due to an over-dependence on the state. Menasse's arguments have merit and help to put the FPÖ's *Kulturpolitik* in a historical and political context. It also shows the peculiar status of *Kultur* in Austria and its central role in political debate - quite unlike Britain.

However, the cultural rhetoric of the FPÖ should not only be seen as a symptom of a decaying political system. By focussing on Haider's *Kulturpolitik* one gains a valuable insight into the *character* of this political phenomenon. This is a character composed of traits such as intolerance, opportunism and cultural parochialism. In its striving for political power in Austria it has been necessary for FPÖ to 'tone down' certain aspects of their core ideology, particularly pan-Germanism and right-wing extremism. By probing their *Kulturpolitik* this more threatening and unsavory aspect of the Freedom Party's political programme comes to the surface.

Notes

- 1) Haider, Jörg: *The Freedom I Mean* Swan Books, New York 1993
- 2) Haider, Jörg: *Befreite Zukunft jenseits von links und rechts* Ibero Verlag, Vienna 1997
- 3) Zogholy, Andre: *Kulturpolitische Strategien der FPÖ und die Hegemonietheorie nach Antonio Gramsci* Johannes-Kepler-Universität, Linz 2001
- 4) Ibid
- 5) Internet: <http://literaturhaus.at/headlines/1999/03/181/>
- 6) Ibid

7) Ibid

8) Internet: <http://www.awadalla.at/el/kulturnation.html>