Sabeth Buchmann and Jens Kastner

Snapshot, Austria: Class Struggle from Above Right

In Austria, ultra-right-wing politics quite obviously attracts a stable or rising fraction of potential voters – between 25 and 30 percent. These numbers are shocking and sobering, but so is their consistency over the past decade. In the 2000 general elections, the so-called Freedom Party of Austria (FPÖ), then still led by Jörg Haider, received 28 percent of the votes and become part of the governing coalition. Most recently, on the October 10, 2010 communal elections, the FPÖ won almost 27 percent of the votes in Vienna – Austria's capital and most populous state and, until now, a stronghold of the Social Democrats (SPÖ) – becoming the second strongest party after the SPÖ. The constant rightward drift in organized politics is, on the one hand, a specifically Austrian phenomenon, and at the same time it is fully in line with the European trend.

As in other countries, the extreme right's electoral gains are largely fed by voters disappointed with the Social Democrats; in the Viennese elections, this group comprised forty-five thousand voters who had previously supported the SPÖ. Since its neoliberal turn in the 1990s, European Social Democracy has been a driving force behind the dismantling of social safety nets and the deregulation of the labor market, and this development has plunged many groups into political confusion. As a consequence, many people abstain from voting altogether. In others, however, the growing feeling of uncertainty finds its voice in an upended common sense: that the economization of the social that has been at the heart of the rise of "cognitive capitalism" over the past twenty years has not only created an encompassing market in which people must offer all their intellectual and physical abilities for sale, but also leads many to wish that the omnipresent marketplace, the world of employment, would return to being as simple and straightforward as it (allegedly) once was. In this world, those who had initially been recruited to perform poorly paid labor, but were also declared aliens, are unwelcome. The assiduous enthusiasm for the native, or rather for the phantasm of an identity-defining and homogeneous culture – in combination with the sluggishness of any attempt to come to terms with the history of National Socialism – is surely an Austrian specialty.

The marketplaces: two typical settings in which reorganization measures are enacted that must – still – be described as neoliberal are educational policy and what is called policy on foreigners (including asylum regulations). The role the extreme right plays in the political field as a whole becomes fairly clear in the interplay between these two areas.

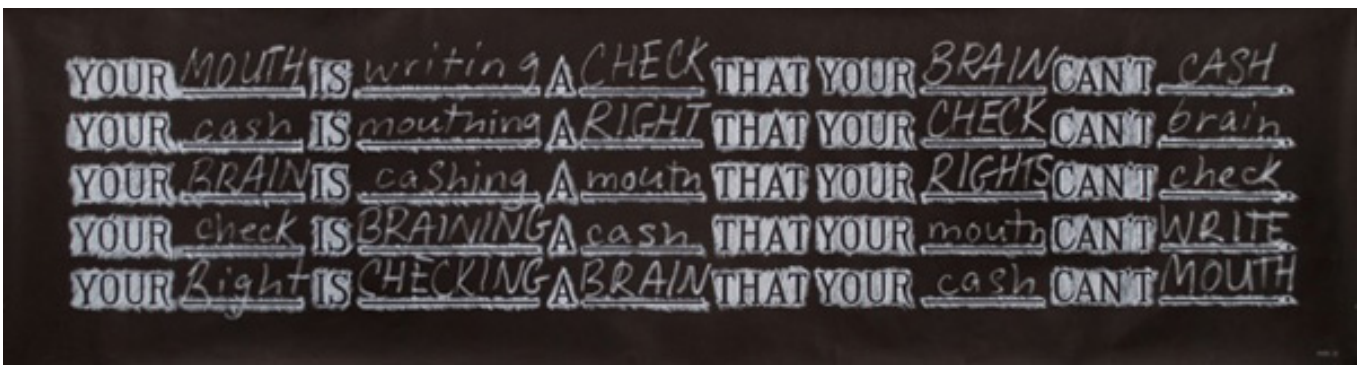
In terms of educational policy, the FPÖ has ridiculously little to say. There is essentially nothing on its agenda that is not also motivated by aims linked to the party's "policy on foreigners"; one example is the paranoid assessment that a situation has already arisen in which German must be mandated as the language not only of instruction, but also of "recess and schoolyard" interaction. The situation is different when it comes to questions regarding the right to asylum, deportations, and what is called integration. In these areas, the ultra-right-wing party's single-issue platform is having real effects. The party's foremost themes are immigration and the alleged "Islamization" of Austrian society, both of which, it claims, must be pushed back or stopped. Awkward rhyming slogans such as "Mehr Mut für unser 'Wiener Blut' – Zu viel Fremdes tut niemandem gut" (More courage for our "Viennese blood" – too much that's foreign isn't good for anyone), from the 2010 election campaign, apparently succeed in reaching voters, especially young men and more generally the social strata sociologists describe as the "traditionless working classes." The reference to "Viennese blood," the title of an operetta by Johann Strauss, conveys on the one hand the party's claim to represent what is allegedly Austria's native high culture, and on the other hand, it makes a well-measured and hence deniable allusion – and the denial came promptly – to the National Socialists' conceptions of *Volk*.

Instead of offering determined opposition to such racist resentment, the entire political class regularly meets it with the opportunistic formula that "the people's fears" need to be taken seriously. Similar views were aired in connection with the debate Thilo Sarrazin had instigated in Germany. During the preceding legislative period, the Social Democrats, then as now the senior partner in a "Grand Coalition" with the conservatives of the Austrian People's Party (ÖVP), had already proceeded along those lines, complying with their coalition partner's demands and passing the so-called aliens legislation package. The bills introduced more restrictive asylum policies and created two new laws, the Aliens' Police Act and the Settlement and Residence Act. To this day, the latter enables Austria to deport foreign nationals even when they are married to Austrians.

How little has remained of the classical political ideas of Social Democracy after New Labor and the New Center is particularly evident in those areas of social life where educational policy and policies regarding foreigners converge. Once upon a time, after all, education was meant to fuel not just political integration but also social mobility. It remains debatable whether this privilege was ever conceptually intended – and whether policies to implement it were in fact designed – to benefit non-citizens as well; either way, as a political goal it is no longer even on the table.

The cuts envisioned in the austerity budget presented by the SPÖ-led federal government, such as new restrictions on aid to needy families, will certainly do the greatest harm to the least educated social strata. In this light, it seems virtually impossible that the number of descendants of working-class parents obtaining university degrees would rise. In a comparative study conducted by the OECD in 2008, Austria ranked last in terms of children of working-class families studying at universities – even while the SPÖ still manages to stage what is probably the world's largest Social-Democratic rally every May 1.

At the same time, the conditions under which foreign nationals study at Austrian universities are becoming ever more restrictive. For example, they will now have to document a source of sufficient income not just once, as in the past, but on an ongoing basis. Most recently, in December 2010, the responsible authority



Mary Reid Kelley, *Your Mouth*, 2011, rubbing and crayon on paper.

(Municipal Department 35), which is led by a Social Democrat, has introduced a regulation requiring students to disclose their account statements, threatening many students with the loss of their residence permits. Even if ultra-right-wing politicians rarely intervene directly in the education sector, their policies have significant consequences in this area of social life as well. They become manifest in measures that are executed by parties outside the extreme right wing, even including the SPÖ-led administration, whose very conceivability is the product of a right-wing hegemony. Political decisions are made on the basis of intellectual models that should by rights be considered paradoxical: in a Catholic country, marriage is protected only between certain kinds of people, namely "domestic nationals"; politicians singing the neoliberal praise of globalization also expose "foreign" rising academic talent to unfathomable harassment. (It is not impossible that, as in England, in the foreseeable future the tuition paid by students from other countries will constitute a considerable part of the universities' budgets.)

The erosion of the country's education system and intellectual culture forcefully driven by the right-wing political climate is growing to

ever greater and previously unimagined dimensions. A few weeks ago, for instance, the public learned about the Grand Coalition's plans to withdraw public base funding for free research. This paves the way for the country's intellectual decline into provincialism, as does the cancellation of so-called "discretionary subsidies": both measures spell the end of international research activities, for example in the form of conferences, that cannot be paid for out of ever-tighter university budgets. They also threaten the very existence of extra-academic research, which has until now managed to stay afloat only thanks to third party funding, and has depended on public funds to cover basic costs. It is hardly surprising that these cutbacks are primarily targeted against disciplines in the social sciences and humanities, which, like the arts, are increasingly pressured to prove their effectiveness: if something doesn't look like it produces calculable – and commercially marketable – output, the Austrian society is no longer willing to pay for it. Ignorance, incompetence, and the *esprit de corps* of technocratic administrators are surely not enough to explain why politicians refuse to see that they are destroying an internationally oriented academic landscape that has already

A.K. Burns and Katherine Hubbard, *Untitled (no. 5 of 7 from the series, The Brown Bear: Neither Particular nor General)*, 2010.

adopted a neoliberal version of the trope of the knowledge society.

The message this sends to the world out there is unambiguous: we don't need it, or if we do, then only as a place where well-heeled tourists come from, or as a global reservoir of underpaid labor we can deport whenever we so choose. That is a form of class struggle from above, the attempt to assert criteria of effectiveness that obey the logic of the market across all areas of social life by combining them with a culturally tinged nativism. This sort of political emphasis on domestic business interests has never been particularly favorable to the social or cultural sciences, to the humanities or the arts. Accordingly, the universities of art, too, are likely to face more severe measures from champions of neoliberal pro-business policies. At the moment, they are told to prepare for a profit-oriented "reorganization of student and tuition management": a phrase that would seem to betoken the reduction of education funding to a minimum.[1] True, the universities of art, now threatened by complete incorporation into the industrial manufacture of cheap education, have never been bastions of equal opportunity: here more than elsewhere the logic of the market comes into play, and it is one to which children from bourgeois homes enjoy unequally better access than those from working-class or migrant backgrounds. Yet as responses to the strikes and protests since October of last year have shown, even the non-privileged students had better not count on solidarity from de-privileged social strata outside the university: why should they benefit from adequate educational opportunities and the chance to learn something when even ordinary people are having a miserable time?

Many "public intellectuals," meanwhile, do not present a more encouraging picture. They prefer to employ a trite rhetoric of iconoclasm directed against an alleged leftist Frankfurt School consensus to complain about the inflated taxes supposedly paid by the country's so-called "top achievers" (they are talking about themselves), catering – inadvertently? deliberately? – to right-wing neoliberal resentments. This debate, instigated by Peter Sloterdijk, took place primarily in the culture sections of German newspapers rather than in Austrian dailies like *Der Standard* or the populist *Kronen Zeitung*. Yet even the leftist-liberal *Standard*, in a column titled "Comment of the Others," regularly gives the word to neoliberal voices; to the sociologist Christian Fleck, for instance, who insisted that the middle class needed to enjoy "opportunities for downward mobility," or to the mathematician Peter A. Markowich, who conveyed his enthusiastic support for the cutbacks in funding for research outside the university. Otherwise, the paper is by and large fairly clearly antipathetic to radical cuts in the education sector, as are, incidentally, most leftist intellectuals: in the fall of 2009, well-known writers such as Marlene Streeruwitz and Robert Menasse expressed their solidarity with the striking students. Yet in a country that is fundamentally anti-intellectual, the "intellectual left" remains largely without influence; unlike Haider in the 1990s, today's right-wing politicians and their supporters no longer even use it as a target for election campaign propaganda. That is evident not least importantly in Austria's most politically influential newspaper, the *Kronen Zeitung*, whose estimated readership of 2.3 million (in a country of eight million inhabitants) makes it the tabloid with the highest market penetration in the world.

Despite and because of the advancing destruction of the country's intellectual-political culture, the national as well as international dimension of the wave of student activism initiated last October at Vienna's Academy of Fine Arts is an encouraging sign. The movement has drawn support not only from teachers and artists but also from members of other milieus, as students, who, rather than limit their agenda to educational policy, also raised demands regarding integration policy, labor conditions, and sparked a debate over a program to provide a basic social safety net for everyone. The students have understood that the simultaneity of neoliberal deregulation and authoritarian-restrictive regulation manifested at the universities entails less opportunity for participation, less democracy, and less collective solidarity. They have understood that the close collaboration between the state and the business world determines formats for the production of knowledge, formats that may in certain circumstances operate as a complementary instrument of social segregation. They have understood that emancipatory models of self-organization in learning and the assimilation of knowledge can backfire; as the English example demonstrates, such models can offer politics a basis of legitimacy for measures aiming either to stifle them or to invoke their success to justify cutbacks in public funding for research and teaching. Their communicative and administrative abilities have shown these students to be a true threat to the current political regime. As several teachers have claimed in a collaboratively written essay,

> The self-organized production of political critique and self-empowering gestures made in and through educational institutions are themselves a form of social

and political theory. This new production of activity is not least a reaction to the neoliberal production of passivity, which manifests itself as the individualized performance of undirected and at best self-referential virtuosity. By deliberately not behaving as a mere consumer or service provider in the new university factories (or edu-shopping malls), but rather as an impatient and irritated historical subject in the most different, unpredictable constellations, associations, and organizational forms, we can turn social theory into an anti-hegemonic, anti-neoliberal praxis of the subjects of these institutions.[2]

Despite these hopes, however, we also know how successful the forms of government manifest not only in Austrian politics are at using right-wing political tendencies to largely marginalize such a practice of protest.

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We are grateful to Ruth Sonderegger for her stimulating remarks about an earlier version of this essay.
Translated from the German by Gerrit Jackson.

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See Tom Holert, “Something Other than Administrated ‘Quality.’ Art Education and Protest 2009/1979,” *eipcp* (October 2010), http://eipcp.net/transversal/1210/holert/en.

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See Fahim Amir, Sabeth Buchmann, Diedrich Diederichsen, Tom Holert, Jakob Krameritsch, and Ruth Sonderegger, “The University and the Plan: Reflections from Vienna,” trans. Nathaniel McBride, *Radical Philosophy* 162 (July–August 2010).

e-flux journal #22 — january–february 2011 Sabeth Buchmann and Jens Kastner
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