

Vari on Hakkarainen, 'Comical Modernity: Popular Humour and the Transformation of Urban Space in Late Nineteenth-Century Vienna' and Hödl, 'Entangled Entertainers: Jews and Popular Culture in Fin-de-Siècle Vienna'

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Heidi Hakkarainen. *Comical Modernity: Popular Humour and the Transformation of Urban Space in Late Nineteenth-Century Vienna*. Austrian and Habsburg Studies Series. New York: Berghahn Books,

2019. Illustrations. viii + 279 pp. \$135.00 (cloth), [ISBN 978-1-78920-273-1](https://www.amazon.com/dp/9781789202731).  **Klaus**

Hödl. *Entangled Entertainers: Jews and Popular Culture in Fin-de-Siècle Vienna*. Translated by Corey Twitchell. Austrian and Habsburg Studies Series. New York: Berghahn Books, 2019. 194 pp. \$135.00

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Humorous Magazines and Jewish/Non-Jewish Interactions in the Making of Viennese Popular Culture

Writing almost twenty years ago in the conclusion of the collective volume *Rethinking Vienna 1900*, historian Mary Gluck made the observation that due to the Schorskean paradigm becoming so successful in interpreting the meaning and legacy of the fin-de-siècle Habsburg capital, “older stereotypes of Vienna, the city of operettas, waltzes and coffeehouses, have given way to a new myth of Vienna, the habitat of aesthetes, connoisseurs and psychoanalysts.”[1] Yet, as the other contributions to the same volume suggested, Carl Schorske’s thesis, which related Viennese modernism to the death of historicism and the rise of an ahistorical culture—an explanation that during the 1980s served to connect Vienna with the rise of late twentieth-century postmodernism and to turn its intellectual milieu into the petri dish from which the ideas of the twentieth century were born—was already challenged by many scholars of the Habsburg monarchy.[2] Moreover, the period since then has also witnessed a more sustained scholarly examination of comic operas, operettas, waltzes, variety theaters, and coffeehouses in the rise of late eighteenth- and nineteenth-century popular culture in Vienna, a cultural domain that—as Gluck had pointed out—the focus on high culture and politics specific to Schorske’s academic legacy had obscured for so long.[3]

The two volumes under review here represent important contributions to this new wave of scholarship. They offer insights on the making of Viennese popular culture through the study of fin-de-siècle popular humor and, respectively, the world of Viennese *volksänger*. Heidi Hakkarainen’s study relies on research in humorous magazines like *Der Figaro*, *Der Floh*, and *Kikeriki* between 1857 and 1890 to “explore ... popular humour in the nineteenth-century city both as a mode of lived

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experience and as a discourse on urban life” (p. 2). The author unfolds this topic thematically by analyzing humorous images of and commentaries on Vienna’s rebuilding after the 1857 imperial decision to take down the old ramparts surrounding the city’s medieval core (which led to the building of the modern Ringstrasse), including comical musings on the new rules and regulations that governed modern urban life. According to Hakkarainen, the urban chaos engendered by street traffic and the intermingling of different classes was another topic that amused the Viennese. Cartoonists also made humorous parallels between the sense of general disorder caused by the tearing down of old buildings and the presence of ubiquitous worksites in the city during the 1860s and 1870s, which reminded them of the political and social upheaval caused in Vienna by the 1848 revolution two decades earlier. Coupled with a rising sense of nostalgia for the refreshing shadow provided prior to 1857 by the trees and gardens covering the area of the Viennese glaxis, for which—in the opinion of contemporaries—the drying tree saplings and the barren vistas of the modern city could not make up, the humorous magazines’ exploration of the differences between the old and the new city was thus a constant source of popular humor.

Hakkarainen’s study is grounded in a solid knowledge of the secondary literature on modernity and theories of humor. One of her important claims, which adds a new perspective to them, is that in Vienna “the ‘modern’ was encountered and processed through humour long before it became such a prominent feature in society and social debate” (p. 3). While humorists poked fun at various aspects of the Viennese urban modernity in the making, humor itself was a product of this early modernity.

Hakkarainen identifies two kinds of humor: “rebellious humour,” which drew out “humour’s creative and innovative potential,” and “disciplinary humour,” which had “suppressive and conservative tendencies” (p. 18). The first kind of humor was noticeable in the humorous magazines’ comical renderings of Vienna’s urban redevelopment plan, in their chastising of the incompetence of city authorities to quickly turn the Ringstrasse into a livable place, and in the ridiculing of the misplaced punctiliousness of the police. At the same time, however, the general attitude of the humorous magazines addressing a middle-class, and in some cases, a lower-middle-class audience, was one of conservative nostalgia for a past that was fast disappearing under the very eyes of the Viennese. By contrast to the certainties of that simpler past, the present made many experience a sense of confusion and visual deception when confronted with the sights of their new urban modernity.

According to Hakkarainen, even humor itself was seen by contemporaries as becoming deteriorated in the process, being transformed “from thought-provoking training of the mind into superficial and lifeless entertainment” (p. 151). Yet while providing entertainment, the numerous juxtapositions in the humorous press of representations of Alt- and Neu-Wien, also fed nostalgia for the former as a space of Viennese authenticity, with the Ringstrasse being depicted, by contrast, “as part of New Vienna, representing novelty, [and] not memory” (p. 156). The specific dynamic between the past and the present was not the only issue in focus in Viennese humor though, since the same humorous publications also offered their readers visions of Vienna from a distant future, embodied in dystopian visions of the city, which enabled them not just to react to how modern urban planning changed the city between 1857 and 1890 but also to “actively construct ... the experience and understanding of [Viennese] modernity” (p. 167).

The most exciting chapter of the book is the last one, in which Hakkarainen explores humoristic takes on gendered images of the city, female and male fashion, cross-dressing, women’s involvement in the

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making of Viennese humor, and first-time encounters by foreigners, tourists, and non-German ethnic groups from the Austro-Hungarian monarchy, with Vienna as a *Weltstadt*. While this chapter is quite crowded, since the author also looks at representations of Jewishness and the Viennese underclass with its various characters and types in the satirical press of the time, the richness of these topics is indicative of the multitude of research paths one can follow in the study of Viennese popular humor. At the same time, even though Hakkarainen's interpretations are based on a well-informed European-wide comparative frame throughout her book, it is especially in the case of this chapter that her references to developments in London, Paris, and Berlin would have also benefited from a more sustained analysis of the connections between Vienna and Budapest. With the latter city taking on at the time the dual role of Vienna's competitor and alter-ego as a *Weltstadt*, which also imagined itself in gendered terms as a young female metropolis, and a number of other rising urban centers within the Austro-Hungarian monarchy, such as Prague, Trieste, Fiume/Rijeka, Zagreb, and Cracow, on the one hand, and cities located in the broader eastern European space like St. Petersburg, Warsaw, Kiev, Odessa, and Bucharest, on the other, bringing peripheral modernities in intense dialogue with the European urban core, such comparisons would have added other revealing findings to the book.[4]

Although Hakkarainen provides only a brief discussion of the connections between urbanity, Jewishness, and modernity in the constitution of fin-de-siècle Viennese popular culture, this brevity is compensated by Klaus Hödl's focus on that very connection in his *Entangled Entertainers*, the recent English translation of a book that was published originally in German as *Zwischen Wienerlied und Der Kleine Kohn: Juden in der Wiener populären Kultur um 1900* (2017). Hödl's straightforward thesis is that long-term academic focus on Jews' cultural assimilation in middle- and upper-middle-class Viennese society and their participation in the making of fin-de-siècle high culture has obscured the fact that "Jews played a substantial role in the shaping of Viennese popular culture" (p. 7). As Hödl points out, unlike their more prominent and much better-studied counterparts in the sphere of high culture, Jews involved on the volkssänger scene or those who wrote or performed in the vaudeville (variety acts) of the time did not pursue a path of acculturation in a preexisting popular culture but actively shaped it as part of their interactions with Jews and non-Jews involved in the field of Viennese popular entertainment. At the same time, these Jewish artists have been less visible than other Jews in Viennese society because neither mainstream nor Jewish newspapers reported on popular culture, while, due to the artistic names that they took, Jewish variety theater authors and performers became harder to identify as such, and thus became less visible for scholars. However, cheap newspapers like the *Illustriertes Wiener Extrablatt* and *Das Variété* (which in addition to the texts of a large corpus of variety theater plays are one of the main sources for Hödl's research) closely followed the Viennese variety theater scene and therefore hold a wealth of information that enable one to reconstruct the main developments in that world around 1900.

Entertainment venues located in Leopoldstadt along the Taborstrasse and Praterstrasse like the Etablissement Nestroy-Säle, the Edelhofer Leopoldtstadt Folk Orpheum, and the hotel Zum Schwarzen Adler, together with the Zum Marokkaner variety theater located in the Viennese Prater, served as venues for Jewish volkssängers and entertainment troupes like the Folies Comiques, the Lemberg Singspiel Society, the S. Fischer Society, the Hirsh and Kassina Ensembles, the Appolo and Danzer's Orpheum, and, the most well-known among all, the Budapest Orpheum Society. The most important thing about these ensembles, as Hödl emphasizes, was that they were made up of both Jewish and non-Jewish artists, an intermixing that also extended to their audiences in the

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aforementioned venues. Instead of staying separate and aloof from each other, as was the case among the Christian and Jewish members of Viennese middle- and upper-middle-class society, lower-middle and working-class milieus provided room for continuous everyday interaction between Jews and non-Jews, an interaction that was also prominent in the plays that their audiences watched in these locales.

At the same time, the plays by Jewish authors that were performed “portray[ed] Jewishness without reference to religion.” As Hödl explains in a crucial passage of his text, in these plays “Jewishness is anything but clearly outlined: instead, it is fluid, multifaceted, and opaque.” In the plays, “Jewishness is expressed in a form of performative difference: Jews distinguish themselves from non-Jews through activities to their effects, [which] means that Jewish difference, as constructed in these works, is time- and context-dependent.” Moreover, “this concept of Jewish self-understanding is inclusive, in that even non-Jews can adopt their characteristics” (p. 69). To add further evidence to the validity of this point, the author uses the concept of the performative character of Jewishness to explain Albert Hirsch’s, a notable author of popular variety theater plays, involvement in the so-called *Volkssänger* Wars that shook the Viennese volkssänger scene in the early twentieth century. These “wars” that were triggered by different responses among Viennese artists to the question whether to allow a Budapest-based volkssänger troupe to permanently move to the city showed that there were no clear dividing lines between Jews and non-Jews in the world of Viennese variety theater and that Hirsch and other Jewish artists like him were neither prisoners of an essentialized view of their Jewishness nor motivated by a desire to acculturate to non-Jewish cultural norms and values. Instead, Jewish artists expressed their Jewishness performatively through Yiddish jargon or Jewish jokes, as members of a professional community of Viennese artists that included both Jews and non-Jews.

In Hödl’s interpretation, however, performative Jewishness did not exclude Jewish difference. Jews could still be different from their non-Jewish peers depending on the context. In the last two chapters of his book, Hödl examines two such contexts: that of the relationship between the city’s past and the present and of the dialectic play between similarity and difference. Just like the widespread nostalgia for the lost charms of Old Vienna that was so prominent in the humorous magazines analyzed by Hakkarainen in her book, the trope of Alt-Wien resurfaced at the turn of the century in the world of the Viennese popular entertainment as well. However, while in the non-Jewish humorous magazines examined by Hakkarainen references to the city’s past often served as vehicles to cast a shadow on and poke fun at the ills of modernity, for Jews, as Hödl observes, “the embellishment of the city’s recent history did not merely serve as a critique of the present. Rather, Old Vienna was a foil that allowed them to inscribe themselves into the history of the city. A Jewish presence in the past was meant to serve as a counterpoint to the widespread view that Jews were foreign immigrants, who did not truly belong to society” (p. 123). For instance, Jewish architect Oskar Marmorek, the builder in a composite and imaginative form of the plaster recreation of Old Vienna in the Viennese Prater in the 1890s, “included the medieval *Judengasse* among the few side streets that led to his reconstruction of the Hoher Markt.” Another way for Jews to inscribe their presence in the city’s past was by “showing Jews [engaged] in peaceful interactions with non-Jews,” especially on the outskirts of Vienna, an essential space in the contemporary nostalgia for Alt-Wien (p. 124). The latter was a plot component that many Jewish volkssänger authors, like Hirsch and others, commonly included in their variety theater plays.

By the turn of the century, however, rising anti-Semitism in Vienna’s suburbs prompted Jewish

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authors active in popular journalism, such as Felix Salten and Stefan Zweig, to switch to the present and imagine, by contrast, Vienna's entertainment district, the Prater—a space from which anti-Semitism and nationalism were noticeably absent—as Vienna's “eternal periphery” (p. 132). Jewish vaudeville authors, too, turned their attention to the present as a newly relevant temporal location for their plots. They especially used two temporalities, those of the fleeting and the permanent present to imbue them with new meanings. For instance, in an attempt to address the contradictions of “a transitory present ... experienced as fleeting,” which raised the specter of worsening relations between Jews and non-Jews, *Little Kohn*, a play by Caprice, performed by the Viennese Budapest Orpheum Society, used racist clichés embedded in the figure of the eponymous character, who—as the play unfolds—turns to be the opposite of what those clichés suggested, enabling its author to counter anti-Semitic stereotypes about Jews (p. 136). By contrast, in a variety play by Josef Armin titled *The Journey to Grosswardein*, it is a permanent present—depicted through the inability of several, both Jewish and non-Jewish, characters to depart the Viennese train station for their intended destination—that is featured. As Hödl argues, these plays prove “that Jews in Vienna around 1900 regimented time and space differently than Jews in other epochs and in different social contexts.” Moreover, “in Vienna, this understanding appeared distinct, in a manner that replaced religion and other prevalent signifiers of Jewish difference, but without running the risk of being essentialized” (p. 142).

In the world of popular culture, Jewish difference became thus inclusive. In addition to inclusivity, and based on all the other variety plays that he examines in the book, Hödl identifies “individuality, interactionality [and] performance” as the other main markers of Jewish difference (p. 156). He concludes that Jewishness “as a form of difference based on inclusive qualities, which can also shape the identities of non-Jews” rather than being paradoxical, points to the fact that there was a similarity between Jews and non-Jews, a similarity that “does not resolve differences between them” but “indicates a gradual, rather than a fundamental difference” between the two groups (pp. 157, 158).

Overall, by focusing on interactions between Jews and non-Jews in the volkssänger milieu, *Entangled Entertainers* proves Gluck's claim—made earlier in her *The Invisible Jewish Budapest: Metropolitan Culture at the Fin-de-Siècle* (2016)—that “the true context for modern Jewish identity lay not in the interior spaces of bourgeois domesticity nor in the official public realm of political life but in institutions of urban culture such as the coffee house, the boulevard, and the music hall, where a new world of personal significance and make-believe could be constructed,” a claim that Hödl brilliantly explores and further nuances from the perspective of the Viennese context.[5]

Ultimately, both Hakkarainen's and Hödl's work reveal something new and important about fin-de-siècle Viennese popular culture, which appears in their analyses as a space of unexpected entanglements and complexity that belies the relevance of commercial and unreflective properties that were attached to it for so long. Works such as these make historical research in the field of European popular culture engaging and intriguing, bringing Vienna to the attention of a larger community of scholars once again.

Notes

[1]. Mary Gluck, “Afterthoughts about Fin-de-Siècle Vienna,” in *Rethinking Vienna 1900*, ed. Steven Beller (New York: Berghahn Books, 2001), 265.

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[2]. For a full exposition of Schorske's thesis, see Carl E. Schorske, *Fin-de-Siècle Vienna: Politics and Culture* (New York: Knopf, 1979).

[3]. See Ralph Köhnen, *Die Zauberflöte und das "Populäre": Eine kleine Mediologie der Unterhaltungskunst* (Frankfurt-am-Main: Peter Lang, 2016); Ian Woodfield, *Cabals and Satires: Mozart's Comic Operas in Vienna* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019); Camille Crittenden, *Johann Strauss and Vienna: Operetta and the Politics of Popular Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000); Derek B. Scott, *Sounds of the Metropolis: The 19th-Century Popular Music Revolution in London, New York, Paris, and Vienna* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008); Marion Linhardt, *Residenzstadt und Metropole: Zu Einer Kulturelle Topographie des Wiener Unterhaltungstheaters, 1858-1918* (Tübingen: Max Niemeyer, 2006); and Charlotte Ashby, Tag Gronberg, and Simon Shaw-Miller, eds., *The Viennese Café and Fin-de-Siècle Culture* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2013).

[4]. On Budapest, see especially the chapters by Péter Hanák, "Urbanization and Civilization: Vienna and Budapest in the Nineteenth Century," in *The Garden and the Workshop: Essays on the Cultural History of Vienna and Budapest* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1998), 3-43 ; and Gábor Gyáni, "A United City on the Danube," in *Identity and the Urban Experience: Fin-de-Siècle Budapest* (Boulder, CO: East European Monographs, 2004), 3-22. The secondary literature on the other cities is quite extensive.

[5]. Mary Gluck, *The Invisible Jewish Budapest: Metropolitan Culture at the Fin-de-Siècle* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2016), 171.

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