

## Sociology in Austria: from gifted amateurs to institutional banality

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### Abstract

This paper provides an overview of the history of sociology in Austria from its first appearance in the late nineteenth century until the present time. I argue that the Austrian case disproves the conventional view of professionalization leading to disciplinary improvement; Austrian sociology enjoyed a greater status prior to its institutionalization as a university-based discipline. The Austrian case, if anything, suggests the opposite, that the growth of the discipline in terms of institutional status and resources has arguably been accompanied by decline in terms of prestige, recognition, innovation and excellence.

**Keywords:** Austrian sociology, institutionalization, professionalization, academic discipline, university autonomy

Any study of the development of a particular scientific discipline is confronted with the problem whether, and to what degree, the case under consideration has been influenced by social, political, intellectual factors or its several environments. Obviously sociology and similar disciplines are molded by the nation state in which they exist, who finances their personnel, from whom they get their data and to whom they deliver their findings. This is a characteristic of the social sciences, and probably some parts of the humanities, whereas chemistry and astronomy do not show a comparable rootedness in and dependence on a nation state beyond basic facets as finance and legal frames. There is widespread agreement that something like a German sociology exists and is different to the French variant. The case covered here is different and only few observers would go as far and speak about an entity which goes by the name 'Austrian sociology'. First and foremost one is inclined to avoid such a labeling because what one can observe inside the borders of Austria as sociology lacks a specific uniformity. Attempts to establish something like sociology as a distinct style of thought and scholarly unit have

been executed more than once over the last century and a half in the area which is called the Republic of Austria since the end of WWI; however, at no point in time were the proponents able to develop a unified approach to the discipline. Sometimes rivaling positions existed side by side, at other times later-borns did not recognize and, most probably, often did not even know their predecessors. In other words, the history of sociology in Austria could not serve as an illustration of a case of cumulative development and enhancement. Too many political, intellectual, organizational interruptions generated a trajectory of discontinuities. Furthermore the relative short history of sociology in Austria, about five academic generations long, should rather be seen as the falsification of the conventional wisdom that the more institutionalized a discipline the better its outcomes. The Austrian case demonstrates that even the opposite can happen and that more structure, money, personnel, acceptability, etc. can result in less prestige, recognition, innovation or excellence. Not only spokesperson for particular professions but also historians and sociologists of science are persuaded that 'more' means 'better', that a higher degree of institutionalization, professionalization etc. produces more output. The case of sociology in Austria could be handled as a counter case for such convictions. But how and why did this happen?

### **Promising beginnings**

The best known contributions to sociology from Austria stem from times where even the most basic steps towards institutionalization were non-existent. By institutionalization we usually refer to factors facilitating a process of perpetuation by establishing forums for exchange of ideas in the form of journals, conferences, departments etc.; by creating modes of transferring knowledge to the next generation, either via formal curricula or instances of apprenticeships; and finally by enabling continuation through financing people and activities with the sole aim to continue what had been planted and set in motion. These processes together enable the creation of a discipline and help to employ those individuals who by identifying themselves with it create an identity by telling the story of their own and their predecessors' attempts.

Before WWI when today's Austria was part of the larger Habsburg Empire the scholarly world was located overwhelmingly in universities. The majority of these scholars opted for the ruling German nationality in this multi-ethnic state, which lacked all features of a nation state. Only the split of its oldest university, Charles University in Prague, into a German and a Czech branch in 1882 cut through the German domination inside academia.<sup>1</sup>

For much of the nineteenth century the social sciences were not as differentiated as today's disciplines are: economics, statistics, political theory, law and sociology belonged to what was called *Staatswissenschaften*, or the study of the state, forming one of the four faculties of a traditional university. This

academic unit produced civil servants, lawyers and judges, politicians and journalists, and its professoriate proclaimed being servants of the state, but these strange servants strove to rule the house according to their own interpretation of what was good for the state, the emperor or the nation.

During the course of the nineteenth century the social science discourses circled around two big questions. First, scholars were afraid of the side-effects of capitalist accumulation. Above all, poverty and urbanization caught the attention of university professors. The German-speaking Austrians joined the numerically much larger group of Germans who became known as the *Kathedersozialisten*, or socialists of the lectern, assembled since 1873 in the *Verein für Socialpolitik*, or association for social policy, a combination of an academic discussion forum and an advocacy group. The proceedings of their meetings were published over three decades in 190 volumes. Some of these professors worked closely with statisticians who were both state officials and academically orientated scholars. Some of these statisticians had established international collaborations.

On the other hand, sociological inquiry was inevitably rooted in particularities of the multi-ethnic double monarchy of Austria-Hungary: on ethnic groups, their trajectories, centripetal moves and clashes in particular.<sup>2</sup> Out of this environment one of the most prominent figures of the founding generation of sociology emerged, Ludwik Gumplowicz (1838–1909). Gumplowicz published most probably the first German book with sociology in its title *Der Rassenkampf. Sociologische Untersuchungen* (1883). The very title caused misinterpretations because readers deduced from it that the author must be a racist. The opposite is true. Gumplowicz saw race not as a biological entity but as an outcome of battles between social groups in which one came to dominate others and cemented its power, i.e. the dominance could be overturned only by the emergence of newly formed groups. Gumplowicz espoused a conflict theory of social order. Some academics joined him because they were interested in the multiethnic reality of the old Empire; however, later authors stressed the role of nations and nationality more heavily than Gumplowicz did. The leading Austro-Marxist Otto Bauer (1881–1938) formulated an interesting perspective by claiming that a nation is nothing historically fixed but the result of intensive arguments over past experiences by those who share them. A nation is the result of joined action and concerns, a community of fate. An echo of Bauer's interpretation can be found in Max Weber's definition of an ethnic group ('race creates a "group" only when it is subjectively perceived as a common trait', Weber 1978: 385) and in Benedict Anderson's *Imagined Communities* (1983: 107–9), only the last one quotes Bauer.

Gumplowicz's life has some illuminating aspects, some apt for generalization, others less so. He was born to a Jewish family in Cracow, then a small, semi-independent republic. He remained a member of the Jewish community until 1884 when he and his wife left the Kehilla, known in German as the *Israelitische Kultusgemeinde*, the official label for the Jewish community's

administration, and converted later to Protestantism. Gumplowicz's national creed influenced his thinking stronger than did his religion. His hometown became annexed to Galicia, at that time a 'crown land' of the Austrian Empire, when he was a school boy. As a young lawyer he participated in the Polish uprising against the big powers Russia, Austria, and Prussia which he saw responsible for the partition of his Polish homeland. After the defeat of the Polish independence movement Gumplowicz resigned from politics. In 1875 he moved to Graz where he successfully tried to get entry to the local university. He got first a habilitation and finally became professor in the faculty of law. Gumplowicz was the most prominent exponent of sociology in the old Empire but could not teach sociology because of the lack of any proper study programs in the area. His plea for a non-individualistic, conflict oriented interpretation of sociology that tries to follow the model of the sciences as much as possible was not as idiosyncratic as one would assume today. Gumplowicz bonded with other scholars of his time, nationally and internationally. He never traveled and in this light his prominence comes even more as a surprise. Instead of going into more details of this controversialist's thinking I would like to draw the readers' attention to the fact that Gumplowicz was not alone, neither in his understanding of sociology and its duties nor with regard to his social position. If there is anything characteristic to sociology in Austria until the rise of Nazism one could point to the fact that the Austrians favored a positivist interpretation with regard to meta-theoretical reasoning and therefore were committed to empiricist orientation at the everyday level of sociological investigation. Their reference group consisted of John Stuart Mill and Ernst Mach, very different to their German neighbors' preference for Hegel or the Neo-Kantians.

Several other early sociologists were Jewish or did have Jewish ancestors, so it seems to be easier to name those who did not belong to this ethno-religious group. The field marshal Gustav Ratzenhofer (1842–1904), a contemporary supporter of Gumplowicz, could be mentioned, and from the next generation Karl Renner (1870–1950) and Joseph Schumpeter (1883–1950). The latter two could be labeled 'part-time sociologists' (Fleck 1990: 31). Even Gumplowicz earned his money by teaching administrative law, and all those who later on became regarded as sociologists produced their contributions side-by-side with other obligations, either academic or professional. Schumpeter was an economist. Renner was a lifelong politician who only in the early stages of his career, when he served as a librarian in the parliament, found time to write on nationalism and sociology of law under a pseudonym. His treatise on the social functions of civil law from 1904 later became well-known abroad, due to a translation which went through several editions since it first appeared in 1949 (Renner 2010).

Over the next decades the social position of what was then a *Privatgelehrter*, or independent scholar, remained the dominant pattern. At the same time the focus of the sociologists switched from dealing with ethnic rivalries to more abstract reasoning on the one hand and more specialized coverage on the other.

Alfred Schütz (1899–1959), a banker during the longest part of his relatively short life, wrote at night about philosophy and methodology; whereas Otto Neurath (1882–1945) ran with the hare and hunted with the hounds and no one knows when he found time to write all his pamphlets, amongst them *Empirische Soziologie* (Empirical Sociology), which carried the ambitious and programmatic subtitle ‘Scientific Content of Economics and History’ (Neurath 1981). However, the group Neurath eventually helped to create, the Vienna Circle of Logical Positivism, influenced later sociologists and other social scientists more through other publications, including oral transmission, than through Neurath’s own writings. Neurath never tired to regularly assemble representatives from different branches of scholarship. His Unity of Science movement tried to spread the positivist message until the end of the 1950s. Schütz’s first book, *Der sinnhafte Aufbau der sozialen Welt* (1932), became known beyond the circles to which he belonged in Vienna only after he fled to New York in 1938. The book acquired the status of a ‘must read’ in Europe only indirectly through the reception of writings of some of his New School students and American admirers. Schütz’s book did not have anything to do with the political or social debates of his time but resorted to philosophy and its application to basic features of sociability. Over time, Schütz’ disciples obliterated that part of the social milieu, which initially had influenced Schütz and his thoughts. Weber’s and Husserl’s influence continued to be mentioned while the one stemming from Ludwig Mises and his associates was pushed aside.

Whereas we can identify some continuities in topics, frames of references and points of view from the old Empire to the First Republic (1918–33/4), when the Nazis took over power in 1938 we have to recognize a severe rupture with regard to the institutional side of the history of sociology and other social sciences. Whereas under the Emperor even an outsider, nonconformist and Jew like Gumplowicz could successfully enter a university, at least a provincial one, in the interwar period academia was almost completely closed. Some have attributed the closed doors to the rising anti-Semitism, but this is less than half the truth. Without a shadow of a doubt, expressions of anti-Semitism became more pronounced; however, discrimination could not really happen because there were no job openings. The Republic of Austria, with its population of 7 million, was the heir of the multiethnic old Empire with its 30 million inhabitants, not including the Hungarian part. The famous contemporary dictum ‘L’Autriche c’est qu’il reste’, usually ascribed to the French Prime Minister Georges Clemenceau, did not satisfy the situation of the state bureaucracy and the universities which were part of it. Both sectors were bloated and much too big for the small country. This resulted in a popular metaphor for the capital Vienna: the ‘hydrocephalus of Austria’. Actually the two decades of the interwar period were characterized by stagnation and prejudice; most probably these two factors were not completely independent of each other. In academia, anti-Jewish sentiments could be demonstrated consequentially at the threshold of the academic market,

the habilitation, which became inaccessible for Jews, socialists and even some liberals. Anti-Semitism was expressed even more dramatically by students against the few professors and fellow students of Jewish belief.

Vienna's upper middle class sent their children to the universities in large numbers because of the lack of other labour market options. A sense of anomie amongst students from prosperous backgrounds fed into a climate of political messianism but contributed also to sociological curiosity and experimentation. The best known example in social research is the small monograph *Marienthal: The Sociography of an Unemployed Community*, which appeared in print some weeks after Adolf Hitler assumed power in Germany. *Marienthal* originated from a small environment of politically committed young people who taught themselves the techniques of social research or learned it on the job. Paul Lazarsfeld (1901–76) recruited a number of collaborators, first from the counter culture movement of the Social Democrats and then from the vicinity of the University of Vienna's psychology department of the Bühler couple. In 1933 he got a Rockefeller fellowship which brought him to New York. Marie Jahoda (1907–2001), married for a while to Lazarsfeld, remained longer in Vienna but was expatriated in 1937 by the authoritarian government because of her underground activities in the socialist movement. She fled to London where she spent the war years as a political exile. At the end of WWII she inquired whether she would be welcomed in Vienna by her old party. She soon learned that anti-Semitism had survived the end Hitler's dictatorship. She decided not to return and to opt for academia as her sole world. The third author of *Marienthal*, Hans Zeisel (1905–92), had contributed to the study with an afterword on the history of sociography. Trained as a lawyer, he published on economics and earned his living as a sports reporter for the Social Democratic daily, *Arbeiter Zeitung*. He escaped from Vienna only after the 'Anschluss' and resettled in New York where he worked in the marketing industry and later as a professor of sociology at the law faculty of the University of Chicago.

Looking back at the half of a century that started with Gumplowicz's first use of the term sociology in Austria and lasted until the *Marienthal* study, a number of aspects stand out:

- We see some scholars economically secure enough to pursue their own agenda (as Gumplowicz for example); however, these scholars did not have real students but mainly attracted admirers, only some of which were based at universities.
- We encounter a large group of people with enough leisure time to formulate their ideas concerning social life; some of their output attracted an audience at the time and continued to be read by later generations.
- Thinking and writing about social topics has been popular at the time and attracted scholars from neighboring fields who contributed individually with a small number of publications, but which, taken together became a kind of

a library of modern social sciences. Besides the above mentioned Renner and Schumpeter one could name here also Hans Kelsen (1881–1973), who contributed to what would later become the sociology of law, political theory and sociology of knowledge, Wilhelm Jerusalem (1854–1923), who was one of the first authors who considered ideas as objects worth of sociological analysis, and his disciples and followers Walther Eckstein (1891–1973) and Ernst Grünwald (1912–33).

- The existential basis of the production of knowledge, something which Merton listed in his paper on the paradigm of a sociology of knowledge as being one of the most important ones (1996: 208), did resemble neither the traditional form nor our modern way of knowledge production. Only very few could enjoy the freedom and, with it, the reflective solitude of a university chair. The vast majority earned their living by meager jobs and spent their free time in coffeehouses and other places debating their ideas and insights.

All these things came to an end when at first the authoritarian right-wing government of Dollfuss and Schuschnigg started persecuting political enemies and then turned fatal when the Nazis took over. During the seven Nazi years not much sociology was around and only a few former (or later) sociologists remained inside the Third Reich. We do know of some victims of the racist extermination system, the best known was Käthe Leichter (1895–1942), and some others who survived even years of imprisonment and wrote afterwards about it, like Eugen Kogon (1903–87) and Benedikt Kautsky (1894–1960). The overwhelming majority of former or later sociologists managed to escape Nazi-ruled Europe. Those who reached the American shores climbed the career ladder with astonishing pace; the ‘children transports’ even got ahead of their US native matches (see Fleck 2011: 146; Sonnert and Holton 2006).

In Austria, Nazi rule ended after seven years. During this time sociology blossomed in America and it wasn’t an easy task trying to catch up with the frontrunner. In the years after 1945 the Austrians decided not even to try.

### **Deadlock**

During the first ten years Austria’s Second Republic was occupied by the victorious allies of the Second World War. The insecurities of the occupation regime were used, at least unconsciously, by those who survived war and persecution to regain their positions or to save them vis-à-vis demands of former victims of the Nazi purge. Neither offers to the Austrian government by groups of émigrés naming potential candidates for vacancies nor demands that all promotions under Nazi rule should be declared invalid reached an open ear in Austria’s ministry for education. For sociology this meant that some ‘sociologists’ who weren’t really qualified as such, were allowed to enter university posts. August Maria Knoll (1900–63), who belonged to a branch of right wing Catholic conservatives

in the 1930s and earned a habilitation in 1934, secured the post of associate professor in 1946 and received a full professorship in 1950 at the University of Vienna, where he remained until his death. Johann Mokre (1901–81) who belonged to the same social and political milieu as Knoll before 1938, but had been in exile in the United States came back in 1948 as a visiting professor first (because he had taken US citizenship and could therefore not be appointed to a regular position in Austria<sup>3</sup>) and got a professorship for philosophy of law, political science and sociology in 1949 at the university of Graz where he remained active until his retirement in 1971. Both men were not of the entrepreneurial type but more the nineteenth century quixotic scholars. Knoll was able to impress some students intellectually at least, whereas Mokre did not leave anything lasting or worthwhile remembering, neither disciples nor publications.

In the mid-1950s, while dozens of former Austrians held positions in sociology department at colleges and universities in the US, Austria had only one professor of sociology and social philosophy (at Vienna University). Elsewhere in Austria professors dedicated small parts of their time lecturing sociology. Even more meager than the small number of sociologists was the output. During the first two decades after 1945 only one book deserves mention: Ernst Topitsch's *Vom Ursprung und Ende der Metaphysik* (1958), (Metaphysics' origins and ends). Following Kelsen and Heinrich Gomperz (1873–1942), whom he discovered only by reading their texts, Topitsch (1919–2003) practiced what might be called a sociology of knowledge approach, which involved the study of philosophical and political ideologies. It was also Topitsch who called the cultural situation of the 1950s in Austria 'Catholic restoration'. What did he mean by this label?

In the years after WWII Austria's intellectual and political situation was characterized by the absence of any Jews, so one could sarcastically say that Hitler's policy of eliminating all Jews was successfully completed in the universities of his country of origin. The postwar political system was in the hands of two political parties, a Social Christian right and a moderate Social Democratic party at the left. These two parties divided the country between them in spheres of interest. The nationalized industry belonged to the socialists whereas the education system was handed over to the conservatives who build a monolithic system banning people with leftist inclinations from entering faculties. In contrast to Germany the occupation forces did not intervene in Austria's higher education system. As a consequence hardly any émigré returned, with the detrimental consequence that former Nazis and other beneficiaries of the Aryanization policy could spread. Since the latter knew that their ascent was not linked to scholarly merit they did not see any reason to start acting according to the principles of meritocracy.

However, the Catholic Church showed an interest in the new research techniques of surveys and questionnaires. In 1952 an 'extramural' (i.e. non-university)

Institute for Ecclesiastic Social Research was founded, producing hundreds of reports about parishes, mostly in the form of 'grey literature'. This helped the careers of those who had conducted such 'research'. It also certainly helped the clergy to formulate strategies so that the Church could adapt to modern times. The Institute could be seen as a validation of the fact that what happened outside Austria was not completely ignored but only selectively imported. The religious orders' international network brought some foreigners as teachers to Austria, and some individuals linked to the Institute also spent time abroad as exchange students. The Institute even founded a sister unit for the study of religious life in Hungary under Communist rule, run by refugee priests.

When in the 1950s the Rockefeller Foundation offered one former fellow stipends for his students to improve his own research he had to refuse the offer for lack of able students. In 1959, Paul Lazarsfeld returned to Europe for the first time after the war by order of the Ford Foundation to look out for candidates for fellowships. He succeeded in Poland and Yugoslavia but reported about his hometown Vienna: 'As to the Austrian situation at large, I find it as depressing as before. No brains, no initiative, no collaboration. Someone should make a study to find out how a country can be intellectually so dead, and at the same time have such wonderful musical festivals.'<sup>4</sup>

### **Slow improvement**

Immediately after Lazarsfeld's return to New York he began lobbying the Ford Foundation to create a scheme to help a small group of people based in his old hometown who were interested in becoming social scientists. After long negotiations, during which the Austrian minister for education, declared his policy as one of 'negative goodwill' towards the rich uncles from America, an Institute for Advanced Studies was opened in Vienna in 1963. It offered a two-year postgraduate education and fellowships either in sociology, political sciences or economics. During the first years the so-called Ford Institute did not take off but become a morass. Officially the University of Vienna did not approve the founding of a rivaling institute. However, this did not stop several university professors to channel Ford's dollars in their own pockets. The situation remained problematic for years and James Coleman commented after his return from an extended visit: 'An "Institute for Advanced Study" covering only Austria is wholly inappropriate; that is like an Institute for Advanced Study for the state of Tennessee.'<sup>5</sup> It took a long time before the Ford Institute was sufficiently established to offer Austrian students who were interested in empirical social research to improve their skills and knowledge.

Nevertheless the 1960s were a decade of reform and optimism, even in backward Austria. Due to pressure from UNESCO and OECD a reform of university curricula came into effect in 1966. For the first time a study program of sociology was established. It quickly attracted students at the two universities where

the government had given its green light: in Vienna and at a newly founded university in Linz. These two and some more universities got new professorships, about ten in total. Not really surprising for Austrians contemporaries, but strange for foreigners and later-borns, the new jobs were offered to those who had strong connections to the Roman Catholic Church. Even two priests, Julius Morel (1927–2003), a Hungarian Jesuit who had fled after the Communist takeover in 1949, and Jakobus Wössner (1921–75), a priest from Bavaria, got chairs (in 1969 and 1968 respectively). All the other newly hired professors of these years also belonged to the Catholic Church's professional network. According to the law the newly hired got lifelong employment immediately and had to retire at the age of 70. This meant that the newcomers of the late 1960s remained in their university positions until the end of the 1980s. The majority of these men did not find an easy way to interact with the new generation of students; at university departments under the tutelage of the Roman Catholics an entire generation, not to speak of female students of that cohort – all now keen on entering the university – did not experience friendly admission. Traditionally the culture of religious orders favored men and reticent individuals and preferred bookish types over activist students. Over a quarter of a century the gulf widened between university-based professors of sociology, encircled by a handful of apprentices, and the slowly increasing number of sociology students who, in keeping with the *zeitgeist* idealized liberation and social change, admired critical theory instead of survey research and rejected traditional authority for democratization.

### **A new hegemony**

From 1970 until 1983 the Social Democrats held absolute majority in the parliament and were therefore able to run a single party government. Chancellor Bruno Kreisky, supported by younger cadres who conducted voter surveys and public opinion research, proclaimed an era of reform and opening. Thousand experts, so Kreisky's propaganda claimed, helped to formulate a new reform agenda, and indeed the Social Democrats executed several path breaking reforms, in particular in family law, the judiciary, women's rights. Abortion became exempt from punishment, and women who wanted to start working outside their home were not any longer compelled to ask their husbands for approval. The government tried to democratize the universities by breaking the monopoly of full professors and granting students and lower level faculty voting rights. Unsurprisingly, many sociology students participated in these new opportunities. Indeed 'sociology' became a label used by people who never attended any course in sociology but saw themselves as reformers, or even revolutionaries. Sociology became, once more, associated with the agenda of social reform. This time the equation of sociology = socialism did reflect the mood of the day, much more than was the case in former times.

However, much of the social research related to this new agenda was not undertaken by universities. Instead government contracts for such research went to newly established research institutes. Most of these were relative small, with two to five employees, and heavily dependent on money from the government or funds controlled by politicians. The former Ford Institute – after ten years the Ford Foundation had ended its financial support – became one of the hotspots of research projects directed to support that reform agenda. With the help of consulting visiting professors, groups of more or less unexperienced graduate students and young post-docs got involved in studying almost everything, from public administration, the situation of the social sciences, and the system of medical care to the patterns of social mobility in Austria. Other research institutes investigated the social situation of peasants, urban problems, incarceration rates etc. In other words, the whole spectrum of Social Democratic reform agenda was accompanied by empirical social science research. Some projects collapsed before the researchers delivered their final report, others surpassed the time allocated threefold, while yet others took on the form of television documentaries. Some of the collaborators even learned the art of sociological research. In 1976, twenty six years after its founding, the Austrian Society of Sociology even succeeded in starting their own journal, the *Austrian Journal of Sociology* (to nobody's surprise the first issues contained only articles that dealt almost exclusively with Austrian topics and its social problems). Near the end of the reform period an edited volume on the conditions of life in Austria appeared which exhibits what sociologists were able to perform back than (Fischer-Kowalski and Bucek 1980). It should not come as a surprise that none of its contributors held a chair in sociology at the time of the writing. Internationally the research behind this book belonged to the social indicators' movement; internally it was regarded as a moderate Marxist statement that criticized the Social Democratic government for not doing enough to equalize social conditions. People from the same milieu proposed during the debate about a new party platform for the Social Democrats, the idea that the spread of income should not exceed a ratio of 1:7 with any particular employer. This was taken as a serious proposal in the ongoing public debate, and not as a pipe dream.

From an international comparative perspective the research conducted by the then younger Austrian generation of social scientists could hardly be called sophisticated; however, compared with what happened at the same time at universities it seemed like a triumph of those on the margin over those in the ivory tower. As a reward, several members of this generation eventually got promoted to professors, but mostly not in Austria. It would take as long as the mid-1980s for the first alumnus with a full-fledged sociology education to be appointed to a professorship at an Austrian university. Over the next one-and-a-half decade others would follow. However, the most prestigious chairs remained in the hands of older men and their handpicked successors.

### **A morning after mood: disillusionment and stagnation**

By the mid-1980s the illusion of a new dawn started to fizzle out. The reformist government encountered severe troubles due to the nationalized industry's failure, increased unemployment, and the new social movement of environmental concerns. The consequences for sociology were severe: the discipline was obviously not in the position to revolutionize society; in fact it was not even attuned to inform a minor reform agenda. After several years of contract research some directors of the smaller research institutes felt exhausted. At the universities, the number of students went up year after year but the number of faculty remained the same. A new generation of politicians and their newly recruited helping hands turned to other types of advisers: The spin-doctors had not been invented yet, but the corporate consultant and the marketing expert were offered increasing amounts of money compared to what empirical social researchers could get. Rising unemployment provided a new opportunity for sociologists interested in applied social research; for a while the Ministry for Social Affairs became the major funder for extramural social research. On the other hand the environment movement, the 'banalification' of the women's movement and the import of cultural studies and post-structuralism took away money, energy and followers from sociology. In the end the popular mood turned away from sociology proper.

Although tenured sociologists adapted to the new circumstances without troubles, they were not in need to retreat into the ivory tower because they were there all the time. Relieved from the burden of having to improve the world, some opted for alternatives such as the flight into abstraction and detachment from the world. System theory in the Luhmann tradition and historical comparative approaches following Elias found some supporters. The consequence was increased fragmentation and a retreat from debate and exchange: What could an 'Eliasian' discuss with a 'Luhmanniate' over a beer? Gossip only.

Fragmentation and individualism became two sides of the same coin. Academia is pre-designed for both because rivalry between academics is so far removed from ordinary life while payoffs are convertible only in a detached small world. The minute academics were allowed to withdraw from the wider world they did so. Looking back, it appears now as if the reform mood of the so-called Sixties generation contained a number of illusionary aspects but at least it bonded that generation together instead of investing only in their own careers and academic advancement.

### **Recent developments**

Prior to 1989 Austrian sociologists did not interact closely with those from neighboring Communist countries. What existed was some cooperation between a few Austrian Catholic sociologists and their friends in Poland; however, secular colleagues remained indifferent to these interactions. Some researchers interested

in social mobility had collaborated with East European colleagues who had won some freedom to pursue a more autonomous research agenda. It is to the credit of some Austrian sociologists and their colleagues from other Western European countries that early in the 1990s a European Congress of Sociology brought Eastern Europeans to Vienna. With some success, it can be argued: the meeting resulted in the founding of the European Sociological Association only two years later.

The other big event of the 1990s, the decision of the Austrian Parliament to apply for membership in the European Union (which came into effect four and a half years later, in 1995) did not find strong support from Austrian sociologists; however it opened quite a few opportunities for them afterwards. At least in the early years university-based sociologists did not join the bandwagon of EU-funded research. However, entrepreneurial younger sociologists at the margins of the university system seized the EU opportunity and applied for funds. Some of these managed to succeed, but only for some time. Only two or three social science research units with no formal relationship to the universities have survived the Framework Programme funding of the 1990s. From a point of view which favors lasting contributions more than short-term twister, or to frame it in very old-fashioned terms, from the perspective of scientific progress nothing remained.

Early in the twenty-first century the Ministry for Science and Research, which had supervised and governed the universities for more than the last 100 years, granted greater autonomy to the universities. Their budgets still came from the government, but in terms of day-to-day business, and particularly the hiring of the faculty, the responsibility lay now with full-time rector-presidents with considerable executive power. Critics called it a neoliberal reform but for sociology it brought an expansion of the professoriate and a change in its composition. Whereas up until 2004 the ministry decided who was appointed – and very often party affiliation and comparable networks made the decision instead of the faculty – now the rector appointed new professors. Furthermore, universities were now allowed to compete with each other, and were encouraged to develop their own profiles. Sociology was one of the beneficiaries of the autonomy. Two, up until then marginal departments, Innsbruck and Salzburg, expanded and became places where one could study for a major in sociology for the first time. However, the two universities with the longest sociology tradition stagnated. After 2004 many more new jobs were created than in the two decades before: twenty-one professors were appointed by the ‘autonomous’ rectors, compared with twelve between 1984 and 2004. For the first time, half of the newly hired were women; but the most astonishing feature was the increasing number of Germans getting jobs in neighboring Austria. Twelve out of the twenty-one newly appointed professors were Germans by birth (three Austrians returned home from Germany, plus four homegrown Austrians and one Swiss and Czech sociologist, respectively).

Given the common language and some cultural similarities, the German speaking academic markets have always been interconnected and back and forth moves were the rule. However, over the last few decades Germany's universities produced much more candidates than were positions available there, whereas Austria's universities were reluctant to follow this line. On the other hand it should not come as a surprise that going to Austria has been a second-best decision for German academics, and those who had have a chance to return to their country of birth did it sometimes only after a very short stay in Austria. It is also important to recognize that foreign born members of the discipline did not exhibit strong interests in purely Austrian affairs but usually stick to their own research agendas. Analyzing Austria and disseminate findings to the surrounding society is something that can't hardly be expected from foreigners. It is not really surprising therefore that the Austrian Institute for Economic Forecasting, founded back in the 1920s by Mises and F.A. Hayek, became the quintessential deliverer of analyses of social affairs and commentaries in newspapers than German sociologists working at Austrian universities. To sum it up, the expansion of sociology after having achieved 'neoliberal' autonomy was a mixed blessing; it enlarged the discipline but deflated its competence to analyze the very society in which it is located.

### **Concluding remarks**

Looking over a little bit more than 100 years one must come to the conclusion that in the case of sociology the Austrian case demonstrates that conventional wisdom about the trajectory of scholarly endeavors must be refuted: More personnel, more resources, more places to study sociology, a more diverse funding landscape, etcetera did not end up with better results. For obvious reasons this is an unfair judgment but it is nevertheless true that Austria's present day sociological output seldom got recognized abroad. Austria exported some scholars whose names are familiar worldwide, not only during the era of forced expulsion but also later, but the last book written by an Austrian which gained resonance beyond the borders of this tiny country appeared in print generations ago. Again, it is unfair to those living in Austria and pursuing their vocation according to the rules outlined decades ago, but it is still unavoidable to accept the simple truth: Excellence is elsewhere, and it won't help sociologists in Austria to challenge the definition of excellence. Those who define the standards of academic quality today are located far away and don't care about protest from Vienna and the other small universities of Austria.

### **Notes**

- 1 Polish was used since 1867 at the university in Lemberg (Lwiv, Ukraine), and until 1846 at Cracow's university when instruction started there in German (until the end of the Habsburg Empire).

- 2 An impressive ethnographic panorama of the ethnic diversity of the Empire offers the so-called 'Kronprinzenwerk' *Die österreichisch-ungarische Monarchie in Wort und Bild*, which appeared in print between 1885 and 1902 in nearly 400 deliveries, see Zintzen 1999.
- 3 Until 2004 Austria's professors were civil servants and had to be Austrian citizens by definition.
- 4 Paul F. Lazarsfeld, Letter to Shepard Stone, 29 June 1959, Lazarsfeld Papers, Columbia University, Box 32, folder 4.
- 5 James Coleman to Ford Foundation, 10 September 1964, Ford Foundation, reel 2845.

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