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Vienna as Seen From Miami: Three Colloquia on the City

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Over the last decade I have taught three undergraduate colloquia centering on the images of the city of Vienna.¹ These colloquia have been offered at various campuses of Florida International University (FIU), the public research university of Florida located in the state's southernmost counties.² I have also co-taught two seminars on related topics at the University of Vienna during that period. The following remarks will trace some of the themes of these courses, emphasizing the comparative nature of the presentations, as well as the general course theme emphasizing the tension between the past and the present in Vienna and Miami.³

In Spring Semester, 2006, I taught this course to 17 students (13 Liberal Studies and 4 History—3 BA and 1 MA) at the North Miami campus of FIU, a campus situated on Biscayne Bay, and one confronted with the typical South Florida tension between real estate development (the campus is situated next to

an immense waterfront development project) and nature preservation (the campus is also home to a marine biology program and the university cultivates strengths in environmental studies). This tension between the situation “as is” and the one “as it could be” allowed me to develop a comparison to Vienna as a site of where things “were” and where they “are.” The Austrian presidency of the EU also allowed me to tie the city into broader themes associated with European integration and to discuss the differences between Vienna as a historical capital and Vienna as the current seat of the head of the EU (January-June, 2006⁴).

Each class we explored the differences between the images of Vienna as presented in the textbook, tourist guidebooks, and websites, and the assigned English translations of twentieth-century Austrian literature. For much of the discussion concerning contemporary developments in the city, I used the guidebook *Wien verstehen: Wege zur Stadt* edited by Heinz Fassmann and Gerhard Hatz.⁵ (I am currently working with Professors Fassmann and Hatz on an English translation of the third edition of this work. My English translation of this work is scheduled to be released in 2007 by LIT Verlag in Münster under the title *Understanding Vienna: Pathways to the City*.) The confrontation between Vienna and Miami was made manifest when dozens of University of Vienna students visited FIU in April, 2006.⁶

The initial meeting took place at the Wolfsonian-FIU, a museum specializing in the material culture of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and one which FIU students visited earlier in the semester in order to become acquainted with the hundreds of objects in the collection dealing with the city of Vienna.⁷ Three classes met together that April afternoon⁸: my colloquium on Vienna, the study tour from Vienna, and my colleague Professor Christopher Klemek’s course on the comparative study of post-WW II urban planning. A Miami-Dade County Commissioner, Katy Sorenson,⁹ participated as well and discussed recent attempts to expand development in the county beyond a previously-agreed-upon limit and into a natural preservation zone bordering the Everglades. Afterwards, participants went out to dinner at a South Beach restaurant, and then met the next day in West Miami for a barbecue at the home of a FIU History doctoral student. (One FIU student later remarked that he was surprised by how “American” the Austrian university students seemed to be.)

The constant contrast between the immediate and the imagined pasts of Vienna and Miami structured the course and was strikingly topical in the Miami area. The recent high-rise housing boom there has led to “salvage archeology” on a large scale. The pre-modern history of the area is becoming better known with each passing day,¹⁰ but what is worth remembering and what not? The parallels with both Vienna’s subterranean discoveries since the *U-Bahn* excavations beginning in the Seventies and the more general issues of what past is to be remembered led to excellent discussions of the weight of the past. The

contrast between a city such as Vienna, which is imagined to have a deep and significant past (so deep in fact that UNESCO has recognized it as a World Heritage Site¹¹), and Miami, which is imagined to have no history (or at least no history before the twentieth century), has led to many discussions as to what “history” is and who “has” it.

Discussion of *Der Standard's* reporting on the recovery of the famous Cellini sculpture, now returned to the *Kunsthistorisches Museum*,¹² allowed our Vienna symposium to think about museums, what is in them and what roles objects play in public memory. These themes were reinforced via our tour of the Wolfsonian-FIU museum and the Wolfsonian librarian's discussion of the development of that institution. This then informed our reading of Thomas Bernhard's *Old Masters*.¹³

Discussions of immigration and the situation of the non-German speaking populations of Vienna resonated with the south Florida students: the majority of Miami-Dade County residents do not speak English at home. How are language and identity tied? In a Protestant political world how do Roman Catholicism or Judaism fit? What about Islam? And how is this different in a Roman Catholic context such as Austria? There were seldom enough minutes on our classes to follow up on all the parallels seen between Miami and Vienna. Ethnic and religious identities and how they were reflected in Joseph Roth's *Emperor's Tomb* and Ingeborg Bachmann's *Malina* were popular topics of discussion and student essays.¹⁴

Last semester we had the opportunity to not only think and talk about issues relating to political power, art, and religion in our course on Vienna. We also discussed sports and gender. The Winter Olympics provided us with the raw materials to open a discussion as to why a woman or man down in Vienna would be interested in what a man or a woman up in the mountains was doing.¹⁵ To what end skiing? Each day the class went to the website of the Austrian National Olympic Committee and followed along with the stories of success. Not only did this theme introduce students to the very foreign world of winter sports (many FIU students have never seen either snow or a mountain), but it tied in well with our reading of Elfriede Jelinek's *Piano Teacher* and viewing of Michael Heneke's 2001 film based on the novel.¹⁶

Given the war-time contexts of the course, themes relating to war in Vienna were broached. In addition to some discussion of the results of World War I on the city, World War II and especially the post-war occupation of Vienna were detailed. Students wondered about parallels between the US/Allied decade-long occupation of Austria and the contemporary military/political roles for the US Armed Forces in Afghanistan and Iraq. (In Miami, it might also be recalled, memories of—and calls for—US military occupation of Haiti or other Caribbean

countries are part of the political discourse.) Issues relating to “Americanization” and/or globalization were connected to this phase of Viennese history, and students were asked to visit the movie sections of on-line Viennese newspapers to see what films were playing in the city’s cinemas. The film used to discuss the occupation period was Carol Reed’s famous “The Third Man” (1949).

Student semester research projects varied in topic. One analyzed Viennese on-line dating websites to see what categories were available on the forms and then compared these to US-based websites with similar functions. The creation/imagination of identities in the two contexts was shown to be different in significant ways. Another project related to the analysis of the memorialization of the post-war period, particularly as it related to the various activities surrounding the fiftieth anniversary of the end of the Allied occupation of Vienna.

In the past versions of the course, other topics of student research papers included a discussion of the difficulties facing the conservative political camp in redefining itself after the period of National Socialist ascendancy. This student was from Spain and clearly had parallels between the Franco regime’s political foundations and those of Austrian conservatism in mind. A student who directs a Study Abroad program in Ghana chose to analyze the role that UNESCO World Heritage Site designation had on Accra and on Vienna, and to tie this comparison into a discussion of heritage tourism more generally.

Of course, the tremendous attraction of (and ease of researching on) the fin-de-siècle phenomenon means that each time I have taught this course, large numbers of the students taking it were drawn to topics with the “usual suspects” such as Gustav Klimt, Adolf Loos, Sigmund Freud, etc. More than one student has chosen to at least frame her or his analysis with a comparison between Vienna at the turn of one century and Miami at the turn of the next. While I do not wish to press this comparison too far in this context, I would like to end by stating that the three colloquia on the city of Vienna which I have taught over the last decade or so in the Miami metropolitan area have led to intriguing and fruitful comparisons between the two similarly-sized urban centers. These colloquia have enabled me to imagine Vienna in new and different ways, and the enrolled students to see a place they have never seen (or often even heard of) in ways related to their experiences in Miami.

¹ These colloquia were generally designed for Senior History or Liberal Studies majors and were taught in English. No knowledge of German was required. They were required for Liberal Studies majors and elective for History majors. (They fulfill a Modern Europe distribution requirement in the History major.) A limited number of History graduate students are allowed to enroll with instructor’s permission. Data from 2004 show an average of 77 BA in LS awarded per year. 2002 data shows 24 BA in History per year.

LS reports approximately 550 majors in 2004; I don't have the numbers for History majors, but they are significantly smaller.

² The university website is found at <<http://www.fiu.edu/>>.

³ When "Miami" is mentioned, the general Miami-Dade metropolitan area is meant. Many of the points raised about the tension between the past and the present in Vienna and Miami actually deal more with the city of Miami Beach, a city with numerous historic preservation districts, including the most famous one, the Art Deco District.

⁴ See <<http://www.eu2006.at/de/>>.

⁵ *Wien verstehen: Wege zur Stadt*, eds. Heinz Fassmann and Gerhard Hatz (Vienna: Bohmann, 2004); 1. Ausgabe: *Wien. Stadtgeographische Exkursionen* (Vienna: Hölzel, 2002). See <<http://www.univie.ac.at/stadtgeo/Wien%20verstehen.htm>>

⁶ This visit was part of the University of Vienna excursion sponsored by the Institut für Geographie und Regionalforschung. For more see the website: <<http://www.univie.ac.at/stadtgeo/US-Exkursion/Index-Dateien/frame.htm#slide0026.htm>>.

⁷ See <<http://www.wolfsonian.org/>> for information on the museum.

⁸ On the joint meeting of the three classes, see: <<http://www.fiu.edu/~klemek/UrbanHistorySyllabus.html>>.

⁹ Information on County Commissioner Sorenson can be found at: <<http://www.miamidade.gov/district08/udb-pres.asp>>.

¹⁰ An example on information on the pre-modern history of Miami is found at: <<http://www.historical-museum.org/history/circle.htm>>.

¹¹ On Vienna's designation by UNESCO, see: <http://whc.unesco.org/pg.cfm?cid=31&id_site=1033>.

¹² See on the theft of the Cellini sculpture: <<http://www.khm.at/system2.html?/static/page3497.html>>.

¹³ *Old Masters: A Comedy*, trans. Ewald Osers (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1992 [orig. *Alte Meister*, 1985]).

¹⁴ Joseph Roth, *Emperor's Tomb*, trans. John Hoare (Woodstock, NY: Overlook Press, 2002) [orig. *Kapuzinergruft*, 1938]); Ingeborg Bachmann, *Malina: A Novel*, trans. Philip Boelm (New York: Holmes & Meier, 1999 [orig. *Malina: Roman*, 1971]). Additional books assigned were: Inge Lehne and Lonnie Johnson, *Vienna: The Past in the Present* (Riverside, CA: Ariadne, 1995) and Matti Bunzl, *Symptoms of Modernity: Jews and Queers in Late Twentieth-Century Vienna* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 2004).

¹⁵ See the Austrian website on the Winter Olympics: <<http://www.oec.at/>>.

¹⁶ Elfriede Jelinek, *The Piano Teacher: A Novel*, trans. Joachim Neugroschel (London: Serpent's Tail, 2002 [1998] [orig. *Die Klavierspielerin: Roman*, 1983]).