

BOOK REVIEWS

Vienna and Her Children

Whalen, Robert Weldon. *Sacred Spring: God and the Birth of Modernism in Fin de Siècle Vienna*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007. 339 pp., hardcover, \$25.00.

Hülsmann, Jörg Guido. *Mises: The Last Knight of Liberalism*. Auburn, AL: Ludwig von Mises Institute, 2007. 1143 pp., hardcover, \$43.00.

Review by Jason E. Jewell

For most people now living, understanding the world of the early twentieth century can be extremely difficult. Despite its relative nearness to us in historical terms—indeed, there are still a handful of people alive today who can remember the outbreak of World War I in 1914—the tremendous economic, social, and political changes worldwide since then have created a gulf not easily crossed in our minds. Transportation was by steamship, train, or horse and buggy. Nearly every major Western state was ruled in name, and often in fact, by a monarch. In these monarchies, titled aristocrats preserved a tradition of privilege and high culture stretching back nearly a thousand years. Western states ruled most of the earth's land mass, with Britain and France in particular maintaining vast colonial empires in Africa and Asia. The lasting superiority of the West seemed assured, and many believed that wars were a thing of the past.

In many ways, the cultural center of this vanished world was Vienna, capital of Austria-Hungary, which at that time was the second largest state in Europe, with a land mass exceeding Germany's and a population larger than Britain's or France's. Although London could boast of its financial district, and Paris of its republican progressivism, Vienna was where Europe's refined cultural traditions were best preserved and on display. The ruling Habsburg dynasty had been on the throne since the Middle Ages; Emperor Franz Josef himself had reigned for over fifty years by 1900, having come to the throne in 1848. Romance and intrigue,

as well as scandal, swirled around the upper ranks of the nobility, the best example being perhaps the murder/suicide of Crown Prince Rudolf Habsburg and his mistress in 1889.

Two recent books by Robert Whalen and Jörg Guido Hülsmann give us glimpses of fin de siècle Vienna (roughly the period from 1889 to 1914) from very different perspectives. Whereas Hülsmann has produced the first critical biography of Vienna's greatest classical liberal, Whalen offers a religious reading of its artistic and literary avant-garde. In the process, both authors have also provided lively overviews of the period which can benefit readers unfamiliar with the era.

Whalen's thesis in *Sacred Spring: God and the Birth of Modernism in Fin de Siècle Vienna* is that Viennese modernism, which continues to influence us, "was at root a religious phenomenon . . . Modernism arose because God visited Vienna." Obviously, this contention flies in the face of the conventional wisdom which states that the overwhelming trend of the modern world is secularization. In Whalen's view, the mainstream interpreters of modernism have mistaken a decline in traditional church membership and theological disputes for a loss of interest in spiritual questions of all sorts. In his introduction, Whalen goes out of his way to emphasize the audacity of his thesis: "The point of this book . . . is to question what seems beyond question. My claim is not simply that one *can* do a religious reading of the *Wiener Moderne*; one can do a religious reading of anything. My point is that one *must*."

Sacred Spring consists of nine thematically-organized chapters in which Whalen analyzes the religious concerns of Vienna's avant-garde, concerns such as death (Chapter Two), rebirth (Chapter Three), dreams and visions (Chapter Four), and the uncanny (Chapter Seven). Cut off from the traditions and dogma of orthodox Christianity, which they had rejected almost without exception, the modernists searched desperately for meaning and hope in these areas—usually without success, it must be said. Displaying a good command of both primary- and secondary-source material on the period, Whalen ably presents portraits of each of the key figures in Vienna's avant-garde: Gustav Klimt, Gustav Mahler, Karl Kraus, Hermann Bahr, Arnold Schönberg, and a handful of other "self-appointed, cliquish and self-absorbed" *artistes*.

A possibly unavoidable shortcoming of Whalen's approach is his tendency to flit between figures within each chapter, often devoting a mere two or three pages to a particular artist's connection to that chapter's theme. Whalen also displays an annoying tendency to repeat the same

information, such as particular biographic details or an explanation of how Vienna's geography affected the city's mood, in several different places. Perhaps he feared that without such repetition, readers might lose track of the narrative thread connecting each individual subject throughout the course of nine chapters.

However, these are minor criticisms of what, on the whole, is a refreshing look at the fin de siècle period from a perspective Christians will appreciate. Whalen does not announce any Christian presuppositions affecting his analysis, despite having Eerdmans as his publisher, but the subtext of his work seems clear enough. The Viennese avant-garde for the most part lived a tormented existence characterized by *ennui*, alienation, adultery, and suicide. Their quest for spiritual rest is presented sympathetically despite its unsatisfactory conclusion.

One need not have a background in the period to appreciate Whalen's work; he provides an overview of major historiographical interpretations to bring readers up to speed. Moreover, he inserts numerous vignettes of the city and its people that bring his subject to life for the uninitiated. For example, the second chapter begins, "On January 1, 1900, on the first day of the first month of the brand new twentieth century, the lions in the Vienna zoo ate the zoo's snake-handler." One certainly cannot ask for anything livelier from an academic text!

Fin de siècle Vienna produced not only edgy artists but also level-headed, no-nonsense economists who profoundly altered the received wisdom in their field. Had Ludwig von Mises (1881-1973) been an apologist for socialism, his gripping life's story would have long since been made into a Hollywood film starring Warren Beatty and Barbra Streisand. A decorated war hero who almost singlehandedly saved his native Austria from economic ruin through his influence on policymakers, he astounded his friends and enemies alike with his path-breaking contributions to economic theory before fleeing from the Nazis, arriving in America with no connections or support at age fifty-eight and, undaunted, going on to publish what some consider the twentieth century's greatest treatise in the social sciences, *Human Action*. However, Mises was an advocate of *laissez-faire* classical liberalism, a fact which made him an outcast among fashionable intellectuals throughout his life and denied him numerous career opportunities open to lesser men.

That it took nearly thirty-five years after Mises's death for the first full-length critical biography of him to be published is an indication of how desperately mainstream economics wishes to ignore his work.

But it must be said that Guido Hülsmann's *Mises: The Last Knight of Liberalism*, an exhaustively researched treatment of Austria's greatest economist, was worth the wait. It is the product of a decade of combing through obscure archives in several countries and a thorough study of the thought of both Mises and his contemporaries. (It is worth noting that we might still be waiting for this book's appearance had not the Ludwig von Mises Institute, which funded Hülsmann's research, decided to publish it itself instead of turning it over to Columbia University Press or Oxford University Press, both of which wanted the title, but with substantial textual cuts, an astronomical retail price, and a turnaround time of over a year. The Mises Institute's ability to publish the work much more quickly and at a lower cost is indicative of technological changes in the printing world and the growing market share of small, independent publishers.)

Hülsmann divides his text of over 1,000 pages into six chronologically-arranged sections tracing the logical phases of Mises's life: his youth and education; his early work in the so-called Austrian school of economics, which culminated in his first great treatise, *The Theory of Money and Credit* (1912); his service as an artillery officer in World War I and involvement in the postwar Austrian recovery, including the publication of his second great treatise, *Socialism* (1922); his most influential years as a teacher and economist in Austria in the 1920s and early 1930s; his years in Switzerland (1934-1940); and, finally, his sojourn in the United States, which included the publication of his third and fourth major treatises, *Human Action* (1949) and *Theory and History* (1957). Each of these six sections is subdivided into several chapters, some of which still run to well over fifty pages. Fortunately, Hülsmann has taken pity on his readers and provided helpful subheadings within each chapter which break his content into more digestible units.

An outstanding feature of *Mises* is Hülsmann's placing of his subject into a well-developed context. For example, he digresses to explain the status of Jews (Mises was Jewish) in Vienna society and Austria-Hungary more generally in the fin de siècle; he also devotes upwards of seventy-five pages to establishing the context of the Austrian school and the important forerunners of Mises, such as Karl Menger and Eugen von Böhm-Bawerk. This survey will help particularly a general readership not already familiar with the methodological differences between Austrian and mainstream neoclassical economics. By the time Hülsmann arrives at a discussion of *The Theory of Money and Credit*, the reader knows exactly why the work was immediately hailed as a critical breakthrough for its

integration of monetary theory into the system of marginalist value theory pioneered by Menger decades earlier.

In the same vein, Hülsmann explains clearly why *Socialism* produced a thunderstruck reaction among the socialists riding high in the wake of their electoral victories following World War I. Mises's argument that a fully socialist society could not make rational economic calculations due to the absence of a system of market prices was a bombshell from which socialist thinkers still have not recovered. On page 379, Hülsmann succinctly describes the reaction when Mises first unveiled his thesis in a public lecture:

He had turned the obligatory rearguard action that everybody expected him to deliver into a surprise attack against the very heart of socialism. Vienna's Austro-Marxist elite was left speechless. They had believed that the intellectual war had long been won and that all that was left was the resistance of special interests and the unenlightened. His triumph would become ever more complete over the following weeks, months, and years, when it became increasingly obvious that the objections of his opponents were spurious—and that he had already anticipated most of them.

No doubt Vienna's socialists would have been even more dismayed had they known that it was Mises's influence over Otto Bauer, the most powerful figure in Austria's postwar government, that had prevented the country from becoming fully communist in 1919.

Space limitations prevent me from commenting adequately on the remainder of the story that Hülsmann tells so well. As fascism grew in influence in Germany and Austria, Mises thought it best to leave his home for an academic position (the only salaried one he ever held) in Geneva. This turned out to be a wise decision, for when the Nazis seized power in Austria in 1938, Mises's Vienna apartment was immediately ransacked and all his papers confiscated; his *laissez-faire* individualism was just as repulsive as his Jewish heritage in Nazi eyes. (The Soviets, who hated Mises as much as the Nazis did, in turn took his papers from Berlin in 1945 and carried them back to Moscow, where they lay undisturbed until the 1990s.) In 1940, as Hitler's armies rolled across Western Europe, Mises fled his adopted home in Switzerland for the United States, where he spent the last three decades of his life. Unable to secure a paid academic

position because of the ideological hostility towards him among the literati (he was eventually given an unpaid visiting professorship at New York University), he had to rely on sympathetic admirers of his work for living expenses while he continued to research and write. The result was a number of outstanding works, including *Human Action*, the contents of and reactions to which Hülsmann devotes an entire chapter of over sixty pages; this work made Mises "the central intellectual figure of the entire American Right."

Christians have always responded in conflicting ways to Mises. A lifelong agnostic, his occasional criticisms of the socio-economic influence of Christianity often earn him the hostility of believing readers. However, his insights into the motivations for human action and his assumption of the values of Western civilization are to a great extent in line with the classical and Christian natural law tradition, and champions of his thought are found among both traditionalist Roman Catholics and conservative Protestants.¹ Readers interested in shaping an explicitly Christian economics and social theory may find valuable source material in Mises's works, particularly in his negative critique of socialism and interventionism aptly summarized by Hülsmann.

Despite his many triumphs, by the time of his death, Mises and the Austrian school had become marginalized; Keynesian orthodoxy had become too entrenched in America and Britain in the 1930s, before Mises's works had been translated into English. However, the awarding of the Nobel Prize to Mises's student F. A. Hayek in 1974 and the founding of the Ludwig von Mises Institute in Auburn in 1982 helped bring about a renaissance. Austrian business cycle theory, most fully articulated by Mises and Hayek, has garnered much mainstream attention in recent years for providing the best explanation of the stock market bubble of the 1990s and the real estate bubble of the last few years. According to Hülsmann, this Austrian resurgence justifies his work: "The main point of a Mises biography . . . is to come to grips with a figure who, without any institutional backing, by the sheer power of his ideas, inspires, more than thirty years after his death, a growing international movement." *Mises: The Last Knight of Liberalism* certainly succeeds on those terms. Sympathetic but not hagiographical, the work provides an intellectual feast for anyone interested in economic theory, political philosophy, or the world of Old Vienna.

¹ Catholics dominate the Ludwig von Mises Institute; Protestant advocates of Mises include Christian Reconstructionist writers R. J. Rushdoony and Gary North, as well as the entire economics faculty of Grove City College.

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Cathcart, Thomas, and Daniel Klein. *Plato and a Platypus Walk into a Bar: Understanding Philosophy Through Jokes*. New York: Abrams Image, 2007. 208 pp., hardcover, \$18.95.

Review by Fred R. Jewell

Plato and a Platypus Walk Into a Bar: Understanding Philosophy Through Jokes created a stir in the publishing world last year and spent several weeks on the *Times* best seller list. It might as well have been published in the . . . *for Dummies* or . . . *for Idiots* series. In just under 200 pages, authors Thomas Cathcart and Daniel Klein treat approximately fifty-five philosophical concepts and movements spanning 2,500 years of the Western philosophical tradition in ten thematically organized chapters titled Metaphysics, Logic, Epistemology, Ethics, Philosophy of Religion, Existentialism, Philosophy of Language, Social and Political Philosophy, Relativity, and Meta-Philosophy.

The similarity between this book and a traditional survey of philosophy ends with these rather traditional chapter titles. In a cross between a joke book and “pocket book” of philosophy, the authors employ 143 jokes and nine cartoons to illustrate philosophical concepts, thus elevating “philogagging” (their term) to an art form. The authors entitle the Introduction “philogagging” and explain its essence: “The construction and payoff of jokes and the construction and payoff of philosophical concepts are made out of the same stuff. They tease the mind in the same ways. That’s because philosophy and jokes proceed from the same impulse: to confound our sense of the way things are, to flip our worlds upside down, and to ferret out hidden, often uncomfortable, truths about life. What the philosopher calls an insight, the gagster calls a zinger.”

While the technique of “philogagging” generally works, this reviewer believes that some jokes were pressed into duty for no other reason than the authors thought they were too good to omit; they are jokes in search of a philosophical peg on which to hang. Many, if not most, of the jokes are “golden oldies” and range from full-scale stories to one-liners. Loosely holding the jokes together is a sparse, but sometimes insightful and frequently humorous, narrative providing a (slightly) more