
A Delicate Relationship: Austria's Oversensitivity–Germany's Undersensitivity?

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Abstract

The relationship between the two German speaking states has been characterized by the changing “nature” of Austria from a multilinguistic empire to a small republic. Defined after World War I by the Entente as the “rest”, the Austrian republic saw itself as a “German state”, strongly interested in joining the Weimar Republic. When the “Anschluss” came in 1938, dictated by Nazi Germany, the Austrian society reacted ambivalent. After “Greater Germany’s” defeat, the Austrian political elites—represented by and organized in two dominant ideological camps (center-right and center-left)—as well as the mainstream of the Austrian society redefined Austria: not as a German state, but a state based on the understanding of a specific Austrian identity.

Germany became Austria’s “defining other”: Differently from Germany, Austria was not partitioned along East-West conflict lines and, due to its declaration of “permanent neutrality”, abstained from any direct involvement in the Cold War. Austria’s political system was shaped also differently from the West German system: Decades of “grand coalition” and a deeply rooted neo-corporatist system (“Social Partnership”) made Austria—like Switzerland—a model for consociational democracy or, following Gerhard Lehmbuch’s terminology, “Proporzdemokratie”.

The German-Austrian relations changed again when the end of the Cold War opened the door to Austria’s full integration into the EU. The German-Austrian relationship within the Union did not become what some suspected would be a “Germanic bloc” within the Union but a rather relaxed cooperation between one bigger and one smaller state within the framework of an “ever closer” European Union.

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Two personal remarks at the beginning: When I visited the German Democratic Republic (GDR) for the first time—February 1973, as member of a small delegation of Austrians, I had a talk with some farmers of one of the agrarian cooperatives (LGPs) in Thuringia, near Weimar. The farmers told as to be especially curious: They were used to visitors from the Federal Republic; and of course to visitors from other communist countries. But how to judge German speaking visitors coming neither from West Germany nor from the GDR itself? Our group enjoyed a kind of exotic status.

Years later, 1994, a meeting in Brussels: Some months before Austria joined the EU, I participated as Austrian representative in a meeting organized by the EU's Council. The chairman, a very prominent French intellectual, expressed during a break his ambiguous feeling about Austria's EU-membership: What to do with a country which, different from Germany, didn't seem to have learned the lessons from the Nazi era? And to which extent did the Austrians just wait for the best opportunity to join the just unified Germany?

Two different—but perhaps not so different—experiences! From the outside, Austria tends to be seen mostly from a view first and foremost focused on Germany.

1 The Background of the “Anschluss”-Movement in Austria

When the Republic of German-Austria was founded in 1918, the Provisional National Assembly declared Austria “part of the German Republic”. It was the policy of the Entente, especially the French government, which prevented an “Anschluss” in 1919 by forbidding Austria in the State Treaty of St. Germain to join the German Republic.

The declaration of 1918 was consistent with the structure of the Habsburg Empire. Partitioned between an Austrian and a Hungarian part, Austria—consisting of a vast territory between Trieste and Cracow, Czernowitz and Dubrovnik—officially was seen a multinational state. The “nationalities”—defined as linguistic groups—enjoyed certain rights, and none of them was the majority. According to the constitution of 1867, Germans and Czechs, Italians and Poles, Slovenians, Ruthenians (Ukrainians) and Romanians elected representatives to the Austrian Parliament—the “Reichsrat”, who shared power with the emperor and a government, appointed by the emperor and not responsible to parliament. All nationalities were considered to be Austrians. Austria was not a nationality or a nation but an institutionalized umbrella for different nationalities.

In 1918, at the defeat of the Dual Monarchy, the different nationalities left the Austrian umbrella to create different nation states—Poland and Czechoslovakia, or joining existing states like Italy and Romania, or participating in reshaping the Kingdom of Serbia into the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenians. Austria ceased to exist. Following the logic of Italians and Poles and the others, those Austrians who had been considered part of the German “nationality” opted for becoming part of Germany.

The Germany the German (speaking) Austrians wanted to join was the Germany of what soon became the Weimar Republic—an enlightened system, the product of a center-left coalition. And the Germans in Austria had any reason to claim the right of self-determination for their orientation: Had Woodrow Wilson not declared this right to be the cornerstone of the peace the victors want to establish? Had this right not been the background for shaping the borders of the other successor states? Of course, there had been disputes—e.g., concerning the border between the Kingdom of Italy and the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, Slovenians. And, of course, the border of Czechoslovakia had in doubt been decided against the will of significant German and Hungarian minorities. But all in all: The principle of self-determination had not been disputed by the powers dictating the treaties of Paris.

When France and its allies decided to prevent the Austrian Germans to join Germany and forced them to become an independent state, the Republic of Austria, the Austrians had any reason to see this as gross violation of the very principle the victors had declared. The Austrian government and the Austrian parliament had to accept the dictate. But it was under protest, and for the next two decades, the feeling that the Germans in Austria had been treated extremely unfair dominated Austrian politics. All major parties declared that the “Anschluss” only to be postponed; all major parties—the Social Democrats, the Christian Socials, and the Pan-Germans—insisted that under new and more favorable international conditions, joining Germany should be on the agenda again.

This was the consistent and rational side of Austria's German orientation, between 1918 and 1938: The overwhelming majority of Austrians considered themselves ethnic Germans like they did before 1918 under the umbrella of multi-ethnic Austria. And the overwhelming majority of Austrians thought to have a legitimate claim to decide about their future in correspondence with the principle of self-determination.

But there was also a less rational side. What became known as the Pan-German camp in the 1880s and 1890s had a specific understanding of being German. For this political-ideological camp, German identity did not consist of linguistic and other cultural preferences. German identity was seen in “racial” terms: To qualify for German identity, someone had to be of German “blood”.

This—second—background of the “Anschluss”-movement was defined by a biological anti-Semitism, constructing a Jewish “race”. Austrians of Jewish origin—from Theodor Herzl to Gustav Mahler, from Stefan Zweig to Arthur Schnitzler—may define themselves German. But for the Pan-German nationalists in Austria like Georg von Schönerer, they could never qualify as Germans. This camp's popular slogan was “Die Religion ist einerlei—in der Rasse liegt die Schweinerei” (Religion doesn't matter—it is the race that counts). It has been this side of Pan-German nationalism in Austria which formed the thinking of the young Adolf Hitler in Linz and in Vienna (Bukey 1986; Hamann 1996).

The ambivalence between the rational, democratically legitimate side of the Austrian yearning for becoming part of the German Empire and the “racial”, racist, especially anti-Semitic side became obvious when the Germany of the Weimar Republic was replaced by the Germany National Socialist dictatorship; when

Germany stopped to be the focus of democratic republicanism and became diluted by the exclusion of Jews and an rearmament program which became more and more aggressive.

In 1933, the Social Democratic Party of Austria deleted the programmatic “Anschluss”-orientation from its program. And the Christian Social Party, for a complexity of reasons looking for Mussolini’s Italy as protector, defined the authoritarian state—constructed by Christian Socials step by step 1933 and 1934—as an antithesis to “Marxism” as well as to National Socialism. From the viewpoint of the two founding parties of the (First) Austrian Republic, the “Anschluss” has become obsolete, due to the significant change of Germany’s political outlook.

But the third camp—the Pan-German camp—became starting in 1932 more and more infiltrated by National Socialists. Most of the representatives of the two parties of the Pan-German camp, the Greater German People’s Party and the Landbund (“Country League”), joined the Austrian NSDAP already before 1938, a party which had become illegal in 1933 as a consequence of the violent means the party used.

When in March 1938—as a result of military blackmailing from the outside and internal infiltration—the “Anschluss” became reality, the jubilation of a significant part of the Austrian population reflected the ambivalent background of Austria’s attitude towards Germany: Some welcomed the German troops in spite of Nazism, and some because of it.

2 The Experience of the Years Between 1938 and 1945

In 1938, Austria became fully integrated into the—now—Greater German Empire. Even the term Austria had to disappear: The province of Lower-Austria became Lower-Danube, Upper-Austria became Upper-Danube. Nazi-Germany’s repressive system worked in Austria as it did in Germany: The victims were Jews and the regime’s political opponents (from the left but also from the right), soon also people with disabilities, and Roma and Sinti, and members of the Slovene minority in Carinthia. At the beginning, anti-Nazi resistance did exist, but only on a small scale: Communists and (pro-Habsburg) Monarchists were the most active among the resistance groups (Luza 1984). Both—Communists and Monarchists—combined a political-ideological with a patriotic motivation: The goal of all their activities was the rebirth of an independent Austria. The two groups did not have much else in common, but the intention to undo the “Anschluss” was the common denominator. It may be seen a tragic irony that the patriotism of Communists and Monarchists prevailed in 1945, but neither Communists nor Monarchists were able to play a significant role in the Second Republic of Austria.

The Austrian exile with centers in London, New York, Stockholm, and Moscow was unable to form a common platform. Communists and Social Democrats and Catholics (among them many Monarchists) were unable to agree on a government in exile. The main reason for this failure was the disagreement concerning the

future: Until 1943, most of the Austrian Social Democrats in exile favored an All—German formula, a “German Revolution”, aiming on the renaissance of a Weimar—like Republic, including Austria. The Monarchists were focused on an Austria including as much and as many of the former Habsburg territories as possible, expressed in the phantom of a “Danube Confederation”.

The future of Austria was neither decided by the Austrian exile nor by the Austrian resistance but by the Allies: On November 1, 1943, the United States, the Soviet Union, and the United Kingdom declared their intention to re-establish an independent Austria within the borders of 1937. This put an end to the leftist, republican dream of a democratic Greater Germany as well as to any kind of a Habsburg renaissance.

The insight in the reality of the Allies’ policy changed the outlook of the Austrian exile and even more of Austrians within Greater Germany. When Adolf Schärf, a former Social Democratic member of Parliament, was approached by a Social Democratic member of the German resistance and asked about the possibility of Austria staying voluntarily within Germany after Hitler’s defeat, Schärf’s response was clear: “The Anschluss is dead” (Stadler 1982: 174).

It was the experience with the reality of the existing Greater Germany of Adolf Hitler and the catastrophe of World War II, provoked by the German leadership, which changed the mainstream of the Austrian understanding. A combination of strategic (opportunistic?) thinking and of a rather new Austrian patriotism created an Austrian identity, beyond Habsburg and Pan-Germanism. As soon as the German defeat became obvious, it made sense to stress a specific Non-German identity. And the reminder of Austria’s history, excluded from the creation of a German nation state in 1871, helped to build a rationale above an interest driven, patriotic orientation.

This has been the background of Austria’s “victim theory”: Following the arguments of the Allies in 1943, the official Austria, after the liberation by the Allies in 1945, began to believe in its own innocence. As part of the construction of national innocence, a non-German national identity had to be stressed. In that respect, the “Anschluss” to Germany had been the midwife of a non-German Austrian identity. Among the creators of a post-Habsburg, republican, national identity of Austria, the Austrian Hitler must be given a prominent place. Hitler had articulated and implemented the thesis, and the Austria society replied with an antithesis. Beginning with 1945, the Austrian identity became defined in a negative way: Whatever the Austrians might be—there were not Germans.

3 Germany: The Defining Other?

Austria’s second attempt to establish a democratic republic was in all possible respects more successful than the first. One difference could be seen in the fact that the new Austria had not be forced to be independent. Differently from 1918, Austria did not declare its longing for becoming part of Germany. Differently from 1919, Austria had not to be prevented by international actors from joining Germany.

Parts of this picture were the international conditions. In November 1918, there was a Germany—defeated, but undisputed in its existence as a nation state. In 1945, there was no Germany, only different regions (“zones”) directly administered by allied administrations. In 1945, nobody in Austria was able to predict the future of what used to be Germany. But Austria, in its pre-“Anschluss” borders and based on the democratic and republican constitution of 1920, was definable. Austria could claim to have a future. The Germany of 1945 could not. The Austrian future might have still be dependable on the policies of the allies, but from the viewpoint of 1945, the perspective of an independent Austria had more to offer than the perspective of a future Germany.

According to Benedict Anderson, national identities have to be “imagined” before becoming a reality. And according to Immanuel Wallerstein, “Peoplehood” has to be constructed (Wallerstein 1991). This exactly happened in Austria, beginning with 1945.

This does not imply a pure voluntaristic understanding of the growth of Austrian identity. There had been a lot of factual evidence on which such an identity could be built: The existence of an Austrian statehood, parallel to the German state of 1871; the existence of cultural specificities—from the dominance of the Catholic counterreformation to the positive view of the late Habsburg empire as an attempt to tame and to civilize the aggressive potentials of nationalism; the experience of a rich history cultural of Austria, more than just a sideshow of German history. And by accepting the status of a small country, beyond any dreams of an empire, Austria explored its potential role of a “second Switzerland” (Koja and Stourzh 1986).

But some elements of this nation building process were pure construction: The distinction between peace loving Austria in contradiction to belligerent Prussia; and, of course, Austria’s victimhood during the years between 1938 and 1945 when the culprits were “the Germans”. The “Building of an Austrian Nation” (Bluhm 1973) consisted of piecemeal engineering, of legitimate and not so legitimate interpretations of history. But nation building was successful, because it became by and large the credible construction of a superstructure over a society which longed to believe in an Austria with a specific national identity. The structural basis of was the agreed concept of power sharing—between the center-left and the center-right (Pelinka 1998: 15–29). The superstructure above the political construction was the willingness of Austrians to imagine Austria as a specific national identity.

The proof of the success of this process is the empirical evidence. During the decades of the Second Republic, an increasing majority of Austrians began to believe in the existence of an Austrian Nation (Bruckmüller 1994; Thaler 2001; Reiterer 2003). Seen from the background of history, this implied one unavoidable meaning: Austrians stopped to see themselves as Germans. Austrian national identity became defined by what it is not: it is not (as it had been during the first decades after 1918) German nationhood.

This kind of national identity was and is not based on linguistic distinctiveness: The special Austrian variations of the German language have never been sufficient to construct an Austrian language, different from German. In that respect, Austria’s

national identity—as developed after 1945—can be called post-ethnic. Austrian national identity is the result of a civic consensus: Austrians agree to form a specific kind of nationhood.

The relations between Germany and Austria in the twenty-first century can be seen as a “big brother-small brother” relationship. Austria and Germany have so many things in common, beginning with the language and ending with the close economic links that the differences may be overlooked. Those differences are in many respects quite similar to the (Anglo-) Canadian–US-relations (Von Riekhoff and Neuhold 1993) or to the Irish–British relations. Germans usually are surprised how emotional Austrians respond when Austrians believe German media dispute the “Austrianness” of Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart; or when Austria’s sport fans are especially emotional when an Austrian national team plays the German national team. In what can be seen as an inferiority complex, Austrians have to stress their difference; and in what can be seen as insensitive, Germans tend to overlook the difference.

4 No “Germanic” System

When it comes to the comparison between the two democratic systems, some similarities can be taken into account (Ismayr 2009; Pelinka 2009):

- The traditionally dominant parties in the post-1945 democracies in both countries belong to the same party families: The CDU/CSU has its equivalent in the Austrian People’s Party (ÖVP), and the SPD finds in the Social Democratic Party of Austria (SPÖ) a center-left partner of its own kind.
- Since the 1980s, the Greens have become rather stable parties in the two party systems, in both countries of medium size, and in doubt preferring alliances with the Social Democratic parties. Both green parties are fully integrated into the European Parliament’s Green party group.
- Despite a curious constitutional asymmetry—the Austrian constitution, still the constitution from 1920, is shaped in many respects (due to an amendment from 1929) after the constitution of the Weimar Republic, a pattern the Federal Republic has intentionally left behind—the consequences of the institutionalized framework of both systems follows variations of the Westminster system: It is the majority in parliament (Bundestag, resp. Nationalrat) which decides about the government; and it is the head of the government (chancellor) who is the key figure of politics—and not the head of state (president).

Nevertheless, the differences are at least as important as the similarities. It starts with the party system: Austria doesn’t have an equivalent to the FDP. With the exception of the years 1993–1999, there was never a liberal party—in the sense of the European liberal party family—in the Austrian parliament. And there is no equivalent to the FPÖ (Freiheitliche Partei Österreichs) in the German polity: A party, constructed 1995 by former Nazis for former Nazis, traditionally number

three in Austria's parliament, but completely isolated on the European level. On the other side, there is no equivalent in Austria's political landscape to the German Left Party.

These differences are the result of different historical developments. In Austria's political history, movements of political liberalism have been taken hostage by the different types of nationalism; in the territory of contemporary Austria, by Pan-German nationalism. On the other side of the political spectrum, the Communist Party of Austria was never able to play any significant role in the short period of democracy after 1918—very different from the KPD. And despite (because of?) the significant role Austrian communists played in the anti-Nazi resistance, the weakness of Austrian communism did not change in the Second Republic. And, of course, the partition of Germany into two extremely different systems as well as the unification has no parallel in Austria. This explains why there is no Austrian left comparable to the German Left Party, the transformed SED in more than one respect.

There is another significant difference: On the federal level, Germany experienced “grand coalitions” only twice—1966–1969 and 2005–2009. In Austria, “grand coalitions” governed for most of the time since 1945: 1945–1966, 1987–2000, and—again—since 2007. In Germany, a coalition between center-right and center-left is the exception; in Austria, it is the rule. This is the reason why—in addition to Austria's specific form of (neo-)corporatism, “social partnership”, authors like Gerhard Lehmbuch and Arend Lijphart have qualified post-1945 Austria as a model of “Proporzdemokratie” or “consociational democracy” (Lehmbuch 1967; Lijphart 1977).

It is Austria's political culture and not so much the party system or the constitution which makes the difference between Austria and Germany. Germany follows more the “Westminster” pattern of democracy, Austria more the “consociational” (or “consensus”) model (Lijphart 1999: 9–47).

5 Germany and Austria Today

The Federal Republic was one of the founders of the European Communities which became the European Union. Austria joined the Union not before 1995—despite its (domestically) clear orientation on Western, liberal democracy; and despite its economic orientation on the West, on West Germany in particular. The reason for this delay was Austria's geopolitical position resulting in the country's status of neutrality. Only after the demise of the Cold War, Austria (together with two other neutrals, in a similar geopolitical position—Sweden and Finland) thought it feasible to integrate itself into a community which had started as a West European institution.

Differently from Germany, Austria is not a member of NATO. As long as Austria insists that its status of neutrality is still valuable, Austria will stay outside this alliance—despite the fact that all former communist neighbors of Austria have become NATO members. As long as NATO is looking to define its post-cold-war

role, there is no urgency for Austria to rethink its relationship with NATO, and there is no specific NATO interest in incorporating Austria into its alliance. But as soon as the European Union will be able to specify its concept of a Common Foreign and Security Policy (enshrined into the EU's de-facto constitution and, as a principle, accepted by Austria), Austria would have to choose between insisting on its special status as a neutral or accepting its full integration into an all-embracing concept of an integrated European Foreign and Security Policy.

Germany had, step by step, forfeited its different special status: by backing NATO's military intervention in the Kosovo and by participating actively in the warfare in Afghanistan, Germany has stopped to see itself in a particular role. Germany's foreign and defense policy outlook has become normalized in the sense of Westernized. Austria, on the other side, has still to confront the consequences of its insistence on a special status. Austria still has to decide whether a specific Austrian approach to European and global politics is justified.

In European and global affairs, Austria is almost anxiously demonstrating that it is not part of a "Germanic bloc", that Austria's foreign policy is not decided in Berlin; that Austria has not become an appendix of Germany. Yes, Austria's economy is strongly interwoven with Germany's. But so is—or even more—the Irish economy with regard to the British. Yes, Austria's media (and especially the electronic media) are in many respects on the periphery of the German language media system. But so are—or even more—the Anglo-Canadian media regarding the US media.

But despite this center-periphery situation, Austria behaves differently from Germany in many respects. So in 2012, when Austria backed the Palestinian claim to be recognized as a state by the United Nation and by UNESCO, Germany did not. And: On the semantic and psychological level, Austria and the Austrians are used to stress the difference: Austria is not Germany, and Austrians are not Germans. There is the old paraphrase, used among others by Karl Kraus: Austria and Germany are united in many respects but separated by the same language.

This does not prevent a friendly and unproblematic relationship between the two states. And it does not prevent Austrians moving to Germany especially for reasons of individual careers—and Germans coming to Austrians, and not only as tourists but also for professional reasons. The German-Austrian relations can be called rather normal and quite friendly, and not only on the diplomatic level. But it is a relationship between unequal partners.

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