

The *Heldenplatz* Scandal

Liberal Myth, Conservative Nostalgia

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Abstract

This article re-examines the Heldenplatz scandal of 1988, long considered the most explosive theatrical controversy of Austria's Second Republic. While the scandal has often been framed in terms of collective repression and psychoanalytic “working through” of the Nazi past, this study argues that such readings obscure the deeper dynamics at play. Drawing on Judt's (1992) notion of liberal myth and Uhl's (2000) analysis of shifting Austrian memory culture, the article situates the scandal at the intersection of media, politics, and theatrical staging. The tabloid-led campaign transformed Bernhard's provocative lines into a nationalist insult. At the same time, the play itself dismantles both nostalgic nationalism and liberal myths of reconciliation by exposing the emptiness of Austrian political discourse in a neo-liberal era. Rather than dramatizing repressed trauma, Bernhard stages repetition, cliché, and hollow rituals, revealing how authoritarian residues persist as fragmented speech acts and ideological gestures. The scandal, then, is understood less as a rupture of denial than as a performance of polarized identities, where theater, politics, and media collided in a battle over cultural authority.

Keywords: *Heldenplatz*, memory-culture, resentment, theatricality

It is always wrong to explain the phenomena of a country simply by the character of its inhabitants.

(Musil, 1995, p. 9)

event, they tend to reduce both the play and the scandal to psychological explanations of memory and denial. My aim here is to show that these readings obscure the broader political and ideological dynamics that shaped both the production and reception of *Heldenplatz*.

Introduction: Repression of Guilt?

The 1988 premiere of Thomas Bernhard's *Heldenplatz* at Vienna's Burgtheater provoked one of the most consequential cultural scandals of Austria's Second Republic. The controversy has frequently been interpreted as a moment of confrontation with Austria's Nazi past. In the secondary literature, it is often framed and analyzed through a psychoanalytic perspective: repression of guilt and a collective “working through” of historical trauma. For example, in her analysis of the play, Catherine Kiebuszinska (1995) argues:

*In the play, taking his cue from the upheavals generated by the election of Kurt Waldheim in 1986, Bernhard not only dismisses the postwar image of Austria as victim of Nazi Germany, but maintains that Austria's retreat into nostalgia for its imperial past, implied in the celebrations of the Burgtheater's one-hundred-year history, represents yet another problem of Austria's inability of *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*.*

(p. 378)

This “inability” of coming to terms with the past is shared by other scholars (Leeb, 2021; Daviau, 1991; Malkin, 1999; Mihai, 2014). They read the play almost in therapeutic terms, moving away from the “victim thesis” to taking responsibility regarding the Nazi era. While such interpretations highlight the symbolic importance of the

Building on Tony Judt's (1996) notion of the postwar “liberal myth” and Heidemarie Uhl's (2001) analysis of Austria's transition from the “victim thesis” toward narratives of shared responsibility, this study reinterprets the Heldenplatz scandal as a conflict over ideology at the intersection of theater, media, and politics. I argue that Bernhard's play does not expose repressed historical truth or unresolved national guilt. Instead, it critiques the ideological functions of memory discourse itself. In short, by translating National Socialism into a psychological disposition or moral failure, postwar Austrian memory culture depoliticized its historical and structural conditions, transforming catastrophe into a manageable narrative of acknowledgment and reconciliation. The play suggests that reducing Nazism to a mere psychological disposition — an attitude, a set of primitive resentments — strips it of its historical, institutional, and social dimensions (Postone, 1995). Such a reduction operates as a strategy: it substitutes historical and structural explanation with a ready-made psychological scheme.

The article addresses three central questions. First, how does *Heldenplatz* challenge dominant frameworks of Austrian memory culture? Second, how did the public scandal surrounding the play reflect broader struggles between theatrical representation, tabloid media, and political discourse? Third, what does Bernhard's dramaturgy reveal about the persistence of authoritarian residues within late twentieth-century democratic societies? To answer these questions, the article is based on Bernhard's practice of staging as historicizing. Unlike

commemorative or narrative approaches to history, Bernhard's theatrical form exposes historical experience as fragmented, repetitive, and unresolved. The play replaces psychological depth with ideological cliché, presenting language itself as a site where authoritarian structures persist in everyday speech and social ritual. From this perspective, the *Heldenplatz* scandal emerges not as a rupture of denial but as a performance of polarized identities within transforming media and a political landscape. By situating *Heldenplatz* within broader shifts in Austrian political culture during the late Cold War and early globalization era, this article argues that the scandal reveals a deeper ideological impasse. Rather than addressing the structural conditions that enabled National Socialism, public discourse increasingly relied on symbolic performances of memory that obscured ongoing social polarization and the rise of right-wing populism. Bernhard's play exposes this condition by dramatizing the limits of liberal narratives of historical reconciliation and by revealing how authoritarian modes of thought survive as fragmented ideological gestures within democratic culture.

A historical account of the changes in Austrian memory culture (i.e., the second republic approach to the Second World War) has been suggested by Uhl (2001). She identifies this process within the discourse of museums, historical exhibitions, TV shows, and official ceremonies. This 'memory culture' has taken a different form, in which Austria's past is no longer silenced, but discussed, studied, and exhibited. I do not question Uhl's analysis, as to the rejection of the "victim thesis," however, it is not so clear what exactly the 'shared responsibility' thesis means. Yet what are the social implications of such a transition? How is this ideological shift connected to government policies and, more importantly, how does it address the social and political conditions that brought about National Socialism in the first place? As the right-wing populist parties gain more support in Austria as well as in other European countries, it may be necessary to revisit Bernhard's critique. My suggestion here is that his play was not about shared responsibility but an attempt to demonstrate how deeply fascism was embedded within Austrian culture and why liberal ideologies fail in addressing these challenges.

First Act: Medienstreit – Tabloid Against Theater

*You can save yourself a fortune in pills
if you surrender early in the morning
to the total stupidity of the Kronenzeitung and
the Kurier
it whips your circulation into a frenzy first thing
in the morning
I am not talking about the Presse
that rotten paper for ten schillings is much too
expensive
even as a sleeping pill.*
(Bernhard, 1999, p. 380)

The Heldenplatz scandal erupted in the autumn of 1988, in the newspapers, weeks before the planned premiere on 4th November (it was originally planned for 14th October but had to be postponed as six of the actors canceled their participation). Excerpts of *Heldenplatz* were leaked to journalists. *Neue Kronen Zeitung* and the *Wochenpresse* printed monologues from the play. In their printed form, Bernhard's lines turned from theatrical performance into news editorials. This could only mean one thing: an insult. Sentences such as "Austria is a nation of six and a half million idiots" and "today there are more Nazis than there were in 1938" or in Austria "you have to be either Catholic or National Socialist" (Bernhard, 1988, pp. 14–15) were read not as literature but as commentary, which led to an (orchestrated) outrage. From this moment on, the sentences were transformed into headlines and cited over and over again by journalists, critics, and politicians. For almost two months of scandal, they have been constantly repeated, thus fueling a public debate. This ensured that not only the audience of the Burgtheater, but everybody knew just how many of the Austrians are idiots.

Precisely this choice of language, the immediacy of the speech, the familiarity with real-life figures and issues, and the directness of the monologues were essential in evoking the enraged public response. From this perspective, the Heldenplatz scandal can be understood as a dispute about which medium is better suited for the scandalous mission — theater or tabloid — and who will have the upper hand.

The dispute was not eased by an unapologetic interview that German Intendant Claus Peymann gave to the *Basta* magazine. Self-assured that he has the upper hand in the debate, he welcomed the scandal. When asked about the pessimistic and tragic tone of the play, he answered: "Theater is also the place of catastrophes, in fact it is there where people are shown in their horror and despair." (Echsel & Rossler, 1988, p. 154) But he was giving a theatrical speech to a magazine, and at one point even admitted: "I do not read newspapers anymore, I couldn't care less." (Echsel & Rossler, 1988, p. 154) But he actually did care, and it was no other than the Burgtheater that collected and published all the articles and press releases the following year, creating a very nice album edition that documented the flow of events.

Instead of a celebration of a national symbol at the Imperial theater, the event was broadly represented as a direct attack against the Austrian society, which the tabloids claimed to represent. The tabloids introduced several means in the battle: first, caricatures that show the Burgtheater in flames or that portray Peymann and Bernhard shooting at the taxpayer from a paper-money cannon. They coined catchphrases and word-games such as Nestbeschmutzer [nest-soilers] or referred to the event as "Peymannschlacht". They hosted politicians who produced even more phrases and slogans. Foreign Minister Alois Mock (ÖVP) called for the "privatization" of the play, and FPÖ leader Jörg Haider used the occasion to mobilize nationalist sentiment against the cultural establishment. He used the phrase "Hinaus aus Wien mit dem Schuft" (Lehmann, 1988), a citation from

the Austrian-Jewish critic Karl Kraus, originally used in yet another Viennese scandal against the corruption of the press in 1925–1928 (Kraus, 1925). President Kurt Waldheim, who was alluded to in the play, also objected, calling *Heldenplatz* an outrage against the Austrian people. Chancellor Franz Vranitzky stated, “rudeness must be met with rudeness” (and announced he will not attend the premiere). Even the retired Chancellor Bruno Kreisky said that the play “should not be allowed to take place”. In an article in *Profil* (1.8.1988), literary critic Sigrid Löffler observed how, through the scandal, while aiming to reject Bernhard’s false accusations against them, the Austrians were in fact proving him right.

Peymann thought that the scandal was serving the interests of the theater and refused to cancel the production, insisting on the “autonomy of art” and the right to upset the public. Based on this argument, he received backing from SPÖ politicians, among them an unenthusiastic support of Minister of Culture and Education Hilde Hawlicek. What this meant, in yet another formulation of a journalist of *Die Presse* was “Defamation of Austria or Censorship – Bernhard/Peymann have reached their desired goal” — emphasizing how, because of this non-patriotic play, Austria now must choose between two bad options. The dispute thus came to center less on *Heldenplatz* as a work of art and more on Austria’s public image. On the night of the premiere, 4th November 1988, the theater was surrounded by police barricades as demonstrators holding signs with the cited phrases waved Austrian flags. These were the tabloid readers who demonstrated against the theatergoers. Inside the sold-out theater, a different divide was made between the protesting audience on the balcony and the supporters of the Parkett. Yet, despite all the demonstrations and hassle, after the performance was over, the premiere evening ended with forty-minute applause. They overpowered the boos from the crowd on the balcony. Peymann and Bernhard came up on stage, in what was seen as their victory.

Going through almost 300 pages of press articles and journal reviews, one can conclude that the dispute had certainly gone out of proportion as the performance at the Burgtheater became a national event. But what was the issue? It was not about the artistic quality of the play nor its content, which, throughout the public scandal, was mostly unknown. The politicians and commentators who denounced the play did not engage with its characters or with the social questions that it raised. I also see no reason to look for a psychological explanation since there is no substance (the truth about the Nazi past or new discoveries about the antisemitic present) nor anything which goes beyond a phrase or cliché. In her study of the *Heldenplatz* scandal, Kiebuszinska (1995) writes: “politics appeared in Bernhard’s *Heldenplatz* as a refraction of the degenerate language used so automatically in the press, and which by virtue of its ready-made, dead clichés denied all the actors, those on stage and off, any possibility of individualism and expression.” This is an important insight since it leaves behind the subjective and psychological explanation for the sake of the operation of the medium. It also links the tabloid production of news,

the statements of politicians, and stage performance as forms of speech-acts that have decoupled from meaning, identity, memory, or morality. They are part of a different signification system, which is what the scandal highlights (Seethaler & Melischek, 2014).

The public outcry against Bernhard’s condescending statements was by no means a spontaneous but an orchestrated campaign, led by figures such as Hans Dichand, the founder and chief editor of the *Neue Kronen Zeitung* (a supporter of Waldheim, Haider, and other conservative and populist politicians). He quickly understood the opportunity and the potential benefits of the scandal, in which what matters is a simplistic, immediate reaction – as emotive and sensational as it may be. What he understood was the connection between the privatized media market and national sentiment. In his own column on 11th October, he wrote under the pseudonym Cato: “What is happening in our Burgtheater with these defamations of Austria has nothing to do with artistic freedom anymore. These are insults, slanders, and defamations in an endless stream.” (Dichand, 1988, p. 33) This sentence demonstrates how scandalization takes place: the theatrical lines that were cited by the press can now be taken as statements that could be morally evaluated and legally scrutinized. This move that actually empties the very notion of artistic freedom is explained as a necessary means to protect democracy from illegal abuse by unpatriotic artists and writers. At the same time, the tabloid places itself as the true representative of the interests of the people, while Dichand himself, just like old Cato in Rome, is their loyal protector.

In early August 1988, at the very outset of the *Heldenplatz* scandal, the critic Sigrid Löffler, already anticipating the future, wrote: “The battle is on the cultural hegemony in Austria. It is a struggle about who will take over. The more debates are consensually muted by the big coalition, and on command dismissed from the political debates, the more frequent these repressed ideological disputes culminate in the cultural sphere, the more vehement and sharper the culture war will become.” (Löffler, 1988). The emotions and fierceness surrounding Bernhard’s play had to do with an unresolved political crisis. Löffler suggests that the power that new social actors gained was at the expense of politicians and a result of their incompetence. In the lack of effective leadership, the question of authority will erupt elsewhere. What she refers to is less to Waldheim’s and more to Franz Vranitzky’s era.¹

To conclude this part, the scandal surrounding the Burgtheater premiere, the furious debates in parliament and in the press, the brutal accusations against Bernhard and Peymann — all show that it was not so much the number of idiots, the latent Nazism of the Austrian society

¹ Franz Vranitzky was a social democrat who served as a finance minister before becoming chancellor. His era, if to use this term, was characterized by transformation from Kreisky’s Austro-Keynesianism towards a neo-liberal economic regime. This meant privatization of national industries, budget consolidation and tax reforms. Although he did not completely dismantle the welfare state, those years contributed to an asymmetrical economic growth, while his big-coalition compromises led to an erosion of the social party (see Bischof et al., 1999).

or the other accusations in the play, but a deeper sense of divide. A process in which social hierarchies changed, and new forms of identity politics that had developed came to the surface, as different visions of the future manipulated the narratives of the past. It was less a result of a historian's debate, as in Germany, or the interest of a younger generation of liberals who questioned their national identity, and was mostly driven by the pressures of globalization and the subsequent rise of right-wing populist politicians like Jörg Haider. It was a growing social polarization, in which the post-World War image of Austria was rejected and replaced by two contradicting images: the nostalgic one aimed at a return to a mythical monarchical past, and the mythical liberal one, towards a globalized neo-liberal future. Although both the play and the scandal dealt with the same question: what does it mean to be an Austrian?

Second Act: Staging as Historicizing

*... he regretted that he hadn't lived a century
earlier
We always live in the wrong time he said
we all want to live only in the past
we fixed up the past so nicely
just the way we like it
nobody wants the future
but everybody has to enter the future
where it's cold and unfriendly.
(Bernhard, 1999, p. 393)*

The play *Heldenplatz* takes place on the day after the suicide of Professor Josef Schuster, a Jewish professor of mathematics. In 1988 (the time of the premiere), a day before the family was supposed to return to England, he jumped off his third-floor apartment overlooking the famous Heldenplatz square in Vienna. After spending the War years in Oxford, the Jewish professor and his family decided to return to Vienna in the 80s. To his disappointment, he realized that the city he left had not changed much. In fact, it became more distasteful and antisemitic than ever. His wife is also unhappy in Vienna; she is suffering from phantom screams of crowds cheering at Hitler's Anschluss speech, voices that haunt and torment her. They both live a life that becomes an unbearable burden. The play takes place on the day after Schuster's suicide. The family gathers for Schuster's funeral, and their words disclose their views, habits, and history. Even more telling is the way they talk about Austria, which, as noted, is much more a "tabloid talk" than theatrical language: full of generalizations, exaggerations, and clichés, repeated phrases, sometimes contradicting each other, often simply recited.

The play contains three acts. In the first act, the housekeeper Frau Zittel and the maid Herta prepare Joseph Schuster's home after the funeral. The two women talk with each other the entire long scene. Frau Zittel does most of the talking; she speaks about the deceased professor while disclosing a very unflattering description

of his character: abusive, selfish, has little care for others. She goes on quoting his statements, ending each of them with the phrase: "the Professor always said." (Bernhard, 1999, p. 308) Herta, the younger woman, coming from a lower class, mostly listens, except for a few times when she breaks the flow of speech with short, almost mechanistic statements. During the entire time they occupy themselves in their daily routine, as if all is normal: shining his shoes and ironing his shirts with much attention, as if he will use them again. There is a parallel between this empty gesture of ironing and shining the clothes and the citations of words of the professor and the useless; both are part of an attempt at addressing the loss, yet the emptiness just becomes more evident.

The second act shifts to the Volksgarten, not far from Heldenplatz and the Burgtheater (seen through the fog), where Schuster's daughters Anna and Olga meet their uncle Robert. Their conversation discloses more about the family history and habits, highlighting the reasons for the professor's despair: he didn't want to stay in Vienna, since he felt that people were in fact as Nazi as before. The city was also banal and tasteless for him, the politics deceitful and corrupt. But he couldn't return to Oxford, where nothing was waiting for him anymore. The suicide, so we learn, is political in the sense that it was a response to the decay of the nation and to a feeling of resentment. It is also a repetition, since this is what the professor's younger brother did fifty years before. Josef Schuster, like his brother Robert, is a stranger to both time and space; they symbolize a cultural class that has no place. History here means the painful reminder of this estrangement. Like the previous scene, it is not their personal relationship to the deceased but the latter's feelings and resentment against the Viennese culture. In these exchanges between the family members, some of the most provocative accusations that fueled the scandal are voiced.

The third and final act returns to the apartment's dining room, where the widow Hedwig, the brother Robert, their children, and friends convene. The discussions on the hypocrisy of the Austrians continue, while the story of the collapse of the republic because of mediocracy and corruption is linked to the family's gloomy future. Professor Robert continues his denunciation monologues, which shift from nostalgia to exaggerated accusations regarding the present. His words gradually concern the war and the square, which may be seen through the window. As memories, laments, and self-pity pile up, the imagined screams of the *Sieg Heil!* from the square get louder and louder in Hedwig's head, until the offstage roar of the Heldenplatz crowds invades the room. The play ends with Hedwig collapsing onto the table, falling into her bowl of soup. This closing scene is very dramatic — and at the same time has some slapstick qualities. It is perhaps the ultimate gesture for this impossibility of accommodating the past within a deteriorating, nostalgic yet quite superficial culture.

As this summary suggests, the play is far from the provocative and placative image it received from the press before the premiere. The accusations that the press found so scandalous ("all Austrians are either catholic or

Nazis,” and “in Austria there are 6.5 million idiots”) are made by questionable figures, lesser characters, and more caricatures who are portrayed as hypocritical, racists and narcissistic. When Robert observes, “Seit fünfzig Jahren reden die Leute hier immer denselben Unsinn” (Bernhard, 1999, p. 37), the force of the line lies precisely in its refusal of depth: Austrian discourse is not haunted by an unspeakable past but drained by the endless and mindless recycling of the same phrases. These statements make no distinctions between nationalists or socialist, between conservatives and liberals. There is also a very blurry line between the behavior that the Schusters criticize and their own conduct and beliefs. It is not their Jewishness that is here at stake, but their insistence on their (paradoxical) identity as Austrians. They belong in the sense that they wish not and cannot completely belong. Thus, it is not a historical truth that is presented on stage, which, should be noted, is something that Bernhard insistently rejected, nor is it an attempt to give voice to the Jewish victims (the family escaped during the war, Josef Schuster found a job in the respectable University of Oxford, and later freely chose to return to Vienna). What we find instead is that the present and the past seem to mix and merge, turning past and history into a staging of an impasse.

Bernhard makes this point explicit in another text:

All you see when you look back is this gaping void. Not only your childhood, but the whole of your past, is a gaping void. This is why it's best not to look back. You have to understand that you mustn't look back, if only for reasons of self-protection, I thought. Whenever you look back into the past, you're looking into a gaping void. Even yesterday is a gaping void, even the moment that's just passed.

(Bernhard, 1995, p. 300)

Retrospection does not promise resolution or cure; it does not yield a comprehensive or legible account. Rather, it confronts us with absence, rupture, and impossibility. This insight is dramatized in another Bernhardian play: *The Histrionic* (1990), which follows the protagonist, a stage director and playwright, Bruscon's ambition to stage his greatest work, *The Wheel of History*, yet in spite of all his efforts, the attempt collapses. Despite his grand vision — historical figures confessing their crimes, humanity exposed in its failures — the play-within-the-play is never performed. What emerges is not the disclosure of historical truth or timeless wisdom, but an exploration of the very limits and conditions of such representation, and the void that inevitably opens when these boundaries are transgressed. This tension is not a result of the tragic/comic inhibition of the protagonist to fulfill his mission, but lies within the notion of historicization itself, which is precisely what ideology seeks to ignore.

This tension runs in many of Bernhard's plays, as Olson (2010) suggests:

Bernhard and his protagonists, in the face of their

own and others' histories — i.e., in their decisions whether to historicize or not — occupy [a position] along a spectrum. First, the persons opt out, usually by suicide, thereby never reckoning with the decision [...] Second, they do not necessarily want to publish what they have been storing up (e.g., Robert Schuster) [...] Finally, Bernhard or his narrators historicize themselves.

(Olson, 1994, p. 44)

In *Heldenplatz*, “time is out of joint.” As the lines cited from the play at the title of this section — as “We always live in the wrong time” (Bernhard, 1999, p. 393) — there are many indications that the characters are alienated from their times. In Professor Robert's first monologue, he claims that he did not understand the “signs of time” (Bernhard, 1999, p. 368), while towards the end of the play, we find out that this was the title of Josef Schuster's unfinished manuscript (Bernhard, 1999, p. 404). Robert says: “[T]he conditions today are really/ just as they were in thirty-eight” (Bernhard, 1999, p. 343). Time is not about moving forward; if anything, then backwards, towards the catastrophe. Hence, instead of thinking about the play (as often been the case when evaluated through the scandal) as facing the past to reconcile and acknowledge its consequences, Bernhard stages history as a threat and an impasse. The inability to express or imagine anything new traps the characters in a cycle where past and present blur, culminating in the fall of the professor at the beginning of the play (he cannot stand the present) and his wife (who cannot endure the past) in the end. The question is, why is “time out of joint” in this play? What is the logic behind this impasse vis-à-vis history and memory, and how could such a performance of impossibility not merely provoke but teach us something about the political challenges of our times?

In her study of the play, Naqvi (2002) examines this form of historicization. She claims that *Heldenplatz* dramatizes the problematic construction of identity through victimhood. The Schuster family, Jewish intellectuals who returned from exile, cast themselves as plaintiffs in a juridical drama in which the Austrian public is collectively indicted. Yet their self-positioning as victims is unstable: their testimonies contradict one another, their grievances slide into exaggeration, and their rhetoric takes on the very absolutist, repetitive tone associated with fascist discourse. This static identity is reinforced by what Naqvi calls their “non-synchronism”—the collapse of 1938 and 1988 into one seamless moment—which prevents them from distinguishing past from present and leaves them trapped in a fatalistic logic of victimhood:

The carefully constructed non-synchronism of the Schuster patriarch is an essential component of a new postwar identity that envisions past and present in terms of continuity rather than disjuncture. The mythic poetical possibilities of imitating the untainted figure of the cosmopolitan gentleman offer a spatial and cultural solution to an historical and political impasse.

(Naqvi, 2002, p. 413)

Naqvi's insight goes in an opposite direction from a psychoanalytic one. It is not the past that dominates and haunts the present, but the opposite: the present position of victimhood fixates the Schusters in a negative relation with the past, which they are unable to transcend. They are locked within these mythical ideals about high culture, other places and alternative epochs, yet fail in constituting relationships with the reality in which they live. Josef Schuster models himself on the fin-de-siècle Viennese gentleman, cultivating a cosmopolitan aesthetic identity tied to high culture (the play provides various examples: Glenn Gould and Tolstoy, shoes from Rome and Suits from England). Yet these self-fashioning imports problematic elements from the past (elitism, resentment, even racist stereotypes regarding the East or lower classes). Thus, his attempt to ground identity in cultural continuity reproduces rather than escapes Austria's ideological traps. This is not simply emotional disability or cultural pessimism, but also an idealization of the figure of the patriarch, the professor who symbolizes a Renaissance figure that is beyond any social or historical upheaval.

If to follow her line of thought, the tragedy of the Schuster family lies precisely in the binary distinction between war victims and perpetrators. The identification with the opposite of how they imagine the Nazis (who are everywhere) means a shift in positions between the accused and accuser. Yet, this position, rather than encourage reflection and accountability, serves self-justification and functions as a de-historicization of the past. Caught in this loop, in which they are condemned to a mythical-paranoid view of the past, the family can do little more than reenact, double, and cite until the voices heard by Hedwig and the audience become unbearable. Repetition here is not psychological but ideological; it is not a neurotic response to an unattended event of the past, but a result of a mythical and nostalgic mindset.

Bernhard denies the public any form of reconciliation: the past is ever unresolved, and far from over in the sense that elements of it continue to haunt the present. Whereas Europe's liberal-democratic order sought to manage memory through selective exclusion—figured in Austria by projecting guilt onto Waldheim as the obstacle to a “clean” national and European identity²—*Heldenplatz* insists on the impossibility of such purification. The obscene remainder is not confined to a single individual but is inscribed into the symbolic fabric of Austrian society. In this sense, Bernhard treats staging itself as a form of historicization: unlike myth, which seeks to smooth over conflict and reconcile the past with the present, theater confronts the fractures, repetitions, and impossibilities that structure the multitude of the historical experience. Its repetitions — the constant insistence that “nothing has changed” since 1938 — do not simply serve as partisan

slogans but as a reminder that a mythical view has not been socially transformative.

Bernhard was not satisfied with the allegory alone. He condemns the Austrian politicians particularly: “People with a vision should see a doctor, our chancellor said.” (Bernhard, 1999, p. 365). He attributes this phrase to the Austrian Chancellor Franz Vranitzky, although it has been said by Helmut Schmidt. The politics presented in the play are much along this line: nothing is what it seems, the socialists are “pseudo-Socialists,” which means that they not only do they fail to suggest anything different than other parties, they in fact grant legitimacy to questionable policies, thus allow politics to disintegrate into power struggles and interest games, leading to corruption of the whole system. These are the very “catastrophic conditions” (p. 365) that work for the advantage of nationalistic and populist movements. Historicizing means understanding the ways in which social conditions define and prescribe political visions and public sympathies. As the play develops, we learn that it is not the Jewish family who has adopted the victim's position and becomes entangled with nostalgic perceptions (i.e., instrumentalized frozen memory), but also Austrian society as a whole faces an imaginary stagnation. As 1938 and 1988 become one, so are the Jewish family and Austrians unified in their supposedly shared victimhood.

While the Heldenplatz scandal was definitely a result of the experience of an attack on the Austrian society in these terms, the play was meant to historicize these very emotions and place them within a broader scope of cultural memory. It offered not an alternative picture of the past, but a structural possibility to address collective memory. Bernhard's *Heldenplatz* offers not a coherent ideology, but a landscape of fragments: repeated phrases, broken laments, obsessive accusations, and empty clichés. The Schuster family's speech is not about articulating a rational critique but about exposing the way language itself has been hollowed out and reduced to repetition. Just as Adorno argues, fascism returns not as a totalizing worldview but as a set of irrational residues that circulate in everyday speech, gestures, and public discourse (Adorno, 2010). By dramatizing this fragmented condition, Bernhard refuses the mythical gesture of reconciliation. Instead of purifying the Austrian past by localizing guilt in Waldheim or “closing the books” on National Socialism, *Heldenplatz* insists that fascist residues persist in the very symbolic fabric of society. Staging becomes a form of historicization: it does not present a coherent narrative or “lesson,” but enacts how history survives as fragments, repetitions, and gestures. In this sense, the play does what Adorno demanded of art: it confronts society with the irrational remnants of its own history, showing how easily they can be reactivated under conditions of alienation and mass manipulation.

What emerges in *Heldenplatz* is thus not the psychoanalytic drama of repression or guilt, but a sociological portrait of authoritarian subjectivity: a society where inner life has been replaced by mythical thinking and political speech is reduced to slogans, and where abuse and conformity

2 Mitten (1992) argues Waldheim's opportunism and evasions resonated with the „first victims“ myth, while his defense tapped into long-standing antisemitic prejudice in Austrian political culture. The controversy thus forced Austria's international image and domestic self-understanding into crisis. Rather than resolving the past, it exposed how unresolved and fragile Austria's historical narrative remained.

govern social relations. Bernhard exposes the persistence of authoritarianism not only within Austria's political institutions but also in the microstructures of everyday life — in language, gestures, and social habits. He shows how the liberal myth of coming to terms with the past and nationalist nostalgia are closer to each other than one thinks. Yet beyond this pessimism, he proposes an alternative to the ideological manipulation of memory: theatrical historicization. On stage, history is not reconciled through empathy or catharsis but critically re-examined through the lens of identities and social structures, with their contradictions and constraints laid bare.

In his classical essay, *The Past is Another Country*, Judt (1992) wrote on the changes in Europe's historical narrative vis-à-vis the political transitions after 1945. The vision of post-war Europe, he claims, was built not on confronting the past but on its suppression. Histories were replaced by myths, turning disturbing truths into convenient lies. Across Western Europe, societies embraced what Hans Magnus Enzensberger called a "collective amnesia" (Enzensberger, 1990) — attributing the horrors of the war exclusively to the Germans while portraying themselves as victims or resisters. The collective memory was not so much concerned with the events themselves, but rather served as a substitute, an effective ideological diversion, which enabled Western European societies to evade engagement with their war experiences and actions, and further pursue the construction of a new modern Europe. The Austrian Second Republic may be viewed as a paradigmatic example of such mythology: it secured its place by the side of the winners as the "first victim" of Hitler, thus absolving its citizens from reckoning with the enthusiasm that had greeted the Anschluss and the war-crimes complacency that followed. The dream of a thriving liberal new Austria, that instead of national exclusivism will be based on a liberal constitution and open market, was not free from those unhistorical myths and their ideological biases, especially concerning the relations between East and West, or haunting themes such as migration and antisemitism. Xenophobia and racism were not merely right-wing populist nostalgia, but a result of the divorce between political vision and historical account. Thus, coming to terms with the past demanded more than a liberal myth of tolerance or national nostalgic ideology. Against the optimistic hopes of globalization in a post-Soviet era, Judt ends with a warning: "note the pertinent counterexample of the last years of the Habsburg Monarchy, where economic modernization, a common market and the free movement of peoples was accompanied by a steady increase in mutual suspicion and regional and ethnic particularism." (Judt, 1996).

Analyzing *Heldenplatz* exclusively in psychoanalytical terms is to miss Bernhard's sharper, more unsettling insight that addressing the past is not merely overcoming memory inhibition. Instead, I suggest, this is perhaps the main myth the play undercuts. The play, I argue, does not stage repression, nor does it attempt to dramatize unconscious conflicts demanding psychoanalytic resolution. On the contrary, *Heldenplatz* is a play in which everything is already spoken out and repeated over

and over again. The voices in the play do not manifest unconscious trauma; they echo the hollow phrases of Austrian public life: the tirades against Jews, the banal resentments repeated without reflection. Bernhard's intervention, then, is not to prescribe psychotherapy for a nation unable to mourn, but to reveal the emptiness of its memory discourse. The scandal surrounding the premiere did not expose „unconscious guilt“ so much as confirmed the pervasiveness of these hollow speech-acts in Austrian society, where memory is not repressed but rather instrumentalized, serving political purposes. Neither the play nor the scandal, I argue, offers an outlet; instead, they expose the polarizing effects of this cultural impasse.

Epilogue: Scandal and Its Aftermath

*Any effort even the most strenuous one will lead
to nothing
he always said
everything that's done is senseless
because usually it is done without thinking
he was too complicated to endure the world.*
(Bernhard, 1999, p. 393)

As Rottinghaus (2015, p. 161) suggested, "by their nature, scandals are like prairie fires – easy to flare, difficult to control, and hard to stop once started." The Heldenplatz scandal is a good example of such an uncontrolled prairie fire that went in different directions, while its significance is still debated. It was a scandal not so much because of misconduct or breaking of norms, but as a result of the incapacity of the political system to address cultural and social challenges. The scandal gave rise to new social agents (in media and politics), as Austria was entering the post-Soviet globalized era. These cultural and political processes have shaped the reception of the play and the figure of Thomas Bernhard within a liberal myth of reconciliation with the past rather than transforming the politics of the present, as the play was canonized as breaking the wall of silence around the troubling past. This is the scandal and its aftermath talking, not the play. Bernhard was not mocking the Austrian life; he was voicing accusations that were performative rather than transformative, indicating an ideological impasse vis-à-vis a political crisis. As I tried to show, the historical truth, if possible, jumps out of the window before the play even starts. Those who are confronted with haunting memories are not Austrian perpetrators but a Jewish family member. The drama is not about the resurfacing of the repressed past, but the fact that they find no way out of this time-loop and continuous political abuse. The past here is always "another country" in the sense that it should be reflected on and acknowledged. For Bernhard, the question of memory is political, not psychological. The Waldheim affair or the rise to power of Jörg Haider should be understood not as compulsive repetition in some psychosomatic sense, but as a result of a political crisis, in which politics that attend to the real needs

of society are not addressed, and replaced by mythical imagery and nostalgic ideology.

In one of his interviews, Bernhard said the following:

A state that has so blatantly become the spoils of the two major parties, the SPÖ and the ÖVP. That both of them, without significant opposition, were allowed to ideologically elevate their particular interests to the level of raison d'état [...] and that a large number of the so-called intellectuals could celebrate this entanglement of party and state with jubilant approval as history of a great state.

(Sorg, 1992, p. 305)

This is a structural analysis, which aims to explain not how Austrian politics is impoverished by narrow-minded self-interest politicians, while the intellectuals legitimize this state of affairs as if it is an embodiment of historical vision. This is the myth, I believe, that lies at the heart of Bernhard's critique of Austrian politics. As demonstrated within the play, attitudes are platitudes and myths cannot replace critical approaches to complex social reality. How could one speak on coming to terms with the Nazi past, and at the same time ignore the rise of right-wing populism in Austria, from Jörg Haider back then or Herbert Kickl today? What would coming to terms with the Nazi past mean in terms of the social

challenges of the post-modern era, beyond questionable actions such as sending more guards to protect Jewish schools, while granting automatic support to the Israeli government?

In *Heldenplatz*, Bernhard implicitly challenges the very assumptions underlying Austria's confrontation with National Socialism. What, he asks, is Nazism? What does it have to do with Jews, and what does it mean to "come to terms" with such a past? The play suggests that reducing Nazism to a mere psychological disposition — an attitude, a set of primitive resentments — strips it of its historical, institutional, and social dimensions. Such a reduction operates as a strategy: it substitutes historical and structural explanation with a ready-made psychological scheme. Detached from discourses of biology, degeneration, or biopolitics, and severed from concepts of class, cultural reproduction, or ideological apparatuses, the past becomes "manageable" (*Vergangenheitsbewältigung*). It can be "faced," "acknowledged," or "worked through" as an individual problem of desire and inhibition. In this move, the subject not only gains the appearance of reflexivity and control but also secures moral prestige. Bernhard exposes this mechanism as a hollow ritual of remembrance, one that turns history into a performance of self-redemption rather than a confrontation with social and political realities.

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