

CARL E. SCHORSKE

# Thinking with History

*Explorations in the Passage  
to Modernism*



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THINKING WITH HISTORY





CARL E. SCHORSKE



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Modernism*

PRINCETON UNIVERSITY PRESS

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Published by Princeton University Press, 41 William Street,  
Princeton, New Jersey 08540  
In the United Kingdom: Princeton University Press,  
Chichester, West Sussex

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*Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data*

Schorske, Carl E.

Thinking with history : explorations in the passage  
to modernism / Carl E. Schorske.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 0-691-05977-2 (cloth : alk. paper)

1. Europe—Civilization—19th century. 2. Europe—  
Intellectual life—19th century. 3. Modernism (Aesthetics)  
4. Historicism. I. Title.  
CB204.S37 1998  
940.2'8—dc21 97-44484

This book has been composed in Janson  
Designed by Jan Lilly

Princeton University Press books are printed on  
acid-free paper and meet the guidelines for permanence  
and durability of the Committee on Production  
Guidelines for Book Longevity of the  
Council on Library Resources

<http://pup.princeton.edu>

Printed in the United States of America

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

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 PERMISSIONS AND CREDITS 

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- “The Author: Encountering History” was originally published as “A Life of Learning” in Douglas Greenberg and Stanley N. Katz, eds., *The Life of Learning*, The Charles Haskins Lectures, American Council of Learned Societies (New York and Oxford, 1994).
- “The Idea of the City in European Thought: Voltaire to Spengler” was published in Oscar Handlin and John Burchard, eds., *The Historian and the City* (Cambridge, Mass., 1963).
- “History as Vocation in Burckhardt’s Basel” was published in Thomas Bender, ed., *The University and the City* (New York and Oxford, 1988).
- “Medieval Revival and Its Modern Content: Coleridge, Pugin, and Disraeli” appeared in Ferenc Glatz, ed., *Modern Age—Modern Historian: In Memoriam György Ránki* (Budapest, 1990).
- “The Quest for the Grail: Wagner and Morris” was published in Kurt Wolff and Barrington Moore, Jr., eds., *The Critical Spirit: Essays in Honor of Herbert Marcuse* (Boston, 1967).
- “Museum in Contested Space: The Sword, the Scepter, and the Ring” was published in *Jahrbuch der kunsthistorischen Sammlungen in Wien*, vol. 88 (Vienna, 1995).
- “Grace and the Word: Austria’s Two Cultures and Their Modern Fate” was presented as the Robert A. Kann Memorial Lecture at the University of Minnesota on April 19, 1984, and was published in *Austrian History Yearbook* 22 (1991). A somewhat different version of the paper was published in *Akten des XXV. Internationalen Kongresses für Kunstgeschichte*, 9:9 (Vienna, 1985), 27–40.
- “Generational Tension and Cultural Change; the Case of Vienna” is reprinted by permission of *Daedalus*, Journal of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, 107.4 (Fall 1978).
- “From Public Scene to Private Space: Architecture as Culture Criticism in Fin-de-Siècle Vienna” is reprinted with permission from *The New York Review of Books*, May 29, 1986 (Copyright © 1986–1993 NYREV, Inc.)
- “Gustav Mahler: Formation and Transformation” was published in *Leo Baeck Memorial Lectures*, no. 35 (New York, 1991).
- “To the Egyptian Dig: Freud’s Psycho-Archaeology of Cultures” originally appeared as two articles, here unified with the advice and assistance of William J. McGrath. They were: “Freud: The Psycho-archaeology of Civilizations” in *Massachusetts Historical Society Proceedings* 92 (1980), reprinted with the permission of Cambridge University Press; and “To the Egyptian Dig: Freud’s Ex-

plorations in Culture” in *New York Review of Books*, May 27, 1993. The latter paper was presented at a conference on Psychoanalysis and Culture, Stanford University, 1991.

“History and the Study of Culture” was presented at a conference at Scripps College, March 2–5, 1988, and published in Ralph Cohen and Michael S. Roth, eds., *History and . . . Histories within the Human Sciences* (Charlottesville and London, 1995). Reprinted with permission of the University Press of Virginia.



## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS



THE ISSUES and intellectual substance of the essays on the nineteenth century in this volume arose in the context of teaching. Two of my partners in team-teaching in Princeton's European Cultural Studies Program, Anthony Vidler and Lionel Gossman contributed fundamentally to defining the subjects of the essays on England's Medieval Revival and Burckhardt's Basel, and to my approach to them. John Rockwell, as my teaching assistant at Berkeley, helped me to grasp Richard Wagner's development as musician-in-history.

Through Norman O. Brown I first became engaged with Freud when in the context of the Cold War that thinker was becoming a focus of new intellectual interest. Forty years later, Brown introduced me to the poet H.D., and our lifelong intellectual engagement reached a new intensity in discussions about the meaning of Egypt for Freud. From two generous scholars of H.D., Rachael Blau Duplessis and Susan Stanford Friedman, I received more enlightenment on that wonderful poet than, alas, I could put to use in the Freud essay in this book.

Arno J. Mayer, another lifelong friend, urged me to organize the essays into a book. He both helped to define its structure and offered valuable criticisms of the Introduction. I owe heartfelt thanks too to three other sharp, constructive critics of the Introduction: Katherine Hughes for her insistence on clarity; Michael Roth and my son Richard for their conceptual suggestions.

To William J. McGrath I owe a special debt of gratitude. He contributed to the book at every level: the organization, the substantive articulation of the Introduction, and the fusion of two essays on Freud into one. For many years we have worked on Viennese culture together. Hence, even in much of its substance, this book is his as well as mine.

Walter Lippincott and his enthusiastic staff at the Princeton University Press have been a joy to work with—despite setting a pace of production that would be daunting to a mind and body more vigorous than mine. Particular thanks go to Margaret Case. She has assumed with energy, tact, and generosity burdens far beyond those assigned to her as copy editor.

For her valiant services in typing these and many other papers, my warmest thanks go to Chris McKinley. Finally, I should like to nominate my wife Elizabeth as unofficial member of the production team. She has served not only as stylistic critic but as organizer of illustrations and the other chores that attend the making of even a modest book.

 INTRODUCTIONS   

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*The Book: Theme and Content*

“THINKING WITH HISTORY”: it is not the same as thinking *about* history as a general form of meaning-making. That is what philosophers or theorists of history do. Thinking *with* history implies the employment of the materials of the past and the configurations in which we organize and comprehend them to orient ourselves in the living present. In one mode, we think with the substantive yield of historical inquiry, with the images we form of the past, in order to define ourselves by difference or by resemblance to it. Here history is an object for us, and appears as static, a picture or *tableau vivant* of a bygone culture. We can also “think with history” in another mode, when we conceive of history as a process. Then history is dynamic, linking or dissolving static elements in a narrative pattern of change. We can still treat this process as an object, but it is difficult to divorce it from our existence as thinking subjects. If we locate ourselves in history’s stream, we can begin to look at ourselves and our mental life, whether personal or collective, as conditioned by the historical present as it defines itself out of—or against—the past. “Thinking with history” in the first sense, then, implies the utilization of elements of the past in the cultural construction of the present and future. “Thinking with history” in the second sense relativizes the subject, whether personal or collective, self-reflexively to the flow of social time.

The essays in this volume were not conceived with the purpose of explaining systematically what it means to think with history. Rather than explicating it as theory, they show it as cultural practice—a practice by no means confined to those who call themselves historians. In nineteenth-century Europe, history became a privileged mode of meaning-making for the educated classes. Some examples of that cultural practice and the turn away from it in favor of an ahistorical modernism as the century ended provide the theme of this book.

In most fields of intellectual and artistic culture, twentieth-century Europe and America learned to think without history. The very word “mod-

ernism” has come to distinguish our lives and times from what had gone before, from history as a whole, as such. Modern architecture, modern music, modern science—all these have defined themselves not so much *out* of the past, indeed scarcely *against* the past, but detached from it in a new, autonomous cultural space. The modern mind grew indifferent to history, for history, conceived as a continuous nourishing tradition, became useless to its projects. Postmodernism, to be sure, has found uses for elements of the past in its own constructions and deconstructions. But even as it consigns modernism to the past, it reaffirms as its own modernism’s rupture from history as continuous process, as the platform of its own intellectual identity.

If we turn our gaze from the high culture of the mid-nineteenth to the mid-twentieth century, we realize how drastic has been the break from the historical consciousness. The backdrop of our modernism was historicism rampant, pervasive. Never in the history of European culture had Clio enjoyed such preeminence—not to say hegemony—as in the mid-nineteenth century. If in the eighteenth century philosophy had been queen in the realm of intellect, with history as her modest handmaiden in “teaching philosophy by example,” in the nineteenth, history inherited philosophy’s dominion. History’s mode of thought and its temporal perspective penetrated most fields of learning, while the models of the past inspired the nineteenth century’s arts. Even as science developed its own autonomy from natural philosophy, natural history claimed a large portion of the legacy. Historical painting and the historical novel acquired new salience in artistic practice, while the study and criticism of the arts were reconceived as the *history* of art, of literature, etc. The very process of modernization in the economy and society of the nineteenth century, with the unprecedented effects of industrial technology on land and people, paradoxically evoked this quickened quest for ties to the past. In an era of growing nationalism, collective identities were redefined as a summa of the convergent cultures of the past. The architecture of cities appropriated the styles of bygone times to lend symbolic weight and pedigree to modern building types from railway stations and banks to houses of parliament and city halls. The cultures of the past provided the decent drapery to clothe the nakedness of modern utility. Historicism in culture arose as a way of coming to grips with modernization by marshaling the resources of the past. Conversely, at a later stage, modernism in culture arose in reaction to this effort as intellectuals attempted to confront

modernity in its own terms, free from the manacles of mind that history and historicism were now thought to impose.

To master modernity by thinking *with* history, to master modernity by thinking *without* history: these then are not simply antitheses, but rather successive phases in the same effort to give shape and meaning to European civilization in the era of industrial capitalism and the rise of democratic politics. The essays in this collection, whatever the particular issues they embody, should help us think with history about the passage from the nineteenth century's culture to that of our own time.

"ENCOUNTERING History," the second essay of this Introduction, is a professional self-portrait. The American Council of Learned Societies originally commissioned it as part of its Haskins lecture series, "The Life of Learning," in which scholars of various disciplines are invited "to reflect and to reminisce on a lifetime of work. . . ." It suits well, however, the purpose of this collection.

All autobiography is personal history, a narrative construction that involves both remembering and forgetting, evoking some parts of one's past and repressing others. Yet most autobiographers define their past on a narrow band of personal experience, with little reference to the wider world. In writing of my own life, I became aware that I could hardly think of it except as it had been implicated in larger historical developments. To account for my self, my values, and professional commitments, I *had* to think with history: the confrontation of German and American cultures in World War I in my childhood; the power of American progressivist culture in my home and in my college education; its displacement by a new, formalist academic culture formed in the political freeze of the 1950s that stimulated a rethinking of my scholarly mission; the political and university crises of the sixties that compelled a redefinition of my teaching role. These are but a few of the changing historical contexts in which my personal and vocational identity were, for good or for ill, formed, redirected, transformed. I had always found challenging Nietzsche's exhortation, "Become what you are." As I worked on this essay, however, I came to feel the need to attend to its inverse: "You are what you become." Through ever-renewed encounters with the shifting elements in the stream of history one can come to know oneself in the present, and also acquire an altered understanding of what one has been in the past. In autobiography, to think with history helps to establish a

certain distance from one's self by seeing it as both shaped by the structures and conflicts of society and as responding creatively to their pressures. Thus if I reflect in my life story the larger development of the society, I also reflect (as knowing subject) on that particular historical consciousness, its formation and changes, that my personal encounters with my time elicited as modes of coming to terms with it, whether by resistance or adaptation.

THE essays in Part One, grouped under the title, "Clio Ascendant," are probes into some ways in which intellectuals in different parts of nineteenth-century Europe confronted the promises and perils of modernity. The tremendous awareness that continuous transformation had become endemic to the world they lived in stimulated historical reflection. Spurred by the need to account for change, Clio's ascendancy drew power from the variety of national and local responses to modernization as it spread across Europe from west to east. The city, the social entity most visibly affected by the processes of change, became a favored focus of critical reflection on the condition and prospects of modern man. Three of the essays are directly concerned with it. I wrote them to illuminate in comparative perspective the importance of the city as a symbolic condenser of socio-cultural values in different parts of Europe. Yet as I read them now, a second theme surfaces: that of the variety of forms of historical discourse in which the ideas about the city were constructed. I ask the reader to read them with both themes in mind.

"The Idea of the City in European Thought" (Essay Three) offers a broad sampler of evaluations of the city made by intellectuals from the Enlightenment to Nazism. The passage of cultural criticism from historical to ahistorical discourse can be seen behind the succession of social and moral ideas. Different forms of historical outlook are evident even among the thinkers who saw in the city an agency of human progress. Voltaire and Adam Smith shared a progressivist view of history as a dynamic process in which economic activity fueled the amelioration of the human condition. Despite some differences in their goals, both saw the city as the scene of society's productive transformation. The past for them was a condition to be overcome, but contained within itself forces which, once released by human desire and reason, propelled mankind, via the city, into a gratifying future. On a more complex level, Marx and Engels similarly stressed the processual and dialectical aspect of historical thinking with their orientation toward a pre-visionsed future.

Johann Gottlieb Fichte, who valued the city's contribution to civilization no less than Smith and Voltaire, thought with history in a different way. He focused not on temporal development but on the synchronic coherence of the city in an exemplary moment of the past. Troubled by the chaos of his unfree and divided nation, Fichte found in the late medieval and early modern city-state a German paradise lost that could serve as a moral-political model for constructing a modern national community. The concern with process, through which one synchronic complex is transformed into another, so important to progressivist thinkers such as Smith, Voltaire, and Marx, had little centrality for Fichte. In his stress on a past to be recuperated, Fichte engaged in an archaistic form of historical thinking that would find even stronger articulation in England's medieval revival, considered in Essay Four.

Beyond the processual thinkers such as Voltaire and Smith who placed the city and modernity in a future-oriented trajectory and the archaists such as Fichte who recovered from the past historical forms to renew modern society, there emerged in the mid-century another class of intellectuals who had neither the need nor the inclination to think with history about the condition of man. Confronting the modern city as their existential reality, whatever their different senses of its pleasures and pains, its virtues and vices, they were presentists, pioneers of an ahistorical modernism. French artists such as Baudelaire and the Impressionists were decisive in developing this new mode of thought and feeling. They changed the city's relation to the ordinance of time. For them the modern city had no temporal locus, but rather a temporal quality. The city offered only its present—an eternal here and now, whose content was transience, but whose transience was permanent. Past and future lost their orienting function here; history lost its usefulness.

A specific city provides the setting for "History as Vocation in Burckhardt's Basel" (Essay Five). There Jacob Burckhardt and Johann Jakob Bachofen harnessed historical understanding to preserve their threatened city-state culture against the forces of modern change. Their native Basel had adroitly preserved into modern times many of the social and institutional forms of Fichte's German idealized free city-state. Now threatened by democracy and industrial capitalism from within and without, the patriciate to which our two historians belonged constructed their defenses against modernity with a revitalization of their inherited humanistic culture. Conservative Basel thus generated a new kind of historical thinking, lacking either archaistic sentimentality or futuristic illusion. As academic

professional and as civic educator, Burckhardt sought to cultivate in Basel's citizens a traditionalist sensibility of a kind that would yet prepare them to live in a world of the unexpectedly emergent and to adapt with cosmopolitan cultural flexibility to the forces of change. The essay sketches Burckhardt's particular contribution to twentieth-century historical consciousness: a richly associative synchronicity in structure that is at the same time processual and undeterministic in its recognition of a diachronic trajectory. Bachofen's special kind of archaism celebrated the civilizing power of women in preclassical culture without attempting to restore the vanished past. His work complemented Burckhardt's humanistic realism in combatting their contemporaries' use of ancient history to glorify the modern state.

In "Medieval Revival and Its Modern Content" (Essay Five), the scene shifts to England and a different form of conservative historical thinking. Three intellectuals, Coleridge, Pugin, and Disraeli—none historians by vocation—are examined as they seek in a specific past culture the conceptions and practices to criticize and hopefully to remedy England's problems. All three shared a conviction that the abuse of power, particularly that of property, had brought moral ruin and social division to modern England. All extolled the religion-centered Middle Ages as representing a social and cultural wholeness that had been sacrificed to greed and excessive individualism. In so doing they shared a widespread Tory outlook to which each thinker gave the color of his individual concerns. For all three the Tudor and Whig destruction of the autonomy of the Church as a moral force through the confiscation of its property became an historical turning point for the destruction of England's ideal past. Despite their shared conservatism, all three were in some degree futurists in their archaism. They reached backward to move forward. Each incorporated in his particular exploitation of the presumed medieval legacy an element utterly foreign to it in which we can recognize modern traits. Coleridge aspired to create a base of economic independence for a modern moral intelligentsia. Pugin advanced the idea of volumetric functionalism in architecture against the Victorian preoccupation with a symbolic façade. Disraeli projected a new Christian social ideology of paternalistic industrialism for his era of labor conflict and mass politics.

Essay Six, "The Quest for the Grail: Wagner and Morris," examines two thinkers whose discourse lies in the borderland between history and myth, nurtured by materials from a common cultural heritage. Both found themselves in constant critical engagement with the problems of

their respective countries. While Germany was still struggling through much of the century to work out the political problem of liberalism and the construction of a unified national state, England in the time of Morris faced the social dislocations of advanced industrialization. In view of the differences in the problems they confronted, it is all the more remarkable that the two artists drew so extensively on the same repertory of mythic materials. To the extent that they can be said to exemplify thinking with history, this is manifested not only in their idealization of Nordic and medieval cultures, but in the way they drew on nineteenth-century historicism's enlargement of the mythological inheritance beyond the traditional focus on classical culture. Their use of this heritage of myth increasingly undermined the historical components in their thinking as the modern problems they confronted drove them in different directions. While Morris passed from the religious and aesthetic medieval revivalism of his youth to active engagement with the political world that led him to socialism, Wagner early embraced political and social radicalism and moved—in the disappointment of his political hopes—into a reactionary communitarian nationalism. Wagner ended with a pseudo-religious aestheticism not unlike the starting point of Morris. The interweaving of these inverse trajectories and their historical meaning are the focus of the essay.

With "Museum in Contested Space" (Essay Seven), we return to the city as a locus of nineteenth-century historical thinking. The first essay of Part One surveyed panoramically the intellectuals' ideas about urbanism and the role of historical thinking in their formulations. The second examined the specific case of Basel as a civic community whose endangered elite pressed historical education into the task of equipping the citizenry with a cultural armamentarium for survival in the modern world. Turning now to Vienna, Essay Seven explores the narrower use of historicism in a concrete task: constructing a modern capital for an ancient empire.

Like the rest of Europe, Vienna conceived its monumental public architecture as historical style architecture, with the choice of style related sometimes to the function of the building and always to show forth the values of its patrons. In the construction of the Ringstrasse, Vienna's new capital space after the revolution of 1848, stylistic issues permeated the substance of political conflict. The contests over the location of buildings were struggles of political priority and prestige. The restored, newly entrenched court, aristocratic, ecclesiastical, and military forces on

the one hand and the still aspiring liberal bourgeoisie on the other jockeyed for capital space as for political power, with a new bureaucratic element playing an often independent, sometimes mediating, formative role between them. The historical cultures of the past—Classical, Medieval, Renaissance, and Baroque—supplied the symbolic architectural vocabulary in which the contest for representation in space was expressed. As the contending parties achieved some compromise, they concretized it in the arrangement of buildings executed in previously conflicting historical styles as parts of the larger, unifying capital space. The final design of the Ringstrasse thus represented both the contending elements through their respective historical symbols and the overcoming of conflict among them through their eclectic presence in the same space. In that sense the new “modern” Vienna of the mid-century was the summa of Austria’s historical components. Here historicism becomes modern, in the sense that it achieves mastery of the past by the present: what the Germans call *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*. It is modern by virtue of absorbing history and its elements eclectically, not yet modernist by breaking from them.

The Kunsthistorisches Museum, one of the last buildings to be erected on the Ringstrasse, serves in this essay to clarify the place of historicist culture in the liberal-aristocratic compromise of the later nineteenth century. Designed to contain the already accumulated imperial collections, both the historicist program of the Museum’s architecture and ornament and the organization of its contents celebrated the creators and collectors of past art. The personal collection of the imperial house, however, was opened to the people whose patrimony it was to be. Yet the very name signifies closure: It is an “art-*historical*” museum. Not intended to expand to include new art, it is both a monument to past art and a mausoleum for it.

CENTERING on the culture of a single city, Vienna, the essays of Part Two, “Clio Eclipsed,” approach from different perspectives the ways in which certain intellectuals of that city struggled to find and speak directly the truth of the modern condition as they conceived it. Not for nothing is the subtitle of Part Two, “*Toward Modernism*.” There was no sudden leap out of history into modernism here. Rather the cultural innovators were in continuous dialogue with a present that was still tradition-laden. They were themselves engaged in transforming their cultural legacies as much as rejecting them. Indeed, some of the most self-consciously radical creators of the “New” culture—such as Adolf Loos in architecture or

Arnold Schoenberg in music—would temper their break from the past with claims of attachment to some aspect of tradition even as they shook its systemic foundations.

The two dominant cultural traditions of early modern Austrian history were those of the Baroque and the Enlightenment. We encountered both in the last essay—first in conflict, then in relative integration—in the construction of the capital at the height of the liberal aristocratic compromise. “Grace and the Word” (Essay Eight), aims to characterize briefly their respective religious and philosophical roots. It then exemplifies their tension and interaction through brief probes into two vital Austrian institutions: the theater, queen of Austria’s arts and citadel of Baroque secular culture; and the university, stronghold of rationalism and the Enlightenment. Toward the end of the nineteenth century, the fragile liberal synthesis of the two cultures broke down. Both traditions, however, survived in transmuted form as vehicles for the articulation of two radically different kinds of modernism. The Baroque tradition of Grace, exalting the life of feeling and beauty, fed the sensitivity and sensuousness of fin-de-siècle aestheticism. The Enlightenment tradition of the Word nurtured the rigorous pursuit of ethics and truth.

In three theater pieces, three major artists, carriers of the cultures of Grace, of the Word, and of their synthesis, dramatized the modern fate of their respective heritages and the language systems that sustained them. Each confronted in theatrical form an element of the early twentieth century’s apocalyptic reality: revolution (Hugo von Hofmannsthal), war (Karl Kraus), and the incommunicability of truth to humanity (Arnold Schoenberg). There is no thinking with history here, in the nineteenth-century senses encountered in Part One. The thought is of an end in history, out of a consciousness at once deeply traditional yet in its drastic sense of rupture profoundly modern.

Where Essay Eight exemplifies diachronically the transformation of Austria’s traditional high cultures from their eighteenth-century relations to their modern fate, Essay Nine, “Generational Tension and Cultural Change,” explores synchronically the rupture that marked Austrian modernism’s first major intellectual breakthrough.

*Die Jungen* (the Young Ones)! Such was the term used by those who saw themselves in the 1880s and 1890s as pioneers of modernism, establishing their collective identity as a generation with new, shared values. Their sphere of action included politics, literature, and the visual arts. Over time their initial search for community and for a reordering of