

Demokratische Offensive

Isolde Charim, Gerald Eibegger, Robert Misik, and Rudolf Scholten

I. What is the Demokratische Offensive (Democratic Action Group/DO) reacting to?

The activities of the DO are not aimed at perfecting a democracy not yet fully realized. Nor do we attempt to envision any sort of normative ideal. Our purpose is to oppose an actual concrete phenomenon: the political situation in Austria in the last two years, which has placed democracy itself in jeopardy.

The problem we have in Austria is not one of lack of electoral participation, or anything similar, but a challenge to democracy as such posed by the presence of a far right party in the government: the Freiheitliche Partei Österreichs (Austrian Freedom Party; FPÖ). This has not led to the abolition of democracy — as in the case of a putsch — but, through various strategies, has turned democracy into lipservice, has emptied out its content.

Democracy must be understood historically. In Austria, this means that it must be understood in relation to the history of National Socialism. This is the boundary against which Austrian democracy is constituted and defined. It is precisely this boundary, this agreement, that the far right seeks to reshape, exploiting this shift for political profit. The legitimacy of the present Republic — and its capacity to elicit the support of its citizens — is doubly challenged. The tactics of the Right consist, on the one hand, in calling upon the letter of the law. Simultaneously, they exploit juridical gray areas — for example, the prohibition on Nazi political activity — in an attempt to undermine the very idea of legal legitimacy.

In short, this amounts to an attempt to redefine democracy in radical rightwing terms, to manufacture a new form of legitimacy.

Accordingly, the DO fights to preserve democracy as it has existed until now, and by doing so, inject new energies into what has become a hollow institution. The battle for the preservation of democracy in its previous incarnation is therefore also a struggle for its revitalization.

How does the Demokratische Offensive react?

The DO is a civil-society movement. The first thing to be made clear, however, is that we entertain no illusions about civil society. It is untrue, as has been claimed, that civil society was nonexistent in Austria until now. But it was merely invisible because its function was almost exclusively restricted to building consensus. What is new in the current situation is that this “passive” situation finds itself confronted with a kind of counter civil society that is active in two ways.

First, that it does not participate in consensus-building (the new legitimacy) but, rather, opposes it. Second, these activities are realized in new forms and new formations that go beyond the traditional boundaries of political activity, creating new actors and practices.

We are well aware that civil society does not offer a remedy for all of democracy's ills, and that it

does not function as an autonomous realm outside institutionalized areas of politics. On the contrary, the new political players aim to insert themselves into and transform the established political apparatus.

It follows, then, that one is not concerned with raising consciousness or conviction or enlightenment, but with creating and articulating a — maximally heterogeneous — political milieu, with the production of a counter-appeal. Accordingly, all of our actions have both a ritual and a performative dimension, like political demonstrations: the activities themselves produce the subjectivities toward which, in turn, they are directed.

It also follows that this is not a question of morality versus politics. We are dealing with political phenomena, such as racism, against which we pose a political position. And this position defines itself according to the struggle about the signifier: democracy.

Isolde Charim

II.

One question is: What happens under what conditions? For example: What are the “platforms” in the context of Documenta, which over the years has developed into an established major art event that no longer comes in for any serious critical scrutiny? What is the significance of the “platforms” in this context for art, and what is the significance of this context for the “platforms”? Especially in conjunction with the topic of democracy, it is important to ask: Who is allowed to participate in this discourse and who is excluded from it?

What is true for art is equally and obviously true for discourse, since neither can exist outside the conditions of their production. To call democracy into question therefore also requires consideration of the threat to democracy. The current political situation in Austria compels such a consideration. In a recent public diatribe, Jörg Haider, de facto leader of the FPÖ, drew a comparison between a brand of detergent and the president of the Israelische Kultusgemeinde (Jewish Religious Community) in Vienna, Ariel Muzikant.¹ This statement must be read as an allusion to the production of soap from the bodies of the exterminated during the Nationalist Socialist era.

The DO, a constitutive part of the civil protest in Austria, operates within this specific situation. Our strategic concerns thus demand maximum efficacy. The activities of the DO might be described as mediatory. Central aspects of our work consist of building possibilities for collaboration between NGOs, loosely organized and/or nonorganized sectors of civil society, and traditional political institutions that have recently become part of the opposition. We also strive to mediate between the subculture and the establishment (including the latter’s presence in the mass media). The perviousness thereby produced can be seen as an opportunity for social development.

One cannot underestimate the role to be played by the noninstitutionalized opposition in resisting the dismantling of fundamental democratic structures in Austria. The consciousness and self-confidence engendered by collective action, coupled with the reappropriation of spheres of influence from political parties, should lead — after what is hopefully the imminent demise of the FPÖ within the government coalition — to a social constellation that will promote the further development of democracy.

Gerald Eibegger

III. Established dissidence: on the specifics of the Demokratische Offensive

Austria is both a typical example of its time and a special case all its own. In this country a right-wing government is in office, a government which includes the far right FPÖ. In its attacks upon the institutions of the welfare state, the government is guided by leitmotifs of budget cuts at the expense of social programs and, more generally, of the primacy of economics over politics. Such an orientation has become "common currency" nearly everywhere in Europe. But the current Austrian government is unique insofar as the tone is set by a racist party whose politics fall outside the European mainstream, and which views its critics not as rivals but enemies, whose "ruling mentality" is guided by a mood of revenge for thirty years of social democratic chancellorship. All who oppose this government are forced into a dissident position.

It is crucial to understand this, if one wants to understand the specifics of the "democratic awakening" that occurred a few weeks after the 1999 election. This awakening brought 70,000 Viennese to the city center in a demonstration against a "coalition with racism." The formation of the ruling cabinet in the winter of 2000 was accompanied by daily demonstrations, largely spontaneous, attended by up to 20,000 people. This led to the largest political demonstration in the history of the Republic — some 300,000 protesters gathered in Vienna's Heldenplatz. Since then, a relatively stable protest milieu has evolved, a wellcoordinated network of activists, initiatives, and NGOs.

The DO is a "pressure group" encompassing many of these initiatives and NGOs, as well as individuals who have become politically active since the October 1999 election, and thanks especially to the mass demonstrations staged under its name, the DO has gained international prominence. But it is important to say that not all the protest actions in Austria during the past two years have occurred under its aegis. Far from that. But the DO strives to enlist as many cooperative partners as possible. Two leitmotifs inform our activity: the goal of maximum publicity and for collaboration that goes beyond the limits of the "normal" protest milieu. The result is a flexible structure for which the term "organization" is something of a misnomer.

Our activities have spawned an oppositional network that includes independent leftists, unorthodox NGOs, critical economists, sectors of the Austrian Social Democratic Party, selected trade unions, prominent academics, the Green Party, and newly politicized groups representing immigrants (chiefly from Turkey) and refugees from Africa. Disparate elements have joined forces: initiatives of the leftist "subculture" and the politically marginalized cooperate with establishment figures from art, culture, journalism, academia, the media, i.e., those spurred to action by the virulence of the far right's racist campaigns and its assault on democracy.

This specific character of the movement has created another one: oppositional networks have begun to penetrate the middle strata, traditionally known as the "bourgeois center." The unique feature of this process is that protest and oppositional agitation are no longer solely the province of "outsiders," NGOs, and groups from the left margins of the political spectrum. All of these entities now cooperate with established figures and political apparatuses. The process is difficult: people are forced to work together whose political background, social status, and daily habits do not make them logical candidates for cooperation.

The DO is not a party. Our territory is beyond the established parties, but within the arena dominated by party politics. It was precisely within this arena that the far right party first monopolized political opposition in Austria, then seized power, simultaneously pushing politics and policies further to the

right. This fact inspired the conviction that only the appearance of a new player within this arena could change the dynamics of the “game.”

The DO’s success in acting within this arena as a factor that must be taken seriously is an expression of the heightened political crisis in Austria. It is also an indication that new political formations can gain a foothold in areas that have thus far been occupied exclusively by “establishment politics.”

Robert Misik

IV.

A comparison of traditional parties and civil-society platforms reveals quite divergent loyalties, responsibilities, and obligations. Parties are beholden to close-knit networks of regional and/or interest-driven groups, and must constantly adjust their policies in response to internal pressures. Civil-society organizations, on the other hand, are guided solely by the content of their aims. Whereas parties proceed via compromise between substructures with differing programs, civil-society initiatives pursue their aims single-mindedly. The constraint of compromise is foreign to them.

Political parties derive their legitimacy from member votes and, especially, from the share of the vote they achieve within the general electorate. Civil-society organizations derive their legitimation from no other source than the democratic idea that all people have the right to make their voices heard and to participate in public discussion. Responsible only to its own goals, these kinds of organizations are the “booming” branch of democratic society.

The unique situation in Austria is that civil society has created a political space for itself as a democratic player, a space in which the parties — even the oppositional ones — cannot move with the same freedom. With increasing frequency, the ruling coalition in Austria is transgressing boundaries that, over the fifty-five-year democratic history of the Second Republic, seemed inviolable. Anti-Semitism and racism have become successful campaign slogans, even if in Vienna voters gave a slap in the face to all those who so blithely mouthed them. It is true that during the previous government, the lack of political openness with respect to foreigners occasioned much critique. Nonetheless, the attitudes represented above all by the Austrian Freedom Party should not be seen as the worsening of a previous situation but, rather, as the violent displacement of democracy by authoritarianism. The government’s motto “Speed Kills” is more than a faux pas in formulation.² It is an object lesson in their approach to democratic liberties.

A frequently heard objection to civil vigilance is that it is hysterical and exaggerates the significance of the political shift in Austria, the implication being that people should not get so easily excited. The fact that the author of this “diagnosis” is one of the people who wrote the Right into power demonstrates that conservative opportunists are intensely afraid of persistent civil vigilance. The government desires a return to normality, that is, an acceptance of the unacceptable. But since the entry of the FPÖ into the government, civil society has set new standards for political vigilance and accuracy in Austria. Its victory is that, after the present unfortunate intermezzo, a new government — however constituted — cannot simply take over from where the current one began.

Rudolf Scholten

Translated from the German by Jefferson Chase

Chronicle of DO Activities

November 12, 1999

Demonstration "No Coalition with Racism" Stephansplatz, Vienna ca. 70,000 participants

December 1999

Collection of signatures supporting migrants' right to vote at bodies representing interests (like unions) and supporting a law against discrimination

January 31, 2000

Public announcement of the Demokratische Offensive

February 2, 2000

Demonstration against the formation of a ruling coalition between FPÖ and ÖVP Ballhausplatz, Vienna ca. 20,000 participants

February 19, 2000

Demonstration "Say ,No' to a Coalition with Racism" Heldenplatz, Vienna ca. 300,000 participants

March—June 2000

Collection of signatures demanding the dissolution of the government and new elections

March 2000

Meeting of a delegation from the DO with the European Council in Lisbon Talks with Council President Jaime Gama (the Portuguese Secretary of State), Gerhard Schröder, Robin Cook, an emissary of Jacques Chirac, etc.

May 27, 2000

"New Election Day — Night of Protest" Open-air symposium and concert staged in front of the Federal Chancellor's office Ballhausplatz, Vienna ca. 12,000 participants

November 10-12, 2000

Conference "Forming Opposition" Together with party strategists from the Social Democrats and the Greens, the Educational Trade Union Committee, the School for Fine Arts, the Rail Union, and NGOs. Guest lecturer: Pierre Bourdieu, "Raisons d'agir" Künstlerhaus, Depot, Kunsthalle, and Secession, Vienna ca. 2,000 participants

March 16, 2001

Rally "Show Your Face! Raise Your Voice! — Equal Rights for All" Together with the Wiener Wahl Partie and SOS Mitmensch Stephansplatz, Vienna ca. 15,000 participants (www.demokratische-offensive.at)

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References

- 1 Ed. note: "Ariel" is the name of a popular detergent in Austria and Germany.
- 2 Ed. note: The ruling coalition tried to fast-track a program of privatization, deregulation, and welfare "reform" which was inaugurated under the slogan "Speed Kills," meaning that anyone opposed to the policies would be mowed down