

NEW GERMAN CRITIQUE



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Reviewed work(s):

Source: *New German Critique*, No. 99, Modernism after Postmodernity (Fall, 2006), pp. 41-62

Published by: [New German Critique](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/27669176>

Accessed: 17/03/2013 17:44

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The Cosmopolitan Geography of Adolf Loos

Daniel Purdy

Through much of the twentieth century, the Austrian architect and critic Adolf Loos was best known for “Ornament and Crime,” his short, barbed denunciation of decoration.¹ Presented first as a lecture and then published as an essay in 1908, “Ornament and Crime” was a distillation of ideas Loos had begun developing in newspaper articles during the 1890s. It has often been noted that Loos’s vituperative masterpiece had a subterranean influence on the giants of high modernist architecture.² Le Corbusier and Walter Gropius credited Loos with being the first to advocate the radical elimination of all ornamentation in buildings. Loos’s writing as a whole is thus often read as one point on the time line of architectural modernism’s development.³ Certainly, Loos encouraged such a reading. He appears to have scrupulously edited, revised,

1. Adolf Loos, “Ornament and Crime,” in *Programs and Manifestos on Twentieth-Century Architecture*, ed. Ulrich Conrads, trans. Michael Bullock (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1971), 19–24.

2. Mark Wigley subtly traces the early avenues into modernism by showing how Loos synthesizes Louis Sullivan’s “Ornament in Architecture” and Gottfried Semper’s “Principle of Dressing” in his own writing on fashion and architecture (*White Walls, Designer Dresses: The Fashioning of Modern Architecture* [Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1995], esp. 60–83).

3. Kenneth Frampton traces the line of succession after Loos but notes that later “purists” did not appreciate the full implications of his work (*Modern Architecture: A Critical History*, 3rd ed. [London: Thames and Hudson, 1992], 90–95). More recently, Janet Ward has presented Loos as crucial to the functionalist architectural revolution (*Weimar Surfaces: Urban Visual Culture in 1920s Germany* [Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001], 57–59).

and purged his own writing, so that archivists today are left with a paper trail that leads up to his one very famous essay.⁴

What if we step away from the narrative of modernism's rise to read Loos in terms of the cultural geography of nineteenth-century Europe? If we place him in the context of Austrian anxieties about the effect of modernization on both the empire's internal organization and Austria's ability to compete internationally, we find a writer who formulates a remarkable account of global cosmopolitanism. Loos's essays point out repeatedly that cultural—and, by extension, economic, military, and political—relations at the end of the century had become far more internationalized than before. With his newspaper articles, Loos sketched for his Viennese readers the contours of the new European cosmopolitan order, one that was centered on a few metropolises but which extended far into the rural corners of traditional European society.

In his journalistic ventures, Loos speaks as the cosmopolitan city dweller who advocates the expansion of market relations into the most provincial corners. His position has little in common with the various defenders of traditional rural society, the German writers of the countryside and the Slavic nationalists who asserted the historic rights of peoples ruled by the Hapsburgs. From the middle of the century onward, even before the revolution of 1848, German-language writers, such as Jeremias Gotthelf, Adalbert Stifter, and later Gottfried Keller and Wilhelm Riehl, among many others, depicted the spread of modern tastes, ambitions, and calculation with some considerable foreboding. From Gotthelf's black spider to Stifter's more historically nuanced accounts of the Black Death, writers invested in country traditions often represented modernity as a contagion. Loos had a similar geographic appreciation of how society was changing, yet he positioned himself very differently. If "poetic realists" sought to preserve traditional culture virtually by cataloging it in their fictions, Loos urged the rapid distribution of just those forces that promised or threatened to transform the old rural economy.

From his urban vantage point, Loos made explicit a quality only alluded to allegorically in earlier writers, namely, that the extension of media networks into the farthest reaches of rural society hastens Europe's modernization.⁵ Loos's writing showed an eagerness to understand the pathways by which

4. Janet Stewart, *Fashioning Vienna: Adolf Loos's Cultural Criticism* (London: Routledge, 2000), 14–17; Beatriz Colomina, *Privacy and Publicity: Modern Architecture as Mass Media* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1994), 1.

5. Carl Schorske mentions Loos only in passing, but his description of beleaguered Austrian liberal writers in the 1890s applies very closely (*Fin-de-Siècle Vienna: Politics and Culture* [New York: Vintage, 1981], 6–7).

news moves into the provinces. How quickly does this information travel? How is it received at the various nodal points? What value is given to “the new” in relation to existing traditions? In answering these questions, Loos envisioned a cultural geography in which speed strove to overcome the drag of spatial distance. Innovations may have their origins in a few advanced cities, but the task of the modern man (gender does matter here) is to incorporate and extend these discoveries as quickly as possible within his own sphere. The delays created by distance and uncertain lines of movement led Loos to impose on himself and his Austrian readers the obligation to understand the landscape of modernization. The time lag between an idea’s first introduction and its arrival in the provinces obliges the modernist living in the country to immediately and unflinchingly accept the new. Loos espoused certain iron laws of “keeping up,” codes of behavior, such as dandyism, that were first formulated at the beginning of the century. Timeliness, the insistence on adopting the newest forms of dress and design, compensates for spatial distance, or at least it seems to, as the anxiety that one has not moved quickly enough haunts the provincial modernist.

We see the geographic dimension to modernization quite explicitly in *The Other* (*Das Andere*), a short-lived journal Loos published in 1903. Already the title posits a surprising geographic alignment. Western Europe and the United States are the “other” in relation to the centrality of Austria. The journal’s subtitle, “A Leaflet for the Importation of Occidental Culture into Austria,” implies that Austria lies outside the West, a claim that would presumably have startled, if not offended, most bourgeois readers. The title thus sets up a double displacement by reversing orientalist assumptions—the West is the other that needs to be brought to Austria. The latter lies beyond the West, in the same company as, for example, the Ottoman Empire. Later Loos reiterates his sense that Austria lies outside the West when he argues that Turkey and Japan have already leaped ahead of Austria in the pace of westernization. The journal intends to facilitate the introduction of Western ideas, quite literally by leading them into Austria. The term *importation* (*Einführung*) specifically calls attention to the movement of culture across a distance, as does the first article of the first issue.

Loos leads off *The Other* with a long-winded story about traveling from Philadelphia, where he is visiting an uncle, to see relatives in the countryside who run a farm. His Philadelphia aunt takes him on a train ride for an hour outside the city and then walks with him for another hour until he comes to a farm where the farmer’s wife humbly serves him oatmeal and he meets the farmer as he returns from the field. Weeks later Loos’s Philadelphia aunt dies.

At the funeral he meets an elegant veiled woman wearing a mourning gown straight from Vienna. She speaks to him in familiar terms, but it takes him some time to realize that this woman is the farmer's wife. He is then stunned to see the farmer wearing a stylish black suit. The contrast between the everyday dress of Pennsylvania farmers and their fancy attire set to the latest European fashion amazes Loos. He goes on to say that if one were to ride for an hour into the Austrian countryside and then walk another hour, one would meet people as alien as someone from China:

If we were to take the train here for an hour, and then walk another hour to arrive at a farmer's house, we would meet people more alien to us than beings who live thousands of miles above the earth. We have nothing in common with them. . . . They dress differently, they eat foods that seem to have been prepared at the Chinese restaurant of some World Exhibition, and they celebrate festivals in a manner that would satisfy our curiosity as much as a parade of Sinhalese.⁶

Of course, the comparison between Lower Austria and China was meant to shock. We can sense that Loos is preparing a hyperbolic style that has its most famous expression in "Ornament and Crime." Nevertheless, the essay in *The Other* is explicitly about how millions of Austrians lack modern conveniences. Despite the comparisons with China and the United States, Loos states explicitly that he wishes to alleviate the uneven distribution of culture across Austria. "This condition is degrading. Millions in Austria are shut out from the blessings of culture" (*TO*, 1). In this passage, Loos runs the ironic risk of sounding old-fashioned himself. His complaints have much the same tone as late Enlightenment "popular philosophers" of the eighteenth century.⁷ He goes on, in his reformist guise, to state that advocates intent on preserving traditional rural culture are actually taking a patronizing attitude toward farmers by denying them modern improvements: "The farmer is not taken seriously. Otherwise it could never happen that people advocate the preservation of old costumes [*Tracht*]" (*TO*, 2). In a 1914 essay against native crafts (*Heimatkunst*), Loos would argue likewise: "This pretend naïveté, this

6. Adolf Loos, *Das Andere: Ein Blatt zur Einführung abendländischer Kultur in Österreich*, rpt. ed. (Milan: Gruppo Editoriale Electa, 1981), 1. Hereafter cited as *TO*.

7. Even later, Loos kept the arrogant tone of the Enlightenment reformer: "We are superior to the farmer. He needs to be blessed not only with our threshing machine but also with our knowledge and experience in architecture. We should lead him rather than ape him" ("Heimatkunst," in *Trotzdem*, 2nd ed. [Innsbruck: Brenner, 1931], 143).

deliberate reduction to a lower cultural position is undignified and ridiculous.”⁸ The nationalist celebration of folk costumes (*Trachten*) is but one example of an elitism that holds onto old symbols while keeping the overwhelming majority of Central Europe in poverty. “It is unfair to insist that 80 percent of the Austrian population remain second-class citizens” (*TO*, 2). Loos’s otherwise well-hidden idealism comes directly to the fore when he rejects the Machiavellian proposition that peasants are easier to rule when they have not learned modern manners. “Someone once told me that it is easier to rule over a person who refuses to give up his lederhosen than over a person who knows to trade his lederhosen for a tailcoat. I reject this proposition” (*TO*, 2).

The Philadelphia story in *The Other* gives a context for reading “Ornament and Crime,” published five years later. When Loos makes sweeping denunciations of Papuans who tattoo themselves, he is not taking aim at South Pacific islanders; he is mocking peasant practices of Central Europe.⁹ Although he insistently picks on Papua, Loos creates an other situated physically as far as possible from the implied space of the text and its readers, yet the real object of his critique is within Austria. This becomes difficult to recognize because in the absence of any geographic reversals such as in *The Other*, the readers are presumed to exist within modernized Europe. Read in its own terms, as it no doubt seeks to be read, “Ornament and Crime” presents itself as an elite affirmation of European modernization. The anxious tone that marks so much of Loos’s writing hardly appears in the essay, yet it is abundantly clear in his earlier writing. The texts preceding “Ornament and Crime” reveal anxieties about modernization and the position of Austria in Europe. The essay’s haughty tone is nothing more than an attempt to cure oneself, even if for only eight pages, of all the insecurities plaguing the provincial modernist.

If the Papuan in “Ornament and Crime” stands in for the Austrian peasant’s lack of modernization, the assimilated Jew is the Loosian figure representing cosmopolitanism’s rise. Loos equates Jewish assimilation with a form of modernization that also eliminates useless ornament. No one, Loos claims, argues that Jews in Vienna should don the clothes of the shtetl; hence, why should one take seriously those nationalists who insist on preserving other peasant traditions? “Never have I heard an occidentally dressed Jew

8. Loos, “Heimatkunst,” 139.

9. Loos goes further in “Architecture” (1910) to describe historicists as “new Papuans.” See the English translation by Harry Mallgrave in *Midgard: Journal of Architectural Theory and Criticism* 1, no. 1 (1987): 49–56.

insist that the Jews of Galicia should preserve their caftans" (*TO*, 2). In an unpublished manuscript from 1900, Loos makes another hyperbolic association between ornament and the Jewish ghetto. Every friend of Jewish emancipation and every opponent of the ghetto must be pained, Loos writes, when emancipated Jews adopt secessionist designs, which he equates with adopting a new caftan and living in a new ghetto. While the exaggerated comparison threatens to trivialize the ghetto, the analogy makes explicit how strongly Loos associated ornament with ethnic identities.

Cultural historians have long drawn out Loos's connections with Vienna's Jewish cultural elite. Whereas Carl Schorske interprets this elite in relation to the history of bourgeois liberalism in the rest of Europe, Steven Beller argues that the Viennese elite needs to be understood more emphatically as having a shared Jewish heritage.¹⁰ In his reading of Vienna modernism, Beller emphasizes the experience of assimilation and its precariousness in the context of Vienna's nationalist and anti-Semitic mass movements at the turn of the century. For Beller, Loos is virtually a Jew without actually being Jewish. While he may have recognized the sympathies between Loos and the Jewish bourgeoisie, Beller does so admittedly more on the basis of his intuition than on explicit textual references. Furthermore, he does not draw direct parallels between the historical process of Jewish assimilation and the modernist agenda of Loosian cosmopolitanism.¹¹ Beller takes Schorske to task for his lack of attention to the Jewish background of Vienna modernism; however, by the end of Beller's book, Jewish experience becomes a highly secularized term, one that, according to Beller, could be shared by non-Jews such as Loos and Robert Musil. This scholarly debate over the identity of Vienna's leading intellectuals replicates on an interpretative level the historical dynamics of liberal modernization and Jewish assimilation that it seeks to explain.¹² Given that Austrian Jews' assimilation depended in part on a liberal polity, the debate also demonstrates how difficult it was for Austrians (and, by extension, contemporary scholars) to forget the ornament of ethnicity even once it had been removed through modernization.

10. Steven Beller, *Vienna and the Jews, 1867–1938: A Cultural History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 2–8.

11. *Ibid.*, 239–42.

12. Beller, I would argue, overstates his case when he criticizes Schorske for not emphasizing the Jewishness of the Viennese elite. The debate really hinges both on an understanding of what constitutes Jewish identity in modern Vienna as well as on differences in scholarly style. Schorske approaches the question from a position within assimilation, and Beller from outside.

According to the functionalist ethos, decoration suppressed an object's form. But merely to strip a thing of its surface ornaments did not make it modern, for more important than the lack of deceptive decor was the object's material organization of space. Yet functionalism was not the practical standard that one might imagine. As Loos makes clear in his articles on men's clothes, questions of form very much depended on such impractical forces as public opinion. Thus, even as Loos seems to banish popular taste by insisting that things be designed for maximum efficiency, he reintroduces the whims and insecurities of fashionable opinion by also arguing that modernity amounts to the movement through time of a spirit, known as "civilization." Loos mitigates the vagaries of fashion somewhat in the case of menswear, and it is masculine dress above all that guides his reflections on modern style.¹³ Loos, in essence, elevates dandyism into an abstract code of design.¹⁴ What started off at the beginning of the century as the personal history of Beau Brummell, the widely acknowledged fashion arbiter of Regency high society, became, through French commentators at the midcentury such as Charles Baudelaire and Barbey D'Aurevilly, an elite code of masculine appearance. By the time Loos takes up dandyism in the 1890s, it has become a gender norm that had undergone a variety of transformations. When Baudelaire and D'Aurevilly adapted the lessons derived from English society into a masculine code, they translated the aristocratic character of the English model into an ethos that received its legitimation not through a personal relationship with the monarch but through the poetic vision of the individual. Loos preserved the idealism of the French version, but he reintroduced the importance of being "English" and of having a connection to the monarch. For a resident of Vienna, however, these links to England had to be maintained through travel and the media. Instead of knowing the right people, as Brummell the original dandy did, the Loosian dandy had a modern consciousness.

The encumbrances of geography are discussed quite explicitly in Loos's newspaper articles. He begins a piece about men's fashion by rejecting what he calls the German approach to dress, one that asked whether a given style of clothing was beautiful. In rejecting this overtly aesthetic approach, Loos reiterates D'Aurevilly's paraphrase of Brummell (who himself never wrote but was

13. For a thorough discussion of Loos's dandyism and its relation to architectural theory see Mary McLeod, "Undressing Architecture: Fashion, Gender, and Modernity," in *Architecture in Fashion*, ed. Deborah Fausch et al. (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1994), 57–68.

14. Jules Lubbock, "Adolf Loos and the English Dandy," *Architectural Review*, August 1983, 43–49.

much written about) that one should dress in a manner that does not call attention to oneself: "It is a matter of dressing in such a manner that one attracts the least attention."¹⁵ Conformity to established norms, dressing within convention even as one seems to be setting it, remained the paradox of dandyism for the entire nineteenth century. Beauty calls attention to itself, whereas the elegant man blends in so perfectly that he becomes distinguished. The problem with this rule, Loos notes, is that when applied outside London one might very well call attention to oneself by dressing as a gentleman: "This basic principle cannot be practiced everywhere. Wearing a coat which remains unnoticed in Hyde Park, you would draw a great deal of attention in Peking, Sansibar, and Saint Stephen's Square in Vienna. The coat is after all European."¹⁶ Modernity goes unrecognized through most of the world, including Austria, which Loos sets on an equal footing with East Africa and China. All three are far removed from the center of modern life, London. Adapting the rule for a global context, Loos postulates a hypothetical London: "An article of clothing is modern if at an exclusive event held in the center of culture with the best of society you are least likely to attract attention."¹⁷ This ideal of London society rules absolutely over the modern man, according to Loos. If some complain that modern elegance is tyrannical, what of it, he answers. Modern dress consists of dressing correctly, nothing more. In the end, sartorial performance matters far more than aesthetics or personal freedom.

By grounding modernity in the material life of a single distant city, Loos placed himself, Austria, and the world in an unbridgeably inferior relation. The absolute standard of English good taste could never be attained because of the time lag between London and Vienna. London was always more advanced than Austria, no matter what style was adopted in Vienna. Austria, like the rest of the world, lay outside Europe because it was not sufficiently modern. To make matters worse, Loos explains that English manufacturers take advantage of the lag in information. They sell products that appeal to the tastes of a particular market, rather than export what counts as fashionable in London. Thus the Viennese dandy is unable to purchase the exact style of hat worn by the Prince of Wales, because English exporters deliver only that style of hat that passes for modern in Austria, but that Loos in his perpetually displaced dandy consciousness knows is not truly modern. Here again Loos characterizes the Viennese as primitives: "The English treat

15. Adolf Loos, "Die Herrenmode," in *Ins Leere gesprochen*, rpt. ed. (Vienna: Prachner, 1997), 56.

16. Ibid.

17. Ibid., 57.

us like barbarians. And they are right to do so. In this way they sell a great many hats to us, whereas they would do very bad business here with the hat worn by the most fashionable set. They do not sell to the Viennese the hat that is modern, but rather the one the Viennese think is modern. And there is quite a big difference.”¹⁸ The cosmopolitan order that promised to glide across national boundaries tried to step over the rougher terrain of ethnic enclaves. Within Central Europe, the most profound contrast to westernization was not the gilded eclecticism of Viennese taste; rather, it was the staunch defense of rural habits. The long-standing manners of peasants were the ultimate antithesis to all that Loos held dear. “If the architect wanted to copy the naïveté of the farmer, he would irritate all cultivated people just as the upper Austrian farm girls’ dialect bothers the stock broker.”¹⁹ Here again English menswear provided the model: “It is well known that the clothes of a gentleman have nothing in common with the various folk costumes, given that gentlemen the world over dress in the same manner.”²⁰ While scholars focus on Loos’s critique of the Vienna secession, the real obstacle to his plans for transforming Austria was the overwhelming majority of country folk who knew nothing of the outside world. The flow of modernity came to a full stop in the muddy back roads of small villages, not in the salons and museums of the Ringstrasse. Loos began his plea for Austrian modernization with the entire populace in mind, but by the first decade of the twentieth century he had retreated to making his point strictly among the cultural elite of the imperial capital. The project that had started off as an attempt to overcome backwardness became an elite aesthetic for the administrative classes. By reading ethnicity into the critique of ornament, the accompanying celebration of functionality, and the international culture both were seen to embody, we can more fully appreciate what Loos hoped to gain and how despite his internationalism he wound up speaking to his own class, creating thereby a utopian aesthetic for a select few. Already at its inception the ideal of smooth functionalism was implicitly at odds with the divergent ethnicities of a multinational state. Loos never comes close to sounding like a nationalist even as he advocates for a liberal agenda in Austria because he presumes that modernization requires the ability to admire the accomplishments of other societies. Any patriotism that derided foreign success undermined the ultimate goal of improving Austrian institutions.

18. Adolf Loos, “Die Herrenhüte,” in *Ins Leere gesprochen*, 112.

19. Loos, “Heimatkunst,” 138–39.

20. Loos, “Die Herrenhüte,” 108.

The removal of ornament, the famous Loosian asceticism of “Ornament and Crime,” was meant to help overcome the barriers to modernization created by distance. Ornaments, when understood in the ethnographic context of the Hapsburg Empire, were physical manifestations of unmodernity, for among other things they were markers of place. They reveal the location of an object’s origin and thus also operate as an indication of ethnic identity. Loos only occasionally addresses the ethnic nationalist conflicts that tore apart the Austro-Hungarian Empire; nevertheless, his subdued modern style devoid of locational markings serves as an aesthetic that suits the Hapsburgian elite attempting to rule over a multinational empire composed of Germans, Czechs, Hungarians, Poles, Ruthenians, Slovenes, Serbs, Croatians, Italians, Romanians, and Slovaks. Ethnic nationalism was the most divisive conflict in the Austro-Hungarian Empire at the end of the nineteenth century. It would seem hardly surprising that a correspondent and cultural critic for the most influential liberal newspaper, *Die Neue Freie Presse*, would not have developed, even if only indirectly, a position on the matter. According to Robin Okey, *Die Neue Freie Presse* stood at the center of the liberal defense against nationalist fragmentation: “In Austria the sheer number of fronts on which liberals felt called to fight, against upper-class ‘reaction,’ priestly ‘ultramontanism,’ ‘phraseological’ republicans, ‘street demagogic’ workers—in the *Neue Freie Presse*’s polemical language—reflected the region’s belated development vis-à-vis western Europe.”²¹ Loos’s essays for the paper reflected the mixture of anxiety and confidence that Okey considers typical of the paper’s liberal readers: “Hegemony made liberals, at least of the *Neue Freie Presse* stamp, alternately arrogant because it was theirs, and aggressively fearful because it was challenged.”²²

The kind of economic and political theory that saturates Loos’s essays emerged in Central Europe with the simultaneous assertion of ethnic rights. Beyond the sphere of the German administrative world, the struggle for democratic reform became inextricably linked with nationalist agendas, so that as liberal tenets were adopted, they were integrated into the nationalist aspirations of competing ethnic groups. Far from unifying the empire, the principles of democratic and free market reform had, in their ethnically specific forms, become divisive. By the time Loos was writing in the 1890s, German itself, which had once been the administrative and cultural language of the empire’s

21. Robin Okey, *The Habsburg Monarchy: From Enlightenment to Eclipse* (New York: St. Martin’s, 2001), 211.

22. *Ibid.*

elite, had begun to lose its international quality and instead was treated increasingly as the national language of an ethnic group.²³ While architectural historians present Loos as a precursor of the International Style, his disdain for ornamentation should not be read only as a love of efficiency and functionalism. Instead, it constitutes an attempt to solve the eternal problem of Hapsburg history, the impossibility of coalescing divergent nationalists under one crown. His calls for English restraint, his dismissal of folkloric crafts, can be read as an erasure of ethnic differences, a renunciation of the many particularities of Central Europe in favor of a single understated industrial culture. By reading the national tensions and strategies for their resolution back into Loos's writings, we may develop analytic tools for more generally understanding the interaction between high modernism and ethnic identity.

As the following quote from "Ornament and Crime" reveals, differences in personality, taste, and geographic origin are funneled into a temporal sequence:

The speed of cultural evolution is reduced by stragglers. I am perhaps living in 1908, but my neighbor is living in 1900 and the man across the way in 1880. It is unfortunate for a state when the culture of its inhabitants is spread over such a great period of time. The peasants of Kals are living in the twelfth century. And there were peoples taking part in the Jubilee parade [of the emperor Franz Josef] who would have been considered backward when the Roman Empire collapsed.²⁴

The position of the Austrian Empire is doubly difficult, for not only does it stand a considerable distance away from London, it also encompasses a vast territory of divergent peoples, who themselves have varying degrees of connectedness to Vienna and thereby to the progressive movement of European cosmopolitanism. Loos's anxiety about backwardness is not a particular Austrian phenomenon. It occurs across the globe wherever a local elite hustles to keep up with a distant metropolitan culture.

The multicultural environment of nineteenth-century Vienna was more intense than in London or Paris at that time. Indeed, the mixture of ethnicities in Vienna compares perhaps with New York and Chicago today. Certainly, the

23. Ibid., 304; Peter Wesinger, "Nation und Sprache in Österreich," in *Nation und Sprache: Die Diskussion ihres Verhältnisses in Geschichte und Gegenwart*, ed. Andreas Gardt (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2000), 527–41; for a comprehensive history see Robert Kann, *The Multinational Empire: Nationalism and National Reform in the Habsburg Monarchy, 1848–1918* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1950), 51–108.

24. Loos, "Ornament and Crime," 21.

political strife over recognizing “minority” cultures was more intense in the Hapsburg domains than in western European cities. The tension between the court, the liberal bourgeoisie, and the many newly arrived ethnic groups from across the empire created an urban environment fraught with riots and ethnic conflict. During the 1907 municipal elections, the Christian Socialist politician Albert Gessmann mocked pan-German nationalism when he estimated that between forty and fifty thousand non-Germans migrated into Vienna each year.²⁵ Rudiger Wischenbart claims that in 1910 almost a quarter of Vienna’s residents arrived from Bohemia and Moravia.²⁶ Liberal newspapers joined in the frantic response to Slavic immigration: “The *Neue Freie Presse* devoted a substantial allocation of editorial space in July and August 1909 to hysterical articles on how and why the city would soon be lost to the Czechs.”²⁷ By contrast, Christian Socialists advocated an assimilationist policy that integrated Slavs into the German environment, as opposed to more radical, pan-German measures. Loos’s ideal of modernization would have been very different from migration policies that expected immigrant Czechs to adopt German as a language and to “respect” local German customs.²⁸ Instead of respecting local Viennese culture, the Loosian attitude would have subsumed both Slavic and German traditions within an international culture based on a modernized England. Although Loos framed his 1908 discussion of cultural differences in terms of design questions, it is not difficult to see how his cosmopolitanism counters the political rhetoric of nationalist politics. “It may well not be very pleasant for Germans to hear that they should give up their own culture and adopt the English one. However, the Bulgarian does not like to hear it either and the Chinese even less. This question cannot be avoided through sentimentalism. . . . In the twentieth century only one culture will rule the earth.”²⁹ To the extent that Loos can fairly be described as a forerunner of modernism, his anti-ornamental design principles are very much part of the hegemonic monoculture that defines the upper strata of the global city. However, instead of actually eliminating the competing vernacular forms of the multinational city, corporate modernism has imposed a layer of smooth functionalism over the still unruly cultures of migrant workers.

25. John Boyer, *Culture and Political Crisis in Vienna: Christian Socialism in Power, 1897–1918* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 213.

26. Rudiger Wischenbart, “Vienna, 1910: A City without Viennese,” in *Vienna: The World of Yesterday, 1889–1914*, ed. Stephen Bronner and F. Peter Wagner (Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities, 1997), 36.

27. Boyer, *Culture and Political Crisis*, 220.

28. Ibid., 216.

29. Adolf Loos, “Kultur,” in *Trotzdem*, 66.

Saskia Sassen's description of the global city shows that the tensions Loos sought to eliminate are still present:

The large Western city of today concentrates diversity. Its spaces are inscribed with the dominant corporate culture but also with a multiplicity of other cultures and identities. The slippage is evident: the dominant culture can encompass only part of the city. And while corporate power inscribes these cultures and identifies them with "otherness," thereby devaluing them, they are present everywhere. For instance, through immigration a proliferation of originally highly localized cultures now have become a presence in many large cities, cities whose elites think of themselves as cosmopolitan, as transcending any locality.³⁰

While global finance capital in the present may have distinctive qualities, the urban tensions between an internationalized elite and recently arrived immigrants played itself out in Vienna as a prelude to similar conflicts today. The Austrian economic system differed substantially from contemporary global capitalism. Part of Loos's agenda was the introduction of greater market competition on the English model. His mockery of the Viennese Hatters Association is part of a larger critique of Austrian monopolies and trade associations that controlled the market, set prices, and restricted imports. Austrian capitalism was protectionist and organized into monopolies. Nevertheless, the migration and competition between ethnic groups within the Hapsburg Empire produced an urban culture comparable to that found in contemporary cities, where the aesthetic of the corporate elites rubs against the urban adaptations that immigrants produce of their homelands. High modernism has so dominated urban building that the attacks on eclecticism (postmodernist ornaments do not proliferate in Victorian manner) have little of the Loosian urgency. What remains after modernism has established itself within official culture is its juxtaposition with immigrants from traditional societies—those who, as it were, have not yet heard the news of ornament's death.

Architectural critics such as Janet Stewart, K. Michael Hays, and Gustav Küntler have pointed out that Loos combines traditional with avant-garde tendencies.³¹ However, they mention the traditional elements only in

30. Saskia Sassen, *Globalization and Its Discontents: Essays on the New Mobility of People and Money* (New York: New, 1998), xxxi.

31. Stewart, *Fashioning Vienna*, 83–88; K. Michael Hays, *Modernism and the Posthumanist Subject: The Architecture of Hannes Meyer and Ludwig Hilberseimer* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1992), 60; Gustav Küntler, "Der 'Traditionalist' Adolf Loos," in *"Alle Architekten sind Verbrecher": Adolf Loos und die Folgen; Eine Spurensicherung*, ed. Adolf Opel and Marino Valdez (Vienna: Atelier, 1990), 49.

passing, because they seem to undercut the radicalness of Loos's proposals, yet these aspects need further articulation as part of the liberal origins of his cosmopolitan project.³² Indeed, Loos was more patriotic than he let on.³³ His writing can be read in that vitriolic Viennese tradition of scathing criticism that reveals an underlying loyalty. (Thomas Bernhard is but a more recent example.) The more viciously Loos attacks other Viennese for their supposed hypocrisy, the more his investment in "curing" Austria becomes apparent. One obvious sign of his loyalty to Austria: in the midst of all his denunciations of Viennese pomposity, Loos never even hints at criticizing the emperor Franz Josef. Indeed, he writes around the ceremony of the monarchy, using the occasion of the royal jubilee for criticizing archaic ornamentations but never taking aim anywhere near the palace. Loos's Austrian loyalties made themselves clear in one of his first newspaper articles. In a review of the prizes awarded by the city of Vienna for an architectural competition to build a new exhibition hall, Loos objected that the first-place proposal went to a design that reminded the viewer of the German Reichstag in Berlin. How strange it was, Loos stated, to honor the Austrian emperor's jubilee by building a pavilion in the imperial style of Prussia. Not that he was a blind patriot, he wrote, but he disliked having Austria embarrass itself in front of others by wearing Prussian hand-me-downs: "I am certainly not a dyed-in-the-wool patriot, yet I do not like to see us disgrace ourselves in front of others when it comes to artistic questions. We do not need to stumble around in the clothes thrown off by another monarchy."³⁴ At the next architectural competition in Paris, Loos hoped that Austrian competitors would not fail to demonstrate the modern elegance, so as to disprove the old saying that Austria was always one idea behind the times: "In Paris we must demonstrate that we stand in first place. If our industry lacks an elevated modern framework, it will suffer a loss against foreign competitors. It is time to do away with the old saying that Austria is always one idea behind the times."³⁵ The foreign competition

32. When theorists today discuss cosmopolitanism, they often note that the worldly allegiances do not rule out the possibility that a cosmopolitan intellectual can also have very strong, even "patriotic" commitments. Without a doubt, Loosian cosmopolitanism is antithetical to the generous attitude of Kwame Anthony Appiah, who balances patriotism and cosmopolitanism to allow all cultures to share in universal beliefs while preserving their particularities ("Cosmopolitan Patriots," in *Cosmopolitics: Thinking and Feeling beyond the Nation*, ed. Pheng Cheah and Bruce Robbins [Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998], 91).

33. Mitchell Schwarzer, *German Architectural Theory and the Search for Modern Identity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 163–64.

34. Adolf Loos, "Eine Konkurrenz der Stadt Wien," in *Die Potemkinische Stadt* (Vienna: Prachner, 1997), 22.

35. *Ibid.*, 23.

in this context is the German Reich, or more specifically the Prussian tradition of its monarch.³⁶

As a westernizer in Austria, Loos wavers between two positions of exclusion from the mainstream, either as an internationally aligned aristocrat or as an Enlightenment reformer. The position of a westernizer in Central Europe was inevitably a difficult one. Someone who is understood as importing English ideas to Austria was almost by definition excluded from both cultures. The eastern European westernizer is seen not only as incapable of truly belonging to the progressive culture of industrial Europe but also as having abandoned his national origins. Loos's rhetoric positions him as a loyal adherent to English cosmopolitanism. Because he confines his analysis to fashion, his rhetoric has the quality of a role to be played for the sake of society. He can sound like a sartorial Englishman and an Austrian critic. This double identity reiterates the stance of the Hapsburg aristocracy, whose members, as Loos himself points out, dress in the English manner but play politics as loyal Austrian subjects. He is not writing for aristocrats but for liberals who wish to extend the bourgeois-aristocratic compromise into a modern form, one that allows an industrially self-conscious aesthetic that understands the capitalist concerns over labor costs and efficiency, yet holds on to a monarchical system.

Loos reiterates the long-standing Germanic presumption that English fashion and style embodied progressive industrial democracy; however, he holds to his Anglophilia with greater urgency than even the most enlightened German. For Loos, England does not represent one step toward the liberal ideal; rather, it is the absolute standard of behavior. Whereas Enlightenment Anglophiles looked to England as the standard of democratic and modern industrial freedom for individuals and manufacturers alike, Loos invokes the same English symbols as the basis for an intense conformity. The only individuals capable of freedom are, ironically, those who fail to live up to the modern standard of good taste. Pleasure, emancipation from restraint, the absence of asceticism are qualities Loos leaves to the primitive stragglers, who fail to understand their own backwardness. His condescension toward the unmodern reiterates a ruling-class attitude within the Austro-Hungarian Empire. This becomes explicit toward the end of "Ornament and Crime" when he addresses his ideal audience:

36. Stewart goes a long way toward tracking down the many valences of Germanness in Loos's writing, particular with regard to the language's relation to others within the Hapsburg Empire (*Fashioning Vienna*, 59–66); however, she does not mention the long-standing antipathy between Austria and its Prussian, later German, competitor.

I am preaching to the aristocrat, I mean the person who stands at the pinnacle of mankind and yet has the deepest understanding for the distress and want of those below. He well understands the kaffir who weaves ornaments into his fabric according to a particular rhythm that only comes to view when it is unraveled, the Persian who weaves his carpet, the Slovak peasant woman who embroiders her lace, the old lady who crochets wonderful things with glass beads and silk. The aristocrat lets them be: he knows that the hours in which they work are their holy hours.³⁷

Whereas socialism would industrialize labor, Loos insists that he seeks to preserve the pleasure that primitive people feel in their labor. Only those who see themselves as taken up by the movement of history are in any sense compelled to dress in the modern manner. Modern society is juxtaposed to traditional cultures in much the way that Ferdinand Toennies distinguished between *Gemeinschaft* and *Gesellschaft* (community and society). Each constitutes a separate sphere, which Loos does not imagine will converge. Unlike a Rhineland conservative, such as Wilhelm Riehl, who feared that market relations and urban manners were replacing the centuries-old habits of rural society, Loos described the two spheres as distinct, even if they were interlocked. Pockets of traditionalism could exist within advanced societies, so long as the elite kept up with industrial development. This combination of a progressive elite tolerating enclaves of folkloric backwardness is a distinctly German Austrian position, one engendered by the administrative classes that the Hapsburg Empire layered over its subjected national groups. Loos's dandy code constitutes an attempt to reform the administrative class, to say nothing of the aristocracy. His dandy aesthetic introduces renunciation to a group who were themselves roundly criticized for their own hedonism.³⁸ By insisting that the German-speaking administrative elite participate in what Loos understands as

37. Loos, "Ornament and Crime," 24.

38. Loos's somewhat surprising assertion that the Austrian or, more particularly, Viennese aristocracy had already adopted an English manner was elaborated on some fifty years later by Hermann Broch in his essay "Hofmannsthal und seiner Zeit," first published after World War II. Broch shares with Loos a moral outrage at the ornament, though Broch employs the word *decoration* to denounce an Austrian tendency to celebrate what in his terms amounts to nothing more than a distracting facade. England's aristocracy was saved because it adapted to the country's increasing democratization, whereas the Austrian nobility, Broch argued, led the rest of society in decorating a crumbling political order through empty, aesthetic performances. Ultimately, Broch has little patience with the Austrian nobility. Loos in the 1890s is far more willing to see the transnational Austrian aristocracy as a new form of cosmopolitanism, whereas Broch in the late 1940s characterizes the same phenomenon as an aesthetic evasion from ethical obligations. Aristocratic interest in English culture was, for Broch, another manifestation of a nineteenth-century eclecticism fundamentally averse to modernization.

an international culture of modernism, he introduces a stylized form of discipline while preserving the old Austrian distinctions between classes. Loos's essays are distinct because they never leave the discussion of design and fashion. His reform, his attempt at Austrian renewal, as it were, speaks only through the voice of style, thereby displaying internally the disdainful sensibility it seeks to inculcate in its readers.

In "Ornament and Crime" Loos justifies removing decorations because they are wasted labor, yet he also states that they afford peasant craft workers a certain pleasure, presumably derived from some noneconomic factor. Loos does not explain the source of craft workers' pleasure further; he is content to elevate himself above it. Without question, craft workers are not the only people who connect ornamentation to a specific cultural tradition. Loos's frequent complaints about Austrian taste make clear that there are many pockets of unmodern satisfaction. When Loos correlates the desire for ornamentation with barbaric urges, he is perhaps not just writing in a hyperbolic manner, for not far from the enjoyment of decoration are other manifestations of the folkloric, namely, a nationalist joy at preserving a material culture. Ornamentation embodies urges that civilized individuals should repress; it reveals pleasures that ought to be expressed in public, he argues. The pleasure of an ornament is very much communal, it defines a way of life, and those who enjoy the ornament are by implication invested in the mores and habits it invokes.

Slavoj Žižek's discussion of eastern European nationalism in the post-Soviet era elucidates the libidinal tensions surrounding the ornament for Loos. Arguing against discursive theories of national identity that seek to explain nationalist politics as a form of performance that constitutes subjects through the enactment of power on the body, Žižek argues that "the bond linking together [a given community's] members always implies a shared relationship toward a Thing, toward Enjoyment incarnated."³⁹ National antagonisms are fanned when one group feels that its way of life will be stripped away by another group. Within all nationalist discourses lies an implied fantasy of pleasure embodied by social conventions. When nationalists describe their antipathy for another group, Žižek argues that their attack focuses on specific social forms of pleasure: "They dressed in absurd clothes." "Their food smells of too much garlic." "They speak an uncouth dialect." Žižek asserts that "a nation exists only as long as its specific *enjoyment* continues to be materialized in a set of social practices and transmitted through national myths that structure

39. Slavoj Žižek, *Tarrying with the Negative: Kant, Hegel, and the Critique of Ideology* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1993), 201.

these practices.”⁴⁰ The Austro-Hungarian Empire at the end of the nineteenth century grappled with many of the ethnic conflicts that motivate Žižek’s reflections. The Balkans today replay the same antagonisms that threatened to overwhelm the Hapsburg monarchy. The nineteenth century saw the formulation of many nationalist movements within the Austro-Hungarian Empire. Linguistic and historical scholarship tends not to focus on folkloric decoration as an expression of political identity; instead, language is understood to be the definitive ethnic marker.⁴¹ Histories of Central Europe couple the various liberal struggles for parliamentary reform with nationalist movements advocating school reform and the official recognition of minority languages. Okey summarized the historical process of national identity formation in Central Europe: “The romantic concept of the nation as a community of culture expressing its ‘soul’ through language merged with the liberal principles of enlightenment and association: an expanding network of schools, press, and associations became the basis for ever wider radiation of the ‘national idea.’”⁴² The Austrian administration acknowledged the importance of language differences in the population when in the 1880 questionnaires it asked for the “language of everyday use.” However, officials were equally determined to avoid larger ethnographic questions by refusing to ask about the interviewees’ mother tongue or political nationality. Gary Cohen notes that “language by itself does not denote ethnic identity, but, in the context of Austria’s ethnic conflicts, politicians, demographers, and the general public quickly accepted the declaration of everyday language as an affirmation of ethnic or national allegiance.”⁴³ Žižek’s model applies just as well to the practice of speaking a specific language as it does to dressing or building in a traditional style. While we might more readily accept that a language is fundamental to preserving an ethnic culture, dress and vernacular building also make up central elements of the enjoyment of communal identity. The difference between

40. Ibid., 202.

41. Joshua Fishman summarizes the linguistic attitude toward the pleasure in ethnicity thus: “The joys of one’s own language and ethnicity are . . . expressed over and over again, from every corner of Europe and in every period. In modern times this feeling has been raised to a general principle, a general esthetic, a celebration of ethnic and linguistic diversity *per se*. . . . In Herder and in Mazzini, in the Slavophiles and in Kallen—indeed, in much of modern anthropology and anthropological linguistics—the theme of ethnic diversity and the sheer beauty of cultural pluralism provide an unending rhapsody” (introduction to *The Rise and Fall of the Ethnic Revival: Perspectives on Language and Ethnicity*, ed. Joshua Fishman et al. [Amsterdam: Mouton, 1985], 8–9).

42. Okey, *Habsburg Monarchy*, 287.

43. Gary Cohen, *The Politics of Ethnic Survival: Germans in Prague, 1861–1914* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1981), 89.

designing in a folkloric style and speaking a local language is really a difference of media. When realist literature celebrates regional identities, for example, ornaments in dress, speech, design, and cooking are highlighted as distinctive features worth saving.

Loos points to the similarity between ornamental style and language when he praises Latin grammar for having vitiated national differences: “In the drawing classroom, the classical ornament plays the same role as grammar. The discipline of our souls and our thinking we owe to Latin grammar and every other grammar. . . . The classical ornament brings order to the formation of our everyday appliances, it disciplines us and forms us, it overcomes ethnographic and linguistic differences to create a shared design form and aesthetic.”⁴⁴ Vernacular languages by implication function like folkloric art: they foster divisions rather than the ancient cosmopolitan unity of Latin.

Hostility between groups, according to Žižek, is motivated by the fear that one group seeks to steal the Thing of another. “They are threatening to steal what is uniquely ours,” begins the logic of racism. National mythologies reiterate the danger that an outside group will take away the distinctive pleasure of the nation. The threat exists on the level of fantasy, as does the conviction that a nation possesses the unmediated pleasure of its Thing at some real moment in time. Like so many other moments in Žižek’s Hegelian Lacanianism, the original state of enjoyment is a projection backward into history. The national Thing that brings happiness to all who share it comes into being, according to the national mythology, only after it has been lost. The nation then must mobilize to restore what was lost, to undo the castration imputed to the other. With so many competing nationalities, each struggles against all others, seeking to regain what was stolen.⁴⁵

By advocating westernization through a functional dismissal of all ornamentation, Loos tries to elevate himself above the fray of competing ethnic pleasures. He does not set his sights on any one stylistic tradition; rather, he aims at replacing all forms of symbolic enjoyment with a capitalist work ethic. The argument in “Ornament and Crime” does not confine itself to just one form. Likewise, Žižek stresses that it would be a mistake to reduce the Thing of pleasure to a specific object or practice; on the contrary, the object of pleasure is constituted by the community’s belief in its unique character. This tautological structure is precisely the object of Loos’s critique. Most of his articles aim at ornamentation as such; they rarely quibble about the value of

44. Adolf Loos, “Ornament und Erziehung,” in *Trotzdem*, 206.

45. Žižek, *Tarrying*, 204.

any specific style. The real attack is on the abstract understanding of ornamentation as a source of pleasure. Austrians' pleasure in decoration needs to be purged in general, regardless of the particularities of any given style. When Loos does make an exception through his specific criticisms of *Jugendstil* and the Vienna secession, he treats them as manifestations of long-since-repressed consciousness. They are not engaged on their own terms as aesthetic objects; instead, he treats them as symptoms of tendencies that should be suppressed. The Vienna secession asserts what for Loos is an impossibility: "modern decor" makes as much sense as "lustful asceticism," an oxymoron that Nietzsche would know how to handle but that Loos treats simply as a paradox, a false consciousness that allows the return of plain old lust and decor. As a dandy himself and a disparager of masks, Loos cannot allow himself a Nietzschean genealogy that posits a hedonistic pleasure in restraint.

Through much of his writing, Loos wavers between wanting to modernize as much of Austria as possible and retreating into an elite aesthetic.⁴⁶ In *The Other* he takes offense at the claim that 80 percent of Austria cannot be reformed, that its people are destined to remain backward. Twelve years later in "Ornament and Crime" he adopts an elitist tone, claiming to write only as an aristocrat who no longer seeks to deprive the peasants of their happiness. This better-known position joins readily with the metanationalist position ascribed to the administrative elite of the Hapsburg Empire. Anglophile modernity becomes the Loosian solution for the breakdown of the ruling culture in the Austro-Hungarian Empire. The modernist subject renounces all forms of locally determined pleasure in favor of an international asceticism. In renouncing all these particular ornaments, the administrative modernist holds on to the one pleasure that matters most—the power to judge all other groups. By emptying itself of ornament, the modernist subject/building insists on its own universality, its abstraction above all traditions. Abstraction, however, never suffices to ensure a design's modernity, given the pace of innovation and the concentration of capital in a few cities. The Austrian modernists' obligation was to keep up with foreign advances and translate them unflinchingly into Austrian conditions. In geographic terms, this required concentrating on developments in London, pursuing the latest information across Europe's media networks, establishing the new design within the cul-

46. Amanda Anderson notes that "cosmopolitanism . . . typically manifests a complex tension between elitism and egalitarianism" ("Cosmopolitanism, Universalism, and the Divided Legacies of Modernity," in Cheah and Robbins, *Cosmopolitics*, 268).

tural elite of Vienna, then transmitting the modern style across the diverse nationalities of the Hapsburg Empire. During this journey the Loosian modernist shifts his subject position dramatically from yearning disciple, as news from London is awaited, to strict disciplinarian, as the Viennese public is indoctrinated in the new manner, to generous enlightened administrator who educates the peoples beyond the capital city.⁴⁷ The first stages follow a narrative that moves from the delicate anticipation of an almost masochistic romantic to the lawgiving sadist. From desiring proximity to the Prince of Wales, the mythic master of modern style, the Loosian dandy becomes the local Viennese embodiment of the father-identified sadist who knows that the delays of time and space allow for respite from the enforcement of progress. The outrageous tone of “Ornament and Crime” and its insistence on punishing decoration are manifestations of that short-lived sadism that Gilles Deleuze describes as momentarily “curing” masochism.⁴⁸ Loos the lawgiver is never secure because, as he knows better than anyone else in Vienna, the wheel of progress will turn so as to create a new cycle of yearning, more self-flagellation before the new, followed by self-mastery and then a sadistic application of the new onto the recalcitrant Viennese public. In his yearning mode Loos associates local knowledge with pleasure, with the lifestyle of a specific, historically defined group. As a fashion disciple of the English rule, he adopts an almost diasporic version of the national group Žižek describes. Exiled to Vienna, the anticipation of cosmopolitan pleasure stretches across all Europe, leaving Loos in the position of a homesick colonial who wants nothing more than to walk through Hyde Park once more. Yet when he “introduces” the new to Vienna, Loos adopts an internationalist tone wherein English style loses its local quality to be as international a term as possible. “English,” as a virtual synonym for “modernity,” appears to restrain itself from any superfluous references to place; it floats as a transnational term.

Modernization, according to Loos, requires renouncing pleasure; indeed, it entails recognizing that as an Austrian one can never be truly modern but must always toil in a state of inferior advancement vis-à-vis London. If nationalism arises from the belief that another group has stolen the mythic pleasure of a community, then Loosian internationalism entails the reverse: the

47. Scholars tend to overemphasize the ascetic moment in Loos, thereby giving the impression of a stable subject that does not undergo radical changes. Hays fails to consider the full range of Loos’s writing when contrasting his views with Simmel’s discussion of the hypersensitive modern city dweller (*Modernism*, 62–63).

48. Gilles Deleuze, “Coldness and Cruelty,” in *Masochism* (New York: Zone, 1991), 37–46.

admission that another group will always remain superior, more progressive, more elegant. All that remains is the perpetual drive to remain close to the happy state of the first nation. This international consciousness becomes assertive only in relation to other groups that it perceives as even more removed from the ideal state. Hence the masochistic deferral of ever truly attaining a modern condition turns into a sadistic enforcement of that same code among those who do not even recognize their lack of modernity.