



## KAFFEEHAUS

*The exuberant editor in chief of the online journal Eurozine sees English as a key "tool" in overcoming cultural isolation*

# Carl Henrik Fredriksson: Reviving the Public Sphere



Carl Henrik Fredriksson: In the coffee house, news was more participatory Photos: Matthias Würz

by Dardis McNamee

At Café Prückel in late August, *Eurozine* editor Carl Henrik Fredriksson was in his element. A sociable Swede with a ruddy face and big gestures, he loves conversation:

"The coffee house was the original 'public sphere'," he said, referring to a leader in *The Economist* a couple of years back, "where news was more participatory, more social, but, of course more gossipy. That's what's happening on the internet."

Founded in 1998, *Eurozine* is an online network of European cultural journals based in Vienna, publishing what the editors believe are the most compelling ideas and essays from across the continent. With a very respectable reach of 100,000 to 200,000 unique visitors a month, they give authors 100 times the reach of the most respected print journals, and through top-quality translation, available in and out of any European languages, they can stimulate "a common political discourse among an international readership."

On the *Eurozine* website in late August were lead articles on global threats to free expression, and how "Future Councils" on energy development could draw the public back into politics. Under a topic called "The EU: Broken or Just

Broke?" I found essays by EU founding father Jacques Delors of France, German philosopher Jürgen Habermas and British diplomat Robert Cooper. And then I got lost in a fascinating discussion of the recently published diaries of Polish novelist Witold Gombrowicz – with one critique by Paweł Majewski entitled, irresistibly, "Life itself (whatever that is)".

### An insider on the Nobel

The public sphere has been Fredriksson's career. He was only 29 when he became an editor of *Ord&Bild* (*Word and Image*) Sweden's oldest cultural journal, founded in 1892. "I think it's the oldest in Europe, at least in continuous publication," he told me, specialising in introducing international writers, artists, philosophers, thinkers, and intellectuals to a Swedish readership.

And Sweden being Sweden, rumours abounded that authors introduced there were on a shortlist for the Nobel Prize. So were they, I wondered? Fredriksson just smiled. ("Well, the 'rumours' were probably more true a decade or two ago than they are now," he wrote later in an email. "Then again, it was at that time I worked with the journal...")

"We were very proud of what we were doing

at *Ord&Bild*," he went on. "But I suddenly realised, this was a one-way street. These Swedes knew all about the others. We also published the best Swedish intellectual writers, artists, and so on, and my colleagues in Europe didn't have a clue about these guys."

"So that was my personal entry into the whole thing. To turn the one-way street into a two-way street. To put Swedish intellectuals onto a European platform."

Today, we were sitting in his favourite booth at Prückel, half way along to the left as you enter from the terrace on Karl Lueger Platz. Across the Ring from the MAK at Stubentor in the 1st District, Café Prückel is beloved of artists, writers, and assorted eccentrics who settle happily into its sprawling 1950s decadence, pleasingly threadbare Bankets upholstered in stained ochre next to Formica tables and lyre-back wooden chairs, whiling away their hours over newspapers, laptops and long conversations, sipping espressos or Spritzers, and nibbling a *Schinken-Käse Toast*. This is a real intellectuals' living room, with no pretence of style. At least not one that I resonate with, growing up in an America raped by suburban sprawl.

"But I do," Fredriksson countered with a laugh. "I mean just look at this. Ahhhh. It's great! And as a Swedish modernist, this is something Austria, or at least Vienna, and Sweden share, part of this long social-democratic tradition." To Austrians, I reminded myself, the '50s were a time of optimism connected to post-war recovery, and the style; at least in part, to their vision of the American Dream.

"I love this place," he went on. "My wife told me the café was her living room when she was a student here – where she could order a *kleine brauner* and sit for four hours. So when we moved here, it became mine too." Fredriksson's Austrian wife, Andrea Zederbauer, is an editor at *Wespennest*, the Vienna-based journal that with editor Walter Famlir, became one of the original founding partners of *Eurozine*.

The other local founder was Klaus Nellen, editor of the journal *Transit – Europäische Revue* at Vienna's Institute for the Human Sciences (IWM). The other four were *Mittelweg 36*, in Hamburg, *Kritika & Kontext* in Bratislava, and *Revista Critica der Ciencias Sociais*, in Coimbra (Portugal), and of course Fredriksson's *Ord&Bild*.

This is an elite crowd, a consortium of leading European cultural journals, all print, with longstanding intellectual traditions, that through *Eurozine's* internet platform, are able to engage in a continuous and active conversation with each other.

### The "trickle-down theory of ideas"

"You have to have elite media, as well as other media, one that has a small readership but big impact," he said. It's what he called a "trickle-down theory of ideas" ("although as an economic theory, it's not only wrong, but despicable!"), where things get read by opinion makers who are multipliers.

Today, *Eurozine* has 84 partner journals, and translations make articles and ideas from western partners available in relatively obscure languages to partners in the East. Although this happens far less the other way.

"It has to do with self-perception and with tradition, with status and so on," Fredriksson said. "An Eastern European journal joins to get access to material – to authors, contributors, articles – that it would otherwise not have. That means that there's a lot of translation going east. While Western European journals join to put their own authors on a wider European scene."

"We are working hard all the time to compensate – the worst thing you can do is create a kind of Eastern European ghetto, which is what a lot of the funding programmes do – only Bulgaria, only

Hungary or whatever. We even considered moving 40 minutes away to Bratislava, in order to get to funds that we couldn't otherwise have."

In all of this, the English language plays a key role, "not as a hegemonic sort of thing, but as a tool, something that opens up multi-linguality," Fredriksson said. "Suddenly a text travels from a print medium in a linguistically-limited national context, via a digital international English language medium back into another nationally defined intellectual landscape in print."

"And that means that the website is a fantastic publication in itself. So that's a really nice kind of side effect."

So with partner journals across Europe, funding more available and real estate cheaper elsewhere, why Vienna?

"If you look at the map, you'll see," he said. "We don't define Europe as just the EU, we define Europe as much wider, an area stretching to Turkey, Belarus, Russia, Ukraine, Norway and Switzerland. And if you look at this vast geographical area, you will see Vienna is smack bang in the middle."

Still, Vienna took some adjusting to. "It was a culture shock at first," he admitted. "For one thing, the machismo – you turned on the TV and had talk show after talk show... in 2001, there were no women at all. It's changing, but very slowly."

And the Sunday shop closings, particularly for food. "I like to cook, and I ran out of canned tomatoes. So I had to go to the railway station, and all the cans were behind bars. So you could see people creeping in, reaching their hands between the bars... Then you had to flirt and charm the cashier to pay out."

"I come from a very secular country," he said, "and here there's a very strange pact between social democracy and the Catholic Church, whose impact on Austria is huge."

### In Vienna, you meet history every day

But these contradictions are also what fascinates Fredriksson about Vienna, dualities characteristic of Europe, that make it the ideal home for *Eurozine*. "The symbolic geography... you get to a place like this, like Prückel, and there's a guy sitting reading a newspaper from home, having left Bosnia and the war behind. You see the Franzensbrücke, the bridge that [Romanian Jewish poet] Paul Celan couldn't cross, because he thought he saw the murderers of his father and mother coming toward him. Or the 80-year-old lady next door in the 2nd District who happens to say, 'Well, things were better before'."

"You meet history every day in this city, you meet the people; it's not just something you read in books."

One of his favourite examples is 1683, the last Ottoman Turkish Siege of Vienna, which helps explain the resonance of the 2004 campaign rhetoric of "Daheim statt Islam" (Our home, not Islam) and "Wien darf nicht Istanbul werden" (Vienna mustn't become Istanbul) and a manipulated photograph in the *Kronen Zeitung* of St. Stephan's Cathedral with a crescent on the roof. Or Austria's stubborn resistance to initiating talks over Turkey joining the EU, as a holdover from the Turkish Siege. When Foreign Minister Ursula Plassnik finally caved in at the 11th hour, a leading Turkish newspaper ran a headline, "Vienna has fallen".

"What is all that if not 1683?" Fredriksson asked – history resonating in these two societies in completely different ways. "This is something that anyone talking about a common European public sphere has to deal with. And what if media could contribute something here, to get the Austrian story known in Istanbul and the Istanbul story known in Vienna, to give people access to each other's intellectual and historical traditions?"

"That is exactly what we are trying to do." ◊

