

Some Reflections on the Uses of the Construction of National Consciousness

The Historical Construction of National Consciousness. Selected Writings. By Jenő Szűcs. Edited by Gábor Klaniczay, Balázs Trencsényi and Gábor Gyáni. Budapest–Vienna–New York: Central European University Press, 2022. 354 pp.

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The present essay aims to testify to a significant moment in Hungarian historiography. We are launching a book that contains the selected writings on the historicity of national consciousness of Jenő Szűcs, who is unequivocally considered as one of the most significant historians of the Kádár-era between the 1960s and 1980s.

I first read Szűcs' writings on the subject as a student of a prestigious Budapest-based high school. In my history specialisation course, our teacher, who was also a lecturer at the Department of the Auxiliary Sciences of History at ELTE, tried to discourage us from studying history at university by making us read Szűcs's nationalism studies in the volume entitled "History and Nation". Obviously, her message was that we would be unable to understand such difficult texts. Thus, my present gesture of writing about these studies recently translated into English is a celebration of the ultimate failure of this pedagogical venture.

Szűcs's seven studies included in the volume are preceded by a well-written "Introduction" with an illuminating analysis of his career and works. The width of Szűcs's oeuvre needed a medievalist, as well as a nineteenth-century, and a twentieth-century historian as editors, who situate the issue of the cultural construction of national consciousness in Szűcs's works as a middle stage in the 1960s and 1970s, between his early writings on late medieval urban history in the fifties, and his research devoted to the last Árpáds in the eighties (intended as a chapter for the ten-volume history of Hungary). This went together with his rethinking of nationalism during his involvement in the political reform movement.

Szűcs's chapter entitled "The Three Historical Regions of Europe" seems to be

somewhat different from the rest of the volume. On the one hand, it is not a close thematic fit, as it is mainly concerned with medieval precedents of ‘democracy’ and ‘civil society’ rather than with national consciousness. On the other hand, the issue it addresses has never been endangered by undeserved oblivion, unlike the studies on national consciousness. The “Outline”, as it was called in the original Hungarian version (“*Vázlat Európa három történeti régiójáról*”), gained immediate international recognition for Szűcs, has undergone numerous reprints and has been published in several languages since its first publication in a samizdat volume in 1980, officially appearing in *Történelmi Szemle* in 1981, then in English in *Acta Historica* in 1983, and in French in 1985 prefaced by Braudel). In the present book, however, the English text is thoroughly re-edited. The editors argue that the re-publication provides an opportunity to give a more nuanced picture of the intellectual roots of Szűcs’s interpretation of historical regions.

Consequently, it is worth starting to read the volume at the beginning because the “Introduction” locates the studies in the Kádár-era’s political and historiographical context: it repeatedly reflects upon the apparent paradox that Szűcs’s themes were deeply embedded in his time, yet he was very much ‘ahead of his time.’

Szűcs took part in contemporary debates, including the debate on nationalism triggered by Erik Molnár, which formed part of the nationalist turn of the political establishment. However, unlike many of his contemporaries, Szűcs was a true historian, not led by ideologies (parting with Marxism very quickly), who checked all the sources and always tried to understand the actors in his sources. Whatever he examined, be it the barbaric ethnic consciousness of the conquering Hungarians, Simon of Kéza’s invention of the Hunnish–Hungarian continuity in the *Gesta Hungarorum*, or the intellectual horizon of the Dózsa uprising (which are all part of the present volume), it invariably pointed in the direction that national consciousness is a cultural construction, tied to its time, therefore, in constant transformation. Labeled as the ‘invented tradition’ or ‘imagined community,’ only in the 1980s did this approach gain importance in the writings of Hobsbawm, Anderson, Gellner, and others, including Patrick J. Geary (“The Myth of Nations”, 2001), the author of the blurb on the back cover of the present volume.

The “Introduction” also explains why the “Outline” immediately made Szűcs a household name in intellectual circles throughout Europe (to the extent that Milan Kundera and Czesław Miłosz are cited as parallels), and why, at the same time, his writings about medieval national consciousness had a very limited reception. The editors think that this is partly because the papers included in the present volume were slow to appear in German. It took as long as seven years for the book *History and Nation* to be published in German in 1981. Now we are curious to see how this volume will be received by historical scholarship nearly fifty years on.

There seem to be several reasons for optimism. For example, it appears that in the past ten years, one of the most frequently downloaded articles of the *Hungarian Historical Review* (which is the new series of *Acta Historica*) has been the “Outline”, a highly tangible sign of its ongoing appeal. How do Szűcs’s writings make an impact today, we may ask.

At this point, let me recall my second encounter with Szűcs’s works, which happened in 2014, at the time of the 500-year anniversary of the Dózsa peasant revolt. At the Institute of History, I was placed in charge of organising a conference on the uprising and generally orchestrating its commemoration. Thus, in a sense, I found myself in the shoes of Szűcs forty years on, since in 1972, he together with Gábor Barta and Ferenc Szakály, had been asked to revisit the history of the revolt. The important difference is that in the seventies the occasion was an invented one since they had to commemorate the invented 500th anniversary of Dózsa’s birth. The communist party obviously needed new revolutionary symbols.

Szűcs wrote three studies on the ideology of the peasant revolt, one of which is included in the present book. I remember how pleasantly surprised I was when reading them, although I was still haunted by my high school trauma. One could say he worked like a microhistorian. First, he tried to understand the actors’ logic, starting from something strange that was going against his expectations: in this case, he tried to explain why and how the peasants turned against the nobles rather than the Turks. Second, he indulged in a transparent dialogue with the reader about the historian’s work, questions, doubts, sources, and their gaps. Finally, he came to the unorthodox conclusion that it was Christian universalism, the search for spiritual salvation, rather than economic interests, that mobilized the peasants. And third, his greatest achievement was that by finding new sources and by doing brilliant microphilological analysis, he managed to identify the ideology brokers of the rebellion in the young ‘opposition’ of observant Franciscans excluded from the Order, who replaced the infidel Turks with the infidel nobles as the enemies of the holy army of the peasants fulfilling its divine mission.

In the course of our 2014 commemorations, Pál Ács posed a vitally important question: what made it possible for Szűcs to identify the young Franciscan friars in the role of the radical opposition? As a solution, he proposed the analogous situation and forms of behavior between the Franciscans and the intelligentsia inspired by the ideas of the 1968 generation. As Ács suggests, both were characterized by an ‘ideological imbalance’: the Franciscans’ spiritual–apocalyptic ideology and language implied the possibility of both the inquisitor and the heretic and, therefore, required a constant struggle for balance, just as it was vital for the intellectuals of 1968. This brings us back to the initial dilemma posed at the beginning of my essay: why does Jenő Szűcs fascinate a generation of historians so much that fifty years on they still write

about him and republish his works in English? And how can all this be related to the common experience of the 1968 generation or the samizdat themes of the 1980s?

The following paradox may offer some explanation for these questions. A consensus prevails that Szűcs was a veritable historian. He was quick to dismiss Marxism and used an empirical, rather than an ideological, historical approach. That is why he was able to show the fragmentation and complexity of premodern national identity, which was very different from the monolithic national identity of the nineteenth century. But in fact, he became famous for what is highly ideological in his work: his analysis of the historical roots of a tripartite Europe as opposed to the dual model of Cold War Europe, which was a hot—partly ideological—topic in the 1980s. Thus, it is perhaps justified to suspect that this might also explain why the “Outline” is included in the present volume. In other words, could the reason be our innate need for ideologies?

