

Szűcs's Challenge

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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Jenő Szűcs's reputation comes under two distinct headings: his work as a medieval historian and his essay on “The Three Historical Regions of Europe”. The first aspect necessarily pertains to medieval historiography. The second touches on a much broader range of topics.

Reputation in the ‘Mitteleuropa debate’ may well have come at the expense of adequate attention to his contributions as a historian in his “Three Europes” essay. As is well known, Szűcs's essay was written for the *Bibó-emlékkönyv* [Bibó Memorial Book]¹ and was then rapidly presented as an official publication in *Történelmi Szemle*.² Subsequently, it was published in an (official) English translation,³ in French,⁴ and in many other languages. The original publication date (1980) may lead to associating the essay with the almost contemporaneous ‘Mitteleuropa debate’.

This is, however, an association which does a disservice to Szűcs's work. Firstly, because the *Mitteleuropa* debate was an overwhelmingly literary debate (at best, a literary and philosophical one). The recurring names in were of novelists such as Milan Kundera, playwrights such as Václav Havel, and writers such as György Konrád. The 1988 conference convened in Lisbon witnessed a clash between Russian and Central European writers and poets, but not historians.⁵ For that matter, even a comprehensive overview of the debate, such as the one provided by Rudolf Jaworski,⁶

1 Donáth, ed., *Bibó-emlékkönyv*.

2 Szűcs, “Vázlat Európa három történelmi régiójáról.”

3 Szűcs, “The Three Historical Regions of Europe.”

4 Szűcs, *Les trois Europes*.

5 Pratt, “On the Language of History.”

6 Jaworski, “Die aktuelle Mitteleuropadiskussion.”

did not think of mentioning Szűcs, and Robin Okey⁷ did not devote to him more than a cursory mention either.

Secondly, the association with the Mitteleuropa debate overshadows the true value of the massive work undertaken by the three editors, over at least a decade. Not only have they assembled a collection of essays previously unavailable as a set but have also produced an accessible and rigorous translation of the texts. Last but not least, they have finally provided (at least for non-Hungarian readers) what was always missing in the excessively cursory discussions of Szűcs's work: context. This is no minor achievement.

Szűcs's essays relate to the following set of issues: (i) the historiography of Medieval and Early Modern East-Central/Eastern Europe; (ii) the Erik Molnár debate(s); (iii) debates on the divergence between Eastern and Western Europe; (iv) the modernist vs. primordialist debate; and, last but not least, (v) the political sub-text to the 1980 essay. Each of these would require a wide-ranging discussion rather than a mere review.

The first point may be safely left in the hands of the guild of medievalists, since it is an aspect which requires at least some knowledge of primary sources.⁸ However, the Molnár debate(s) must be addressed. Hungarian historians have been analysing them for many decades,⁹ while western Historians have shown little interest in them. Szűcs himself referred to the debate, in a collection of essays which was also available in German.¹⁰ For some reason, historians more closely associated with Molnár (Ránki, Berend, and Hanák) seemed to be less inclined to refer to this issue, at least in an international context.

As Maciej Górny (following Lutz Raphael) has pointed out, “two main models dominated [Communist historiographies of the Stalinist period – G. F.]. The first could be characterized as more »national« (or »rightist«), the second as »a-national« (or »leftist«).”¹¹ In fact, Molnár had been defeated in the first round (in 1950). In the aftermath of the 1956 revolution (officially ‘counterrevolution’), he was appointed Director of the Institute of History of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences and encouraged a less ‘nationalist’ direction in historical studies (which, he argued, had contributed to the uprising). He encouraged historians such as Szűcs “to rely on Marxist theory and deconstruct [the] »primordialist« position.”¹²

7 Okey, “Central Europe/Eastern Europe.”

8 Nagy, “Complaints from the Periphery.”

9 Litkei, “The Molnár Debate of 1950.”

10 Szűcs, *Nation und Geschichte*, 13.

11 Górny, “Historical Writing in Poland,” 251; Raphael, *Geschichtswissenschaft im Zeitalter der Extreme*, 58–59.

12 Trencsényi, *History of Modern Political Thought*, 18.

In any case, what is striking in the 1980 essay (and elsewhere) is Szűcs's repeated reference to the 'absolutism debate' in European historiography. This debate had (re) started in 1955, at the eleventh *Congress of the International Committee of Historical Sciences* (CISH), continued at the twelfth Congress in Stockholm, and culminated at the thirteenth in Vienna, when the Report was presented by Molnár himself. It is equally striking to see Perry Anderson's *Lineages of the Absolutist State*¹³ assume such a significant role in the 1980 essay. The book had the indisputable merit of reviving the debate on absolutism and, in particular, on the East–West divergence. Anderson's conclusions were clear: "In the West, the Spanish, English, and French monarchies were defeated or overthrown by bourgeois revolutions from below; while the Italian and German principalities were eliminated by bourgeois revolutions from above, belatedly. In the East, on the other hand, the Russian empire was finally destroyed by a proletarian revolution. The consequences of the division of the continent, symbolized by these successive and opposite upheavals, are still with us."¹⁴

Szűcs also refers to Immanuel Wallerstein's first volume of the *Modern World-System* series.¹⁵ The difference between Anderson and Wallerstein was not of an ideological or political nature: both were neo-Marxists and shared their work. Anderson's approach was, however, more likely to appeal to a historian attentive to legal and constitutional history. Wallerstein's approach proved irksome even to some neo-Marxists.¹⁶ Anderson's book seems to have played a much more significant role in Szűcs's work.

As the editors of this collection point out, "Szűcs's Debrecen context is [...] important from the perspective of his later work as his native city had a strong and rather specific local identity, rooted in the early modern Protestant urban culture based on stock-farming in the Hungarian Great Plain" (p. 2). In his first major work on urban and artisanal culture in Hungary (1955) "the choice of research deviated from the general line in the sense that the new Marxist social history in the early 1950s mostly focused on agrarian history (engaging with Engels's theory of »second serfdom«)" (pp. 2–3). (As it happens, Molnár had a background in law and studied in France and Italy.)

The choice of urban history proved fateful for the subsequent reception (or the lack) of Szűcs's work. During the Cold War, economic history represented a privileged discipline for relations and exchanges between Western and East European

13 Anderson, *Lineages of the Absolutist State*.

14 Anderson, *Lineages of the Absolutist State*, 431.

15 Wallerstein, *Modern World-System*.

16 Hunt, "The Rise of Feudalism."

historians.¹⁷ The Westerners were not necessarily Marxists, although many of them were at the initial stages of their careers. But in the international academic market (at least in those years), urban history simply did not fit into the picture as well as agrarian history.

This leads on to the topic of the revival of the debates on the East–West divergence, which had partly been prompted by Anderson’s book. Needless to say, these debates (and the conceptualisation of the inner boundaries of Europe) had started much earlier and they were never conclusively settled.¹⁸ In the interwar years, the Congresses of the CISH were marked by these discussions, starting with Jaroslav Bidlo in 1933 at the seventh Congress.¹⁹ As it happens, the Hungarian *Revue d’Histoire Comparée* also tried to make a contribution to this field.²⁰

Starting (or re-starting) in the 1950s, in parallel with the debates on absolutism, Eastern European historians, such as Zsigmond Pál Pach and Marian Małowist, addressed the issue of the origins of the backwardness of their region.²¹ Wallerstein promptly repackaged these products for his Modern World-Systems’s interpretation, which was soon contested by another neo-Marxist, Rober Brenner.²²

A key aspect of the present edition is the way it provides ample material to locate Szűcs’s writings in the modernist vs. primordialist debate, which fully emerged in what is usually seen as the golden age of nationalism studies (1968–1988).

Modernists may well have won a few battles, but ultimately primordialists seem to prevail: some variant of primordialism seems to be dominant. In any case, debates have progressively shifted towards the civic vs. ethnic distinction, which at present is hotly disputed. The result is that Szűcs’s contribution to the original debate has been lost in the international context (unlike in the Hungarian context, where it has acquired a controversial political tinge).

The editors of *The Historical Construction of National Consciousness* position Szűcs as a moderate modernist (as opposed to the caricatured version of modernism).

“Already in the early 1960s, he argued against the anachronistic projection of modern forms of national identity on the premodern context, stressing that the peasant soldiers defending Nándorfehérvár (Belgrade) against the Ottomans in 1456 could not have been motivated by patriotism, as this concept was not even present in the consciousness of the peasantry of the

17 Berg, “East–West Dialogues.”

18 Warriner, “Some Controversial Issues.”

19 Wandycz, “East European History.”

20 Betts, “La société dans l’Europe centrale”; Kosáry, “The Idea of a Comparative History.”

21 Subtelny, *Domination of Eastern Europe*, 256.

22 Aston and Philpin, eds, *The Brenner Debate*.

period. His earlier studies on this topic started from the working hypothesis that if there was any common consciousness and emotional bond transcending the divisions of the estate society, this was not some sort of atemporal ethnic consciousness but a Christian universalism” (p. 6).

Furthermore, “his studies documented the existence of premodern forms of collective identity, but he made it clear that there was a profound structural difference between premodern and modern forms of national sentiment and was also adamantly against the instrumentalisation of these premodern cultural codes for the purposes of reviving political nationalism (both in the forms of national communism and anti-communist ethno-populism)” (p. 7). No sensible modernist would disagree with such views. No wonder that ‘historical construction’ is emphasized in the title. It is also no wonder that most primordialists studiously neglected Szűcs’s work.

One of the editors of the present volume has queried Ernest Gellner’s neglect of the role of historians in the process of cultural homogenisation, and perhaps also Szűcs’s contribution.²³ But Gellner was no historian, and his model reflected a high level of abstraction.²⁴

It must not be forgotten that Szűcs’s 1980 essay had a ‘political’ sub-text. Bibó was a political figure, and this was made clear in Ferenc Donáth’s contribution to the memorial volume (of which Donáth himself was the editor).²⁵ The entire 1,001 page-long book including seventy-six authors was submitted for official, legal publication. In turn, cuts were requested, but Donáth refused to accept them. The report to the Central Committee of the Hungarian Socialist Workers’ Party nevertheless recommended that it should be published “as a way of taking a more offensive stance toward an illegal Bibó book that will be published in the West.”²⁶ In any event, the rapid official issue of Szűcs’s essay, its reprint in book form, and subsequent translation²⁷ show that he must have had some degree of support from inside the political and academic establishment.

All this might seem to be the prelude to a happy ending, namely the dissolution of the Hungarian communist system and the ‘return to Europe’, the ‘return to the West’ after 1989. In reality, the story (and history) was to prove more complicated than that.

23 Gyáni, *A Nation Divided by History and Memory*, 102–103.

24 Franzinetti, “Gellner and the Historians.”

25 Donáth, ed., *Bibó-emlékkönyv*; Donáth, “István Bibó and the Fundamental Issue.”

26 Tőkés, *Hungary’s Negotiated Revolution*, 186.

27 Szűcs, “Vázlat Európa három történelmi régiójáról”; Szűcs, *Vázlat Európa három történelmi régiójáról*; Szűcs, “The Three Historical Regions of Europe.”

In 1985, Szűcs published in an official, legal monthly journal an essay on the “Questions of ‘Origins’ and National Consciousness.”²⁸ But as the editors explain, this text appeared “in a truncated form as a result of the censor’s intervention”. It is in this collection that the first translation is available (pp. 299–335).

It would be interesting to see the ‘truncated’ parts since they would be revealing of the political climate of the time. The essay is a dense and highly complex series of discussions of interrelated themes, including ‘ethnogenesis’ and the relationship between state and nation. “What does concern us is that in this part of the world, call it Central and Eastern Europe, the state and national frameworks have remained—or have become—to such a degree separated from each other during the process of state-formation in the modern and contemporary times that the state could only be declared »national« at the cost of the greatest theoretical or practical difficulties (or not even at that cost)” (p. 301).

Another theme is the issue of historical continuity, especially after 1918–1919.

“A cardinal question, even at the level of elementary association, is: what is the *existing* Hungarian nation that postulates its own identity and seeks its historical continuity and identity (even in »non-identity«) on precisely that account? The people who are living in Hungary and who constitute the nation in a *political* sense? No, it postulates its own identity together with those whose historical archetype (and also »non-identity«) it shared in the *historical* process of becoming a modern nation, with whom it shares objective links of *language and culture* in the present, as well as a subjective »We-consciousness« based on these elements. The elementary association is particularly self-evident in the case of the state founding, since the Hungarian state founded at the turn of the first millennium is—for the national consciousness—the chief historical product of the one-time reality of historical Hungary which by now became history, and, at one and the same time, virtually its sole perceptible, hard daily *reality*” (p. 312).

It is not possible to adequately summarize this essay, still less to do justice to it. It is full of asides, detours, and allusions to the political predicament of Hungary in the 1980s. It was not destined for a historical journal. Instead, it was a highly political intervention.

The editors explain Szűcs’s writings of the second half of the 1980s as follows:

“Szűcs’s reserved discourse was strikingly out of tune with the growing euphoria about the space for democratization opening up in the late 1980s... his last major public appearance [a few weeks before his death

28 Szűcs, “Történeti »eredet«-kérdések.”

in November 1988 – G. F.] was marred by his gloomy warnings to his audience with regard to the potential failure of the democratisation process. While he praised Gorbachev for openly labeling the Soviet regime as tyrannical and seeking to introduce »socialist legality«, he did not believe that the communist leaderships in the Soviet Union or in Hungary were really committed to power sharing and the introduction of multi-party democracy. In this respect he was highly skeptical of the Russian political dynamic and envisioned (quite prophetically) a pendulum movement where the democratisation championed by Gorbachev would be followed by the return to an autocratic regime, perhaps in a radical nationalist or imperialist garb. But his main concern was not even the possible failure of *perestroika*, but rather the weakness of the democratic and civic potential of his own society. While there was a strong intention on the side of the non-communist social actors to grab (or at least share) power, there was much less willingness to create a framework where the power-holder (be it communist or anti-communist) would be effectively controlled. Szűcs's general conclusion was that, although the historical path of Hungary had strong links to Western Europe, he did not see any predetermined and unilinear road towards a functional democracy” (pp. 20–21).

This is useful corrective the ‘triumphalism’ of the late 1980s. In the light of his outstanding achievements, why has Szűcs's work remained neglected, and not only by historians? There have been a variety of factors at play.

In relation to the discussion of medieval history, one of the reasons that the editors point out is

“the considerable time lag between the genesis of these texts in the late 1960s and the publication of the German version, *Nation und Geschichte*, in 1981. In the meantime, the German *Nationes* research network, which had a decisive role in thematizing the problem of premodern national consciousness, already moved beyond the paradigm of *Gentilism*, which came under increasing criticism (not unrelated to the unfolding *Historikerstreit*) of being rooted in a pre-1945 historical tradition tainted with anachronistic and politically dubious conceptions of *Volk* and *Führertum*” (p. 12).

It is curious, to say the least, that in his widely quoted survey, Eric Hobsbawm should have mentioned Szűcs's 1981 book (original edition 1974), but never, at any point, did he actually discuss it.²⁹ It seems that he found Hanák, Ránki, or Berend easier to deal with. In any case, the last two decades of the twentieth century witnessed a series of historiographical ‘turns’ which did not encourage interaction with

29 Hobsbawm, *Nations and Nationalism*.

Szűcs's work, such as the linguistic turn and the cultural turn. Postmodernism did not help either, nor did the demise of 'Area Studies' (to the benefit of global and transnational 'turns').³⁰ Szűcs must have appeared incredibly *passé* for many younger historians (at least outside Hungary), a leftover from the 1970s.

In their summary, the editors point out that

“the post-2010 new historical politics of the Hungarian »System of National Cooperation« has been systematically trying to demolish most of the tenets of his analysis stressing the discontinuity between premodern and modern frames of identification. The ideologists of the regime and the new institutions set up by the government draw on ethno-nationalist scholarly and para-scholarly subcultures, trying to restore the theory of Hun-Magyar continuity into its erstwhile dominant position, instrumentalize medieval symbolism (most importantly that of the Holy Crown) in modern politics, actualize and decontextualize historical sources about premodern collective identity, and merge pagan and Christian references. [...] In this sense, one can argue that Szűcs's work is more vital than ever and might offer many relevant points both for scholars of Hungarian history and that of the broader region, as well as inspiration for the younger generations of students seeking to find reliable points of orientation on these highly contested issues” (p. 22).

But Szűcs's oeuvre deserves a much wider audience and a much wider discussion. It is up to non-Hungarian historians to take up the challenge.

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