

“A városok szíverek.” Tanulmányok Kassáról és a reformkori városokról [“Cities are Arteries.” Studies on Kassa and Other Towns in the Age of Reforms]. By Gábor Czoch. Pozsony: Kalligram, 2009. 209 pp.

Studies of Hungarian urban history were embarrassingly slim until very recently. One reason for this was Hungarian historians’ traditional focus on political history and the history of events. Most scholars believed that writing about the city was an unpromising intellectual endeavor, to be left to local historians whose scholarly ambitions were to describe various aspects of individual cities. As early as the mid-nineteenth century, historians suggested that the cities remained alien parts of the nation’s body since the majority of their population was not Hungarian. Patriotic historical writing therefore neglected them as uninteresting places irrelevant to national development.

In the past few decades, however, a small group of urban historians have concentrated intensely on urban networks, the representation of cities, and urban institutions. This recent historiographical development has brought the city into focus as a complex economic, social and cultural center and elucidated the position of individual cities within the wider urban context. The meticulous study of urban societies and institutions, and of the life of city-dwellers and their participation in the community, allows historians to examine individual and collective social behavior, and to investigate social actors in the context of universal and coherent cultural patterns.<sup>1</sup>

Gábor Czoch’s collection of essays on Hungarian cities investigates what urbanization meant in the first decades of the nineteenth century. This was a period when the concept of the city was going through great change, and the legal definition based on feudal privileges coexisted with a more modern understanding of urban centers that involved the size of population and various parameters of economic and cultural life. Czoch attempts to analyze how contemporaries thought and talked about the city, how they defined the “urban issue,” and how the city was represented in public discourse. The essays focus particularly on Kassa (Košice, Slovakia), the shifts in the meaning of civic rights, the city’s ethnic composition, changes in its spatial structure, and the

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1 On the development of urban history in Hungary and on its role in the historical scholarship see: Penelope J. Corfield, “A Conversation with Vera Bácskai: Urban History in Hungary,” *Journal of Urban History* 25 (1999): 514–35; Gábor Gyáni, “Trends in Contemporary Hungarian Historical Scholarship,” *Social History* 34, no. 2 (2009): 250–60.

administrative orders at the time of the famine in the 1840s. In his excellent examination of the importance of the acquisition of civic rights, Czoch shows how various social groups—including aristocrats, artisans, merchants, and intellectuals—maintained the privileges that underlay their prestige in this late period, and he explains their motivation for doing so. Political and economic privileges, including rights to election and filling a public office, property rights in the city’s territory, admission to guilds, free trading activity within the city, exemption from certain customs duties, freedom to sell wine, and the right to make a last will, remained important despite the transition to more modern, bourgeois values.

The notion of the city runs through all the chapters, and is approached through representation, the construction of space, the understanding of urban life, and the reconstruction of the historical role of the city-dwellers and their legacy in the first decades of the nineteenth century. The wide panorama of urban issues and the various aspects of urban everyday life lead us to unmapped territories of urban history and provide a basis for understanding the dilemmas and problems urban communities faced during the first half of the 1800s.

Since the 1970s, Hungarian historians have made attempts to reconstruct the Hungarian urban network by applying a more complex approach than legal definition and statistical analysis, recognizing that the number of a settlement’s inhabitants was only one factor among others. Urban historians have warned us against statistical definition, the reification of the size of the population when positioning a city and describing its urban characteristics, because concentration of population is not the only and not even the primary indicator of urban development. In 1975, a prominent urban historian, Sándor Gyimesi, employed the “functionalist” method; in addition to the size of the population he examined the number of artisans and other economic, administrative and cultural functions a city fulfilled.<sup>2</sup> Vera Bácskai and Lajos Nagy introduced an even more sophisticated approach when they computerized the data of a nationwide census of Hungarian settlements from 1828 and prepared several rankings of cities based on market functions.<sup>3</sup> Their multi-variable factor analysis brought surprising results: by a number of economic and cultural indicators the most

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2 Sándor Gyimesi, *A városok a feudáliszmusból a kapitalizmusba való átmenet időszakában* [Cities During the Transition from Feudalism to Capitalism] (Budapest: Akadémiai Kiadó, 1975).

3 Vera Bácskai and Lajos Nagy, *Piackörszettek, piacközpontok és városok Magyarországon 1828-ban* [Market Regions, Centers and Cities in Hungary in 1828] (Budapest: Akadémiai Kiadó, 1984).

prestigious free royal towns and the most populous cities occupied modest positions within the Hungarian urban network.

Czoch's inquiry leads him into issues of urbanity during a special period in Hungary which is referred to by historians as the Age of Reforms. It is a somewhat misleading term, however, because the social and economic reforms proposed by progressive politicians, intellectuals and artists at the time were much discussed, but little realized. Public figures presented grand ideas about modernizing the state and society through massive economic and social change. Instead, the traditional feudal structures survived. There was a sharp conflict between the conservative defenders of feudal law and the liberal representatives of bourgeois values.

The reformers also engaged in heated debates about what held the most promise for the future, about the political, economic, and social transformation needed by the country. Vibrant discussions were part of everyday life in political forums, the Hungarian diet and county assemblies, as well as in cafés, casinos and the contemporary press. The public expression of opinions resulted in the emergence of a novel form of communication which went beyond the narrow channels of personal or group interactions and integrated wider social strata. In the 1830s and 1840s, these diverging and harsh arguments circulated in a gradually widening public sphere which became the medium of political confrontation.<sup>4</sup>

One of the great strengths of Czoch's approach is his use of Roger Chartier's analysis of representation as a means of investigating social identity.<sup>5</sup> The idea of applying the concept of collective representations to urban history, and more profoundly, to particular urban communities, is an inspired, original thought. This strikes me as a very promising line of argument. Still, I find the picture presented in the book somewhat incomplete.

Czoch explains how contemporary authors wanted to spread national feelings to the cities, and "Magyarize" of the urban communities. They saw cities as the centers of industrial and commercial development, but they found it dangerous that their inhabitants were not Hungarians. In the final essay of the book, an interpretation of how the city was represented in history books from the mid-nineteenth century, Czoch addresses the problem of the traditional opposition between national and foreign urban communities. In fact, this

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4 See Gábor Pajkossy, *Polgári átalakulás és nyilvánosság a magyar reformkorban* [Embourgeoisement and the Public Sphere in the Age of Reforms] (Budapest: MTA Történettudományi Intézete, 1991).

5 Roger Chartier, "The World as Representation," in *Histories: French Constructions of the Past*, ed. Jacques Revel and Lynn Hunt (New York: New Press, 1995), 544–58.

dual representation goes back to the Middle Ages, and was reproduced after the decline of the Ottoman rule. It would be interesting to know whether this perception was general and universal in public speech, or particular, and only applying to particular cities.

In fact, we might learn new lessons from examining historical documents other than those analyzed by Czoch, especially the contemporary press. I have found that editors of the popular fashion journals and their contributors put an emphasis on introducing the cities, their characteristics and communities to their readers. In other words, they produced city portraits that can be read as representations. In the 1830s and 1840s, inspired by patriotic feelings and enthusiasm, editors sent reporters all over Hungary to provide the readers with passionate and overblown descriptions of the country's beauty. This newly emerged genre, "traveler's notes" was edited strategically with the goal to represent and praise contemporary Hungary to the public, and create a common consciousness and identity for all Magyars. Ambitious journalists and up-and-coming young writers had a deep affection for the Hungarian countryside as well as for the cities, despite their deficiencies compared to Western Europe. They were ready to write about even the most boring and uninteresting town with majestic words, strong and lofty emotions and much aesthetic and moral glorification.

The ironic and critical tone of a contributor to a contemporary fashion journal who visited Debrecen in 1845 was unusual and sensational among the somewhat homogenous celebration of the Hungarian countryside. The journalist who visited the city made sarcastic statements and included in his report a scathing satire that ridiculed both the city and its inhabitants and included sentences taken almost verbatim from previous descriptions. The tone was painfully ironic because the author scoffed at the city for presenting itself as the true and most authentic Magyar community while being so hopelessly in decline. As opposed to the capital, Pest-Buda, where the day-to-day mingling of different minorities coupled with an urbane spirit made the city almost cosmopolitan, Debrecen's culture, language, and customs were genuinely Magyar. The vitriolic language was highly provocative because the criticism of Debrecen was, at the same time, criticism of what it meant to be a traditional Hungarian in the time of national revival.

The literary construct of Debrecen as a doleful, uncivilized and village-like urban space with burghers possessed of obscure manners held a powerful sway over the imagination of journalists and travelers, and due to their influence, the

reading public. It remained the dominant representation of the city in the middle of the nineteenth century, and this negative depiction was also incorporated into national literature. Late-nineteenth- and twentieth-century writers built on an earlier tradition of negative impressions, adding some new perspectives of their own. For them, Calvinist Rome, the city which remained faithful to the “true Hungarian religion” symbolized provincialism and traditionalism.

Czoch’s thoughtful argument of the national hostility towards the cities and the negative representation of Magyar values in Debrecen might inspire historians to pose further questions about the connections between urban and national identities, and the representation of Hungarian cities in general. Did they play a unique role in Hungarian history? In addition, it would be good to examine this issue in a European context. Was this hostile attitude towards the cities, their perception as foreign elements, unique to Hungary, or can we find similar examples elsewhere in Europe? I believe that an exploration of these questions would provide us with more through understanding of national identity. As always happens when one reads a great book, I have many more questions at the end than I had before starting to read it.

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