

Letenyei, László: Kulturanthropologie: Theoriegeschichte.

Passau: Schenk Verlag. 2020. 180.
ISBN 978-3-944850-72-6.

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BOOK REVIEW

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László Letenyei and his co-authors (Judit Dobák, Ádám Hoffer, Iván Selmeczi, and Zsuzsa Winkler) published a collection of studies on the theoretical and methodological history of cultural anthropology in three languages. The first Hungarian edition (*Kulturális antropológia: elmélettörténet*) was published in 2012. This was followed in 2020 by the German edition (*Kulturanthropologie: Theoriegeschichte*), while in 2021, an English translation also came out (*Cultural Anthropology. History of Theory*).

Parallel terms used throughout the three books (i.e., *the Hungarian reader/the reader; Hungarian ethnography/ethnography*, etc.) indicate the dual objectives of the publications. The Hungarian-language volume is a concise textbook that provides non-specialist students with an introduction to anthropology by means of an overview of the history of cultural anthropology. However, the goal of the German- and English-language editions is to integrate Hungarian ethnographic and ethnological research into other languages and into international anthropological circulation by situating it within the international anthropological canon and within the paradigm shifts in anthropology. The volumes do not, however, aim to provide a theoretical perspective on the development of anthropological scholarship. As the author states in the preface to the Hungarian volume: “The main aim of this volume, written for non-anthropologists, is to arouse interest... Thus, in the present ‘discursive’ volume, complex theoretical and methodological considerations are discussed only to the extent that the interested reader becomes made aware of the significance of the issue without being burdened unnecessarily” (2010: 12). Chris Hann (former director of the Max Planck Institute for Social

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Anthropology) likewise emphasizes in his foreword to the German edition (2020) that it reflects “general trends in this country, such as the relationship of comparative anthropology to folklore and nation.”

The differences arising from these divergent perspectives are most clearly apparent in the introductory chapters. While in the introductory chapter to the Hungarian edition, the author — for the sake of simplicity and clarity — refers to “Anthropology and ethnography: the two schools of cultural research,” the German and English versions, positioned within the European context, already talk about three schools of cultural research: anthropology, ethnology, and ethnography.

In the present review, I focus on two specific aspects of the publications. Firstly, I briefly discuss the (almost identical) structure of the volumes, which primarily follows the principle of a diachronic perspective on the historical development of anthropology. I then present the complex interconnections and divergent paths of Hungarian ethnography, European ethnology, and cultural anthropology, as presented in the volumes, touching on the similarities and differences in their horizons and investigative methods.

It is worth looking initially at the volume(s) as a whole: Letenyei’s book surveys the major turning points in the history of cultural research from the nineteenth century to the end of the twentieth century (1990s). In broad brushstrokes and in varying degrees of depth, the author describes the central concepts and methodological–theoretical paradigms of anthropology. In the introductory chapter, under the subtitles “The beginnings of cultural research” and “Practicing anthropology,” the reader is presented with examples of the overlapping stages of anthropological research, its complexity, and the ever-changing attributes of the anthropologist as researcher. As an explorer, the anthropologist is present in the field simultaneously as an insider and an outsider when interpreting social facts. In his investigation of this problem, Letenyei highlights the methods and results of Lévi-Strauss’s fieldwork among the Bororo people. Following his description of the methodological and epistemological challenges of fieldwork, the author situates cultural anthropology in the collision zone of anthropology, European cultural studies, and the social sciences. The relationship between cultural anthropology and physical anthropology (as well as their initial convergence and separation in the twentieth century) is discussed, drawing on examples from the U.S. and France. This is followed by a discussion of three major disciplines within cultural studies: French ethnology, German ethnography, and British anthropology. This survey is followed by an insight into the conceptual history of ethnology. Finally, boundaries are drawn between the disciplines of sociography and *Landeskunde*-type local anthropology, as well as between sociology and anthropology. We learn that sociography has long fulfilled a similar function in the lives of “civilized” people as ethnographic descriptions among non-European subjects, and that while sociology has focused primarily on human society, anthropology has comprised the study of cultures. This perspective on the position of anthropology brings us to the end of the chapter and to the introduction of action anthropology, which, while contemporaneous with classical anthropology, differs in terms of approach and methodology. In the final section of the introductory chapter, the various anthropological concepts of the notion of “culture” are combined in a highly selective and subjective way. However, as a unique and innovative collection of dissimilar ideas, this overview illustrates the diversity, malleability, and changeability of concepts of culture.

The second and third chapters deal with the beginnings and institutionalization of the ethnographic and anthropological disciplines of cultural research. In relation to anthropology



(Chapter II), the author first describes the interweaving of social Darwinism and evolutionism. The author illustrates this research paradigm by detailing the cultural and historical contexts of the evolutionary pyramid, in view of the exhibiting of primitive peoples in European and American zoos. This conceptual framework sheds new light on the main scientific works (*The Golden Bough*, *Primitive Culture*, etc.) and methods (the armchair scholar approach) of the era, demonstrating how they provided a firm basis for early applied field studies (development studies) but also for colonial powers' assistance to "civilizing" missions. It also becomes apparent how this civilizational approach, now scientifically obsolete, has remained part of everyday discourse and popular culture (for an excellent example, see the computer game *Civilization*). Through its description of the cultural context and approach, Chapter III also highlights the specificities of the institutionalization of ethnography in Central and Eastern Europe (especially Hungary). Among its essential characteristics, the author highlights the value-centredness of the discipline and its integral links with national and artistic movements. This chapter provides the clearest explanation of the divergent motivations and orientations of ethnography and anthropology's interest in ancient cultural traits. In anthropology, the primitive and ancient means the underdeveloped, and the attitude of scholarship towards it is either value-neutral, or the researcher is "superior" to the researched. In ethnography, by contrast, the ancient and primitive means the intact, authentic, and pure cultural traits of ethno-national culture that are worthy of preservation. While the educating mission of anthropologists involves the development and civilization of primitive, backward societies by the introduction of an advanced, "civilized" culture, ethnography aims to bring authentic-primitive folk values to "civilized" urban citizens. Moreover, although both sciences are initially ethnocentric, the ethnocentrism of East-Central European ethnography is fueled by nationalism, while it is a belief in development that lies behind the ethnocentrism of Western anthropology.

The last three chapters deal with the rise of cultural relativism and the resulting new approaches that have replaced evolutionism. Chapter IV deals with the school of culture and personality, while the last two chapters deal with the youth and coming of age of anthropology: through diffusionism, neo-evolutionary studies, and Marxist anthropology, we move on to structuralism, cognitive, symbolic, and interpretative trends, and finally to postmodern and feminist trends. The author also points out the national differences between the various anthropological trends (French ethnology, British functionalism).

Following this outline of the structural principles of the volume, I now turn to what makes it innovative. The following paragraphs address the question of the international embeddedness of Hungarian ethnographic scholarship. While the raising of this topic is not entirely without precedent, what makes the contribution of the volume(s) innovative and important is the depth and sensitivity of the analysis. Among the volume's antecedents, I will mention only Chris Hann's article: "Against Fences; For Example between Socio-cultural Anthropology and Ethnography," which was published in the volume *The Anthropology of Encounters*, edited by Veronika Lajos, István Povedák, and Tamás Régi (Budapest, Hungarian Cultural Anthropological Society, 2017). In this article, Chris Hann discusses the relationship between the "native" national ethnographers of Central and Eastern Europe, who study their own culture using cumulative methods, and the anthropologists of the West, whose goal is comparative research and the study of other cultures. He also raises questions about the interpenetrability or non-interpenetrability of these two disciplines in the context of Tamás Hofer's study "Anthropologists and Native



Ethnographers in Central European Villages,” which was published in *Current Anthropology* in 1968. László Letenyei explores this question in several chapters of the reviewed volume.

In the introductory section of Chapter I (“Anthropology, ethnology, and ethnography”), the first issue to be raised is the question of the boundaries between the European cultural and social sciences. In connection with the institutionalization of ethnography and anthropology, the author notes that Hungarian cultural research in the early nineteenth century was not only affiliated with the *Volkskunde* type of scholarship, which researched its own ancestral and folk culture, but for a long time also fitted into Anglo-Saxon anthropological paradigms (researching non-European communities, not only ethnic cultures). The methodological focus of ethnography began to narrow down to the study of national culture in Hungary only from the 1920s and 1930s, after which it became increasingly introverted. As the author states: “Ethnographers specializing in the research of national culture increasingly tended to refer to authors of their own scholarship and attend their conferences exclusively, thereby creating an institutional distance between the two schools of cultural research” (2020: 18). The author also points out that this dichotomy seems to have largely disappeared, as cultural anthropology has long since “returned home” and is now also investigating its own culture. At the same time, contemporary ethnography is no longer characterized by the turn-of-the-century vision of value-oriented research embedded in national discourse.

Interdisciplinary interpenetration and contradictions are revisited in Chapters II and III. The author discusses the institutionalization of Anglo-Saxon anthropology and its early research paradigms. By presenting the work of Somló Bódog, who belonged to a Jewish banking family from Bratislava, the author illustrates how the boundaries between cultural studies and the social sciences were still blurred at the turn of the century. Quoting from Somló Bódog’s book *Sociology*, Letenyei argues that by presenting an evolutionary anthropological perspective on marriage, one of society’s most fundamental institutions, Somló Bódog’s work was affiliated equally with the ethnographic, anthropological, and sociological schools (2020: 38–40). Chapter III focuses on the ethnographic approaches of cultural research in Hungary and Central Europe (comparative and national, respectively) and situates Hungarian ethnography within the European canon by analyzing the writings of three prominent Hungarian researchers (János Xántus, János Jankó, and Zsigmond Bátky). The aim is to illustrate the prototype of the Eastern European (and more narrowly Hungarian) ethnographer and of the European ethnologist engaged in comparative ethnography. The author identifies comparative ethnographers as European ethnologists, or what he calls cultural anthropologists in present-day parlance.

To conclude, I would point out that all three volumes go beyond their intended objectives. While the Hungarian volume can readily be integrated into undergraduate teaching in the fields of Hungarian anthropology and ethnography, the foreign editions both highlight the Hungarian context and at the same time represent a new contribution to the international body of work on the history of science by interpreting certain concepts and topics in innovative contexts.

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