

What is the Intellectual Heritage of Szűcs?

On the Apropos of His Newly Published Collected Works

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 was a colleague of mine at the Institute of History of the Academy of Sciences for several years. As our research was concerned with very diverse historical periods, we hardly knew each other personally for a long time. More precisely, I was, of course, wholly familiar—even from my university student years—with Szűcs's interesting studies and books; not just those in which he dealt distinctively with the nation and nationalism but similarly with some of his other contributions about medieval urban history or other topics. Still, it took some time for us to come together. The special occasion for this was created by public discourse about Central European historical consciousness, a topic that attracted vital public interest in the eighties in contemporary Hungary. As is well-known, Szűcs was one of the few Hungarian historians who then elaborated cohesive and overall historical argumentation that supported and strengthened this concept in terms of the Middle Ages and the early Modern Period. Péter Hanák soon joined him in the process of conceptualizing the historical notion of Central Europe, thus they became the most outstanding spokesmen of the Central-European historical paradigm. The debates between them and the representatives of the rival historical concept, whose spokesmen argued for our belonging to East Europe from at least the sixteenth century onwards, surfaced in the 1980s, not too long before the shift of the political regime that occurred at the end of the decade both in Hungary and the whole region ruled by the Soviet Union. It was then that I published a reference study on the theme with the aim of recapitulating the entire controversy, and this was the event that finally brought us closer.

How can I describe and characterize Szűcs's main intellectual profile? The first thing worth mentioning is that he always tried to adapt many of the insights obtained from the school of conceptual history, especially those represented by the German *Begriffsgeschichte*. This happened in advance of the appearance of the seven-volume *Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe: Historisches Lexicon zur politisch-sozialen Sprache in Deutschland*; the German *Begriffsgeschichte* school was then in an embryonic state, producing only a few journal studies. Nevertheless, when revealing the genesis of the nation and nationality dating back to pre-Christian Hungarian ancient history and continuing by discussing the medieval era in that context, he successfully defined the particular trajectory of history by adapting the interpretative framework provided by conceptual history. This made him capable of transcending the conventional approach (the linear story of national history) and pointing to the fundamentally constructed nature of any nation, being born as a result of modern historical development. He thus could state that the 'nation' as it is understood now (which, however, did not exist in the pre-modern historical past) is called into existence when the 'nationality' (an old historical formulation) and the notion of 'society' (a similarly old one) that refers to a sovereign political community starts to be associated with 'political loyalty'. That is, to an entirely new entity within which these three categories are fused in a functional relationship.

When Szűcs was immersing himself in examining the various historical issues with a spectacular theoretical sophistication, we lived at a time, more precisely in the 1960s and 1970s, when a kind of Marxism was dictating the intellectual guidelines both in Hungary and everywhere else in that particular region of Europe. Jenő Szűcs thus elaborated a new, bold, and provocative vision of history that plainly differed from the conventional image of the past informed by the national paradigm because his approach was grounded on the use of the analytical toolkit of the conceptual history.

My second remark concerns his narrative style and rhetoric; the way he used language in his scholarly narratives. This also made him a little bit exceptional and perhaps even a deviant scholar, only because even his Hungarian language was difficult to comprehend. Moreover, Szűcs, who was long denied a place teaching at university, was uneasy about holding lectures and communicating with university students later on. The opportunity for this was given to him only in the last few years of his life. Szűcs, however, was not very satisfied with his university achievements and sometimes complained to me about them in the late 1980s. You can thus imagine how difficult it might have been to translate his Hungarian texts into English; the task actually caused much hardship for the late Tim Wilkinson, who translated most of the studies to be found in the present volume, and for the editors of the book, who managed and checked the translations prepared by Wilkinson. The many problems

concerning the quality of the English-language text that came from the rhetorical characteristics of the original Hungarian text also contributed to the drawn-out process of making available the recent collection of essays.

Finally, Jenő Szűcs, the ‘medievalist’ historian, belonged to that group of scholars who always maintained close contact with his own time; he thus was far from totally under the spell of the concrete historical past he so vigorously researched. Szűcs was, in fact, an iconic public intellectual personality in contemporary Hungary; someone who wanted and could even articulate through his clearly scholarly narratives and occasional public political gestures his demand and fervent wish for a truly democratic political culture to be established in Hungary. However, he found as a historian that Hungary’s history was in need of a well-established liberal and democratic historical past, and this may also be considered true of the wider region around today’s Hungary. Thus, any current efforts to create a Western-type socio-economic and political make-up in place of the Communist dictatorship in the coming years will be hard; maybe impossible. In one of his last political notes, made available after his death, Szűcs expressed his unambiguous doubt concerning the probable success of Hungary transcending its non-Western historical heritage. One may even suppose that such despair had a lot to do with his early death.

I am very glad to see that such a collection of Szűcs’s best studies can now be read even in English and thus find its way to the broad community of international historians.

