

Theoretical Elements in Jenő Szűcs's Historical Scholarship

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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This fine volume makes available seven classic studies—the title of one of which is paraphrased in that of this review—, most of them for the first time, in English, with an excellent editorial introduction and further helpful apparatus to contextualize the emblematic Hungarian historian's oeuvre. Most of the studies address (as the title says) the 'historical construction of national consciousness', much in the manner of classics—Hobsbawm, Gellner, Anderson—now defining the discourse about the subject, but written before their theoretical framework became available. Besides, the volume also includes a new translation of Szűcs's seminal contribution to the 'Central Europe' debate of the 1980s by way of a grandiose outline of the *longue durée* development of 'structures' in the three historical regions of Europe.

The question may arise why republish these writings for an international audience two generations after their original appearance. There is a narrow and a broad answer. The former is that the issues they address are as 'hot' in the Hungary of the 2020s, and perhaps more widely, as they were in the 1960s–1980s. Problems like conceptions of nationhood, closely related to the question of 'where we belong' on the Europe/Orient, East/West axis, are evidently with us, maybe more than ever, if one considers the kinds of topics and approaches encouraged and funded from the public purse in the network of new research institutes that have arisen in Hungary during the 2010s. However, the relevance of these texts goes beyond the substance of Szűcs's very complex answers that point to the ruptures and discontinuities between premodern and modern forms of group consciousness, their constructed (non-intrinsic) character, and (in spite of all the ambivalence and temporal fluctuation) the predominantly 'Western' tendency of structural development in Central Europe. The larger significance of the volume is that Szűcs's contributions on these subjects represent a model of the possibilities of honest and uncompromising historical

knowledge production to tackle such questions in subtle connection with the issue of ‘presentism’ in historical studies. As we know, history is not the past (‘as it actually was’, to invoke another, much earlier classic). It is the past speaking to the present and ‘present’ in it—but the historian engages it through contemplating and comprehending the ‘pastness of the past’, pointing to context, situatedness, and difference. Szűcs was uncompromising in insisting on this pastness, applying the highest standards of historical scholarship, combating anachronism and the imposition of the standards and the discourse of the present in discussing historical subjects. He was impeccably honest in his aspiration to address questions of intense contemporary public concern by a strictly academic approach, while putting forward ideas that were inevitably caught up in the public discussion. His work is thus marked by an effortless sense of relevance: his academic texts resonated in the present without a special striving on his part to this effect.

This was partly thanks to his endeavor and ability to combine meticulous, hands-on, source-based historical reconstruction with vastly ambitious generalisation, large-scale interpretation, and framework-building. Such is the case not only in the work with ‘outline’ in its original title (“The Three Historical Regions of Europe”), and the one introduced with the phrase “In this outline...” (“»Gentilism«: The Question of Barbarian Ethnic Consciousness”), but elsewhere, too. The very first study in the volume, “»Nationality« and »National Consciousness« in the Middle Ages: Towards the Development of a Common Conceptual Language”, begins “with a purely conceptual analysis and the historical research follows in a separate part ... because reconstruction of the medieval phenomenological world does not *in itself* offer a sufficiently robust basis to situate such phenomena within our current classification framework” (p. 25). Szűcs’s determination to work with carefully considered and distilled theoretical models is remarkable for a historian also known for his passion for and mastery of source-based work, whom eyewitnesses report to have been reading piles of Latin diplomas in the Hungarian National Archives, one after the other, like others read light short stories. In the editors’ introduction, this is described as a ‘tension’, but complementarity may be a more fitting characterisation.

Thus, one also discerns strong ties between the essays on national consciousness and the “Outline”. The introductory section of the study on “Theoretical Elements (originally: Political Theory, Social Theory and the Historical Approach) in Master Simon of Kéza’s *Gesta Hungarorum* 1282–1285 A.D.” addresses ‘the emergence of European structural unity’ in the thirteenth century. Szűcs offers here a concise discussion of how the former ‘asynchronicity’ between the kingdoms of the West and the lands of the ‘new barbarians’ arriving in the eighth–ninth centuries was eliminated and the development (of social structures, political and religious institutional frameworks, legal regulations, cultural-intellectual life, etc.) of Central

(and Northern) Europe became ‘synchronous’. In lack of the several centuries long organic growth which characterized the West, this progress is at the same time acknowledged to have been less firmly rooted and relying more on ‘organisation’, i.e., voluntaristic measures by rulers. Here and especially elsewhere, this leads Szűcs to even more broadly drawn reflections on structure versus agency, path-dependency, ‘determined course’ versus ‘scope of action’ in history—topics that also occupied several of his distinguished counterparts in the Hungarian historical profession in the 1970s and 1980s.

This introduction is necessary for Szűcs for providing in the bulk of the study a comparative analysis of the ‘nation’ arising as a new framework of reference, shared across Western and Central Europe, for discussing history and matters of the political community during the thirteenth century. It establishes the context for Simon of Kéza’s invention of Hun–Hungarian identity or continuity (formerly not an established theory, still less a piece of reality) as the foundation for the newly arising definitions of social difference (hierarchy), model of government, and the political community. The connectedness of the ‘national consciousness’ studies and the “Outline” is closer, and also more explicit, than it is usually recognised.

This also leads us to the question of Szűcs’s own ‘synchronicity’: the international horizons of his outlook and his approach as a historian, not only as predating or anticipating the insights of Anderson and others in the constructivist analysis of national discourses, but his standing vis-à-vis contemporary schools and directions in historical scholarship. His access to international literature under the conditions created by Erik Molnár as director at Szűcs’s workplace, the Institute of History of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences in the 1960s is emphasized in the editors’ introduction. Regarding methodological allegiances, in “Gentilism” Szűcs emphasizes that “source criticism and philology might gain insight through evidence offered by linguistic history, archaeology, or historical ethnography”. There is indebtedness on his part, documented with references, to conceptual history (Otto Brunner, Reinhard Wenskus). Influence of the *Annales* can also be obviously detected, not only in Szűcs’s synthetic and interdisciplinary ambition, but also in his stress on the need for attention to terminological peculiarities and transformations, which was central to Marc Bloch’s analysis of feudal society. (Fernand Braudel’s foreword to the French edition of the “Outline” may be taken as a sign that the commonality of approach did not go unnoticed on the reverse side, either.)

But we may also venture one step further. In several of the studies in the volume, Szűcs repeatedly emphasizes that what he pursues is the ‘history of ideas’, particularly the ‘history of political thought’. Importantly, he—like several foremost contemporary practitioners in the field—claimed to do so not as cultivating a sub-discipline, but as applying an approach to throw light on the full spectrum of the historical

experience. This can be illustrated by several characteristic quotes: “we will select one of many possible approaches—specifically, the history of ideas—and focus on certain particulars ... the conception of history and social theory—in short, in the field of the transformation of political thought” (p. 116). Further on, Szűcs also defines the appropriate tools for interrogating sources in the history of ideas: “a closer look at the language used by the writer to express his conceptual system provides us with the key to the problem” (p. 145). To round off the theoretical apparatus, in “Gentilism” he acknowledges that “[t]his kind of historical reconstruction is not directed at factually based fragments of a former reality, but at fragments of the mental reflection of this reality, gradually assembled from scraps of material” (p. 94).

Szűcs’s approach in these works resembles one in which texts are understood and analysed as linguistic performances: ‘speech acts’ whereby authors express intentions, define intended impacts and, thus, exert their agency. Reading them, linguistic contextualism in the style of the ‘Cambridge school’ comes to mind, especially in light of the fact that Szűcs may be said to recognise in de Kéza’s work the foundations of a Hungarian ‘ancient constitutionalism’ in a similar fashion to John Pocock in his magisterial book on the English common law tradition.¹ Yet, it is noteworthy that Szűcs’s own references in the field of the history of political thought are confined to a more old-fashioned literature marked by Walter Ullmann and James Carlyle. It is puzzling to think whether Szűcs’s neglect or ignorance of the Cambridge tradition of intellectual history around 1970 was a missed opportunity for Hungarian historical scholarship.

Talking about language, a final remark. In their introduction, the editors stress the heavy formulation and construction of Szűcs’s texts. I also remember struggling with them as a student long ago. The English translations published in this volume, however, are eminently readable—a tribute to the late Tim Wilkinson, to whom we owe so many excellent English renderings of Hungarian scholarship in the humanities.

Literature

Pocock, John G. A. *The Ancient Constitution and the Feudal Law: A Study of English Historical Thought in the Seventeenth Century*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1957.

1 Pocock, *The Ancient Constitution*.

