Introduction: Reading and Rereading Jenő Szűcs

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The oeuvre of the Hungarian historian Jenő Szűcs (1928–1988) had a considerable international resonance in the 1970s and 1980s. His study on the Three Historical Regions of Europe, originally written for a samizdat volume commemorating the Hungarian democratic political thinker, István Bibó (1911–1979), but soon afterwards republished by an official publisher, had a remarkable impact (due to the abbreviated English version from 1983 and especially the French translation, with a foreword by Fernand Braudel, published in 1985). The wide circulation of this work instantly put the Hungarian historian into the forefront of the transnational debate on Central Europe, alongside such intellectual luminaries of the period as Milan Kundera and Czesław Miłosz. While this essay enjoys a lasting international fame (in the 1990s it appeared in German, Polish, Italian, Serbian, Croatian, Romanian, Slovak, and Russian), this also had an unintended consequence of shadowing the equally important oeuvre of Szűcs as a medievalist and as a scholar of premodern collective identities.

While not negating the historical importance and sophistication of his essay on the three regions, the present volume seeks to extend the perspective on his work, documenting his seminal contributions to many contemporary debates in historical anthropology, nationalism studies, and conceptual history. In turn, by reframing the intellectual context of his oeuvre, it also intends to offer a more nuanced picture of the intellectual roots and historiographical place of his interpretation of historical regions. Besides, rereading his most important studies, written between the early 1960s and the late 1980s, helps our reflection on the historical culture of Hungary during the socialist regime and, in a broader sense, the ambiguities of intellectual life in post-1945 East Central Europe.
Intellectual Socialization and Early Works

Coming from a Calvinist middle-class family living in Debrecen, Szűcs received his diploma in history and archival studies in 1953 and was also a member, between 1948 and 1950, of the Eötvös College, an institution originally established at the turn of the century as a local version of the École Normale Supérieure, one of the most important pockets of high-level academic socialization in Hungary, which survived both the interwar authoritarian and the communist regimes.¹ His background entailed an ambiguous relationship with the communist regime: while the Calvinist middle class was hardly the social basis of the new order, culturally there was some contiguity between the anti-Habsburg “independentist” historical narrative cultivated by the Hungarian Calvinist intelligentsia, and the historical politics of the Stalinist leadership, especially the minister of culture, József Révai (1898–1951), who sought to legitimize the regime by creating a symbolic and ideological continuity between the romantic liberal nationalist tradition of the 1848 Revolution and the communist movement.²

Szűcs’s Debrecen context is also 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.³

Szűcs was employed from 1952 by the Hungarian National Archives, focusing on late medieval urban history. His first major work was a monograph on fifteenth-century urban and artisanal culture in Hungary.⁴ The choice of research topic 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

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³ What is more, the memory of the revolutionary struggle of 1848/49 was particularly strong there since the city served as the seat of government in 1849.

gels’s theory of “second serfdom”). Szűcs’s study was also marked by an unusual richness of archival material and the absence of dogmatic Marxist historiographical tropes. From all this, it is not surprising that he found his way to the reform communist intellectual networks emerging after the death of Stalin and the temporary fall from grace of the Hungarian Stalinist leader, Mátyás Rákosi. Szűcs actively participated in the “historical debate” of the Petőfi Circle in June 1956, one of the most emblematic events signaling the craving for intellectual freedom and the boiling emotions, which became part of the chain reaction that eventually culminated in the revolutionary outbreak on October 23, 1956. At the debate, Szűcs criticized the poverty of standards of source criticism characterizing the historiographical production of the Stalinist era, arguing that it was a serious problem that there was no proper methodological training at the universities. What is more, he openly targeted the dogmatic style of many of his colleagues, whose “partisan approach” culminated in “distortion, voluntarism, and the non-scientific handling of sources.” His activism, however, did not lead to an open clash with the regime during the revolutionary days, and in contrast to some of his colleagues who took an active part in the October events (representing very different intellectual trajectories: some of them tainted with a Stalinist past, like Péter Hanák or György Litván; others having a national reform communist profile, like Zoltán I. Tóth; or coming from a conservative background, like Domokos Kosáry) he remained rather invisible and was thus spared from the reprisals following the violent suppression of the revolution and the installation of the Kádár regime.

**Nation and History**

After the revolution, Szűcs gradually shifted his interest to the question of national identity, a topic that was already crucial to the debates of the Petőfi Circle. This theme was particularly important from the perspective of the self-legitimization of the Kádárist regime, coming to power with the help of Soviet

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6 His last major study on urban history in the period is Jenő Szűcs, “Das Städtewesen in Ungarn im 15–17. Jahrhundert,” in *La Renaissance et la Réformation en Pologne et en Hongrie = Renaissance und Reforma-

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tanks. In 1960, Szűcs moved to the Historical Institute of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences, the very hotspot of this debate. A key figure of the controversy was the director of the Historical Institute and former minister of justice, Erik Molnár (1894–1966). Trained as a lawyer and having spent time in Paris and Rome during his studies, Molnár was an illegal communist before 1945 with a strong interest in Marxist historical theory. Atypical for this stream, he tried to apply this analytical framework to the prehistory and the early history of the Hungarians. After 1945, he became part of the communist establishment, serving as minister of social affairs in the first transitional government and, later, also as minister of foreign affairs and minister of justice. However, being rather distant from the top Stalinist leadership, he was commissioned to conduct the investigation of the abuses of power after the death of Stalin during the reformist course of Imre Nagy in 1953. After 1956, he withdrew from active politics but remained active in the management of science. In this domain, he also had his own axe to grind as in the late 1940s and early 1950s he repeatedly clashed with (and was humiliated by) the key figures of the “national Stalinist” cultural and historical course (the abovementioned Révai, as well as the prominent historian-apparatchik Erzsébet Andics, who both subscribed to the idea of the progressive nature of premodern anti-Habsburg independentist movements, seeking to recycle the romantic nationalist tropes in order to legitimize the communist regime). In contrast, Molnár was influenced by the historical perspective of the most important Hungarian Marxist theoretician of the early twentieth century, the syndicalist Ervin Szabó, who tried to use a rigorous class-based analysis and argued that, in the conflict of the Habsburg centralizing power and the independentist Hungarian landed gentry, it was the former who represented social and economic progress, irrespective of the suppression of premodern national self-government. The corollary of this argument was that the national ideology of the liberal nationalists in 1848 was based on a false consciousness, covering up their class interest in perpetuating the dominance of the landowners over the peasantry.

While the identity politics of the Stalinist period was schizophrenic in the sense that the uncritical subservience of the Hungarian leadership to the Moscow directives went together with a strong historical emphasis on struggles for national independence (this ambiguity might have had an unintended consequence of training the young generation in a romantic cult of struggles for national liberty, which, during the stormy days of October 1956, could turn into a powerful emotive basis for the desperate fight against the Soviet “invaders”),
Kádárism obviously had to recalibrate its ideological positions, crafting different, but no less paradoxical collective identity narratives. The Kádárist leadership rejected the "national Stalinist" ideological combination and—due also to the specific conditions of its emergence as a negation of the 1956 "counter-revolution" and the personal attitude of Kádár himself, coming from a working class background in a multiethnic urban area (Fiume/Rijeka; coincidentally, the same city where Molnár was born)—in contrast to many of his peers in other satellite countries, refrained from opting for nationalism (and anti-Semitism) as a legitimizing tool in the post-Stalinist ideological vacuum.

After 1956, Molnár continued his struggle against the residual elements of "national Stalinism" (and any kind of post-romantic nationalism), publishing a series of articles which provoked a long and emotional clash, known as the "Erik Molnár debate." The main target of his diatribes was Aladár Mód (1908–1973), another former illegal communist who was among his pre-1956 critics, now heading the department of Scientific Socialism at the ELTE University of Budapest. Given the institutional location of the protagonists, the ideological and power struggle also had broader implications, pitting the Institute of History and the History Department of the university against each other. In a broader sense, this heated polemic can also be placed into a transnational framework around the Soviet theoretical debate on socialist patriotism with repercussions in most satellite countries. It was in this context that Szűcs set to work on the question of national identity, in the institution led by Molnár, who provided unusually generous working conditions (and access to Western theoretical literature) to his younger colleagues. Szűcs's scrupulously academic studies from the period also document an existential challenge as, in some ways, his intellectual and family background would have predestined him to take up the "national"

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position, but his institutional context, and also arguably his scholarly findings, were bringing him closer to Molnár’s position, albeit without the vulgar Marxist social determinism of his boss and based on a much more thorough knowledge of historical sources.

Szűcs entered the debate already in 1962,9 but it is the later essay, “The medieval historical roots of national ideology” (1968), that made Szűcs well-known also to the broader intellectual public.10 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 period.11 His earlier studies on this topic started from the working hypothesis that if there was any common consciousness and emotional bond transgressing the divisions of the estate society, this was not some sort of atemporal ethnic consciousness but a Christian universalism. This is what he identified in the case of the defenders of Nándorfehérvár and the revolting peasants led by György Dózsa in 1514. In his famous study about the latter, he stressed how the peasant army, originally mobilized to fight the Turkish “pagans,” used Christian symbolism to legitimize its social claims against the nobility. Szűcs described this phenomenon in terms of a “popular Crusader frame of mind,” but he also pointed out the role of observant Franciscans in shaping and popularizing this ideological construct.12 Working on these topics, Szűcs became in-

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9 See the thematic block Nemzet, haza, honvédelem a parasztság és a nem nemessi katonásékoló réteg gondolkodásában (XV–XVIII. század) [Nation, fatherland, and defense of the fatherland in the worldview of the peasantry and the non-noble soldiers (15–18th centuries)] Történelmi Szemle 6, no. 1 (1965): 1–101.


creasingly interested in inserting them into a more comprehensive temporal and structural framework. On the one hand, he also started to study Hungarian history before Christianization, asking the question if there existed at the moment of the Hungarians’ entrance to the Carpathian Basin, around 900 AD (or even before), any integrative form of collective ethnic consciousness. On the other hand, he returned to the problem of the continuities and ruptures between pre-modern and modern forms of collective consciousness, investigating the reconfiguration of national ideology in the nineteenth century.

Focusing on the question of the historicity of national consciousness, in a short while he prepared a series of important studies in academic journals and edited volumes, many of which were subsequently published together in a volume, under the title *Nation and History* (1974). While one obviously needs to put these texts into the context of the “Erik Molnár debate,” Szűcs’s position was far from being one-dimensional. 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 instrumentalization of these premodern cultural codes for the purposes of reviving political nationalism (both in the forms of national communism and anti-communist ethno-populism).

It seemed that his personal career path (becoming head of the medieval department at the Institute of History) and the wide resonance of his 1974 volume heralded the triumph of a more critical historical consciousness about Hungarian national identity. However, there were also signs that his position was not so universally accepted, as indicated by the storm around his 1972 text arguing that the theory of Hunnic-Hungarian continuity was not based on some ancient collective memory transmitted by folklore, but was constructed by the chronicler Simon of Kéza in the thirteenth century. What is more, the early 1970s saw a broader turn toward nationalism in the public sphere, triggered both by the growing concern for the situation of Hungarians living in the neighboring states and exposed to increasingly intolerant policies of homogenization, and by the search for new (and old) ideological reference points after the global

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setback of reform communism symbolically linked to the crushing of the Prague Spring (in Hungary, the rupture was less dramatic, but the radical economic reform course was also halted here in 1971). In this context, Szűcs’s meticulous historical analyses about premodern and modern patterns of collective identity had obvious contemporary stakes.

Gentilism and Medieval National Consciousness

The theoretical solution he worked out to deal with medieval forms of collective identity drew on the results of the contemporary German medievalist school, especially the Gentilism theory of Reinhard Wenskus. His key work in this respect was the study “Gentilizmus”: A barbár etnikai tudat kérdése (“Gentilism”: The question of barbarian ethnic consciousness). Importantly, apart from publishing a “sketch” of it, Szűcs did not finalize this work and it was published in its entirety only posthumously in 1992, presumably for the reason he gives in his introduction: it was intended as the opening chapter of a comprehensive work on the development of ethnic and national consciousness up to the end of the Middle Ages. However, the project had to take a back seat to the enterprise that was to engage Szűcs’s energy for years: “The Middle Ages” volume of the Institute of History’s ten-volume History of Hungary project, for which he undertook to write a section on the last kings of the Árpádian Dynasty, which then became his other big posthumous volume.

Szűcs summed up the historical problem he set out to answer as follows: in the West, i.e., in the regions that were to define the face of nascent Europe, barbarian gentes (Franks, Goths, and Lombards) who made their appearance in the early Middle Ages later disintegrated as ethnic groups, and the modern nations—the French, the Spanish, and the Italian—emerged from more broadly-based late medieval formations. In contrast, in Northern and Eastern Europe—the regions populated by the new “barbarians,” who joined the medieval West between the ninth and the eleventh centuries—the newly arrived Czech, Moravian, Polish, Magyar, Danish, Norwegian, and Swedish ethnic groups were the

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15 Its shorter version was published in 1974, in Szűcs, Nemzet és történelem, 327–57. Translation in the present volume. The debate at the Academy of Sciences organized on the manuscript was published in Történelmi Szemle, Jenő Szűcs, “Gentilizmus: A barbár etnikai tudat kérdése (Tézisek és vita)” [“Gentilism: The question of barbarian ethnic consciousness (Theses and debate)”), Történelmi Szemle 14, no. 1–2 (1971): 188–211. The full text was published as Jenő Szűcs, A magyar nemzeti tudat kialakulása (Két tanulmány a kérdés ösztöndíjjal) [The formation of the Hungarian ethnic consciousness: Two studies on its prehistory], ed. István Zimonyi (Szeged: JATE, 1992; 2nd enlarged edition: Budapest: Osiris, 1997).
units that would start to develop into modern nations. Is this indicative of two regionally distinctive types of modern national consciousness? If so, how far does the asynchronism of ethnogenic development account for the differences between the two types? What exactly does this “asynchronism” consist of? What parallels were there between the integration of the “new barbarians” into Christian Europe between the ninth and the eleventh centuries and the barbarian gentes’ integration into the Roman Empire in the fifth and the sixth centuries? In what respects did the two processes differ? Szűcs’s attempt to clarify his original question brought him, as we will see, to the fundamental methodological problem of the comparative study of historical regions and of asynchronous historical processes. He would return to these questions a decade later in his study of the three historical regions in Europe.

After having outlined the broader perspectives in the second chapter of “Gentilizmus,” Szűcs details how the Western “gentilic” political, social, and cultural formations were cemented by common institutions and customs (origo, lingua, instituta, and mores). He then shows that the new medieval states were built on the shattered ruins of these original formations: to give gens a new territorial connotation, the Visigoth, Frankish, and Lombard rulers allied with their foreign entourages against their own aristocracies to destroy the old “gentilic” practices and forms of organization and joined with the Church in obliterating the epics and myths that had transmitted the old barbarian consciousness from generation to generation.

Jenő Szűcs’s “Gentilizmus” represented a milestone in Hungarian historiography. It was the first attempt to interpret Hungarian ethnogenesis in terms of a Western/Germanic model of “gentilic” ethnic consciousness elaborated by German historians.16 But before he could credibly posit the two processes as analogous, and then go on to use the model to illustrate also the differences between the two types of “gentilic” consciousness, Szűcs had to deal with what had for decades been a serious obstacle to an open-minded reconsideration of the subject: József Deér’s theory of the origins of Hungarian national consciousness. Writing in the 1930s, Deér denounced the earlier conjectures of some primeval

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Magyar national consciousness and concluded that the *Führertum* of the Árpád was the real “ethnogenic factor” in the case of the Hungarians.\[17\]

In a surprising manner, Szűcs was arguing against Deér that certain elements of Hungarian ethnic consciousness did indeed go back to pre-Conquest times. Why this apparent change in Szűcs’s position? The fact is that Szűcs had to draw a historical picture of Magyar “gentilic” consciousness—something that those who automatically stretched the notion of “Hungarian national consciousness” into the twilight zone of ancient history consistently failed to do—in order to be able to trace the intricacies of the complex historical transformations of the former, and answer his own question of why national consciousness developed differently here, as compared to the West. Picking his way through the minefields of ethnology, epic criticism, archaeology, and historical linguistics, Szűcs presents impressive arguments which effectively undermine the “four pillars” on which the “dome” of Deér’s theoretical construct rests. He shows that there is documentary evidence that the Magyars’ sense of their common origin was based on epics reaching before the time of Árpád; that they had words for the various frameworks of group cohesion: *nemzet* for what the Latin world called *genus*, and *fajzat* for *populus*, and for their particular form of social organization, the term “*Hétmagyar*” (“Seven Magyars”); and he argues convincingly that the Turkic inscriptions found at Orhon and interpreted by Deér as providing conclusive evidence of the chieftain’s ethnogenic role attest an ideology, rather than a state of affairs.

Jenő Szűcs’s virtues as a historian are most evident when, after meticulously drawing a series of theoretical distinctions, he suddenly places the theory back in its historical context. He returns to where he left off, speaking about the stifling of “gentilic” forms of consciousness in the medieval West, and shows that for all the “asynchronism,” things happened much the same way in the Hungarian case as well: once there were two interpretations of “nation,” and the archaic variant was doomed. But it went down fighting: it is this conflict that Szűcs sees at the root of the eleventh-century pagan revolts, not just the protest against Christianity, let alone the “class conflict” postulated by Marxist historians.

\[17\] József Deér, *Pogány magyarság—keresztény magyarság* [Pagan Magyars—Christian Magyars] (Budapest: Egyetemi Nyomda, 1938); later he also published a reworked German version: József Deér, *Heidnisches und Christliches in der altungarischen Monarchie* (Darmstadt: WBG, 1969). The concept of *Führertum* as a constitutive element of ethnic consciousness was also present in the interpretative framework of the pre-1945 precursors of the Gentilism theory, referred to in the previous note. From this perspective, Szűcs’s arguments against Deér’s conception can also be read as a subtle internal polemic with the Gentilism paradigm.
In one instance after the other, he demonstrated that national consciousness—like every other expression of collective identity—was a construct that was forever being reinterpreted and transformed, the same as any other tradition. Terms such as “invented tradition” and “imagined community,” which have acquired currency through the work done by Eric Hobsbawm, Ernest Gellner, and Benedict Anderson in the early 1980s, are quite in keeping with Szűcs’s findings in the previous decade.  

While we can praise Szűcs for being ahead of his time, it is important to recognize the degree to which his ideas were also the product of his times. Beyond the ceaseless mutation of the forms of national consciousness and its metaphors throughout history, what fascinated Szűcs were models of overall development. The introduction to his “Gentilizmus” seems to imply that we must go as far as the “asynchronous” development of East and West in the early Middle Ages if we are to make sense of the evident continuity between modern nation-states in Eastern Europe and early medieval “gentilic” social formations, and if we are to understand the particular vitality of the region’s nationalism.

Another aspect of “Gentilizmus” that testifies to the time of its writing is its disciplinary approach. Szűcs was interested in the ethnic consciousness of the early Middle Ages not as a part of cultural history, but as a primitive mode of political thought: that is how the barbarian conception of justice comes to be compared with Cicero, Ulpian, and St. Augustine. As for ethnic consciousness being the seed of national consciousness, Szűcs tended to answer this in the negative: he tried to show that the correlation was less significant than modern nationalists generally suppose. The early Middle Ages, he argued, gave rise to various forms of collective identity, many of them no less enduring than ethnic consciousness. It is this insight that is reflected in the subtle change that took place in the second half of the 1970s, when Szűcs’s interest shifted from the issue of “national consciousness” to the question of the medieval precedents of “civil society.” This was a key issue addressed in the study on regions he wrote for the Bibó Emlékkönyv (Bibó Memorial Volume).

These complexities might provide a partial explanation to the rather limited nature of the international reception of Szűcs’s studies on medieval national consciousness, in contrast to the general enthusiasm about his later essay on Eu-

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European regions. Another reason might well be 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. At the same time, Szűcs’s broad structural claims, which in Hungary could be read as a covert way to overwrite the Marxist interpretative language, still sounded rather deterministic for many members of the medievalist community of the Bundesrepublik, not to speak about the fact that his considerations in other (earlier) parts of the book about socialist patriotism appeared to his West German reviewers dangerously similar to the discourse of their peers from the GDR. As a result, his book was compared unfavorably to the (otherwise not so dissimilar) work of the Czech post-1968 émigré historian František Graus (1921–1989). Significantly, the Czech scholar started out with a more dogmatic Marxist position in the 1950s, but gradually became a key exponent of a methodologically sophisticated social constructivist challenge to the traditional understanding of medieval societies and identities, as—after his emigration—his work became swiftly integrated into the trendsetting Nationes series.

**Crisis and Renewal: The Last Árpádians**

In 1968, a decision was made to prepare a ten-volume synthetic work on Hungarian history, coordinated by the Institute of History of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences. Jenő Szűcs was commissioned by the editorial board to write the part on the six decades after the Mongolian invasion in 1241: the history of Hungary until the extinction of the dynasty of the Árpádians. The preparation of this volume consumed all his energy during the subsequent decade. By 1980 (or by 1981 according to other sources), he completed his contribution, which

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satisfied the requirements but turned out to be much longer than expected. For this reason, he kept on working on the text, and concluded it in 1984. However, the planned second volume of this “ten-volume” History of Hungary never appeared, and Szűcs’s part was published posthumously, as an individual monograph, edited by his friend and colleague Pál Engel.21

The intention to write the history of the last Árpádians could have seemed particularly exciting for Szűcs because precisely these decades brought a crucial turnaround in the abovementioned model of historical evolution. This was the historical period when Hungary turned towards the West, more markedly than before, and shaped the social and political institutions of the “second feudal age” (Marc Bloch).22 It was during this period, following one of the biggest historical catastrophes of Hungarian history, in the verve of the postwar reconstruction, that those features were wrought which rendered Hungary one of the significant powers of late medieval Europe. To provide only a sketchy enumeration of the elements that belong here: the differentiated, Western-type social structure (a high and lower nobility acquiring gradually the status of estates, a unified serfdom with rights of free movement, burgher towns protected by privileges); the activities in agriculture, mining, handicraft, and commerce revived with Western technologies and regulating mechanisms, imported partly by the mediation of newly arrived settlers (hospites); the state organization developing an up-to-date administration and bureaucracy, fortified by efficient tools of internal and external defense; and a Christian church catching up with the modern ecclesiastical structures, religious orders, and intellectual currents that have unfolded since the twelfth century.

Many colleagues probably expected that precisely these questions would be in the center of the monograph: the examination of the economic and social structures in an international context and the theoretically grounded confrontation of Hungarian political institutions and ideologies with the Western ones. It came as a surprise, then, that the tone-setting first part of the book focuses instead on the psychological characterization of the rulers—Béla IV and Stephen V—posing the question: how are we to assess their capacity as political leaders? Departing from the starting point of structural history and regional models of evolution, Szűcs is proposing here something different. He continues

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21 Jenő Szűcs, Az utolsó Árpádok [The Last Árpádians], ed. and annotated by Pál Engel (Budapest: História, 1993).
to address the “questions of national fate,” but instead of constituting an abstract model of intellectual history (coded with hidden political messages), he condenses his answers, with a Plutarchian method, into the moral lessons derived from suggestive ruler-portraits.

These political questions were inserted into a framework of social history, investigating the economic, social, and political features of the feudal order and its transformations over the period under examination. From this perspective, the Mongolian raid is the challenge which incites Hungary to make a step forward, following the “growth rules” of feudalism, and satisfying the needs of a more articulated society; this is how the country gets increasingly closer to Western evolution. In Szűcs’s words: “It was in the decades following the Mongolian raids that the new constitutive elements of the social structure—the nobility and the bourgeoisie—took up definitive contours and could not be left, henceforth, out of consideration in the political sphere.”

He came to this relevant observation in the framework of a holistic view of history, not reduced to the spheres of politics and the state, nor to a Marxist-minded economic determinism. As he underlines, “Merely on the basis of economics the social–legal pattern cannot be deciphered; ‘rights’ do not follow mechanically from the availability of economic conditions.”

According to Szűcs, for triggering a transformation and a “growth” within the “feudal system,” external factors are needed, which are not contained within the economic or social structures. That is why he emphasizes the role of agency, above all that of the kings, but also that of the lords who had a larger than average potential of decision and action. This did not mean for him a return to pure political history. He would rather phrase it as an assessment of the importance of rational political agency in the process of the structural transformation of feudal society.

At this point, however, Szűcs had to face the delicate question: what kind of sources allow the historian to understand the intentions and the interior motivations of his historical actors? This is especially troublesome for medievalists, working with very thin documentation. Szűcs cannot resist attributing an articulated political reform strategy to Béla IV, supposing that the king clearly understood the necessity of economic and social reforms for preparing his kingdom for a successful resistance against a possible renewed Mongolian attack.

23 Szűcs, Az utolsó Árpádok, 143.
24 Szűcs, Az utolsó Árpádok, 212.
But he also understands the dilemma that the historian’s perception of the “logic of the situation” might be more articulate than that of the actors of the age, who might have been “tools” rather than “steering leaders” of the unstoppable growth processes.25

Structure and Agency: An Outline of the Historical Regions of Europe

The historiographical ethos of Szűcs was marked by a tension between his aspiration to exhaustive documentation and digestion of all historical details and a desire to formulate more general and encompassing interpretative models. When he set out to work on a new topic, he did not want to make compromises in any direction: he tried to integrate all sources from economic and social history to cultural history while also seeking to enter into a dialogue with representatives of other disciplines, drawing on economic, legal, and sociological categories and theories. The genre of “outline” was a typical form of compromise in his oeuvre, being torn between his intellectual ambitions and the available objective possibilities of realizing the conceived design. It seemed appropriate to name the unfinished fragment published in the “Gentilizmus” volume exactly as “An outline of Hungarian prehistory,” and the essay written for the Bibó Memorial Volume is also entitled an outline. Besides the professional and moral obligation to pay tribute to the highly respected political thinker, the real stimulus for Szűcs was that this “sketch” allowed him to delineate a vast model of historical evolution, in explicit polemics with the contemporary public discourse, and present a series of historical proofs for his arguments.

From the mid-1970s the Hungarian public sphere was increasingly dominated by such polemics, many of them on historical topics. This was due both to the relative tolerance of the regime, keeping a rather broad grey zone open between discourses and phenomena which were explicitly forbidden (touching directly on the legitimacy of the regime, such as the memory of the 1956 revolution), and explicitly promoted. This relative tolerance was reinforced by the geopolitical game of the Kádárist leadership, trying to normalize its relationship to the West (culminating in such symbolic acts as receiving back the Hungarian crown from the US authorities in 1978) as well as by the global dynamic of détente determined by the “Helsinki process.” On the other hand, the global fall of belief in “socialism with a human face” after 1968 catalyzed a colorful plural-

25 Szűcs, Az utolsó Arpádok, 118.
ity of critical voices, gradually coagulating into more coherent groups (including various forms of counter-cultural movements from hippies to folk-revivalists), with some of them also moving toward more explicit political positions. By the late 1970s, they came to form two loosely-knit and sometimes competing, sometimes cooperating, streams: that of the “democratic opposition,” using the language of human rights, and the ethno-populists, focusing mainly on national identity and the situation of Hungarians beyond the borders.

In this context, the issues of national identity got entangled with questions of symbolic geopolitical self-positioning and the problem of civil society. To be sure, the debate on Hungary’s symbolic geographical localization and on historical regions in general had a considerable prehistory going back to the late nineteenth century. However, rather than an unproblematic continuity, there were important diachronic ruptures of this discourse. For instance, after WWII, the binary East/West division of Cold War Europe effectively overwrote the Central European discourse, triggering also a complex historiographical production focusing on economic (especially early modern agrarian) history and using the language of backwardness. The 1960s saw the reemergence of alternative conceptualizations challenging this binary perspective in Hungary as well as in most countries of the Soviet camp, leading to the rediscovery of the Central European cultural and political traditions and the reevaluation of the Habsburg Monarchy which provided a common framework to many of these nations for centuries. While in the Czech case this discourse was originally launched in the cultural and philosophical spheres (with reference to the heritage of Kafka and the local socialist intellectual traditions providing an ideological alternative to Soviet-type communism), in Hungary (as well as in Poland) these discussions engaged especially the historical profession, including such luminaries of the time as György Ránki, Iván T. Berend, and Péter Hanák.

The most resounding Hungarian contribution to this debate was made by Szűcs, which was due both to the intellectual and conceptual sophistication of his essay and to the specific conditions of its genesis. It was published in a collective publication, which was meant originally as a Festschrift to István Bibó, a promi-

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nent dissident thinker and former political prisoner (condemned to life imprisonment for his role in the 1956 Revolution), by an illustrious and colorful group of intellectuals, many of them linked in one way or another to opposition circles. However, after the death of Bibó in 1979, it became a memorial volume. Szűcs was among the organizers of the project and the original intention of the editors was to publish it officially with the state publishing company Gondolat, which had a strong cultural-historical portfolio. Nevertheless, due to the pressure from higher party echelons, the publisher eventually refused the manuscript, which was then distributed as samizdat in 1981.28 One of the most precious pieces in the memorial volume was the historical essay by Szűcs. Its special intellectual merits and the political and cultural conditions of late Kádárism can explain how this bulky type-written samizdat text could still quickly be published in the review of the Historical Institute of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences, and then as an autonomous volume by a state-owned publishing house, and soon afterwards even in English translation by a Hungarian academic review.29

The text explicitly engaged with Bibó’s philosophy of history, focusing on a tension between a general normative vision of European social development toward the “humanization of power”30 and the situatedness of historical actors and decisions responding or failing to respond to particular challenges. For Szűcs, historical regions also provided such broader frameworks fitting into the general patterns of civilizational progress but also far from predetermining the historical path of a given community. Drawing on his previous research on the time lag between the formation of Western European and East Central European monarchies in the Middle Ages and the fundamental difference between the West and the “post-Byzantine” Russian and Ottoman-dominated Eastern Europe, he depicted the relationship of the Occident and East Central Europe in terms of a creative tension, sometimes marked by close approximation (like in the high Middle Ages and in the nineteenth century) and sometimes by the growing of the gap (like after 1945). Rather than a discourse of resentment (like

Kundera’s emotional text on “l’Europe kidnappée”), Szűcs used a structural argument to reassert a fundamental historical linkage between East Central and Western Europe. Along these lines, he also established a connection between the premodern social evolution and the organizing principle of modern civil society. What was somewhat missing from this engaging historical tableau was the Balkans, which later on earned Szűcs the criticism of authors, such as Maria Todorova, who challenged the Central Europeanist paradigm for its blind spot (and alleged exclusionary intention) on the southeastern part of the continent, which could not be reduced to a boundless concept of “Eastern Europe” either.31

The Late Eighties: Between Hope and Despair

As we could see, in the early 1980s Szűcs shifted his attention from the question of national consciousness to the problem of historical and structural preconditions of democracy and civil society. By the second half of the eighties, the situation changed once again. Being involved in the reform movement, he became increasingly sensitive to the revival of nationalism and turned back to the problems of myths of origins, national identity, nation-statehood, and national minorities. This problem area was the subject of one of his last intriguing essays written not long before his death, published in the prestigious cultural monthly, Valóság, albeit with some censorial interventions.32 One of its main theses was that historicizing national consciousness goes back to the premodern era, and its elements survived or rather were revived by nineteenth-century nationalism. This “premodern structure of awareness” was based on the postulate of mythologizing both ethnogenesis and the origins of the state. The former drew on the belief in fictitious “prototypical peoples” constructed by scholars in the Middle Ages “from remaining scraps of historical, geographical, and ethnographical information of late antiquity.”33 As for the latter, “Medieval man was preoccupied less with the origin of a ‘state’ per se than with the genesis of a given kingdom (regnum) as a ‘national territory.’”34 These two myths of genesis, becoming anachronistic by the eighteenth century, would surface again as a conceptual

31 “Within this majestic framework, the Balkans were not even deemed relevant to be analyzed”; see Maria Todorova, Imagining the Balkans (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 143.
33 Ibid., 334 (299 in this volume).
34 Ibid. (299–300 in this volume).
raw material of nationalism at locations where the state and the nation were so
distanced from each other “that the state could only be declared ‘national’ at the
cost of the greatest theoretical or practical difficulties (or not even at that cost).”
The historicized notion of the nation came to fulfill the ideological role which
connected—over many centuries and structures—in the form of a “great arch”
the origin of the state and the people to the legitimation demands of the present-
day nation-state. Consequently, analogy, but not sameness makes the pre-eigh-
teenth-century ideological notion of the nation comparable to the notion of the
modern nation-state created by nationalism. The key difference between the
two is due to the polysemic nature of the premodern concept of nation:

In medieval Hungary . . . a “Hungarian” (Hungarus) . . . was anyone who
was a subject of the kingdom of Hungary (regnum Hungariae). At the same
time, the stance conceptually gave clear recognition to the separate identity
of all who were differentiated as a group by virtue of their “nation,” which
is to say by origin (nationale) as well as by language and customs (lingua et
moribus) . . . . What counted as truly valuable, however, was for somebody
to be considered as belonging to a third kind of “nation”—that is, fitting
into the framework of a natio Hungarica, organized not simply by virtue of
being a territorial subject, or even by linguo-cultural affinity, but in a feu-
dal-corporative sense.

These alternative concepts of the nation automatically provided everybody with
some kind of a group identity while still preserving the distinctiveness of these
identity constructions. As Szűcs remarks: “Everybody was, as it were, born into
his own particular double or triple ‘national’ status, while the identities that
were dealt out got on well together.” The notion of the nation revived (or rather
redefined) by modern nationalism culminated, however, in the fusion of these
three elements: “everyone had to belong to a specific nation, and consequently
the archaic compromise of divided and overlapping ‘national’ identities ceased
to exist.”

Nineteenth-century Hungarian nation state-building, however, was con-
fronted with an almost unresolvable practical problem of how to historicize the

35 Ibid., 334 (301 in this volume).
36 Ibid., 337 (302 in this volume).
37 Ibid. (303 in this volume).
ethnogenesis, facing the obvious ethno-cultural plurality of the country. A further challenge was to eliminate the discontinuity caused by the Ottoman occupation of the country in the early modern period, fragmenting the linear narrative of Hungarian history. Still, the nineteenth-century nation-builders had to find some solution to these dilemmas, since the “national consciousness is . . . a sense of identity of which a sense of historical continuity is an important component. Without this there can be no national consciousness, or else it is present but disturbed.”38 The main task stipulated by modern nationalism was thus to seek identity even in “non-identities,” and look for continuity in disruptions, with the explicit aim of linking the present to the past through a specific historical discourse. Any failure to create such a discursive integration of the nation could threaten the final success of the nation-state building project. From this perspective, modern Hungarian national consciousness with its multi-level fragmentation and the divergence of the mental frameworks of statehood and ethnos was hardly a success story and—in many ways resonating with István Bibó’s critical analyses from the 1940s—Szűcs tended to depict the reemergence of a neo-romantic ethno-cultural nationalism in the 1970s as a pathological symptom of the incomplete process of nation-building.

His critical tone became even sharper in his speech, held less than three weeks before his tragic suicide, in front of the audience of the “New March Front,” a rather heterogeneous group of reform-minded intellectuals trying to mediate between the regime and the mushrooming opposition movements. Szűcs’s reserved discourse was strikingly out of tune with the growing euphoria about the space for democratization opening up in the late 1980s. It is hard to say if his existential anxieties and depression triggered a more pessimistic historical reading, or the other way round, his dark intuitions about the direction of historical development contributed to his personal collapse.

Be it as it may, his last major public appearance was marred by his gloomy warnings to his audience with regard to the potential failure of the democratization 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 democratization cham-

38 Ibid., 346 (311 in this volume).
pioned 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.39 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.

Conclusion

What made Szűcs a distinctive voice in Hungarian historiography, also highly interesting from a broader transnational perspective? Despite the fact that Szűcs was working on an extensive empirical base, he could evade the trap of source fetishism because of his openness already in the 1960s towards the teachings of the emerging (West) German Begriffsgeschichte.40 He was also ready to combine this with the contemporary results of historical sociology and cultural anthropology. All this proved a novelty both in Hungary and even globally, and this also explains why his domestic and international reception by mainstream historiography encountered many difficulties.

The fact that—apart from his contribution to the debate on Central Europe—Szűcs’s oeuvre concerning the conceptual history of the nation and the state is passed over in silence in the scholarly community may be explained by several reasons. The direction of Szűcs’s analyses converged with the constructivist theory of nationalism which appeared in Western Europe at the beginning of the 1980s. While anticipating many of our current assumptions stressing both the relativity and obsolescent characteristics of the national historical paradigm, Szűcs might have gone too far from the perspective of his audience.


40 The first volume of the seven-volume synthetic undertaking of German Begriffsgeschichte is Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe: Historisches Lexikon zur politisch-sozialen Sprache in Deutschland, edited by Otto Brunner, Werner Conze and Reinhart Koselleck. It appeared only in 1972, but Szűcs used already in the late sixties several of the entries published separately in scholarly journals.
In an oversophisticated phrasing (and this was not wholly accidental), he argued that narrating the past as an exclusively national history was conceptually ungrounded and merely an ideological (mythological) undertaking. By assuming such a standpoint, he seemed to challenge not only the nationalist historical master narrative, but also the very sense of superiority characteristic of the identity of professional (academic) historical scholarship in its relationship to any other possible form of historical consciousness and discourse.

The 1990s brought a pluralization of historical discourses and thus the studies of Szűcs became important reference points in the Hungarian discussion on the continuities and ruptures of national consciousness triggered by the reception of the works by Gellner, Hobsbawm, and Anderson. In turn, 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. What is more, they instrumentalize the Central Europeanist discourse in the form of the Visegrad cooperation not against Eastern Europe, but against Western Europe and the alleged multiculturalist deviation of the European Union (thus, seeking to forge a tactical alliance with the autocratic regimes of Russia and Turkey). 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.

Given the multifarious and extensive oeuvre of Jenő Szűcs, our volume could not aim at a comprehensive publication. We sought instead to offer a substantial

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41 The conceptual complexity and ponderousness of his language might well have been a conscious or unconscious means of self-concealment. By rendering the understanding of his texts more difficult, he supposedly tried to take the edge off the subversive effects of his views.

selection of his most characteristic works, some of them previously not available in English, while providing more complete and sometimes textually corrected English versions for those which were already partially available. At the end of the volume, we also included a comprehensive bibliography of Szűcs’s printed works, relying on the previous publication of the journal Történelmi Szemle. We would like to thank the Pasts, Inc. Center for Historical Studies at the Central European University for providing funding for the translations and the editorial work. The long process of translating the texts, checking the translations against various versions of the Hungarian original, as well as assembling and sometimes correcting the original notes, demanded a lot of attention. Apart from the translator, Tim Wilkinson (1947–2020), we are also grateful to Christiana Mauro, Andrew Mike Cragg, and John Puckett for double checking the English versions, to Nóra Vörös and József Litkei from CEU Press for taking good care of the book manuscript, to Flora Ghazaryan for preparing the index, and to Sára Lakatos for formatting the footnotes.

Last but not least, we would like to dedicate our book to the memory of János M. Bak (1929–2020), a sorely missed colleague and friend, who also worked a lot to make the writings of Szűcs available for the international scholarly audience.