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Schubert, Gabriella. 2017. *Was ist ein Ungar? Selbstverortung im Wandel der Zeiten* [What is a Hungarian? Self-Positioning through the Ages].

Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz. 319 pp.

Review by

Fabienne GOUVERNEUR

[formerly] Andrássy University Budapest (Hungary)
Central European Studies
fabienne.gouverneur@gmail.com

"What is a Hungarian?"[1] is the title of Gabriella Schubert's latest book, published in 2017, and the question she sets out to answer on approximately 300 pages (including many illustrations). Some of the basic information expected of every academic work, such as its aim and position within current research, definitions of key terminology, structure, and a brief overview of its main sources, is provided in the foreword and the introduction (Chapter I). It becomes clear that this is a book addressed to German-language readers and intended to provide a differentiated account of the cultural and historic background needed to understand present-day Hungary.

The book's ten chapters are not organized according to a discernible logic or progression, so that there is not necessarily either a chronological or a thematic connection or succession between any two chapters (present-day Hungary is followed by Hungarians' origins, their place within Europe, Hungarian language, others' perceptions of Hungary, Hungarians' perceptions of East and West, their self-perceptions, national symbols and finally famous historical persons). What all the chapters have in common is that they contain approaches to the title question from different angles. Their sequence gives the impression of a compilation, a collection of knowledge about Hungary in the past and today. The chapters will be dealt with here in the order of their appearance to make this impression relatable, because it contributes in an essential way to this review's main criticism of Schubert's "What is a Hungarian?".

1 The translations from German are my own throughout the article.

Following her introduction, the author dives right into present-day matters by asking "Where does Hungary position herself today?" (chapter title, 19).[2] This (unfortunately) brief second chapter of only ten pages touches upon some of the most important developments shaking up and transforming Hungary in recent years, such as its positioning within Europe, which is essentially viewed here as oscillating between East and West. The only constant is seen in the lasting sense of marginalization among Hungarians and attempts to "cure" that with different constructions of "Mitteleuropa," 'Central Europe,' at times with a more Eastern, at other times a more Western connotation. The chapter concludes by pointing out the growing importance of the Visegrád community (27) and the fact that the quest for a Hungarian identity is "in a permanent state of tension which has its causes in the geopolitical constellation of the country and the historical experiences of its inhabitants" (28). With this finding, the discussion is now fully opened and one might be tempted to read the remaining chapters as attempts to resolve that tension. Chapter III thus approaches the question of Hungarian identity from a historical perspective and asks: "Where have Hungarians come from?" (chapter title, 31). It posits the origin as "decisive to the question whether the Hungarian will feel as if belonging to the 'East' or the 'West'" (31). From the perspective of cultural studies, acceptance of this dictum as fact appears as a surprising shortcut considering the amount of work existing on the complex construction of collective identity (think only of Benedict Anderson's seminal *Imagined Communities* (2006 [1983]), for instance). The chapter then presents the contradictory and conflicting theories of the origin of the Hungarian language and people – the widely accepted theory of Hungarian as being part of the Finno-Ugric family of languages, on the one hand, and a few more controversial yet long-lived alternative theories as that of Hungarians' Turkic ancestry, on the other. The author makes sure to point out the crucial importance these theories have today, as they inspire certain groups, particularly those leaning to the far political right, to celebrations of a mythical – and partly invented – Hungarian past intended to help glorify the country's present. The author concludes that

> [t]he root cause of the described […] search for ancestry is the consequence of a self-confidence broken multiple times by traumatic historical experiences and a search for identity that is at the same time carried by worry about the loss of traditional values of Hungarianness. This is to be taken seriously. Yet searching the past should not be a hindrance to coping with urgent problems of the present and with future challenges. (53)

2 All page numbers with no further bibliographical information refer to the work reviewed.

Similar positioning on the part of the author can be found on a few occasions throughout the book and helps readers evaluate contemporary displays of such "traditional values of Hungarianness" (53).

The fourth chapter looks at the "milestones" of Hungary's integration in Europe – these milestones being named here as 1. the Hungarian conquest of the Pannonian basin, 2. the Christianization of king István/Stephen I, and 3. the openness of Hungary as a host country to foreigners in the Middle Ages. This choice of steps itself can be considered a commentary on Hungary's current political situation, especially concerning the migrant/refugee situation in Europe.

Chapter V takes an even more detailed look at Hungarian language, not so much at its origins this time but at its development through the centuries and the influences that helped shape it. Schubert places special emphasis on language because it is what "gave Hungarians, time and again, a ground for arguing their own place as being either in the East or in the West" (77). She reminds readers that Hungarian has always set its native speakers apart from other European languages and their speakers: this tension is one between standing out among all the others, on the one hand, and belonging to an isolated minority, on the other. The chapter provides basic information on the structure of Hungarian language and its similarities with Turkish, Slav languages, German influences, Latin and Italian as well as examples of internationalisms. In return, it also looks at Hungarian terms that have been influential elsewhere, such as "*huszár*" ('hussar'), "*kocsi*" ('coach', 'cart') or "*paprika*" ('pepper').

The next chapter is an overview of how Hungarians have been and are today viewed by others in Europe and abroad. Schubert witnesses a development from an entirely negative depiction of Hungary (as "barbaric") to feelings of respectful distance (for their brave but dangerous hussars), romanticized rapture (fuelled by a sense of the country's "exoticism," love of freedom, operetta, and other stereotypes) to a mixed perception today. The latter assessment is not an expression of the author's indecision but of her opinion that it is too early to speak of a contemporary perception of Hungary abroad, as the country is still involved in a process of transformation and currently stuck in a deep political and cultural identity crisis.

Chapter VII looks at how Hungarians have constructed their own identity over time and finds that this has mostly occurred within conceptions of "East" and "West." Schubert successfully shows the long history of this back-and-forth that continues to this day. The description of Hungarian identity as torn between East and West for centuries does prompt the question in this reviewer's mind of whether (and, if so, where) more original interpretations of Hungarian identity have surfaced yet.

The author goes on to investigate Hungarians' self-perception(s), emphasizing self-images created in the twentieth century and the present. Unsurprisingly, the

chapter yields an eclectic collection of features and Hungarian auto-stereotypes rather than a homogeneous answer to the question that lends its title not only to the book itself but also to this eighth chapter, "What is a Hungarian?" (169).

With its nearly sixty pages, Chapter IX is the longest individual chapter by far – and one of the most thrilling ones, because in dealing with national symbols and their narratives, it touches on some of the vivid debates around collective cultural memory and its manifestations in the appearance (and/or names) of public space(s). Schubert is at her best when she provides a deconstructionist reading of collective symbols in everyday life such as *paprika* ('pepper') and *gulyás* ('goulash') (223–231).

The final chapter introduces readers to famous Hungarian "historical personalities, writers, composers" (chapter title, 245). The choice of personalities (Lajos Kossuth, Count István Széchenyi, Saint István/Stephen I., King Matthias I Corvinus, Francis II Rákóczi, Prince Árpád), writers (Sándor Petőfi, János Arany, Endre Ady de Diósad, Attila József, Mór Jókai, Zsigmond Móricz), and composers (Zoltán Kodály, Béla Bartók, Ferenc Erkel, and Ferenc Liszt) follows a list compiled by cultural anthropologists Ágnes and Gábor Kapitány in their 1997 field work (Kapitány and Kapitány 1999, 48, as quoted in Schubert 2017, 245) – a choice that could have been scrutinized considering the changes in the cultural canon of Hungary in the twentieth century alone.[3] The fact that this consideration is left out, and that the book ends rather abruptly after this list of personalities and their works and deeds, makes the chapter appear as a selective "who is who" of Hungarian history.

Schubert's book is a very helpful, well-researched, balanced and abundant resource for anyone wanting to learn about the cultural codes, the important debates and the cultural canon that are relevant to life in Hungary today. The author tells the "Magyar" tales without succumbing to them, always remembering to point out the purpose they might serve or have served at a specific point in time. Her practice thus echoes the "cui bono?" typical of the critical agenda of cultural studies (Miller 2017, 2). As a contribution to knowledge about Hungary and the currents that move the country today, it is therefore indispensable and cannot be overestimated. In fact, it will be a beneficial read for any person preparing for a stay of any length in Hungary, as it provides a solid background for discovery of that country. Incidentally, however, this very aspect also touches on the book's main weakness: the qualities outlined above make the book a superior travel guide for exigent travellers, a guide that even includes current political commentary – but it is not, and probably cannot be both at the same time, a contribution to academic debate about identity constructions in central Europe. It lacks the theoretical background and the in-depth original analysis of

3 Cf. Kulcsár Szabó 2013, particularly section VII.2.3 about the history of poetry, especially p. 471, as an example of the volatility of the literary canon.

phenomena or events to be such a contribution. The absence of a clearly outlined theoretical foundation to the text and its compendium-like quality as a collection of information rather than a treatise of one topic that culminates in new insights or ideas (epitomized by its eclectic structure and lack of a conclusion) are the hallmarks of this shortcoming.

Yet if held to the standards that the work sets for itself – as spelled out in the foreword and introduction – Schubert's book entirely fulfils its own goals and does an admirable job of doing exactly what it intends to do: educating German-language readers about the complexities at play in contemporary Hungary and the different narratives of the country's past, the collective negotiation of which contribute to its partly conflict-laden present.

Schubert's book offers a deconstructionist reading of some of these dominant narratives and provides a wealth of information that most German-speaking readers will not previously have been aware of. In this sense, the omission of too much theoretical input may even be a strength, if readership is to be found in rather wider than merely academic and, even more specifically, cultural studies circles.

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