

**Steven Tötösy de Zepetnek and Louise O. Vasvári, eds. *Comparative Hungarian Cultural Studies*. West Lafayette: Purdue UP, 2011. 376 pp.**

**Reviewed by Dorottya Nagy, Central and Eastern European Institute for Mission Studies, Budapest**

The present volume furthers the theoretical movement initiated in 2002 by Steven Tötösy de Zepetnek of the Purdue University Press through its monographic series of *Comparative Cultural Studies*. Contextuality is a leading principle of the series, which translates into the recognition that scholarship is always ideological and as such it has an agenda that goes beyond passive observation of societal phenomena. Contextuality is (self-) reflective and demonstrates itself in terms of agency on the level of a given society (which is not to be confused with the borders of a single nation state). In this sense, the question of agency begins with the self-positioning of the editors themselves, which is essential for reading and understanding this type of innovative scholarship. It is not so much the short biographical note on Steven Tötösy de Zepetnek and Louise O. Vasvári that helps the reader understand their position - Tötösy de Zepetnek has built up an impressive oeuvre in comparative studies with special attention to literature, post-colonial and ethnic minority studies, media and communication studies; while Vasvári has a solid academic background in medieval literature, sociolinguistics, translation theory and Holocaust studies, all theorized through gender studies - but it is through the first article of the volume co-authored by them where academic self-positioning takes place.

"The Study of Hungarian Culture as Comparative European Cultural Studies" (11-33) is a methodological disclosure without which contextual scholarship cannot be practiced. This article, which is the introductory chapter of the whole volume, describes the trajectory of *how* Tötösy de Zepetnek and Vasvári talk about "Comparative Hungarian Cultural Studies" and/or the "Study of Hungarian Culture as Comparative Central European Cultural Studies." This fluctuation in terminology points to a struggle of conceptualization and invites further academic discussion and dialogue. The edited volume demonstrates that methodology, never to be confused with but always related to methods, starts with ontological and epistemological questions and positions. These may not be explicitly formulated in a separate academic text, but at a certain point they must be expressed, because without their clarification dialogue cannot be continued. The editors argue for Comparative Hungarian Cultural Studies by locating the genealogical line of it at the Birmingham School and the English-language scholarship that developed from it, but they envision a praxis of Comparative Cultural Studies in multiple languages.

Nevertheless, it would be important to consider the question of whether the recently emerging "intellectual movement" with Comparative Hungarian Cultural Studies on its agenda could create an academic platform through which the newly discussed German



New articles in this journal are licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License.



This journal is published by the University Library System of the University of Pittsburgh as part of its D-Scribe Digital Publishing Program and is cosponsored by the University of Pittsburgh Press

*Kulturwissenschaften* (as in Friedrich Jaeger and Burkhard Liebsch, *Handbuch der Kulturwissenschaften*. Stuttgart: Metzler, 2011) and English- or French-language scholarship would be able to meet and engage in dialogue. After all, Central and Eastern Europe is a region with a long tradition of sending students to different Western universities, which resulted in the emergence of different academic and ideological trends in the continuous socio-political and cultural transformation of the region. Cultural Studies, Comparative Cultural Studies and Hungarian as Comparative Central European Cultural Studies all mark the genealogy of this academic movement. "Culture" in Cultural Studies as it is used in this volume points to "an anthropological and narrative conception of the term to study ordinary features of life, while it aims simultaneously to dismantle the aesthetic-textual and hierarchical conception of culture" (12). A comparative approach means that the focus is on the method of use (the "how") rather than on the object of study (16). As such, it "insists" on intra-disciplinarity (analysis and research within the disciplines in the humanities), multidisciplinary (analysis and research by one scholar employing another discipline), and pluri-disciplinarity (analysis and research through teamwork with participants from several disciplines).

The question of what the editors and authors understand by the very term "Hungarian" in Comparative Hungarian Cultural Studies puzzles the reader throughout the whole book. Where Cultural Studies, Comparative (Cultural) Studies and Central European Studies are clearly spelled out, the key modifier of the subject seems to be left to the interpretation and understanding of the reader. Continuing (332-343) and opening up discussion about the meaning(s) of "Hungarian" might further expand and enrich dialogue not only *on* the issue of the Other, though it is discussed in various disciplines albeit through similar approaches, but expand and enrich dialogue *with* the intra-disciplinary, multidisciplinary and pluri-disciplinary Other as well, especially at a time when sentiments of nationalism and xenophobia are among the most dominant attitudes in present-day Hungary. The editors therefore warn against essentialist approaches and discussions of identity only in terms of the nation state, perspectives that would naturalize these attitudes. The question of how this scholarship understands ethnicity challenges the reader as well. However, it is evident that by calling on scholarship to place Hungarian Cultural Studies in the wider context of Central and Eastern Europe as well as expand Hungary-related research beyond this region (e.g., USA and Israel), the editors of the volume promote multilingual scholarship and aim to avoid any type of methodological nationalism as conceptualized by Nina Glick Schiller, Andreas Wimmer and Ulrich Beck.

One of the first tests of whether the editors were able to realize their theoretical objectives is the volume itself. The edited volume comprises contributions from twenty-seven senior and younger scholars. The selection also mirrors a balanced distribution concerning gender. The choice of authors, most of them of Hungarian background and working at various universities in Hungary, the USA, Germany and Israel (1), exemplifies the multi-layered disciplinary approach of the editors and includes: András Kiséry, David Mandler, Steven Jobbitt, Györgyi Horváth, Lilla Tóke, Peter Sherwood, Ilana Rosen, Éva Federmayer, Ivan Sanders, Catharine Portuges, Debra Pfister, Megan Brandow-Faller, Erzsébet Barát, Katalin Medvedev, Anna Borgos, Nóra Schleicher, John Joseph Cash, Kata Zsófia Vincze, Ryan Michael Kehoe, Erika Sólyom, László Kürti, Lajos Császi & Mary Gluck, Agata Anna Lisiak, and Carlo Salzani. The editors clustered the twenty-six articles of the volume "thematically and diachronically" (2) into five sections under the following titles: History, Theory and Methodology for Comparative Hungarian

Cultural Studies (five articles); Comparative Hungarian Cultural Studies of Literature and Culture (four articles); Comparative Hungarian Cultural Studies and the Arts (five articles); Comparative Hungarian Cultural Studies and Gender Studies (four articles); and Comparative Hungarian Cultural Studies of Contemporary Hungary (eight articles). Some articles (e.g. those by Györgyi Horváth or Nóra Schleicher) would fit into more than one of the above named categories, which shows that the volume has a slight preference for post-1989 topics. The fifth section of the book, containing the largest number of articles, and four other articles that have the term 'post-1989' in their title all suggest that "contemporary Hungary" begins with or after 1989. Interestingly, it is Horváth who addresses the question of 1989 becoming a chronological marker for the contextual approach, but her article is actually found in the second section of the book, which deals with literature and culture. The diachronic arrangement of the volume is convincing, but it seems that its historical mapping starts somewhere in the nineteenth century and yet, as argued above, studies focusing on the post-1989 period dominate a significant part of the volume. Therefore, we need to understand the editors' choice of working with chronology as a meaningful construct.

The volume ends with an extended bibliography for the study of Hungarian Culture with focus on English-language scholarship since 1989. It is, however, regretful that due to publication rules, PhD dissertations could not meet the selection criteria. In Central and Eastern Europe there is a growing corpus of English-written dissertations that address cultural issues but remain unknown despite their innovative research due to bureaucracy, power relations and lack of financial resources, among other factors. The bibliography serves as a stimulus for readers to contribute to it with relevant scholarship from their own field. One such contribution from the field of theology could certainly be Ivana Noble's *Theological Interpretation of Culture in Post-Communist Context: Central and East European Search for Roots* (London: Ashgate, 2010), not to mention the edited volumes written on gender and religion and on women and religion in post-communist societies.

The wide thematic diversity of the volume attests to the editors' aim of addressing a variety of research questions and thereby highlighting the complexity of the field. The themes of the articles are surprisingly diverse and vary from focusing on individuals' struggles to making sense of culture, such as the articles on Ármin Vámbéry, Ferenc Fodor and Sándor/Sarolta Vay, to analyzing anonymous female managers "communicating culture" and new societal phenomena addressing the issue of culture, as in the articles by Vasvári on Alaine Polcz or by Császi and Gluck on the Budapest Cow Parade, respectively. It is remarkable but not surprising that the volume addresses the issues of ethnicity, minority, and xenophobia as well (332) through research focusing on the question of Jewish and Roma people. Without these topics and their human subjects, contextual comparative Hungarian cultural studies cannot be relevant.

Religion and the religious Other is another topic that is highly relevant for comparative cultural studies. Although the volume does sporadically address the issue of religion (mainly with regard to Jewish religion/culture), it would be desirable to pay more attention to the inter-relatedness of religion and culture, or the overlap between them. If one observes the main principle of Comparative Cultural Studies, that the ideology or the worldview behind all scholarship and societal phenomena (always at least partially performed by people) is ontologically and epistemologically grounded, then we may conclude that the analysis of religion and its practiced forms would be a valuable contribution to comparative cultural studies. The

mere example of how sociology, through its religious embeddings (e.g. the terminology used for a census) continues to inform or mislead society demonstrates the need for dialogue on the issue of religion as well. Similarly, when addressing the issue of gender and sexuality, it is important to ask the question of how working with assumptions that are taken for granted leads religious communities to either completely deny the sexually Other or to regard the very question as taboo. In order to develop a more adequate methodology for Comparative Cultural Studies, further dialogue with theology and philosophy is needed.

*Comparative Hungarian Cultural Studies* addresses readers from all disciplines who are in search of innovative thinking and research. It takes the readers on an adventure across multiple fields and ways of inquiry and, by doing so, inspires and motivates them to engage in Comparative Cultural Studies as an intellectual movement that aims at analysis and understanding that avoid the (re)production of relations of power. The diverse theoretical interests of the readers will naturally limit their dialogue with this volume, but its wide range of topics and disciplinary variety will certainly stimulate search for more or further interpretative categories for comparison. This volume is a call for scholars to leave the self-contained academic ivory tower with its addiction to objectivity behind and continue their work with the awareness that scholars always exist in a space amidst everyday life, science and meta-science. This volume is an important contribution by scholars promoting the need to take the risk of engaging in each other's disciplines, fields of study or one another in ways that go beyond essentialism. It likewise exemplifies the need for engaging in public scholarship that dismisses the "global-local" paradox. Thus they/we might emulate the Rabbinical saying that "it is not incumbent upon you to complete the work, but neither are you at liberty to desist from it" (*Mishna*, Tractate *Avot* 2:21).