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Falsorum fratrum rebellio

Jenő Szűcs's Essays on the Peasant Revolt of György Dózsa
40 Years Later

The topic discussed here belongs much more to the history of the 70s of the twentieth century than to that of the sixteenth century. I have more to say about Jenő Szűcs—a highly influential historian in the 1970s and 1980s, one of those most responsible for revival of Hungarian historical studies¹ as well as one of the most significant researchers of the 1514 peasant war who has since been partially forgotten—than about the leader of the revolt, György Dózsa, himself.

The following grotesque, typically Eastern European story took place not long after the occupation of Czechoslovakia in 1968. The idea came from the highest circles within the 1970s political leadership, which – just as today – used history for its own political objectives: high-ranking leaders decided to make 1972 a year commemorating Dózsa with an invented date of birth of 500 years previously.² The classical revolutionary symbols needed to be re-evoked.³ Cultural policy was not in the least disturbed by the fact that Dózsa's date of birth had been “created” by pure speculation: no tangible data proved that the peasant leader was born in 1472.⁴ The memorial year, in accordance with the customs of the era, represented a collective commission of sorts for historians: they were expected to write studies yielding new results that could be exploited by politics as well. Presumably even the politicians who had initiated the 500-year anniversary were surprised how seriously the profession took this request. The novelty and brave sincerity of the essays published in the memorial year caused an even bigger shock.⁵ The quality and quantity

1 Gábor Gyáni, “Szűcs Jenő, a magányos történetíró,” *Forrás* 40 (2008): 6, 18.

2 Erzsébet Tatai, “Dózsa '72. The Visual Representation of György Dózsa in the Middle of the Kádár Era,” (Essay in the present volume), 2015.

3 Gyula Tóth, ed., *Dózsa. Magyar költők versei. Dózsa születésének ötszázadik évfordulójára*, preface by Ferenc Juhász (Budapest: Szépirodalmi Könyvkiadó, 1972); István Nemeskürty, “In signo crucis. Ferencsek és világi papok az 1514-es parasztháborúban,” *Vigília* 37 (1972): 595–99; Idem, *Krónika Dózsa György tetteiről. Híradás a Mohács előtti időkről* (Budapest: Kossuth Kiadó, 1972).

4 Sándor Márki, *Dósa György* (Budapest: Magyar Történelmi Társulat, 1913), 17; Gábor Barta, “Georgius Zekeltől Dózsa Györgyig,” *Századok* 109 (1975): 87.

5 Gusztáv Heckenast, ed., *Aus der Geschichte der ostmitteleuropäischen Bauernbewegungen im*

of the spiritual upsurge surrounding the question of Dózsa by far exceeded the expectations of those who had commissioned the writings. But the genie was out of the bottle and could not be forced back in.

The most influential works connected to the 1972 memorial year were three studies written by Jenő Szűcs. He published the first in a historical periodical,⁶ the second in a popular social-science review⁷ and the third in a journal of literary criticism.⁸ As far as the contents of the three studies are concerned, there was some overlap, though they were all basically independent. Pursuant to his peculiar method, Szűcs minutely detailed the essence of his ideas in all three studies, but sometimes he concentrated variously on historical theory, the history of ideas and cultural anthropological argumentation.

First of all, Jenő Szűcs tidied up the mess regarding the sources of the 1514 peasant war. He demonstrated that in the publicly known Dózsa narrative, historical sources have been turned upside down: the least authentic ones have received the most respect, while the most authentic ones have received the least respect. Humanist poets and historians (most of them rather late-born) edited these works according to literary principles,⁹ building on second- or third-hand sources that have been perceived to be the most authoritative, while primary sources are forgotten. That is why Szűcs paid the most attention to documented sources¹⁰ and scrupulously criticized literary works in light of the documents. This is how he managed to reconstruct the more realistic sequence of events of the peasant war. Szűcs presented a brilliant analysis to prove that at the beginning of events, György Dózsa had not yet become the head of the army of crusaders recruited by Cardinal Tamás Bakócz against the Turks.¹¹ There is no doubt that the famous “Cegléd speech” is pure fiction¹² and that Dózsa, in fact, only took the lead of the nationwide peasant war much later, between May 28 and June 6, 1514, following the victory at Nagylak and the occupation of Lippa: “Everything was

16–17. Jahrhundert. Vorträge der internationalen wissenschaftlichen Konferenz aus Anlass der 500. Wiederkehr der Geburt von György Dózsa, Budapest, 12–15. September 1972 (Budapest: Akadémiai Kiadó, 1977).

6 Jenő Szűcs, “A ferences obszervancia és az 1514. évi parasztháború: egy kódex tanúsága,” *Levéltári Közlemények* 43 (1972): 213–63.

7 Jenő Szűcs, “Dózsa parasztháborújának ideológiája,” *Valóság* 15, fasc. 11 (1972): 12–39.

8 Jenő Szűcs, “Ferences ellenzéki áramlat a magyar parasztháború és reformáció hátterében,” *Irodalomtörténeti Közlemények* 78 (1974): 409–35.

9 Cf. Gábor Kiss Farkas, “Ambiguity and Paradox in the Humanistic Literature of the Jagellonian Age,” (Essay in the present volume), 2014.

10 Gábor Barta and Antal Fekete Nagy, *Parasztháború 1514-ben* (Budapest: Gondolat, 1973); cf. Antonius Fekete Nagy et al., eds., *Monumenta rusticorum in Hungaria rebellium anno MDXIV* (Budapest: Akadémiai, 1979).

11 Gábor Barta, “Georgius Zekeltől Dózsa Györgyig,” *Századok* 109 (1975): 63–88, esp. 70.

12 Cf. Gabriella Erdélyi, “A Dózsa-felkelés arcai: tabuk és emlékezet 1514 mítoszaiban,” in *Szökött szerzetesek. Erőszak és fiatalok a késő középkorban* (Budapest: Libri, 2011), 161–81.

decided that week. After Dózsa had given up on the Turkish campaign and really declared war on the aristocracy,” writes Szűcs.¹³ Thus, Dózsa did not enter the stage at the beginning, but later, as events began to unfold in the midst of a movement that was continuously changing its objectives and becoming more and more radical.

The historian also paid extra attention to the ecclesiastical figures represented in conspicuously high numbers among the leaders of the peasant movement: to the open-minded priest Lőrinc, to Ambrus Túrkevei—“an ardent fan” (*furibundus*)—and his friends, who were considered to be the “ideologists” of the war.¹⁴ Szűcs’s interest was aroused by the fact that the vast majority of the ecclesiastical figures taking part in the revolt were observant Franciscan friars).¹⁵ This is why Szűcs extended his research to a codex never studied before: the formulary serving the purposes of the internal written administration of the Hungarian observant Franciscan order (*Formularium in usum ordinis fratrum minorum regularis observantiae in Hungaria*).¹⁶ This manuscript contains much interesting data on the views of Franciscan friars belonging to the opposition, in contemporary ecclesiastical words “apostates” (that is, friars leaving their convents), who gave revolutionary sermons before and during Dózsa’s revolt. Comparing the data recorded in the history of the Hungarian Franciscan order and the lessons learned from the formulary with the real sequence of events of the peasant war, Szűcs concluded that the centers of the revolt correspond to the significant friaries of the observant Franciscan order. The most ferocious battles were indeed fought around Szikszó, Sárospatak, Gyula, Várad (Oradea, Romania) and Csanád (Cenad, Romania) as well as in the lower part of the region between the Danube and Tisza rivers—precisely the area with significant observant monasteries.

Starting from the data and observations gained from these micro-philological studies and following brilliant and brave logic, Jenő Szűcs formulated his famous theses on the ideology—called “folk crusade concepts”—of the peasant war: he found the roots of this ideology in the deviating trends of Franciscan observance.

13 Jenő Szűcs, *Nemzet és történelem. Tanulmányok* (Budapest: Gondolat, 1974), 642–43.

14 *Ibid.*, 642.

15 Szűcs, “A ferences obszervancia,” 216; *Idem*, “Ferences ellenzéki áramlat,” 411; cf. Nemeskürty, “In signo crucis”; Barta and Fekete Nagy, *Parasztháború 1514-ben*, 61–62. Márta Fata argues in this volume that it was the church historian Ödön Bölcskey who in 1923–24 first proposed the link between the Franciscan order and the peasant revolt.

16 Hungarian National Library, Cod. lat. 432; Antal Molnár, “Formulari francescani della provincia Ungherese dei frati Minori Osservanti del primo Cinquecento,” in *Osservanza francescana e cultura tra Quattrocento e primo Cinquecento. Italia e Ungheria a confronto, a cura di Francesca Bartolacci e Roberto Lambertini* (Rome: Viella– Istituto Balassi. Accademia d’Ungheria a Roma, 2014), 73–86, 75, esp. 80–81.

“At this point, micro-philology is also a psychological source,” Szűcs stated.¹⁷ The question he found most exciting was how an originally anti-Ottoman crusade ideology had transformed into the ideology of the armed revolt against aristocracy. To put it more precisely, Szűcs researched the “translation” of the concepts of the crusade against the Turks into the language of propaganda seeking to put an immediate and violent end to social inequalities. In his analysis, Szűcs thought to discover this peculiar language in the Franciscan order, especially in the radical mystical and apocalyptic way of speech always existing as a possibility in the observant order. Szűcs attached special importance to a circular in which the head of the Franciscan order had condemned the practice of scriptural interpretation found in Hungarian friaries and had criticized the audaciousness of certain friars who “seeking to understand more than would be right, lay certain books in front of their brothers, put on glasses and state several things that come to their mind”.¹⁸ Jenő Szűcs relied partially on previous research by Tibor Kardos¹⁹ and György Székely²⁰ when he tried to provide content to the hard-to-define concept of “Franciscan opposition” derived from mystical-apocalyptic writings well known to Hungarian Franciscans and from the works of two Hungarian Franciscan authors of European significance—Pelbárt Temesvári and Osvát Laskai. It is well known that in the same studies, Szűcs – significantly exceeding the issues surrounding the Dózsa revolt – formulated an even bolder hypothesis in which he attributed the reception and spread of evangelical ideas in Hungary to Franciscan apostates, thus creating the much-disputed theory of “Franciscan Reformation”.²¹

But let us now confine ourselves to the possibilities of contemporary – that is, 1970s – interpretation and circles of meaning in the studies on Dózsa. Why did Jenő Szűcs become an “almost a celebrity historian in Hungary?”²² How is it possible that his texts – among them, the essays on Dózsa – written with complicated philological precision, using difficult and far-stretching chains of conclusions, had a significant effect on wide circles of Hungarian intellectuals, even on those who were not particularly interested in historical studies? The answer seems to be very simple: Jenő Szűcs managed to say very important things regarding significant problems. However, if we also ask about the theoretical schemes of international and national examples and the systems of thought he referred to, it is much more difficult to find an answer.

17 Szűcs, *Nemzet és történelem*, 247.

18 Szűcs, “Ferences ellenzéki áramlat,” 422.

19 Tibor Kardos, “Bemerkungen zur Ideologie des bewaffneten Kampfes in der Dózsa-Revolution,” in Heckenast, ed., *Bauernbewegungen*, 207–16.

20 György Székely, “Der Dózsa-Aufstand,” in Heckenast, ed., *Bauernbewegungen*, 21–36.

21 Szűcs, “Ferences ellenzéki áramlat,” 426–35.

22 Gyáni, “Szűcs Jenő,” 5.

The Dózsa studies – due to their topic – indisputably created the necessity of a Marxist interpretation. The term “ideology” (which Szűcs uses in the title of one of his studies) was not free of certain Marxist allusions. Of course it was not the revolutionary slogans of the crowds singing Florian Geyer’s song, nor Engels’s *The Peasant War in Germany*, nor the mechanical social determinism of Bebel and Kautsky that some people thought of while reading Szűcs’s essays on Dózsa. Rather, they felt the effect of modern, Marxist historians— still considered up-to-date at the time—who still believed in the economic-social determination of the “ideology” of European revolutions. The works of Western European Marxist historians rejecting dogmatism had already been known in Hungary before Jenő Szűcs’s appearance. For instance, László Makkai, a researcher of the history of Hungarian Puritanism, had used Christopher Hill’s works on the apocalyptic vision of the English Civil War.²³

Jenő Szűcs, however, had by this time exceeded “the Marxist vision that had been characteristic of him for a long time,” wrote Gábor Gyáni.²⁴ The works on Dózsa completely lack the analytical techniques of Marxist historians. The author does not see the origin of the peasant revolt in social tensions and economic conditions. He even ignores arguments, still used today, that explain discontent with the growing pains of the peasants, the legalisation of oppression by the seigneurs. Nor do we find the well-known explanation that the aristocracy was afraid of being unable to carry out the spring agricultural tasks and thus decided to prevent the launching of the crusade against the Turks.²⁵

The readers had more reason to notice the reverse of the determinism of Marxism in Szűcs’s writings. These texts could be interpreted to mean that the author, once again turning Marxist argumentation “upside down,” tries to explain the sequence of events of the peasant revolution by starting from the “superstructure – the ideology— – nstead of the “base.” Knowing Jenő Szűcs’s important connection to the concepts of Protestantism, many people had reason to believe that the author wanted to find the roots of social revolution in the originally apocalyptic spirit of the Reformation. As is the case with Western European parallels, one could think of historical works studying medieval and pre-modern millenarian movements from such a point of view. The Oxford historian of deep Baptist roots, Marjorie Reeves, already became famous in the 1950s through her writings on the “pre-Reformation” vision of the millenarianism of Joachim of Fiore (1132–1202), abbot of Calabria (Reeves: 1969/1993); these writings were often read by the Hungarian researcher of the Renaissance,

23 László Makkai, *A magyar puritánusok harca a feudalizmus ellen* (Budapest: Akadémiai Kiadó, 1952), 9, 17, 88.

24 Gyáni, “Szűcs Jenő,” 5

25 Ferenc Szakály, and Gábor Barta, “Dózsa népe és a magyar társadalom,” *Társadalmi Szemle* 27, fasc. 6 (1972): 75–85.

Imre Bán.²⁶ Norman Cohn's *The Pursuit of the Millennium*, published in 1957,²⁷ was less known in Hungary.²⁸ Cohn's book explained the great social crises of the Middle Ages from the starting point of the messianic spirit of crusades, the faith of "revolutionary flagellants," sect-like passions and a general despair— with a view of problems in many ways similar to that of Szűcs. The works discussing pre-modern millenarianism by Dame Frances Yates, an English researcher of the Renaissance (in part due to Tibor Klaniczay, the famous Hungarian Renaissance scholar, who was working closely with Jenő Szűcs), became popular in Hungary precisely in the 1970s. Yates²⁹ found the explanation for the breakout of the Thirty Years' War by analyzing the aspirations of intellectuals at the end of the sixteenth century for a "universal Reformation."

The rejection of this reverse determinism probably also appears in recent essays on the history of the Reformation that severely criticize Szűcs's above-mentioned theses on "Franciscan Reformation".³⁰ It is indeed true that despite its originality and cogency, this theory no longer appears to be valid. Even the strictest handling of sources could not prevent Szűcs from overemphasizing and misinterpreting certain data. On the other hand, in the 1970s he had no way to know the history of Hungarian Reformation as deeply as recent fundamental research allows. The Hungarian processes of Protestantism evidently did not stem from Franciscan friaries, even though some of the first Hungarian reformers came from the Franciscan order.

However, those who condemn Jenő Szűcs because of his determinism – of whatever direction – misunderstand him. In the 1970s, he had ceased to believe even in this above-mentioned, reversed social-determinism – neither in his studies on Dózsa nor in any other writings. "1514 in Hungary has a special place in the series of European peasant movements from the point of view of the history of ideas because it only took three short weeks for the ideological motive to exceed the concept of 'controlled' feudalism and to reach the thought of a radical transformation of the entire social order in a way that the leitmotiv is not

26 Imre Bán, "Dante és a joachimizmus," in *Eszmék és stílusok* (Budapest: Akadémiai Kiadó, 1976), 21.

27 Cf. Howard Hotson, "Anti-Semitism, Philo-Semitism, Apocalypticism, and Millenarianism in Early Modern Europe. A Case Study and Some Methodological Reflection," in *Seeing Things Their Way. Intellectual History and the Return of Religion*, ed. Alister Chapman, John Coffey, and Brad S. Gregory (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 2009), 91–133, esp. 95–98.

28 Imre Bán, "Chiliasztikus és apokaliptikus hiedelmek a reneszánsz korban," in *Költők, eszmék, korszakok*, 65–74 (Debrecen: Kossuth Egyetemi Kiadó, 1997), 73.

29 Frances A. Yates, *The Rosicrucian Enlightenment* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1972).

30 Cf. Sándor Óze, *Apokaliptikus időszemlélet a korai reformáció Magyarorszáján (1526–1566)* (PhD diss. Hungarian Academy of Sciences, 2011); Zoltán Csepregi, *A reformáció nyelve. Tanulmányok a magyarországi reformáció első negyedszázadának vizsgálatára alapján* (Budapest: Balassi Kiadó, 2013).

mystics (although of course there are certain chiliastic traits) and—as far as we know—the principle of common goods does not even appear,” Szűcs wrote.³¹ Thus, in a universal understanding of culture – encompassing the whole of history – Szűcs saw ideology as a part of social changes, as a force that forms these changes, but which changes itself in the process. This vision shows meaningful parallels with the view of history of Szűcs’s contemporaries from the French Annales School—Duby, Le Goff, Ariès and others.³² It is not by chance that more than a decade later, when Szűcs had already become world-famous, the leading figure of Annales, Fernand Braudel, wrote the preface to Szűcs’s short book *The Three Historical Regions of Europe*.³³

Szűcs presented the ideology of observant Franciscans participating in Dózsa’s peasant revolt as complicated and controversial: “this movement started out in the thirteenth century as the inside aim at reforms of a spiritual motive of the Franciscan order (and more extensively, the whole Church) and also appeared as the ardent defender of the authority of a non-spiritual nature of the Church. [...] The nature of observance is such that the same soil grew heretic and quasi-heretic behaviors and such strong representatives of *ecclesia militans*—in some respects similar to later Jesuits—as James of the Marches (Giacomo della Marca) and John of Capistrano (Giovanni da Capestrano), both playing a part in Hungarian history,” the historian emphasized.³⁴ Szűcs was close to observing that the difference between an inquisitor and an “apostate” heretic is almost unnoticeable: they share the same culture and speak the same “language”; and their interpretation and consideration depends only on the place, time and the person itself.

We cannot help but notice the deep skepticism with which Jenő Szűcs – in connection with the Dózsa revolt – looked at the link between the intellectual élite and mass movements, between theory and practice. According to Szűcs, the typical behavioral pattern of Franciscan observance was the search for balance: “the Observants were in constant struggle with the divergent trends – of different directions – emerging in their own circles”.³⁵ Their whole activity was nothing but a heroic-illusionistic attempt at reconstructing the “broken order.” For Jenő Szűcs, the most important historical lesson of Dózsa’s peasant war was the fact that the practice of “revolution” reinterprets, absorbs and suppresses ideologies and ideologists.

31 Szűcs, *Nemzet és történelem*, 618.

32 Peter Burke, *The French Historical Revolution. The Annales School 1929–89* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1990).

33 Jenő Szűcs, *Les trois Europes*, trad. par Véronique Charaire, Gábor Klaniczay et Philippe Thureau-Dangin, préf. de Fernand Braudel (Paris: L’Harmattan, 1985).

34 Idem, *Nemzet és történelem*, 632.

35 Idem, “Ferenccs ellenzéki áramlat,” 412.

Jenő Szűcs was not a Marxist. But while reading the essays on Dózsa, we cannot forget about the problems of the era in which these texts were written. After the Prague Spring in 1968, significant layers of Hungarian intellectuals were looking for a way out of the hopelessness caused by the evaporation of faith in “kind socialism.” The intellectuals of ’68 were also characterized by the unresolvable ambivalence, the “ideological instability,” the constantly re-emerging breaks that Szűcs mentioned in connection with the observant ideologists around Dózsa. In the years following 1968, many Hungarians could identify with the medieval intellectuals who considered themselves reformers, “re-constructors of the broken order,” who were, however, simply “false brothers” in the eyes of power, their restlessness seen as a simple revolt; as you read in the above-mentioned formula: *falsorum fratrum rebellio*.

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