



Bob Dent. *Budapest: A Cultural History.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007. xi + 237 pp. \$15.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-19-531495-3.



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Cultural Archaeology for Travelers

The changes of the past two decades, beginning with the decay of Hungary's socialist system and culminating in the country's admittance into the European Union in May 2004, have transformed the way in which Budapest is seen in the English-speaking world. As Budapest has become a major destination for tourists and business travelers alike, little has been published beyond tourist guides in English to satisfy the demand generated for knowledge of the culture and history of the city. This is the market that Bob Dent aims to reach in his "cultural history" of Budapest. His work succeeds admirably and fills a gap in the available literature.

The visitor interested in learning more than what is contained in most tourist guides could not have a better guide than Dent. A British expatriate journalist who has lived in the city since the mid-1980s, Dent has informed British opinion on matters Hungarian since the early 1990s in a variety of publications. More recently, he has written some of the tourist guides that orient many English-speaking tourists while in the city. In this book, however, he moves beyond this material, to do justice to his considerable knowledge of Budapest, its cultural

history, and indeed, of Hungarian culture more generally. As a former British expatriate resident of Budapest myself, I greatly appreciated the enthusiasm that Dent brings to his subject.

Organizing any investigation of the culture of a city as complex as Budapest is a difficult task, and Dent has solved the problem by creating a structure that organizes his material around several themes and subjects that point to aspects of the city that visitors are most likely to experience. As such, despite its subtitle, the book is not a true "cultural history," at least not a narrative history, or historical interpretation of the city's cultural development, but a kind of archaeology. Beginning with a given subject, whether it is the role of Danube in the urban landscape, the Andr ssy  t that bisects Pest's sixth district, the institution of the coffee house, or the influence of politics in the urban landscape, Dent delves to uncover the historical phenomena that lie beneath.

It is perhaps inevitable that an academic historian reviewing the book for an academic discussion list should point to that fact that the book is a popular history. In doing so, I do not want to detract from Dent's achievement.

He has produced a fine popular history of Budapest, largely free of historical errors and clichés (some that appear in the pages will be spotted by attentive historians, though these are remarkably few and far between), one that will excite and inform those unfamiliar with Hungarian history and culture (and provide enjoyment for many of those who are familiar with them), and one that presents much of the complexity that lies behind the urban fabric. He is also careful to provide the necessary information to the reader who wishes to know more, and to delve deeper into given themes—whether literary, artistic, or historical.

For a popular history, Dent focuses largely on aspects of the city accessible to the tourist rather than the resident. The subjects of the book are those that can be found within the inner city districts of Buda and Pest. He does not deal with the outlying working-class districts of Pest, which were mostly incorporated into the city in the early years of socialist dictatorship in 1950, perhaps because the tourist is only likely to see them on the half-hour journey from the airport to the city center. Much could have been said about industrial Pest and its death in the 1990s, as market-based transformation destroyed the large industrial enterprises of the socialist years, and employment shifted decisively towards services. Such districts are now dominated by the large panel-construction, high-rise blocks built during the housing programs of the 1960s and 1970s. Older working-class communities in areas like Kispest, Úbuda, and Árpás were re-shaped, as the low-rise housing and the neighborhoods around them were displaced, profoundly re-shaping the experience of urban culture and life in the city. Although Dent touches on the realm of consumption, he fails to situate it within the recent cultural history of the city. The project of shaping a socialist consumer culture from the late 1950s until the late 1980s has been displaced over the past two decades by a process of fragmentation

typified by the world of the shopping mall and out-of-town stores and by spaces such as the “Chinese markets,” which offer cheap, low-quality goods to poorer consumers. The experience of public transport has inspired a recent, popular film—Antal Nimrod’s *Kontroll* (2003)—while the desire of many to escape overcrowded trams, buses, and metros has driven a process of motorization that has left Budapest’s roads choked with traffic. Furthermore, the desire of many middle-class families to leave the city limits sparked a process of suburbanization, which has paradoxically extended the city beyond its municipal boundaries—creating a suburban sprawl stretching along the first ten kilometers of the Budapest-Vienna motorway and northeast and southwest of the city along the Danube.

If the historical roots of “everyday” Budapest are neglected, then another theme that is underdeveloped is the complex and tense relationship between the city and the rest of Hungary, which has played a constitutive role in the development of its identity. During the period of relatively rapid economic growth between 1995 and 2006, Budapest experienced an economic boom based on financial services that left the rest of the country, except for the region of western Transdanubia along the border with Austria, way behind. Furthermore, general elections in 2002 and 2006 revealed its political distinctiveness; liberals, weak in the rest of the country, polled impressively in the capital, as did the Socialists and—at least in 2002—Hungary’s main center-Right party performed relatively poorly in Budapest in both elections, falling far behind its overall national score. It would be perhaps worth showing that these developments and the cultural, social, and political processes that lay behind them are merely the latest episodes in a longer story of divergent development, and associated cultural, social, and political tension.

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