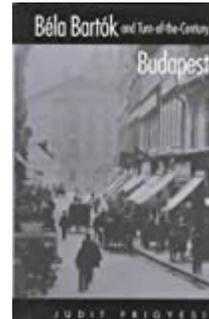


# H-Net Reviews

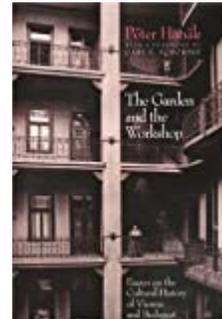
in the Humanities & Social Sciences



**Judit Frigyesi.** *Bela Bartok and Turn-of-the-Century Budapest.* Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 1998. x + 356 pp. \$15.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-520-20740-0.



**Peter Hanak.** *The Garden and the Workshop: Essays on the Cultural History of Vienna and Budapest.* Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998. xxiii + 249 pp. \$15.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-691-01554-5.



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## Culture and Urban Life in a New Key

The phrase “fin de siecle” typically conjures up images of bespectacled intellectuals sitting in cafes, sipping coffee with cigarette in hand, all the while discussing and debating the current state of the human condition. It was, after all, the last time such intellectuals could contemplate the dramatic changes of the Nineteenth Century – technological, political, social, and, of course, cultural – without the burden of the Great War or other subsequent calamities. Some of those who lived during this epoch encountered a richly textured age of seemingly endless possibilities, technological, ideological, and otherwise. For

others, it was a time of uncertainty and angst. The challenge for present-day scholars trying to understand the fin de siecle lies in paring away a century of upheaval and returning to an earlier age in which neither pessimism nor optimism had yet been tainted by the excesses and horrors of the Twentieth Century. In this regard, Judit Frigyesi and the late Peter Hanak have contributed significantly to our understanding of this bygone age.

In a sense, the two books could not be more different. Hanak’s is a collections of essays that examine this

age from all angles and embody the culmination of a lifetime of research, thought, and insight. Frigyesi's is a case study in the culture of the age, an attempt to elucidate the complexities of the time through the works of a single composer and his relationship with a poet, which, in many ways, builds on and responds to the earlier works of Hanak. Together, they add a crucial dimension to our understanding of the complexities of the age by coupling the comparatively well-known cultural world of Vienna – so aptly portrayed in the novels of Arthur Schnitzler and Frederic Morton and in the scholarly work of Carl Schorske – to the relatively less accessible world of Budapest.

This coupling lies at the heart of the *fin de siècle*, not least of all because of the multi-layered relationship between Vienna and Budapest, two cities, in Hanak's words, "bound by a common destiny, tradition, and culture yet divided by their history, character, tradition and culture as well...although they shared the same framework of state and enjoyed the same prosperity and cultural fluorescence under the [Habsburg] Monarchy, their rivalry, mutual suspicion, social structure, and mentality drove a wedge between them." (p. xiv) Indeed, neither the emergence of Vienna nor Budapest as major centers of European culture during the second half of the Nineteenth Century can be fully comprehended without the other. The rise of Vienna from an extended imperial palace-fortress complex at the end of the Eighteenth Century into a major European metropolis, no less than the rise of Budapest from a fishing village and castle in 1800 into a major European city a century later, resulted from a common set of circumstances: a massive immigration and in-migration made possible by the attenuation of antiquated privileges, which allowed thousands of individuals for the first time to consider relocating to the heretofore inaccessible capitals.

Migration and, in particular, urbanization, is an important sub-text in Hanak's cultural history. On a fundamental level, the rapid increase in the population of Budapest and Vienna, among other factors, left city leaders and planners little choice but to redesign along more rational lines. Thus it is not surprising, as Hanak notes, that the tearing down of the walls of Vienna in 1857 and the construction of bridges connecting Buda and Pest took place at a time of rapid and unprecedented population growth, and that these developments were followed a series of others aimed at managing a larger urban population: absorbing suburbs in the case of Vienna, amalgamating Pest, Buda, and Obuda in 1872 in the case of Budapest, and constructing a stable range of communal util-

ities, first in Vienna, later in Budapest, including street lighting, pedestrian walkways, and accessible supplies of fresh water.

At the same time, Hanak notes further, the expansion and development of the two cities did not proceed haphazardly, but, on the contrary, were tempered by an unstated but, in retrospect, clear objective of elite society to maintain their preeminent position in the revamped cities. In Vienna, Hanak notes, because the districts inside the Ring are not easily accessible from outside, "the ring...plays the part of the old town walls. It shields the residence of the court, the imperial nobility and the bureaucracy and the imperial haute bourgeoisie from the lower-middle, middle, and working classes." (p. 12) Thus, Hanak notes further, the way in which the Ring was constructed determined the course of cultural development in Vienna, "serving less to perform modern urban functions than to express a sense of historical authenticity, greatness, and dignity." (p. 12) In Budapest, the erection of the Sagarut, now Andrassy Boulevard, accomplished a similar aim, by creating, in Hanak's words "a broad, spacious promenade expressive of Budapest's status as a great city. Hanak leaves no doubts in the minds of his readers that, in the context of Vienna and Budapest, urban life, culture, and power are intimately related and perhaps inseparable. A cynic might assume that Hanak is being led astray by an overly active preoccupation with class tensions and the role of the intelligentsia, but this is incidental to a convincing portrait of the relationship between culture and politics.

This connection leads Hanak to a central paradox of the period and a central theme in this book: the rich culture of the *fin de siècle* took shape during the waning decades of the empire and amidst growing national tensions that would eventually explore and tear the empire asunder. Neither the political decline of the empire nor nationalist impulses, however, diminished the allure of the two capitals. On the contrary, if anything Vienna and Budapest intellectuals – whether of the Vienna garden or Budapest workshop variety – displayed a transnational confidence, and, when they criticized the shortcomings of the age, they couched these criticisms in universal terms: European or human society was flawed, not Viennese or Hungarian society. From this, Hanák claimed, the argument followed that, for example, Anti-Semitism was not a uniquely Viennese or Central European phenomenon, but a larger European one. As he points out in a highly illuminating essay on the images of Jews and Germans, there were simply too many contradictory images of these supposed outsiders – some embracing, oth-

ers antagonistic – to presume a uniform attitude toward Germans or a common Philo- or Anti-Semitism. They were, of course, salient differences within the world of the fin de siècle, that is, between Budapest and Vienna. Hanak pays closest attention to the stated aim of culture in the two capitals. Viennese culture aimed inward, with a goal of reflecting on the complex interplay between reality and illusion, “to listen to the grass grow and the tremors of the soul, an instinctive, somnambulant surrender to any expression of beauty,” hence the metaphor of a garden. (p. 68) Budapest culture, on the other hand, aimed at affecting public life, in particular, of combating backwardness and wrenching the obstinate Magyars from their age-old customs, traditions, and privileges. This placed the Hungarian intelligentsia, much of which was of noble origin, in an awkward position, which they resolved, as Hanák notes, “by setting only its ideals and not its life before the public, and showed tangible reality in an easy-to-understand, naturalistic form.” (p. 79)

Much of what Hanak writes about this period will be new to many readers, but he addresses more familiar topics as well, most notably the debate over the connection – or lack of it – between creativity and marginality, a pivotal point in previous discussions of the culture of the period, which, when the dust settles, has turned out to be largely an attempt to explain the disproportionate Jewish role in Viennese culture. Here Hanak’s rich knowledge of Budapest in addition to Vienna allows him to liberate himself from conventional parameters of this debate, if only because he has already demonstrated that there was no uniform Anti-Semitic image of Jews. With this shackle no longer an impediment, Hanak is able to look more broadly at the marginality of certain intellectuals, such as Einstein and Freud. Hanak challenges contemporary claims that attributes Einstein’s greatness to his connection with a Jewish circle in Prague and to “Jewish cosmological-mystical thinking.” Rather, he sees Einstein not as an alienated Jew but as a man who “belonged wholeheartedly only to the universe and not to any nation, country, macro-community or small group.” Only such a man Hanak suggests, “could comprehend the final law of relativity as the natural state of existence.” (p. 161) Thus, Hanak does not discard the connection between marginality and creativity, but refines it into a more usable proposition and historical tool.

Ultimately, however, this a book about culture, not least of all music, literature, and poetry. Hanak’s probing essay on Endre Ady restores this pivotal yet often overlooked – by non-Hungarian scholars – to his deserved place of prominence. Hanak’s work, in this respect, laid an important cornerstone for the pioneering work of Judit Frigyesi on the music and cultural milieu of Bela Bartok. Frigyesi’s task is, in one respect, more daunting than Hanak’s: she must explain musically complex compositions to a lay audience while placing this music in a broader, cultural context. Students of Bartok the composer will discover that Frigyesi’s analysis and contextualization open new doors toward understanding not only what he wrote, but why he wrote certain pieces earlier and others later in his career.

While I have no pretensions of fully understanding the musicological dimensions of this book, it is clear that Frigyesi has succeeded in her latter aim. Her ability to negotiate the treacherous boundary between musicology and cultural history was facilitated by two methodological decisions that make this book an excellent companion volume to Hanák’s collection essays: first, she examines Bartók in connection with Ady, allowing the poetry of Ady to illuminate the cultural significance of his composer-colleague’s music; second, she avoids the pitfalls of overly-simplistic taxonomy, classifying Bartók neither as a national composer nor as a composer entirely devoid of national sentiments. For Frigyesi, both Bartok and Ady intermeshed their connections to their culture and to their environment without compromising their ability to write music or poetry that addressed the issues of the day in universal terms. Frigyesi offers a refreshing alternative to nationalist portrayals of Bartók, and it would be equally refreshing to read similarly balanced and nuanced studies of other composers conventionally associated with a particular national cause. Like Hanák, her knowledge of the Hungarian side of the fin de siècle, adds a crucial piece toward solving and understanding this many-sided puzzle.

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