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*Comparative Hungarian Cultural Studies*, an ambitious collection of essays on Cultural Studies endeavours to decipher the transmutation of the concept of culture within Hungarian socio-political-cultural contexts and attempts to offer a cultural evaluation that commends the holistic view of culture. Edited by Steven Tötösy de Zepetnek and Louise O. Vasvári, the essays add to the scholarship of Hungarian culture dealing with issues on culture, history, literature, arts, gender, cinema and media. The approach is “inclusive, multilingual, intertextual, interdisciplinary, and transnational” (25) in supposition and praxis. In the introductory chapter Tötösy de Zepetnek and Vasvari introduces comparative studies as a method to contextually engage in a scholarship on Hungarian culture. The instability in locating definitive terminologies notes the challenges in conceptualization of proper methodology for the study of culture. Culture is defined as “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). Comparative studies deal with the “how” than significance of the object of study emphasizing intra-disciplinarity, multidisciplinarity and pluri-disciplinarity. The term Hungarian is discussed through diverse non-neutralizing and/or non-essentialist discourses on identity revealing the complexity of the term.

The book is divided into five parts: Part I, “History, Theory and Methodology for Comparative Hungarian Cultural Studies” includes articles on culture, literature and identity. Andras Kisery’s article is a study on literary historians Tivadar Thienemann and Istvan Hajnal whose contribution to literary and cultural studies maintains that literature in all its form, oral, manuscript and media offer the foundation for literary history that alters the culture. Steven Jobbit argues that the nationalist geographer Ferenc Fodor’s psychological
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examination of post-World War II Hungarian geography is due to the disappointment with the nationalist scheme. Vasvari’s critical investigation of the novel Asszony a Fronton as a “life writing” highlights the story of a woman whose struggle with chauvinistic and abusive husband makes her a pilgrim in search of identity. Part 2, “Comparative Hungarian Cultural Studies of Literature and Culture” is a reconfigurative assessment on representative texts and Jewish studies. Gyorgyi Horvath’s “Hungarian Literary Criticism and the Memory of the Socialist Path” is an excellent essay that deals with the challenges of literary autonomy and commitment to the political within the aesthetic and ideological realm. She picks narratives from Hungarian literature that has political lenience through authoritarian means. The essay brings out the merits of progressive criticism anticipating a change that would lead to a democratically inclined literary-political criticism. Lilla Toke’s article on absurd as a form of literature argues, giving Hungarian literary examples, absurdism as transpired out of a dialectical connection between artistic expression and historical conditions within realistic aesthetic tradition. Ilana Rosen’s article investigates the oral tradition of Central and East European Jewish Communities that echoes various socio-cultural and political predicaments of diasporic Jews. Part 3, “Comparative Hungarian Cultural Studies and the Other Arts” contains articles on music, architecture, fashion and media. Eva Federmayer discusses the gendered and racialized fabrication of a cultural space of Budapest where bodies that performs in a particular space are gendered and racialized. Ivan Sanders maintains the significance of a Hungarian Jewish operetta composer, Imre Kalman within Hungarian Culture. Catherine Portuges’s writes on Michael Curtiz, a Hungarian Jewish who made it to Hollywood. Megan Brandow-Faller’s expository essay brings out various aspects of Hungarian Art Nouveau and Hungarian cultural nationalism. Part 4, “Comparative Hungarian Cultural Studies and Gender” brings in articles on gender and sexuality. Erzsbet Barat identifies the cultural and political repercussions of female citizenship and empowerment and the manner in which the society idolizes normative sexuality rather than emphasizing the significance of sexual difference. She evinces “the invisible, hidden heteronormative structuration of the field of party politics” (200) that exists both in United States and
Hungary. Nora Schleicher follows the Spivakian trajectory in conceptualising gender as a realm stuffed with meaning about man and woman. Using observation and symbolic interactionism as the method, she analytically examines gender beyond the interconnections of gender, language and workplace. Part 5, “Comparative Hungarian Cultural Studies of Contemporary Hungary” includes articles on race, ethnicity, public life and media. Kata Zsofia Vincze’s “About the Jewish Renaissance in Post-1989 Hungary” is a study on the developments of Jewish Renaissance that brings in a restoration of a discrete cultural and ethnic identity than revisiting the Jewish religious life. She attributes each wave of Jewish renaissance with tenets: first wave was about unearthing, the second wave was constructive of Jewish ethnicity that strived for difference and the third wave had imminent influences on Hungarian culture. Ryan Michael Kehoe employs necropolitical approach to contemporary to Hungarian literature and cinema. His postcolonial approach aims at “aesthetic acts” that interrupt and subvert the imperial regimes. Laszlo Kurti’s analysis of two television programs reveals how the portrayals of Hungary’s Roma minority have changed in the contemporary media scene. Tőtösy de Zepetnek’s essay explains the plight of Jews and Roma after the end of Soviet empire where the minorities are still subjected to aversion.

Comparative Hungarian Cultural Studies is a key contribution to Area Studies and Hungarian Cultural studies. The diverse essays put together not only present the extension of scope that Cultural Studies as a discipline encompasses but also contributes to the study of Hungarian culture in detail. Certain essays are critical and innovative while others are exploratory and expository. The book, moreover, can be seen as a milestone in the Jewish diasporic cultural studies. The scope of the book, though, extended to be a study on central Europe has only two essays beyond Hungary and chiefly cover topics on Jewish studies. To locate and bring to fore the predicament of minority Jewish community through historical, cultural and socio-political studies is commendable. The title of the book proposes to be comparative but the essays do not undertake any methodical comparisons between Hungarian and/or other regional or intra-Hungarian trends. Moreover, the application of postcolonial critique in Hungarian culture might have been a novel trend only if it had been properly
appropriated and adequately substantiated. Overtly ideological positioning of cultural studies as explicated in the essays give only a lopsided vision to the dialogical and holistic approach the volume proposes. *Comparative Hungarian Cultural Studies* is a valuable collection that presents to us spectrum of Hungarian cultural themes reinforcing the ambivalent nature of culture. The book could be helpful to the undergraduate and research students of Cultural Studies, Area Studies and Jewish Studies and to the popular audience who show interest in Hungarian culture.