



DOING ANTHROPOLOGY IN HUNGARY: AN INTERVIEW WITH DR^a VERONIKA LAJOS

Hitalo Ricardo Alves Pereira

Master in Cultural Anthropology at the University of Miskolc, Hungary

<https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3399-928X>

E-mail: hitalow@gmail.com

Veronika Lajos

Associate Professor and Head of the Master's Program in Cultural Anthropology at the University of Miskolc

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0767-8426>

REVZAB
● ● ● ● ● ●

As this dossier focuses on showing different processes of Becoming Anthropologists Amidst Multilayered Precarities, in this interview, I talk with the associate professor and head of the Master's Program in Cultural Anthropology at the University of Miskolc (UM), Hungary, Dr. Veronika Lajos to know more about her processes of becoming an anthropologist in Hungary. Tackling Lajos' background's and experiences doing anthropology in Hungary, amidst precarities, what is presented here is both her personal paths in the discipline; and brief but broader view on the situation of anthropology in Hungary and its academic and professional configurations.

The interview was conducted in August of 2024, mostly through guided topics and some punctual questions. It is structured in the following order: a brief introduction of Lajos' connection with anthropology; Lajos's views on Hungarian anthropology and its institutionalization; and on the start — and contingencies — of two master's programs in Cultural Anthropology conducted fully in English in Hungary.

What is displayed here is a summarized version of the meeting.

119

Veronika Lajos' Background and Experiences in Anthropology

Hitalo: Can you provide an overview of your background in Anthropology?

Veronika Lajos: I graduated 20 years ago in Ethnography and European Ethnology, and later in History at the University of Debrecen, Hungary. At the time in the Hungarian higher education system, there was no difference between doing a bachelor's or a master's degree. Everyone did five years if they wanted to gain any degree in a university. So I majored in Ethnography and minored in Cultural Anthropology and Museology for five years. During my studies, I spent two months in Cluj-Napoca, Romania as an exchange student and half a year on an Erasmus Scholarship in Finland. In 2004, I started a PhD in European Ethnology at the same university. My research took place in Romania, focusing on a minority of Hungarian origin living in one of the villages in the North East part of Romania, called Moldavia. I ended up studying how their socio-cultural life has changed over the years between the 1940s and 2000s, and what challenges the processes of modernization and globalization have brought to a 'traditional' peasant society, the so-called Moldavian Csángós. My dissertation aimed to examine the question of adaptation to the, more often than not, radical transformation processes that took place in the macro-social environment (namely socialism



and post-socialism) and shaped the local conditions. The means of cultural adaptation were presented through one of the possible interpretations of the symbolic and ‘real’ borderline cases in the social transition that had taken place in Moldavia in the years between the 1940s and 2000s. The dissertation, based on a 10-12 months-long fieldwork and the life-story method, aimed to analyze the cultural and social processes that had promoted the application of modernisation strategies to the status of legitimate practice in the Moldavian Csángó peasant society. Thus, I wanted to know how they apply their cultural toolkit to face radical challenges of modernisation and globalisation processes and in which ways they make sense of the social and cultural transitions.

While I was doing my fieldwork I worked as a teacher of the Hungarian language for kids between the ages of four and ten, and I realized that the life-world of the Moldavian Csángó people was very complicated and multifaceted with multiple cultural and language ties (Hungarian, Romanian and Csángó). It was at this point that I began to think: is it enough for me to do ‘classical’ research work and aim to better understand and study scholarly issues or should I strive for something more in the discipline of anthropology? Well, the first problem of the Csángós was not the acquisition of the Hungarian language or the construction of a Hungarian national identity at the time. How can you think about that when you have precarious jobs, precarious everyday life and you have four to six, seven children? So, the young people went abroad and the elderly people stayed in the village, alone. What can you do with the people remaining at home when they need attention? Many questions arose when I was staying there. And that’s how I started thinking about this, the application of anthropological knowledge and understandings. I defended my PhD dissertation in 2011 but after I finished my studies as a PhD student in 2007 I started to work at the Ethnological Research Group of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences at the Department of Ethnography, University of Debrecen, Hungary. In 2017 I started to work at the Department of Cultural and Visual Anthropology at the University of Miskolc, Hungary. Since the 2010s I have become increasingly interested in participatory research, applied anthropology, feminist anthropology, and, more recently, arts-based research. I also see a continuation of my interests in what I have learned and did during my dissertation fieldwork about cultural adaptation processes and the ways in which I try to support international students when they face social and cultural challenges in very different conditions from their own.

Hungarian Anthropology

Hitalo: And how has been doing anthropology in Hungary? Can you give us a broader view of Hungarian Anthropology? Any relation with precarity?

Veronika Lajos: So, at the moment there are two departments in Hungary in which you can study anthropology. Cultural anthropology and visual anthropology. One of them is situated at the Eötvös Loránd University (ELTE), in Budapest, but they only have the Master’s program for students. The other one is at the University of Miskolc, where I work. We have both the bachelor’s program and the master’s program. Those are the only two where you can study the full majors. But there are in several Hungarian universities, or maybe in all of them, courses on anthropology within the social sciences majors, like Introduction to Cultural

Anthropology. Also, there are the Ethnography and European Ethnology departments where you have more anthropology classes, generally the history of anthropology, anthropological theory, and some subfields. However, I tend to think that the number of anthropology major programmes is sufficient because Hungary is not so big. I mean, even in Miskolc there are not so many students applying or wanting to continue in a master's of anthropology after finishing their bachelor's studies. So I'm not so sure if there is a need for more programs, however, there is a need for more anthropologists and their knowledge, skills, and competences to apply.

To be accepted as an anthropologist in Hungary is a strange situation. I don't know how this occurred exactly, but in Hungary, the career of cultural anthropology started in the 1980s, having its roots decades earlier, and it was fully accepted or recognized as a subject to teach in the Hungarian higher education system in the 1990s. And when a student in Hungary finishes a degree as a cultural anthropologist, they cannot find job descriptions wanting cultural anthropologists. Cultural anthropology, as a profession, is not yet recognized as such in Hungary. Since anthropologists have a social science diploma, they can apply for different kinds of jobs requiring general social science knowledge, although almost nobody knows what a cultural anthropologist is in Hungary, except, with exaggeration, a handful of scholarly people and some university students, as anthropology is not yet widely recognized. I think it is our responsibility now to widen the landscape for anthropology in Hungary or at least to raise attention that a profession called cultural anthropology exists. This is, even so, true that there are Hungarian non-governmental organizations, such as Anthropolis Association, PAD Foundation or Artemisszió Foundation considering themselves to be practicing anthropologists or cultural anthropologists working outside the academy. It was not until 2021 that the Hungarian Academy of Sciences recognised cultural anthropology with its own Committee on Cultural Anthropology within the system of the Hungarian Academy.

121

Anthropology in Hungary

Hitalo: As you mentioned, Hungary has two Anthropology programs: one at the University of Miskolc that has both bachelor's and master's; and one at ELTE, that only has a master's. As a recent endeavor, both departments launched English-based versions of their master's programs, and I was a student of one of them. Can you give us an overview of these programs? and their challenges and distinctions.

Veronika Lajos: We started our program at the University of Miskolc in 2021. I am the head of the program and, as you know, we started planning way earlier, with the curriculum, etc. So it's quite recent. At ELTE, they started their program earlier, maybe four or five years earlier. When we were planning to start the program in Miskolc, I talked to one of the professors working at ELTE to get some information and to see what the challenges might be, and one of the challenges they said – and I totally agree with them – is that in order to have a really good English language programme you need an employee, a native speaker, because it looks more professional, especially in writing it can also help a lot. At ELTE they could hire one after many years, but unfortunately we couldn't as it's not under my authority or decision. What I can do is invite some professors to give some lectures on different topics. However, we are the only programme in Hungary that teaches visual anthropology in English, this is



one of our unique features.

Hitalo: And Vera, how is it to teach anthropology to a majority of students who do not have a major in anthropology or social sciences, and who are coming from different parts of the world? Especially considering matters of immigrant life that sometimes can consume students' obligations and demands. Also, is there a huge difference between teaching people who are from the same country as you?

Veronika Lajos: It seems to me that international students are more motivated and willing to learn than Hungarian students. One of the reasons for this may be that international students are usually not 18-year-old students who don't know what to do or what they want, and who have probably just chosen a subject and entered anthropology. In terms of immigrant life, I think sometimes listening to students can be liberating or just enough. I also try to be an initiator of small changes at the university, so that I can help international students to feel more comfortable in Hungary and at home. Such as the two workshops I ran last autumn on cultural adaptation and how to face different stages of the cultural adaptation process. Now this autumn I am developing a course based on these workshops to try to better understand the side of international students and what they go through during their stay in Hungary.

Hitalo: Are these experiences with international students and these cultural differences also redirecting your research interests or your role as an anthropologist?

Veronika Lajos: Yes, a good question. It seems to me that I'm more and more interested in doing research and educational activities in relation to international students. Like working with the International Relations Office at the university. Probably also based on the feedback from students last year, they realized that we could work together, so they invited me again to do a workshop on cultural adaptation with international students this autumn. So yes, in a way I am opening up my role as an anthropologist in higher education. In terms of my research, I still have some reservations because I don't want to use international students as tokens. You know, it bothers me because it seems like a way of abusing my power as a professor and making use of unequal power relations. It would feel strange. Maybe I will change my mind after this new course where I also use arts-based methods for educational purposes, but I still have to think about it.

Hitalo: Returning to the English Masters' in Anthropology, do you think they have any kind of relation — direct and indirect — or do any kind of impact in Hungary or they are dislocated and just based in Hungary?

Veronika Lajos: Good question again! The answer is difficult. Maybe your work had some impact because you were working as an intern for a Hungarian Non-Governmental Organization, so your contribution was incorporated into their practicing anthropological work, but most other students do not have direct relations with Hungarians except students. And in general, the research topic of international students is not connected to any Hungarian issue. Unfortunately, on the one hand, there are not so many NGOs who consider themselves

as practicing anthropologists so they could offer international students internship possibilities in English because if that were the case, it could have an impact on Hungary or Hungarian anthropology in a broader sense. Maybe there is an opportunity here that we can seize and start to integrate international students into the Hungarian anthropological scene? I don't know the exact details about the English Cultural Anthropology MA programme at ELTE, but I think that the English master's students' work in Hungarian anthropology and society is not so much incorporated. On the other hand, the problem could also be related to communication as not all Hungarian scholars can speak English, and international students do not speak Hungarian. However, indirectly, when I try an educational activity out in the Hungarian class and it works, then I also carry that out with international students. And now, that we are talking I realize that what we also lack in our program is that we don't speak much about the institutions, research fields, topics, etc in Hungarian anthropology. International students study anthropology in Hungary but they don't know many things about anthropology in Hungary. So it's kind of weird, isn't it?!



