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Migrant children in a "monocultural" country

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> **MARGIT FEISCHMIDT** and **PÁL NYÍRI** eds.: **Nem kívánt gyerekek? Külföldi gyerekek magyar iskolákban.** (***Unwanted children? Migrants in Hungary's public education system***. Budapest: Centre for International Migration and Refugee Studies, Institute for Political Sciences, Hungarian Academy of Sciences, Sík Kiadó, Budapest: 2006)

Public discourses on Hungary's involvement in international migration are based on several contradictions. The beginning of Hungary's current migration policies and its contemporary role in international migration is closely linked with the political changes of 1989. Despite the waves of migrants, however, Hungary is still considered a monocultural country when compared with the multiethnic societies of Western states. This image of homogeneity is usually tied to the relatively low percentage of foreigners in Hungarian society and/or the relative lack of claims by extant migrant minorities – or their organizations – in regards to identity politics, legal pretensions and public representation. A historicising argument traces Hungary's preeminently monocultural image back to a more or less effective nationalization project, which also included the loss of territories with ethnically mixed populations, as deportation and assimilation.. Whatever the reason, the image of a "homogneous" Hungarian cultural has taken root. Since 1989, there has been a a visible growth of intolerance towards those who are not included in the "homogenous" Hungarian community including but not limited to a general unwillingness to recognize "new" and "old" minorities. This is clearly

demonstrated in recent Hungarian political discourses on migration. Here, the dominant mode of these debates is still the *future tense*: *"What will happen, if they would come?"*, *"What should we do, if they'll be here?"* Additionally, the subject of further EU enlargement and the possibility of Romania's and Bulgaria's accession induces fears in Hungary about migration from these countries.[1] Because these discussions focus so intently on the future, they often leave unexplored issues pertaining to migrants who already reside and work here. "Cultural homogenity" is not just a relative notion; it is also tool used to dismiss the necessity of discussions pertaining to migration and minority-related issues. Because it legitimizes the absence of recognition, justifies a lack of intercultural awareness, and presents cultural diversity as a non-entity, Hungary's "homogeneity" is highly problematic.

In*"Nem kívánt gyerekek?"* ("Unwanted children?"), these ideas and attitudes are challenged through an exploration of the experiences of foreign children in the Hungarian educational system. The book disengages itself from public discourses and instead focuses on the issues usually studied in terms of *the second or further generations of migrants*. The research sites of such studies are varied and unique, they are each invested in challenging the status quo of official programs and recommendations (e.g. the *Commission of the European Communities*) and contrasting them with extant practices.[2] In Hungary, migrant children's integration is determined by the lack of explicitly institutionalized policies. Therefore in addition to critiquing Hungary's general policy towards immigrants, the authors of the book employ different analytic strategies. The result is a polyphonic ethnography that incorporates different perspectives of children from foreign and native backgrounds, their families, the teachers, and the educational institutions in which everyday interactions occur and their mutual experiences develop. The research for "Nem kívánt gyerekek" was achieved through a research team devised by the editors. This team consisted of scholars who are specialized in different sub-topics and, because of their different areas of specialization, were able to more thourughly address and compare different discourses pertaining to migrants. This methodology, for example, allowed them to examine how migrant children correspond to the various expectations of their parents, teachers and classmates and ask questions like the following: What is the relation between a family's migration strategy and a child's educational carreer ?

[1] See: „Megijedtünk a románoktól és a bolgároktól" („We got frightened from the Romanians and Bulgarians").www.index.hu, 6th of September, 2006.
[2] . Hansen, Peo: Education in a Multicultural European Union: between Intercultural Visions and a Realpolitik of Immigration. In Migration. A European Journal of International Migration and Ethnic Relations. 1997/32: 5-40.

What kinds of cognitive patterns and practices exist for Hungarian students and teachers as they relate to foreigners?

In terms of structure, the book has two major parts. One aims to reconstruct the migrants' perspectives; the second approaches the topic from the perspective of the majority through the accounts of teachers' and Hungarian classmates. Accordingly, both parts include chapters that concern *discourses* and *cognitive patterns*; the other chapters are mainly based on the interpretation of *social contexts*, *practices* and *situations*. Emigrants of China and Afghanistan are at the forefront of the authors' considerations, and the empirical section by Pál Nyíri and Dóra Paveszka contains case studies on these immigrants.

Chinese migrants usually arrive to Hungary as traders, entrepreneurs, or as employees of the former groups. On the one hand, these people have economic relations with corporations in China; on the other, most of them have relatives in Westerns countries and/or further undertakings in the broader region. Their transnational social spaces – built by the networks of trade, information and affinity – constitute their ideas and aims pertaining to the education of their children. The transnational orientation of Chinese migrants means that they follow different consumption and social-mobility patterns than those that seem to be offered in Hungary. They understand their possibilities for success rather as correlated with both the modernizing market-economy of China and the possible carrier and success that is imagined as closely related to the Western world. Their formal and informal transnational networks also make it unnecessary to depend on local forms of social and cultural capital.

In contrast to this, the strategies of Afghani migrants reflects the fact that they arrive in Hungary as refugees. As refugees, they have access to limited resources and has one of two cultural results: either the children's and parents' expectations remained similar to those found in Afghanistan or they strove to follow the patterns of Hungarian schoolmates. Where Chinese students imagine the possiblitities of having a bureaucratic or etrepreneurial carrier in the English-speaking world, Afghani students discuss their futures as teachers or a doctors.

Although their stressed wishes for the future can be quite distant from their current social positions in both cases, the difference between Chinese and Afghani migrants discourse about success resembles their current economic or labour market positions. Children from Afghani families face more negative attitudes from Hungarian schoolmates and parents, which is not

entirely unrelated to their refugee-status and general poverty. For these children, family and community pressure to maintain traditional roles is often stronger than in Chinese families. For boys, this means an early involvement in marketplaces or other family-related businesses; for girls, this results in the abadonment of school-excursions or distancing oneself from possible Hungarian friends. Both increase the difficulties Afghani children face when in the company of their contemporaries. Chinese migrants also face similar hardships as they make social adjustments, but their broader migration strategies frame these experiences differently. The willingness to continue the previously initiated mobilization and to attempt to reach the "West" as a student or a transnational entrepreneur is encouraged by the broadcasts of Chinese satellite programs and local Chinese newspapers. These media outlets represent migrants as international pioneers of economic modernization. At the same time most of the Chinese adults do not speak the "regular" Hungarian language, and in many cases, they depend on translators – a role that is often conferred to their children. Since it makes impossible for teachers to be in communication with them, most schools frequently mention the parents' language incompetence among the primary problems, which is usually interpreted as a sign of the parents' indifference related to the education of their children. The "child as a translator" is an often mentioned phenomena within migrant communities, and among Chinese communities, it is usually tied to the highly entrepreneurial way of life that requires Chinese migrants to leave their children under the charge of a Hungarian nurse for a period of time. For similar reasons, most Chinese parents send their children to Hungarian primary schools first but later place them in an international school that promises access to then English-speaking world of global modernity. Because of these ambitions – which differ significantly from the model of success within the Hungarians school system – Chinese migrants also remain on the fringes. In Hungary, they hold a marginal social position that is based on the liminal spheres of urban life – like marketplaces, or the stigmatized eighth district of Budapest. For the children of migrant families involvement and socialization in international schools strengthen the experience of being globally modern and locally subaltern. At the same time the children from Afghan migrant families appear only in the schools owned by the state.

Although we clearly see clearly see the differences between the educational strategies of a transnational trader community and a group of migrants still positioned as refugees in the section on Chinese and Afghani migrants, there is also an appreciable imbalance in these discussions. A reason for this imbalance might lie in the different social statuses of the

migrants. Those from Afghanistan seem to be more homogenious and deprivated, so could not, therefore, be respresented in as complex a manner as Chinese immigrants. However, the varied social positions cannot completely account for the representational imbalance. Even when the topic of Afghani migration is included, the authors broadly quote external material and compare it to their own fieldwork experiences. Most of the readers may be aware of Nyíri's long term studies and his remarkable work on Chinese migration[3]. In a comparison with his own results both in this book and in his former studies, the use of quotations from the two essays of another anthropologist as a source necessarily lends itself to the impression of an imbalanced analysis (these quotations are from the works of Klára Marton, researcher of migrants from Afghanistan).

In the second part of the book, works by Zsuzsa Árendás, Pál Nyíri, Dóra Paveszka and Eszter Szilassy demonstrate a change in perspectives. In these chapters, we are introduced more directly to the discourses on and practices related to foreigners in the Hungarian schools. As we become acquainted with the views of Hungarian pupils and teachers, we gain access to "the majority perspective". These chapters embed the answers of interviewees and focus group participants in the broader discursive frameworks of intercultural relations, difference and similarity in contemporary Hungary. The accounts of these children and teachers can be read as markers of the general ambiguities related to migrants and their treatment in Hungary. While most children endeavored to show positive attitudes towards *foreigners* or *cultural differences* generally during the focus group discussions, these ideas seem only distantly related their everyday routines and concrete definitions. In these discussions, most children agreed with the statement that Hungary has too many foreigners already; at the same time, most of them agreed also that political and economic development as well as Hungary's EU-accession demands a more permissive attitude toward migrants. While the children respected the effect of migration in general terms, its practical consequences are still regarded as unfavourable. This could also be an outcome of broader social uncertainty within a transitional period. At the same time most of the teachers' accounts makes it quite clear that many of them are not addressing the issue of integration; they either failed to recognize or

[3] See among others: Pál Nyíri: *New Chinese Migrants in Europe.* Aldershot, Hampshire: Ashgate, 1999.; Frank N. Pieke, Pál Nyíri, Mette Thunø and Antonella Ceccagno: *Transnational Chinese Fujianese Migrants in Europe.* Stanford University Press, 2004.; Pál Nyíri & Joana Breidenbach (eds.): *China Inside Out. Contemporary Chinese Nationalism & Transnationalism.* Central European University Press: Budapest, New York, 2005.

veiled the existing problems foreign students face. If these differences were conceptualized, they were frequently exoticized or made into pure spectacle. The teachers' tendency to conceal the conflicts within their narratives was in a direct contradiction with the accounts of migrant pupils and, perhaps more frequently, with the narratives of refugee children. Their narratives about school experiences show that they have had to develop an intensely reflective relationship with their stigmatized position, the offences they endure, and the various methods for achieving appreciation or success among their Hungarian contemporaries that are available to them. These different experiences can be understood through the image of the self as a *translator* in both practical and moral terms.

The development of official policies for integrating foreign pupils in state-owned schools should be the task of local governments. Most of school officials believe that their school is "not prepared sufficiently" for foreign pupil enrollment, that's why they take the children's current Hungarian language-competency as the most important aspect of the their selection. Because of this, in those districts where there is a higher proportion of immigrants an informal division of labour has developed in which only a couple schools admit the "disadvantaged" migrant students. Without common integration strategy, foreign children's efficient intergration into the Hungarian educational system is at a given headmaster's discretion. If the migrant students are already in school, their prospects are also determined by the teachers' preferences. The lack of institutionalized practices for intercultural education means that methods are often improvised to handle the situations. Most teachers are not prepared to receive foreign students and are, therefore, often haphazardly experimenting with their own methods. The results of these improvised solutions vary, and success or failure can be linked to a teacher's own tolerance, creativity or lack of interest. Some teachers tend to devalue the insults that foreign students experience while at school, regarding it only as a normal form of rivalry among the classmates. A prevalent strategy for dealing with foreign students without Hungarian language competence is to place them into a class that is one or two years below those that would be appropriate for their age. While the usual reaction of migrant children and their families to recurrent insults or conflicts is submission, some teachers' deliberate efforts in classes or spontaneous dialogues with the pupils were able to anticipate the possible conflicts, or the outcomes of extant tensions between foreigner and inhabitant children.

In contrast to state schools, international schools make it possible to move between countries without significant changes educational styles and systems. In Hungary, several of these

schools advertise themselves in local Chinese newspapers, and in at least two such schools, the majority of students are Chinese. Unlike the state schools, international schools have developed strategies for easing xenophobic tendencies among students including but not limited to presentations of the students' different cultures throughout the school. Children feel as they are participating in the learning process more than if they were at a state school. Despite their efforts, however, these schools seem to be less affective in influencing students' mutual appreciation outside the walls of their buildings.

At the outset, the book's objectives made a conceptual distinction between the "new strangers" of Hungary and two other categories of "strangers": ethnic Hungarians from abroad and Hungary's Roma populations. This methodological division is based upon the working Hungarian concepts of "new" and "old" minorities. The latter refers to "historical minorities" – like the Roma – who have had a historical relationship to the Hungarian nation state while the former have not historically had a relationship with Hungary and whose cultural differences are relatively visible (e.g. Chinese and Afghani immigrants). Although the appearance of non-Hungarian citizens in Hungary resulted in a new system of meanings and relations, it was not independent of older prejudices. While Roma pupils were not an initial concern of this study, they frequently appeared within fieldwork discussions. As the book notes, foreignness in Hungarian schools is rarely understood as a category totally separate from the Roma. The extant discourses and practices willing position migrants and migrant children as simply *other*, a term strongly tied to the Roma in Hungary. In other words, the definitions originally used by the researchers were forced to adapt to the circumstances and definitions employed in the field. For example, both the eighth and tenth districts of Budapest have large numbers of Chinese and Roma students. The schools of these districts of the city are affected by the informal systems which places children categorized as deprived in the same educational institutions. Because of this system, "disability" and "social backwardness" became inseparable from cultural or ethnic categories – and in the case of migrant children with unfamiliarity with the language. The category of *other* incorporated all of these groups. From the majority perspective, the eighth district of Budapest and its marketplaces (where many of the Chinese and Afghan families are living and working) connect migrants with ethnicized urban-poverty, practically synonymous with the Roma in Hungary. For Afghani immigrants, skin colour also contributes to this categorization, and classmates often taunt the children or their families with the term "Roma." As the authors rightly mention, the Roma is an important reference point for these migrants. In order to more effectively control their

image and the negative stereotypes concerning them in Hungary, these migrants attempt to differentiate themselves from this stigmatized minority. Hungarian pupils also discursively position migrants and Roma in parallel, but it was clear that the discursive styles regarding the Roma are more stable than the newer and more fluid characterizations of foreigners. Consequently, the Roma's general public image as "strangers" still prescribes several attitudes towards newly arrived foreigners. Several of the characteristics assigned to migrants by the majority are derived from older and mainly Roma-related stereotypes; migrants are forced to develop methods to cope with this categorization. In methodological terms, this means that the authors' original conceptualization of their object differs from its everyday practice. Although nearly every chapter of the work includes some reflections on the Roma and the question of categories, they still remain the "hidden actors" of the book, given voice by others but rarely allowed to speak.

To broaden the perspectives of the research, the last chapter of the book by Margit Feischmidt, Ilona Fogarasi, and Zsuzsanna Vidra presents an overview about the current debates on migration, multiculturalism and the Western educational systems. The basic assumption of this chapter is that educational policies are always embedded in a broader political or social context, hence they are representing the broader discourses related to cultural, ethnic, religious or "racial" differences of the given political unit. The authors identify two different principles of these policies: the programs of *multicultural*, and *civic* education. The first program emphasizes the necessity of representation and recognition concerning the opressed minority's culture, and calls for the transformation of the given state's cultural hegemony. The critics of this approach argue that the notion of multiculturalism is just veiling the problems without real solution. The main assumption of the second program is that the institutions of the democratic system should create the opportunity for equality, which cannot be attained solely by the validation of cultural peculiarities. Accordingly the representatives of this approach are calling for the possibilities of postnational political communities and the new definitions of citizenship.

By comparing educational policies and discourses from the US, Great-Britain, Germany and France, they show that Hungarian schools shy away from some questions, that other educational systems willing to embrace – though not necessarily easily. The informations about co-existing cultures in the country are still missing from the schedules of the schools. These problems center around issues of cultural or social alterity, and as Feischmidt argues,

these problems have a historical precedent. The problems and otherness that stigmatize the Roma and ethnic-Hungarian minorities from neighboring countries also prevent the success of foreign children in the Hungarian school system. Until these problems are redressed in broader social discourses, no one can expect that the solutions will be found within school system. While some conceptual assumptions and divisions seem to be open to further negotiations, this study is certainly one of the most inspiring in Hungary's recent social scientific literature. It offers not only in-depth ethnographic descriptions but can also serve as a departure point for future discussions among a social scientists, policy makers and everyday participants in the Hungarian school system.