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Introduction

> Power, belief, wealth: the questions about human society are clustered around these notions. They concern the manner in which a society controls its members; the manner in which it forms their thought, and in which their thinking sustains it; and the manner in which it keeps alive and uses its resources.

These are the opening sentences of Ernest Gellner's most technical and least known book: *Saints of the Atlas* (1969), his anthropological fieldwork report on the Berbers of the High Atlas. The tripartite division of the questions about society into those concerning power, belief and wealth correspond to the fields covered in PPE, the degree subject which Gellner read at Oxford. Yet his approach to all three notions is encapsulated in this short epigraph. It is to be noted that he puts the stress on *society*, not on cultures or individuals; that he writes of *ideas formed by society* rather than vice versa; and that he implies that *resources belong to a society*. He thus shows himself favourable to a sociological as opposed to a cultural or psychological approach to social phenomena; to an anti-idealist view in philosophy; and he envisions resources being deployed by societies rather than markets, classes or individuals.

Gellner's immense range is usually taken as simple diversity, forays into separate realms united only by his interest in them. A more demanding yet more fruitful way to comprehend his range is to see it as a single line of thought that unites problems and ideas around which the academy has put artificial disciplinary boundaries.

The grand and ambitious scale of Gellner's thought was not perhaps apparent at the beginning. His first published article, 'Maxims', appeared in the philosophical journal *Mind* in 1951. His most recent book at this writing, *Plough, Sword and Book* (1988) attempts to give an overall explanation of the entire sweep of human history. How did a trained analytical

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philosopher come to be a theorist of society and of history? The usual view treats the fact that Gellner has contributed to all the 'fields' he had studied for PPE as a personal quirk. Such a view is congenial to fellow academics, to whom the parallel structure of hermetic departments is a natural feature of their world. Those who dabble in several fields are oddities, no more. A less superficial view seeks the unity of Gellner's thought as it has evolved from within analytical ordinary language philosophy out towards an overall view of the history of mankind.

As a young philosopher fresh out of Oxford, Gellner voiced various doubts from within about analytic ordinary language philosophy in his articles of the nineteen fifties and in his best-selling book *Words and Things* (1959). With hindsight we see clearly that he was intrigued by what he has taught us to think of as the sociological aspects of Wittgenstein's views of language in general and concepts in particular, but that he was simultaneously repelled by the linguistic idealism that engulfed it and the failure of its adherents to attend to empirical research of any sort. In the notorious final chapter of the book, he asked whether there was significance to the fact that ordinary language philosophy was invented and perpetuated by a professoriate lacking scientific and mathematical education, and operating in a tutorial teaching system that placed a premium on verbal fluency and rhetorical skill. This was reflexive, since the question was Wittgensteinian, based as it is on the thesis, Wittgensteinian par excellence, that meaning is grounded in forms of life. Nevertheless, his asking the question enraged the Wittgensteinian professional philosophers just because it took seriously and applied to them the very idea that they were proposing: observation of social institutions and their daily practices are part of daily verbal practices. Given that these philosophers were engaged in verbal practices of sorts, he offered explanations for their verbal conduct, indeed for the rise of a philosophical school and its influence. They were enraged not only because they were given their own medicine and dissected with their own scalpel: they viewed language as ordinary when put to ordinary use, but they took their own use as rather extraordinary, as therapeutic, as bringing concepts back to where they belong. But where does the concept of bringing back belong to? And where do concepts belong to, and

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where do they all come from? His critique of ordinary language analytic philosophy was that in its systematic oversight of these questions its social ambience became not a real society inhabited by real people but a society of concepts, an idealistic ambience.

At the time of *Words and Things* Gellner was teaching in that hive of the social sciences the London School of Economics, a circumstance that may well have been fortuitous. The criticism of linguistic idealism which he pressed home owed much to Marx, Durkheim and Weber, who are usually taken as founding fathers of the social sciences. But Gellner showed in diverse studies that their interests were philosophical: it was their following the argument wherever it led that drew them into social theory. All of this did not receive the attention it deserved. It was easier, at a time when the social sciences had a very poor standing in the British academic hierarchy, to treat his arguments as *ad hominem*; that hierarchy was indignant over the corollary to his view, that he characterised established philosophers, if not the whole of the philosophical establishment, as disingenuous.

The sociology of intellectuals, why and how they thought as they did, has continued to preoccupy Gellner throughout his career. *Words and Things* and many subsequent essays offered his views of academic philosophers in Britain and America as a professional guild. Other groups of intellectuals that Gellner has written about include social scientists, especially anthropologists; the Soviet and East European intelligentsias, especially the social scientists among them; psychoanalysts and other psychologists. His works on Islam belong to this genre also: he has constantly focused on the interplay between strands of thought in Islam and the way they upset and alter social organisation. He has also made a special study of nationalism, which is a preoccupation of both intellectuals and ordinary citizens in the modern era, and he managed to characterise it in an intellectual manner that reflects a social situation. In order to be effective the ideas of nationalism had to be comprehensible by intellectual and simpleton alike. Indeed, Gellner's theory of nationalism could be described as the quest, socio-economically based, for a common intellectual denominator.

The sociology of intellectuals, is, however, sociology. Gellner began as a philosopher; the search for an underlying problem

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in his work might better zero in on a philosophical one. The dispute between realists and idealists is perhaps what underlies Gellner's interest in the sociology of intellectuals. Around what problem does this dispute centre? That is not easy to specify. Crudely, the problem can be put as, which comes first, human thought about the world or the material world? Put like that, today's common sense (of the scientific and industrial modern world) would see no contest: the material world came first. But let us replace the material world with the social. Do we think about how we want society to be and then alter it, or are we, as products of society, already thinking in terms and categories that derive from society? Common sense lends itself to no easy dismissal of this problem. In Marxist idiom this becomes the question, what are the determinations of consciousness?, in Gellner's own idiom these are the issues of *Thought and Change* (1964) and *Legitimation of Belief* (1975).

Where does Gellner stand on the issue? As an Enlightenment thinker he is plainly attracted to materialism rather than idealism. But he does not think society can be wholly reduced to or explained by material factors. Thought plays a role. What role? The answer is a three-part one. First there was the pre-modern world; second there was a transition; third there is the modern world. Gellner thinks that for much of human life on earth social organisation was prior to and dominant over thought. Then things changed and the scientific revolution became possible. After the scientific revolution, and within its parameters, some thought managed to transcend its social determinations and take on an independent power to shape the world. Gellner has put this rather vividly in his image of there being a Big Ditch between the modern world and its precursor. The aspect of the Ditch that interests him is the nature of the thought-systems on each side, the differing relationships they have to social organisation, and the mysterious means by which mankind crossed the Ditch.

Beyond the Ditch, in our human past, there were thought systems which were highly varied. Early Gellner treated this diversity as without cognitive interest because of the pervasive error in those thought systems. Thus in that pre-modern world it was the forms of social organisation that interested him, not the ideas. More recently, especially in *Plough, Sword and Book*,

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he has shown much greater awareness of the importance of intellectual developments within the agrarian era. The conditions necessary for the escape from 'the cosy social cocoon of early man' are connected to the social change brought about by surplus and by literacy. The manipulation of literacy by the clerisy – scripturalist religions – and the possibility, inherent in writing, of disembodied thought, make possible the emergence of scientific thought. His view of the decisive importance of the emergence of scientific thought has remained unchanged. In scientific thought we witness the birth of a new form of power, cognitive power, a development with immense social implications. Utterly new forms of social organisation become possible, totally new demands for the improvement of life-chances are realistic. But the comfortlessness of the world as scientific thought views it ensures that it must co-exist with a re-enchantment industry, a cognitive Disneyland.

The actual world today consists of a few societies in which modern scientific thought is dominant, even if not without challenge, and other societies in various phases of crossing the Ditch. Thus pre-modern social forms persist into this modern period, so the categories should not be taken as purely historical. Gellner has been very concerned with societies changing in the here and now in his writings on both the anthropology of the Islamic world and the politics of Eastern Europe. But beginning perhaps with his paper 'Our Current Sense of History' (1971), and culminating so far in his sweeping survey of human development *Plough, Sword and Book*, he has also looked at the transition to the modern world as a series of historical events.

In seeking to bring together a group of scholars who wish both to honour and to debate with Gellner, we have relied on the three-part problematic of the Ditch to organise the volume. The authors brought together in this book have tackled problems either on one side of the Ditch (Part I: The pre-modern world) or the other (Part III: Modernity and its discontents), or the travails of crossing the Ditch (Part II: Transitions to the modern world). We thus think to do justice to both the range and the most current formulations of Gellner's ideas.

In Part I, The pre-modern world, there are three papers which offer new ideas about the pre-modern condition. Colin

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Renfrew tackles the major question of the spread of human beings across the globe as it is discernible in the pattern of linguistic dispersion. He attempts a major synthesis and explanation of the present evidence which, if accepted, would clarify the outlines of the prehistory of mankind. The proliferation of many forms of this major human innovation of language was of course essential groundwork for the possibility of thought on either side of the Ditch. A.M. Khazanov also attempts to synthesise and clarify current evidence, in this case about the movements and migrations of the nomads in the vast area of Central Asia. Gellner has held that the extraction of surplus gave incentive for brute force to commandeer and utilise that power. If this implies that in the absence of such predatory force there would be fairness and equality, account would now have to be taken of the powerful argument put forward by E.A. Wrigley, to the effect that poverty, rather than exploitation, was a structural feature of traditional societies.

In Part II, Transitions to the modern world, Sir Karl Popper and Alan Macfarlane offer further suggestions on factors affecting the transition, in the Mediterranean and the British Isles, respectively. Sir Karl Popper looks to a single invention, popular marketing of the proto-book, Macfarlane to a complex of circumstances unique to Britain. Nationalism often plays a major role in contemporary transitions to industrialisation, but Michael Mann connects its European form to geopolitical power politics. Reflecting on the historical factor of individualism, Ronald Dore raises the question of what kind of world we can expect from the new era of high technology industrialisation that, as in Japan, may owe little if anything to individualism.

In the third Part, Modernity and its discontents, the contributors cover the range of Gellner's thought, from its earliest manifestations to its most recent. Perry Anderson portrays Gellner's philosophy of the modern world as fundamentally Weberian in its problematic and its outlook. This is echoed by Joseph Agassi, who sees Gellner's secret charm as his attempt to synthesise rationalism with as much romanticism as logic permits, and his peculiarity in delineating the outcome only in stages. John Watkins urges against Gellner the universality of science by defending the idea that its methodology need have, indeed, no biasing presuppositions. I.C. Jarvie tries to show

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that Gellner's positivistic view of science prevents him from giving an account of how we get knowledge from experience. He claims that the philosophy that Gellner rejects, Popper's falsificationism, would permit him to conserve almost all the components of his system of thought and also to give a coherent account of how we get knowledge from experience.

The final five papers take up the politics of change in Europe, especially following on the collapse of the Soviet satellite régimes and the resultant questions about the viability of Marxist solutions to the discontents of modernity. Louis Dumont shows how the categories of Left and Right have evolved in France since the revolution, and how the meanings they have taken on there derive from particular circumstances. Cautious generalisation should only proceed from careful comparative work. John Dunn considers the staying power of the ideals and hope of socialism; Gerard Radnitzky challenges the basic understanding of society on which socialist thought rests. José Merquior and John A. Hall address themselves to the forms of social and geo-political organisation we may find in the modern world after the Cold War.

Our aim in assembling these essays was a volume which conformed to the spirit of Gellner's own approach to scholarship and inquiry: namely papers that would stimulate discussion not only of his ideas, but of the topics about which he has ideas. Thus, whether the authors agree with him or not, they have found his work worth engaging.

If the volume is a tribute to the range and fertility of his ideas, to the value of pushing inquiry into a single cluster of problems deeper and deeper, thus making contact with an ever-broadening range of cognate problems, our best hope as its editors is that Gellner in turn will find it fuels his project.

John A. Hall
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PART I

The pre-modern world

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CHAPTER 1

World languages and human dispersals: a minimalist view

Colin Renfrew

Entia non sunt multiplicanda praeter necessitatem

William of Occam

'Don't be afraid to be wrong', Sir Mortimer Wheeler once wrote to me encouragingly. When one thinks of Ernest Gellner it is of intellectual audacity, tempered however with tough-mindedness and refreshing and often self-critical wit. He certainly lives up to Wheeler's maxim – which is not, for a moment, to suggest that he is indeed wrong with any frequency. To be asked to contribute to a Festschrift in his honour seemed to me a daunting task. But my initial faltering wish to contribute was strengthened when my reading in the rather hazy overlap area between the fields of archaeology and language brought me to glimpse the possibility of an emerging synthesis on a grand scale, important if right, – but not yet securely documented and therefore to be judged 'premature' among sound (conservative) academics[1]. If upheld it would offer a strikingly simple view of the origins of linguistic diversity, and one conforming satisfyingly with that stern injunction, the razor, of William of Occam. It is a pleasure, however, to offer this 'wild surmise' in admiration to a scholar who seeks to perceive the broad perspective and who will respond first to any originality, and only later gently point out the objections[2].

To do so is doubly appropriate, in view of Ernest Gellner's generous response to my book *Archaeology and Language*, itself not without critics. I well member a very agreeable evening with Ernest and Susan at 9 Clarendon Street, after a seminar where the distinguished Soviet (now Israeli) scholar A.M. Khazanov had been discussing ethnicity. Khazanov told me of the 'Nostratic hypothesis', of which I had only dimly heard at that time,

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formulated by the late V.M. Illich-Svitych and by Khazanov's colleague Aron Dolgopolsky, in which a number of the language groups of Eurasia were seen as related. I went away – as so often after a visit to the Gellners – with some new ideas, new enthusiasm and some new references. The present contribution is offered in thanks for occasions such as that.

A. CONVERGENT DISCIPLINES: THE EMERGING SYNTHESIS

The pattern of languages distributed upon the map of the world has hitherto seemed a very confusing one, and one which certainly defied any kind of rational historical explanation in terms of coherent processes of culture change. Of course, for the past two centuries there have been attempts to explain linguistic relationships in historical terms by recourse to archaeology. But they have all too often relied upon the assertion of long-range and rather unexpected migrations of tribes between areas unrelated by any plausible historical links. Over the past few years, however, there have been developments in the otherwise not traditionally related fields of palaeolithic studies, language classification, archaeological theory and molecular biology, which may for the first time all be leading in the same direction. It is possible now to indicate some areas of convergence and to suggest the outlines of what may be an emerging synthesis, as well as to pose some questions which remain to be answered.

The several, potentially converging strands are as follows:

1) The recognition that the fully-modern human species, *Homo sapiens sapiens*, seems to have emerged in Africa about 100,000 years ago, and that the human population of the world today is the result of the dispersal of this new species, and its replacement worldwide of earlier hominid forms. In Europe Neanderthal Man, *Homo sapiens neanderthalensis*, is on this view no longer seen as an ancestor of modern humans, an intermediate link in the evolutionary chain, but simply as an extinct branch. The extinction will have come about some 35,000 years ago in the face of the relatively rapid dispersal of modern humans. This view is now widely advocated, although there are influential dissenters who would argue for local transitions

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