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# Culture, Identity, and Politics

**Ernest Gellner**

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## Preface

The nineteenth century was the age of nationalism. It was also the age in which the great secular ideologies emerged, and it was the period during which the social sciences came into being. The three events are not unrelated. The turbulence and instability which were undermining the old order naturally led some men to try to understand what was happening, to investigate the very foundations of society, to grasp the principles of the new social forms which were emerging. It led others to try to change the world, or specify the directions in which it should change.

The present essays are primarily concerned with the theories and reactions provoked by fundamental social change in this and the last century. But they are also concerned with the deep structure of that change itself. One essay deals with the nature of the new political principle of nationalism, and relates it to the ideas of the foremost French theorist of social cohesion, Émile Durkheim. Another one deals with a man who has been unjustly forgotten, but who provided Durkheim with one of his central ideas: Émile Masqueray. This Frenchman carried out most of his important work in Algeria, and his ideas exemplify the impact of the new colonial experience on European thought. The ideas themselves have had an enormous, though as yet unacknowledged, impact on modern social anthropology.

Durkheim's theorising neither underwrote nor repudiated modern nationalism. Bronislaw Malinowski, the main founder of contemporary anthropology, in effect used the social sciences as an alternative to nationalism. Recent Polish research into his youth and the intellectual dilemmas and influences which formed him have made this plain. He fused romanticism and positivism in an altogether new way, which made it possible to investigate the old communities in the round, but which at the same time refused to accord political authority to the Past. His famous synchronicism was not merely a charter of intensive fieldwork and a means of repudiating evolutionist speculation, but also a way of rejecting that nationalist manipulation of the past for cur-

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rent purposes which was so characteristic of Central and Eastern Europe. The essay on Hannah Arendt analyses another and more complex attempt by an intellectual to come to terms with romanticism and its frequently lethal political implications.

Two of the essays are case studies, attempts to observe what happens in a post-revolutionary situation in our age. One of the revolutionary regimes is a communist one, the other, a Shi'ite Muslim fundamentalist one. The real conditions prevailing under socialism provide an interesting check on our theories concerning the potential of industrial society; so does the Iranian revolution. The former illuminates the strain between a society based on cognition and technological growth, and the imposition of a unique social ideology; the latter corrects any facile theory of the secularisation of our world. The third essay which belongs in this group investigates the moral problems which face any researcher into authoritarian societies. These problems have to be faced, whether or not they have neat or satisfying solutions: we must needs try to understand our authoritarian neighbours, and to do so, we must talk to them. How far may we go in attempting to explore and understand, without endorsing the unacceptable?

Finally, four essays deal with substantive problems or aspects of contemporary industrial society: its egalitarianism, its celebrated 'disenchantment', and the social and philosophical difficulties it faces in its endeavours to secure legitimation. One of these is highly abstract, and considers what kind of logical schema could possibly be available for the self-vindication of our social order. What premisses remain at our disposal which could serve for the legitimation of our moral order?

All the essays circle around the troubled relationship of state, civil society, identity, culture and legitimacy. These relationships have assumed a radically new form in our time, a form which also varies from place to place, and which continues to develop. The preoccupation with the range of our options, and with what constrains them, gives these essays their unifying theme.

Ernest Gellner  
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