

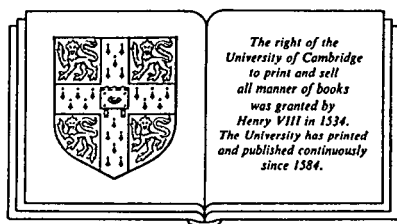
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Ernest Gellner
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Relativism and the Social Sciences

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Editorial preface

One of the surprises of editing several volumes of Gellner's essays has been the receipt of solicitous inquiries about when he died. Such inquiries would not be provoked before the mid nineteenth century, when the practice of one scholar's mediating the publication of the work of another was standard. With the professionalisation of the academy, mediation was ousted by patronage. Today a celebrity can write a foreword to a book by a lesser-known person, but not vice versa. This is clearly not the present case. Gellner is alive, well, and as productive as ever.

Less surprising was that our editorial work made us seem Gellner-cronics. We have indeed described ourselves as fans. This probably conjured up images of uncritical adoration of the Beatles. In the Popperian circles where we come from, being a fan does not exclude a critical attitude. How is it possible to be fans of, to value, ideas from which you dissent? Answer: ideas have to be challenging to provoke dissent: ideas, views, opinions, judgements, which we all endorse are usually trivial. The traditional rationalist view that every contribution to human knowledge, however minute, is very important, goes with the traditional view of the rational as the uncontestable – at least uncontestable in principle. Yet, being uncontestable-in-principle cannot be used as a criterion of significance.

Before we jump from the old rationalist criterion that the uncontestable is the intellectually and practically significant, to the new – Popperian – opposite criterion that the contestable is the (intellectually) significant, let us explore the grey area between the uncontestable and the contestable. There are two sides to it: firstly, exposing inconsistency; secondly, discovering new possibilities. Inconsistency is a matter of simple logic, but finding it in a person's ideas can be an intricate exercise in applied logic. Similarly with the discovery of new possibilities, e.g., destroying dichotomies. When we consider a set of ideas, theories, hypotheses, which satisfy certain conditions – certain desiderata – we seldom try to list them exhaustively, but often we have a short list. Adding to that short list is a discovery which is in a sense logical – we can

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prove it complies with the desiderata – it is applied logic. At times we can even complete the list of alternatives. For example, for the classical theory of rationality we have two and only two kinds of proof methods traditionally available – proof by observation and proof by contemplation – by the eye of the flesh and the eye of the mind. It is interesting to note that we do not know how to judge whether this list is complete or what conditions a newcomer must satisfy in order to enter it. Take divine revelation: is it a proof method? In a sense, of course, yes; in a sense, of course, no. Try to specify these senses. But do not be disheartened if you cannot. It takes a Gellner to do it.

So much for the grey area. As to the Popperian criterion that the contestable is (intellectually) the significant, one of Gellner's criticisms of it in this volume is that not all contestable ideas deserve to be contested. This brings us back to our relations to Gellner's ideas. Whether contestable or not, whether contested or not, Gellner's ideas are always valuable. They are sometimes so ordinary looking that one hardly feels like contesting them. He finds criticism which seems easy to patch up but which turns out on reflection to call for extensive overhaul. Or he discovers an alternative option which one wishes to dismiss out of hand, but which resists dismissal. In brief, Gellner's influence on his readers is as unavoidable as getting one's clothes wet while walking in the rain. If one gets soaked it is harder than expected to dry out: it turns out to have been no light April shower at all.

Gellner draws attention to inconsistencies and points out neglected workable options. How important are they, really? Gellner, charmingly, makes no claim, and humorously insinuates the claim to be moderate. His insinuations impinge on his style of writing to the point of interfering with the contents of his work: he eschews closely-knit, sustained arguments: preferring a sketch, a brief outline, a mere hint. This, we propose, is the strength and the weakness of his critical work.

It is the forte of a suggestive writer merely to hint. This leaves the working out to the reader. The writer can overlook a reply to his criticism when he thinks the overlooked reply has an overlooked rejoinder. He then seems disturbingly facile on a quick reading – but disturbingly astute on a careful one: Gellner's seeming facility is also garnished with corny polyglot–polycultural humour for accent. He skates fast over thin ice, while flapping his arms for lift. The requirement that he should be more careful and stand on solid ground amounts to insisting that he must not discover solid ground beyond the reach of the less facile and humorous among us. We therefore address readers disturbed by his levity with all due respect and suggest that they attempt to repeat his work more solidly with the aim of covering no less territory.

As to Gellner's positive ideas: some we endorse, some we reject. But we value these also. And, to repeat, one values the positive ideas of an author not necessarily when one agrees with them, much less when one deems them uncontestable, and not necessarily when one deems them contestable or contests them; rather, an author's significance stems from the questions he addresses being important and the answers he conjures to them being new, or from his defending old answers with new arguments or otherwise presenting them in a new light for reconsideration. All this Gellner does.

The agenda of this volume is not hidden, but may be worth rehearsing. Gellner's concern throughout is with understanding the nature of the modern world, partly by socio-historical contrast with the pre-modern world, partly by exegesis of the major attempts by philosophers to articulate explanations. Trained by the Oxford philosophy establishment, Gellner eventually came up with two criticisms of it: either it ignores the problem of the modern world or it offers facile attitudes towards it, or both. To understand a movement's ability to combine both, he turned to the study of society. Here the problem was addressed and so was the problem of addressing the problem. Hence, after expressing his utter exasperation with the philosophy of the Oxford establishment, he 'sociologised' that philosophy in his *Words and Things*. Indeed, he learns in due course to 'sociologise' all sorts of philosophies – which leads straight to philosophical relativism – except that he sociologises relativism itself as well.

His subsequent work can be broadly interpreted as his attempt to articulate a model to explain the modern world. This proceeds obliquely, as he criticises classical and contemporary rival models and attempts to elbow aside those who argue that the problem is a pseudo-problem: 'modern, pre-modern, what's the diff., its all relative, don't you see?' Between interpreting the whole of modern history (*Thought and Change*), carrying out concrete social scientific research to test the model (*Saints of the Atlas* and *Muslim Society*), and pondering the position of science in modernity (*Legitimation of Belief*), he had articulated his position only slowly and in fragments and, presumably, while grappling with continual corrections, modifications and new insights. His early volumes of essays were spin-offs and side-issues from this main project, the shape of which, we conjecture, may have revealed itself only piecemeal to Gellner himself. But by the time of *Spectacles and Predicaments* the pieces are no longer occasional, but rather integral building blocks of the whole edifice. In that volume and this we witness the appearance of two central themes which deserve future discussion.

The first is empiricism – Gellner's epistemological, sociological and

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moral commitment to empiricism. It is the matter, he states bluntly, of placing the wells of truth beyond the walls of the city, i.e., under the control of no group and of no interested party. Otherwise wells can be poisoned against truth, and involve the city fathers in personal and social corruption. Dare we hint that there are elements of the old shibboleth positivism here? Once more: we concur that the concern is central: the wells of truth must not be tainted, still less poisoned. Yet we would have to say that the only supplies of water we have are dammed into the social matrix and what has to be invented are not springs outside society, but, as Gellner well knows, social institutions and arrangements that make it hard to gain control of them, and which foster and reward vigilance.

The second is science; Gellner is deeply impressed by Kuhn's model of science. Kuhn may not join what Gellner has derisively called 'the pluralist chorus', but that is only because his mode of monism is deeply irrationalist and against the spirit of free inquiry that Gellner views as at the heart of science. Kuhn's model of science puts the wells of truth well within the walls, it puts them firmly under the control of the city fathers and even declares them bound by loyalty to their own edicts, whatever these be. The question whether these edicts are true is dismissed by Kuhn on the grounds that all talk of truth is pre-scientific anyway. Kuhn's radical break between pre-science and science is deceptive: it is not apposite to the problem of understanding the modern world as Gellner wishes to pose it. Less nakedly than positivism but with the same effect once more, it hands the keys of the city to the enemy. We still hope to see Gellner do a Gellnerite socioanalysis on Kuhn.

Joseph Agassi
I. C. Jarvie

Santa Monica–Toronto 1984

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