Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-63324-6 - The State of the Nation: Ernest Gellner and the Theory of Nationalism
Edited by John A. Hall
Excerpt
More information

Introduction

John A. Hall

The most striking way in which Ernest Gellner stood apart from the rest of his generation of postwar social scientists was in his concentration on nationalism. The neglect of nationalism within the academy after 1945 is easily explained: as is often the case, geopolitical events set the intellectual agenda. Nationalism was blamed for the onset of war in 1939; as statesmen paid no attention to national self-determination when dividing Germany and Korea, so scholars in their turn ignored nationalism. If there was some interest, not least in the case of Gellner himself, in decolonisation and in nation-building in the new states that resulted, it remains the case that generalised intellectual attention turned to nationalism only in the 1980s – interestingly and puzzlingly slightly *before* the break-up of the last Eurasian empire made nationalism a central topic of public concern. In these circumstances, Gellner's theory of nationalism, first adumbrated two decades earlier, suddenly received enormous attention, with *Nations and Nationalism* becoming an influential, much translated bestseller.

The circumstances of Gellner's life which made it utterly impossible for him ever to have neglected nationalism are well worth bearing in mind as background to the studies assembled in here. Both his parents were lower middle class Bohemians of Jewish background who changed their allegiance, from the German to the Czech community, to accommodate themselves to the way in which sheer demographic weight created a new form of society in Prague at the end of the nineteenth century.[1] Gellner himself grew up in a bilingual household within a genuinely multinational city. He was necessarily aware not just of Zionism, Marxism and nationalism but also of different communities, often in violent conflict with each other. After his class had sung together in his Czech primary school, for example, he volunteered to sing the same song with different words – German words, to the shocked silence of his classmates. This was the sort of event that let would-be insiders know that they would never really be accepted, especially if they came from a Jewish background. Loyalty to Masaryk's republic kept the

Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-63324-6 - The State of the Nation: Ernest Gellner and the Theory of Nationalism
Edited by John A. Hall
Excerpt
More information

family in Prague very late, so that Gellner witnessed the start of the German occupation which was to lead to the death of some of his relations. But the escape of his immediate family allowed attendance at St Albans County School for Boys and a year at Balliol College before active service at the end of the war as a member of the Czech Brigade. Gellner marched in the victory parade in Prague in 1945, but was unable to re-settle in the city he so loved. For one thing, he was appalled at the manner of the expulsion of the Sudeten Germans at this time, even though he found it entirely comprehensible. For another, he could see – or so he claimed in later years – that Czechoslovakia was in for a very bad time: there was limited active opposition to communism because the Czechs had no doubt that Germany would revive and no trust that the West would protect them should that revival react to the political and ethnic cleansing in which they were then engaged.

Thinking through these experiences necessitated theorising nationalism. Most obviously, the marvellous extended parable of 'Megalomania' and 'Ruritania' that stands at the heart of *Nations and Nationalism* demonstrates identities to be constructed and chosen, thereby making his central claim that it is nationalism that explains the nation – and not, as is so often believed, the nation which accounts for nationalism.[2] But it is a less obvious element of Gellner's background that makes his theory permanently thought-provoking. Gellner's thought contained powerful tensions. The firm stress on the need for protection given by the political roof of nationalism goes hand-in-hand with a no-holds-barred defence of universal rationality against every form of relativism; equally, the insistence that national homogeneity enables political and economic development did not rule out deep loathing for nationalist politics and ideology.

These tensions came out especially clearly after he returned to Prague in 1991 to open a Centre for the Study of Nationalism for the newly founded Central European University. At a local level, Gellner disliked the claustrophilia of Václav Klaus's Czech Republic despite the fact that it was producing, as his theory had predicted, something of an economic miracle. More generally, he was deeply worried by the speed and totality of the Soviet collapse, fearing that ethnic cleansings might lead to dreadful political instability throughout the region.[3] This was something of a change of heart: he had returned from initial close contacts with Soviet ethnographers delighted that his concern with ethnic stratification seemed to cast so much light on problems sure to plague the Soviet Union. With characteristically witty self-deprecation, he made the best and most cutting joke against himself – that he had become a Russian imperialist.[4] He became equally enthusiastic about the virtues of

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-63324-6 - The State of the Nation: Ernest Gellner and the Theory of Nationalism
Edited by John A. Hall
Excerpt
More information

Austro-Hungary, not least when assessing the contribution of Malinowski – and particularly so when setting him against the narrow communalism he found in Wittgenstein.[5] At the end of his life there was accordingly considerable tension between the formal descriptive theory of *Nations and Nationalism* which predicts the demise of entities such as Austro-Hungary and the Soviet Union and his prescriptive hopes for some way in which cultural pluralism could be achieved within a larger political unit.

The purpose of this volume is to analyse Gellner's theory of nationalism as a whole. In order to do this properly, the book is structured around four key themes. It is vital, to begin with, to fully comprehend the making of the theory, not least since emphases within it – for example, the late emergence of a prescriptive tone – changed over the three decades over which it was articulated. Secondly, considerable attention is given to the classical criticisms brought against the theory. At a substantive level, Gellner's theory was accused of being too modernist and too optimistic; at a more formal philosophical level, it was attacked again and again for having too instrumental a view of human motivation and for relying excessively on functionalist argumentation. These charges are discussed at length here, giving one justification for the title – that is, providing the most up to date state-of-play of discussions of Gellner's theory of nationalism. But the title is designed to suggest a second meaning. Gellner's theory explains nationalism by means of socio-economic categories. The principal positive claim of the third section of this volume is that nationalism cannot be understood without systematically bringing politics back in; differently put, this section is representative of modern studies of nationalism in seeking to challenge Gellner's account by stressing the impact of the actions of states. The fourth thematic section considers some implications of Gellner's theory: if two essays – one on civil society, the other on Islam – follow Gellner's own agenda, the final essay by Rogers Brubaker presents nothing less than an overview of the future of nationalist studies in general.

These themes can best be brought out by devoting the rest of this introduction to discussion of the individual chapters – albeit this process necessarily cannot take the place of the rich detail in which the reader will soon be immersed. But before turning to this task, two general points deserve emphasis. First, it is curiously rare in social science to subject any theory to sustained analysis, let alone to definitive refutation. Intellectual interest seems driven by fashion, with one view being replaced by another because it lends excitement rather than truth. This is dreadful, not least since it means that untested theories come back

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-63324-6 - The State of the Nation: Ernest Gellner and the Theory of Nationalism
Edited by John A. Hall
Excerpt
More information

again and again. The studies assembled here aim at better cognitive practice, not least since Gellner's theory needs attention on the grounds of complexity as well as merit. Secondly, it should be emphasised that all Gellner's work to do with nationalism, listed in the bibliography at the end of this volume, is considered here. This means that attention is given to his initial statement in the mid-1960s and to the complete account of *Nations and Nationalism*, to later historically-sensitive amendments and to the prescriptive writings already mentioned, to his important 1996 'Reply to Critics' and to *Nationalism*, his last book on the subject published posthumously in 1997. One benefit of considering the full panoply of Gellner's work on nationalism is that it is possible to draw attention to replies that Gellner developed to standard criticisms of his position.

The charm of Roman Szporluk's account of the way in which *Thought and Change* suggested an intellectual agenda should not distract from the novelty of its analytical contribution. Szporluk shares with Gellner an East Central European background, and this makes him especially sensitive to the way in which Gellner's assessment of nationalism was merely a part of a larger attempt to take stock of the ideological options provided by the modern world, and in particular of Marxism and liberalism. The most important claim of Szporluk's own important *Communism and Nationalism* – that is, its interpretation of Marxism as a nationalist strategy of late development – is clearly inspired by Gellner's view of Marxism as a protestant ethic of the twentieth century.[6] Still, there remains a difference between the two accounts. Gellner's review essay of Szporluk's book took issue with the praise given to List's view that nations are eternal: this ontology was rejected on the grounds that nations are *created*, with nationalism itself being seen as the result of ethnic conflict – for all that the 'nation', once formed, then often eagerly embraces developmentalist strategies.[7] This is not a matter on which Gellner changed his mind, noting in a very late statement (in a passage quoted at length below) that 'nationalism is not to be explained by the use it has in legitimising modernisation – a view with which I am quite mistakenly credited . . .'[8] Despite the power of Gellner's reply, Szporluk is surely right to insist that Gellner showed too little interest in 'old-state' nationalism. This is an extremely important point. Gellner *defined* nationalism in terms of the 'awakened' seeking their own state. But large and established states, not least Revolutionary France and Wilhelmine and Nazi Germany, can and have embraced nationalism in ways that have vitally affected the historical record. Szporluk further notes, perhaps as the result of a background whose contours are powerfully evoked by Chris Hann in his contribution to this volume, that peoples are fought for by different states. This leads him to hint at another definitional point of which we will hear more: states are not always quite so unitary and homogeneous as Gellner imagined. Szporluk certainly makes much of this point in his most recent work on the Ukraine, and this in turn derives in part from stressing the way in which differential outcomes may come about as the result of nationalist ideas – which Gellner famously scorned.[9]

Gellner responded generously and warmly to an earlier version of Brendan O'Leary's essay, not surprisingly since it was then the most complete critical account of his work on nationalism. This version of O'Leary's essay is very much expanded, and takes into account all of Gellner's late writings on nationalism; O'Leary now goes beyond his discussion of *Thought and Change* and *Nations and Nationalism* to critical assessment of the historical stages of nationalism proposed as well as to analysis of Gellner's late prescriptive argument. The essay now stands as the most accurate analytic reconstruction of Gellner's theory. O'Leary adds to this a defence of many of the theory's key points, most notably its modernist emphasis and its claim that nationalism would lose its virulence once the transition to modernity had been achieved. He is particularly interesting on the typology of nationalism, noting both that it is not as inclusive as Gellner had imagined and that it does not structure his later historically sensitive amendments. O'Leary is of course not without critical points of his own to make. Those concerning the philosophy of social science and politics concern us below, for they are at the heart of later essays; but one point should be mentioned here. O'Leary insists that nationalism has a perfectly coherent ideology, based on the principle of self-determination, and that it is inherently modern and progressive – a view that means a great deal to O'Leary, one suspects, given that his works suggest adherence to a particular and highly liberal version of Irish nationalism. Gellner's response at this point was blunt: 'We should not make nationalists a present of their ontology. It is not universally applicable, and to accept a principle which implies the contrary, means that we start from false premises.'[10] One should not miss O'Leary's footnotes for his reply to Gellner at this point. And his essay anyway deserves the closest reading: it is packed with innovative views, not least in its appreciation of the role of geopolitical conjunctures in the history of nationalism.

The second section of the book turns to detailed consideration of the classical accusations levelled at Gellner's theory. The first substantive issue to be considered is the charge that nations are far older than Gellner's modernist account allowed. A thesis of primordialism was suggested by John Armstrong in his *Nations before Nationalism*, but

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-63324-6 - The State of the Nation: Ernest Gellner and the Theory of Nationalism
Edited by John A. Hall
Excerpt
More information

Gellner gave sustained attention to two different authors, Anthony Smith and Miroslav Hroch, who offered more subtle accounts seeking some mix of modernism and primordialism. He did so, it should be noted, because he was genuinely troubled by the issue, noting uneasily that Shakespeare's plays are full of nationalist rhetoric. Still, he sought to maintain his modernist view, albeit he took care to open the matter to empirical debate. Thus *Nationalism* doubts Anthony Smith's view that successful nation-states must have an ethnic core at their heart, but suggests empirical research to establish how many states have historic 'navels' and how many invent them – as well as to consider those which seem to manage without them altogether.[11] He gave still more attention to the work of Miroslav Hroch, often joking that the publication of his *Social preconditions of national revival in Europe* made it difficult for him to open his mouth for fear of making some mistake. He most certainly took very seriously Hroch's insistence that Balkan nationalism did not fit his scheme since it had nothing to do with industrialism: he varied his reply to this point, becoming most consistent, in the eyes of both O'Leary and Mouzelis, when arguing that industrialism cast a long shadow to which peripheral elites reacted. Still, he eventually devoted a critical essay of great power to Hroch's work, accusing him of reifying both class and nation.[12] It is to that essay that Hroch replies here.

Hroch carefully and interestingly describes the process of his intellectual formation so as to evade certain of Gellner's objections. He insists that his use of the nationalist term 'revival' did not entail acceptance of any ontological view of the permanence of nations. Equally, he explains that the class terms in which his argument had been expressed did not indicate allegiance to the materialist conception of history: if pure economic classes mattered on occasion, so too did all sorts of social groups whose existence is best understood in Weberian terms. It is good to have these matters cleared up, and there is justice in Hroch's claim that this increases the conceptual overlap between their two accounts – both of which, after all, draw on socio-economic rather than political categories for the explanations they offer. Still, two sets of differences remain. First, there is disagreement as to the material on which nationalist processes work. Hroch stands closer to Anthony Smith in insisting that nationalism would be ineffective were its appeal not directed at a pre-existent community; this contrasts with Gellner's more constructivist position. Secondly, Hroch's celebrated phase model makes an important distinction between national identity and nationalism, and he insists that some movements sought to affirm their identity without seeking their own state. This again puts Gellner's definition of nationalism under scrutiny.

Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-63324-6 - The State of the Nation: Ernest Gellner and the Theory of Nationalism
Edited by John A. Hall
Excerpt
More information

A second substantive charge often made is that Gellner was too optimistic in imagining that nationalism would lose its bite once modernisation had been completed. This claim is of course extremely important to his general position, for it allows him to restore a measure of universalism by arguing that the excesses of nationalism will be temporary. One occasion on which he devoted his full attention to the impact of nationalism within the industrial era was when reviewing Tom Nairn's *The Break-Up of Britain*.[13] He did not find himself especially troubled by the arguments of that book, not surprisingly given that it made extensive use of his own categories. Nor did he find movements of rich regions seeking some autonomy from the fiscal extractions of central states – for that is how he and Nairn then saw the matter – especially troubling for his general position.[14] But Nairn here makes a rather different case – one moreover which does go absolutely to the heart of Gellner's thought. When Gellner sought to explain the viciousness to which nationalism can be prone, he tended to make much of John Plamenatz's contention that nationalism in Central and Eastern Europe was bound to be nasty, given the absence of a high culture and the presence of complex ethnic intermingling – a corollary of Gellner's view here being that the undoubted horror associated with German nationalism was seen as essentially contingent.[15] Nairn's interpretation is very different. Modernisation is brutal, as Gellner knew, but it need not be passive: rather, traumatic experiences which take away the promise of affluence lead those placed in pain to codify anti-modern memories. According to this view of interrupted modernisation, ethnic nationalism is the result of a peasantry managing to write its way into history. If this has happened in Central and Eastern Europe, most notably in contemporary Serbia, Nairn insists that it can happen anywhere: he has in mind here not just the Khmer Rouge with whom he begins but quite as much the cases of France and Germany – which is, of course, to agree with Szporluk that the form of nationalism within 'core' countries matters a very great deal. In making this argument, Nairn interestingly distinguishes between chauvinism and nationalism. The words themselves do not matter, but the reality does. For all that nationalism can be reactionary and vicious, it can equally be progressive; this was the case with Gellner's Czechs seeking to escape the constraints of Vienna and the Baltic peoples seeking to leave a moribund Soviet Union – and, Nairn insists, of the Scots wanting autonomy from an overcentralised and decrepit imperial state.[16]

These two substantive criticisms effectively concern the beginning and end points of the record of nationalism with which Gellner was concerned. But most attention by his critics has always been given to the

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-63324-6 - The State of the Nation: Ernest Gellner and the Theory of Nationalism
Edited by John A. Hall
Excerpt
More information

area in between, namely to the putative link between industrialism and nationalism. It should be said immediately that rather different issues are here deeply, even licentiously entangled. An immediate problem is that of functionalist logic, that is, of whether the needs of industrial society cause nationalism. Should the answer to that question prove to be negative, the claim that national homogeneity enables, that is, is functional for, economic (and political) development may still convince – which is to stress that multinational arrangements are rare and difficult. But a further distinction needs to be drawn here, between societies that have built their nations before industrialisation and those that face modernisation after nation-building has begun. It may be the case that the advantages given by the relative social homogeneity of the former should *not* convert to policy prescriptions for the latter designed to extirpate all pluralism. Asymmetry in development – ethnic and linguistic homogeneity achieved over time in the one case, nation-building through a recognition of cultural diversity in the latter – may have much to recommend it.

The chapters by Laitin and Mouzelis form something of a pair, arriving at similar conclusions even though one is a negative and the other a positive critique. David Laitin is one of the most distinguished practitioners of rational choice theory, an approach he clearly finds attractive on account of its rigour. This makes Laitin's charge against Gellner – that he attempts to be *too* rigorous – all the more striking. In fact two elements are involved here. First, Laitin accuses him – as have many others, notably Charles Taylor and Brendan O'Leary in this volume, as well as Michael Mann and Perry Anderson on previous occasions[17] – of adopting a functionalist logic of explanation. It is not at all hard to see what is meant here. Gellner constantly marshalled the categories of his general philosophy of history when discussing nationalism, and it very often seemed as if he did mean to say that industrial society's need for social and linguistic homogeneity was the cause of nationalism. But Laitin moves beyond this to say that Gellner relies heavily on the most instrumental view of human motivation imaginable.[18] Laitin believes that one can do much better by drawing in other variables, in this case adding to material self-interest the extent to which one's own group forces nationalist activity upon one through varied social pressures and the extent to which the larger society might be prepared to welcome moves to accommodation. The second part of his chapter makes marvellous use of these variables, themselves identified through the construction of ingenious measures, to identify patterns of behaviour in Estonia, Latvia, Kazakhstan and the Ukraine which would not be revealed by Gellner's approach.[19] In all this, it should be firmly

Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-63324-6 - The State of the Nation: Ernest Gellner and the Theory of Nationalism
Edited by John A. Hall
Excerpt
More information

noted, Laitin clearly envisages a range of relations wider than Gellner's stark choice between nationalist secession or assimilation – a viewpoint for which he argued extensively in an earlier pathbreaking book on language repertoires and state construction.[20]

Nicos Mouzelis has become particularly well known in recent years for a series of books dealing with the logic of social theory, and he here applies his skills to a defence of Gellner's position against the first of Laitin's charges.[21] There is indeed no doubt that it makes no sense to take consequences as causes – that is, in this case, to take the need of a social formation as the cause of its very creation. One way out of this dilemma is suggested by O'Leary. He notes that some nationalist leaders in effect agree with Gellner's view of the needs of a new form of society, and therefore actively try to create it. If this brings agency back into the historical record, equally important is the fact that the seeming necessity of the equation between social homogeneity and the modern world is subtly undermined. Differently put, that equation is an ideology, and an ideology which may not be completely true: for all that modern social organisation may be easier given social similarity, policies to engineer social homogenisation forcibly may, as noted, have grave disadvantages. That is the point at the heart of Laitin's interest in the extent to which a larger society will welcome those who seek to enter its bounds, the particular point being that Estonians can create loyalty and diminish dissent if they welcome Russians who learn Estonian. Alfred Stepan also reflects on this case, underscoring the potential in the situation by saying that the Russian population can be politically integrated rather easily even though it will retain a measure of cultural distinctiveness.

Mouzelis accepts O'Leary's criticism, but then uses these words of Gellner to mount a defence of a particular type of functionalism:

> Functionalism is a term people sometimes apply to their own position and it is not clear why it should be a badge of shame. What I think the critics mean is that [my] theory is *teleological*, that it explains a phenomenon in terms of the needs it satisfied, and this is not acceptable in good social science: a need may be demonstrated but it does not bring forth its own satisfaction . . .
>
> I accept entirely this repudiation of teleological explanation: I have many needs which, whatever their urgency or intensity, nature has not deemed fit to satisfy. Bitter experience, quite apart from the canons of scientific propriety, has taught me this unpalatable truth. Needs engender no realities. But my theory does not sin against this. It is straightforwardly causal. Political and economic forces, the aspirations of governments for greater power and of individuals for greater wealth, have in certain circumstances produced a world in which the division of labour is very advanced, the occupational structure highly unstable, and most work is semantic and communicative rather than physical. This situation in turn leads to the adoption of a standard and codified, literacy-linked

Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-63324-6 - The State of the Nation: Ernest Gellner and the Theory of Nationalism
Edited by John A. Hall
Excerpt
More information

> ('High') idiom, requires business of all kinds to be conducted in its terms, and reduces persons who are not masters of that idiom (or not acceptable to its practitioners) to the status of humiliated second-class members, a condition from which one plausible and much-frequented escape route led through nationalist politics.[22]

This is an important passage, making it crystal clear that Gellner's principal thesis is that nationalism results from the actions of a social group placed at a disadvantage by newly unified cultural space – the causal origins of which lie with varied and unspecified 'political and economic forces'. Mouzelis follows Michael Mann in arguing that the new social context was initially as much the result of military as of economic factors.[23] Gellner came to accept this, admitting that a 'state committed by its very manner of operation to cultural *Gleichschaltung* is not merely an effect of a new socio-economic system, but also an important independent cause'.[24] Mouzelis then defends functionalism shorn of teleology as a useful general orienting approach to social life. But it is noticeable that this attempt to save Gellner in fact ends up largely agreeing with Gellner's critics. Both Laitin and Mouzelis insist that Gellner's very abstract general model needs to be filled up with historical detail. Mouzelis seems to think that in general we are bound to have abstract theories which can then suggest detailed historical accounts, with Gellner certainly believing this to be true for nationalism. In contrast, Laitin is in the company of a group of contemporary scholars who feel that historical details are not just one damn thing after another: as we shall see, this school rather seeks to theorise politics as a comprehensible middle ground standing between abstract generality and random particularity.

The possibility of political explanation is also raised by Laitin's second charge, namely that Gellner's theory suffers from an excessively instrumental view of human nature. Gellner firmly rejected this charge:

> I *am* deeply sensitive to the spell of nationalism. I can play about thirty Bohemian folk songs (or songs presented as such in my youth) on my mouth organ. My oldest friend, whom I have known since the age of three or four and who is Czech and a patriot, cannot bear to hear me play them because he says I do it in such a schmaltzy way, 'crying into the mouth organ'. I do not think I could have written the book on nationalism which I did write, were I not capable of crying, with the help of a little alcohol, over folksongs, which happen to be my favourite form of music. I attend folklore performances from choice, but go to Covent Garden or the Narodni Divadlo from social obligation or snobbery.[25]

More than the merely personal is involved here. Gellner emphasised – in a passage replying to Perry Anderson, who had made Laitin's point with