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978-0-521-88291-0 - Ernest Gellner and Contemporary Social Thought

Edited by Sinisa Malešević and Mark Haugaard

Excerpt

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## Introduction: an intellectual rebel with a cause

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*Mark Haugaard and Siniša Malešević*

With his exceptionally independent and uncompromising mind, Ernest Gellner was a rare breed of intellectual. Unshakable in his defence of Enlightenment, and a self-proclaimed ‘rationalist fundamentalist’ (Gellner 1992: 80), Gellner had his fair share of followers and sympathisers. Yet he never really belonged to an identifiable collectivity, whether a religion, nation, state, class or status community, or indeed an academic school of thought, paradigm or intellectual circle. Even though, on a personal level, he missed the warmth of communal bonds as they extend beyond the immediate family circle,<sup>1</sup> he remained an adamant ontological individualist in his academic, political and, to a certain extent, personal life. An intellectual maverick who openly expressed disdain for fashionable philosophies and hegemonic systems of thought, it is perhaps no surprise that he found himself on the fringes of the academic mainstream. In this sense he was a true intellectual rebel: a stubborn rationalist and materialist when the Wittgenstein-inspired idealism of linguistic philosophy was in its heyday; a liberal anti-Marxist and fierce anti-communist when Marxism and socialist ideals dominated British sociology; and an unyielding positivist and anti-relativist as postmodernist and poststructuralist thought rose to prominence in the fields of anthropology and cultural studies.

Yet despite, or perhaps because of, his lifelong defence of rationalism and individualism, Gellner’s intellectual passion drove him to understand, to explain and to empathise with shared values, forms of life and ideological systems of belief that were otherwise alien to his own. He had a genuine and sincere appreciation – both sociological and personal – of life under state socialism, Sharia law or postcolonial autocracies, perhaps more so than many Western-based intellectuals who built successful careers through the criticisms of orientalist, imperialist or ethnocentric thought. Gellner’s individualism was a spur rather than a hindrance in comprehending the collective nature of human sociability, and he was

<sup>1</sup> This is most clearly expressed in Gellner’s interview with John Davis. See Davis (1991).

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one of the few twentieth-century thinkers who managed to combine successfully the study of sociology, philosophy, anthropology and history in developing creative, original and persuasive explanations of the macro-structural changes that have shaped our world. His uniqueness lay in his gift as a polymath, and Gellner left his mark in areas as diverse as social anthropology, analytical philosophy, the sociology of the Islamic world, nationalism, psychoanalysis, postmodernism, East European transformations and kinship structures.

As John Hall points out in chapter 10 (and more extensively in Hall 1998), Gellner's intellectual outlook is deeply ingrained in his biography, which in many respects parallels the history of Central Europe from the late nineteenth century, with the break up of empires, world wars, genocides, a proliferation of radical political ideologies and rise of dictatorships, but also the unprecedented economic growth, intensive industrialisation, the expansion of city life, secularism, development of the welfare state and the birth of mass educational systems. Gellner witnessed most of these tectonic shifts, which undoubtedly influenced his thought at an experiential level. Born in 1925 in Paris and raised in the multiethnic city of Prague, in the heart of Europe shaken by the Great War, the young Gellner lived amid the remnants of the post-Habsburg world. The bilingual son of German-speaking Jewish parents, he would become trilingual after attending the Prague English Grammar school. Despite a strong anti-semitic environment, Gellner seems to have enjoyed the vibrancy and cultural diversity of a typical *Mitteleuropa* city. The advent of the Second World War exposed Gellner to change of seismic proportions as the world he knew was literally blown apart by political forces and ideological currents that sought either to obliterate difference or to mould it into some form of uniformity. The rise of Nazism and the collapse of Masaryk's Czechoslovakia forced Gellner's family to move and settle in England in 1939, where Gellner continued his education at St Albans County Grammar School. He was an excellent student and as a result won a scholarship to Oxford's Balliol College.

At Balliol he studied philosophy, economics and politics. Although he was fond of all three subjects, the dominance of Wittgensteinian ideas in Oxford at that time contributed to Gellner's preference for the social sciences over philosophy. He briefly interrupted his studies to fight in the war as a soldier with the Czech Armoured Brigade (and was involved in the siege of Dunkirk). As the war was ending he was longing to return to Prague, where in 1945 he attended Charles University for one semester before witnessing the new Czechoslovakia becoming a Soviet satellite state and the intolerance of the radical right giving way to that of the political left. From Gellner's perspective one rigid collectivism had simply replaced

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another. All of this compelled him to settle in England for good. He graduated from Oxford with first class honours in 1947 and was appointed lecturer in philosophy in the same year at the University of Edinburgh.

After only two years Gellner moved to the London School of Economics where he joined the department of sociology. Upon the completion of his fieldwork in Morocco he successfully defended his PhD thesis 'Organisation and the Role of a Berber Zawiya' in 1961. Just a year later he was appointed Professor of Philosophy with a Special Reference to Sociology. In 1974 he was elected to the British Academy. After nearly thirty-five years spent productively at the LSE Gellner moved to Cambridge in 1984 where he was William Wyse Professor of Social Anthropology and a fellow of King's College. Following his retirement in 1993 and the collapse of communism, he returned to Prague to head the Centre for the Study of Nationalism at the newly established Central European University. It was here in the apartment block in Prokopova Street – which he shared with his first cohort of the Centre's PhD students – that Gellner died on 5 November 1995, just one month short of his seventieth birthday.

Although his education at Oxford equipped Gellner with the intellectual tools that would eventually help him to articulate his most influential theories, he could never reconcile the dominant ideas of 1940s and 50s Oxford with the realities he had experienced in Central Europe. In Wittgenstein's philosophy of language – espousing the view that there is no such thing as a private (individual) language, so that humans are chained in autarkic and self-validating cultural worlds – Gellner saw echoes of the rigid collectivism that had nearly destroyed Europe. Rejecting the political paralysis that such relativist views seem to invite, Gellner began his inquiry into their origins and development, subjecting the Wittgensteinian turn to rigorous sociological and historical analysis.

His first book *Words and Things* (1959) was simultaneously a rebuke of linguistic philosophy and a sociological analysis of its influence and function. Gellner argued that the esoteric character of this philosophy requires no argumentation or justification as it ideologically reaffirms the common sense of 'the Narodniks of North Oxford'. He described it as a populist, philistine mysticism and parodied it as 'philosophical form eminently suitable for gentlemen' (Gellner 1959: 264–5). He also found many parallels between the *Weltanschauungen* of Oxford dons and Berber tribesmen as he wrote *Saints of the Atlas* (1969), his only empirical book. However, his most important early work is, without any doubt, *Thought and Change* (1964), where he lays the contours of his theories of modernity, social change, nationalism and historical transformation. It is here that one can really chart the worth of his socio-historical method as he sets out a powerful sociology of specific philosophical doctrines and

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ideologies, from utilitarianism and Kantianism to nationalism. Instead of analysing philosophies in terms of their internal coherence, Gellner attempts historically to contextualise and explain the reasons behind their origins and influence. It is here that he also charts the unique, unprecedented and exceptional character of modernity which is sustained by continual economic growth and a degree of cultural uniformity.

His Moroccan field study generated another long term interest – Islam. In many of his publications, but most of all in *Muslim Society* (1981), he was preoccupied with the question of why the Islamic world, like no other, has proven to be so resistant to secularisation. Combining Ibn Khaldun's and David Hume's ideas, he offered an original interpretation by pointing out the peculiar cyclical nature of social change which characterises the urban/rural relationship in traditional North Africa. By differentiating between popular folk orgiastic Islam and high ascetic Islam of the Book, he argued that Islamic modernisers are in a better position than many other late developers as they are able to draw on, and invoke, rich traditions of the existing high culture in order to modernise without a need to sacrifice cultural authenticity. In this context Gellner saw in the high culture of Islam an equivalent to Weber's Calvinist ethic, a potential generator of intensive economic development.

However the book which has without doubt received the most attention from Gellner's opus is *Nations and Nationalism* (1983). This book expanded on the chapter from *Thought and Change*, providing a highly original, sophisticated and in many respects still unsurpassed theory of nationalism. On the one hand Gellner demonstrates the intrinsic modernity of the desire for supposedly primeval national attachments, and on the other hand he underlines the necessity of cultural homogeneity for the smooth functioning of post-traditional societies, which links into questions of ideology and practice. In this book (together with *Culture, Identity and Politics*, 1987; *Encounters with Nationalism*, 1994 and *Nationalism*, 1997) Gellner made a major breakthrough by capturing the intrinsic paradox at the heart of nationalist doctrine, explaining that 'nationalism is a phenomenon of *Gesellschaft* using the idiom of *Gemeinschaft*: a mobile anonymous society simulating a closed cosy community' (Gellner 1997: 74).

His interest in nationalism, Islam and industrialisation was never distinct from his philosophical interests and he often switched from one to another in the same essay – part of an intellectual style which connected issues as diverse as tribal kinship structures and linguistic philosophy in a masterly and imaginative style; Platonic ideals and agricultural production; Freudian unconscious and original sin; Adam Ferguson and Imam Khomeini; Emile Durkheim and Lenin – whom Gellner nicely described as the 'Ignatius Loyola of Marxism'.

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Much of his philosophical work, for example *The Devil in Modern Philosophy* (1974), *Legitimation of Belief* (1975), *Spectacles and Predicaments* (1980), *Relativism and the Social Sciences* (1985a) and *Reason and Culture* (1992) were written in defence of rationalism and empiricism. Gellner launched an unyielding attack on a variety of relativist and idealist styles of thought, from hermeneutics and phenomenology to existentialism and postmodernism. Although clearly influenced by Popper, Gellner claimed a greater commitment to realism in the historical sense of the word, and he successfully sociologised Popper's epistemology by arguing that 'the positivists are right for Hegelian reasons' (Gellner 1985a: 216).

In *The Psychoanalytical Movement* (1985b) Gellner provided a socio-historical explanation of this argument, honing his analytical strategy to perfection as he carefully and argumentatively untangled one of the most interesting puzzles of recent times: why did psychoanalysis achieve such an astonishing degree of popularity in the second half of the twentieth century? The answer was to be found as much in its falsification-resistant doctrine and its closed systems of initiation as it was in its ability to provide a sense of personal salvation, intellectually stamped comfort and therapeutic relief in a highly secular age. While psychoanalysis may be illuminating at the diagnostic level, in the concept of Unconscious Gellner discovered 'a curious offspring of Descartes' Daemon, Kant's Thing-in-itself, and Schopenhauer's Will', declaring its promise of cure utterly unfounded (Gellner 1985b: 216)

If Freudianism was a potent individualist and secular doctrine of salvation, Marxism was for Gellner its collectivist counterpart. In numerous articles and book chapters and in two separate books, *State and Society in Soviet Thought* (1988) and *Conditions of Liberty* (1994), Gellner subtly dissected the origins and structure of state socialist movements and Marxist-Leninist ideology. Marxism, unlike other faiths, had experienced almost irrecoverable collapse which, according to Gellner, had less to do with its 'formal elimination of the *transcendent* from religion' and more to do with its 'over-sacralisation of the *immanent*' (Gellner 1994: 40). In other words, echoing Durkheim in reverse, Gellner argues that fully functioning societies require the profane as much as the sacred – the routine, ordinary, banal – and the Soviet world obliterated the profane. Stalin's terror could not destroy the mass belief but the muck of Brezhnev's era did the job:

When *nomenklatura* killed each other and accompanied the murderous rampage with blatantly mendacious political theatre, belief survived: but when the *nomenklatura* switched from shooting each other to bribing each other, faith evaporated. (Gellner 1994: 41)

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With the publication of *Plough, Sword and Book* (1988) Gellner offered a systematic historical sociology of human development. Although he identified the three principal stages of human history as the hunter/gatherer, agrarian and industrial worlds, the focus was firmly on the contrasting images of economically stagnant, culturally polarised and coercive *agraria* versus vibrant, culturally homogenous, literate, growth- and cognition-oriented *industria*. The main idea behind this work was to reaffirm the Weberian tripartite vision of social development as against a singularist Marxist view; that is, to see history as the interplay of politics, economics and culture rather than solely through the prism of economic modes of production.

Gellner's last book, *Language and Solitude* (1998), is a condensed, almost autobiographical reflection on the many themes he struggled with throughout his career. While it is the ideas of Wittgenstein and Malinowski that come under the spotlight, Gellner's real target is the sociological underpinnings of post-Enlightenment and post-Romanticist thought, where Wittgenstein and Malinowski stand for two different articulations of human experience. For Gellner this is the world split between the individualist Robinson Crusoe tradition (stretching from Descartes, Hume and Kant to neo-positivism and neo-liberalism) and the collectivist, organicist 'village green' tradition (extending from Herder and de Maistre to nationalists, populists and eventually social Darwinism 'mediated by Nietzsche'). Whereas Gellner places himself firmly on the side of individual autonomy, which for him is the precondition for cognitive and economic growth, as a sociologist he follows Weber in acknowledging that 'shared culture alone can endow life with order and meaning' (Gellner 1998: 186). However, this is less a normative problem of personal preferences and more an open-ended historical process of change: the gradual and in some way inevitable move from the intrinsic warmth of a cosy but inefficient and oppressive *Gemeinschaft* to contractual, rational and efficient yet solitary and cold *Gesellschaft*.

Despite the variety of topics that appear in Gellner's books there is an exceptional degree of unity and coherence in his life's work. His intellectual world-view is evident in everything he wrote, from his early studies on language and kinship, to his mature analyses of nationalism, Islam and modernity, to his philosophical critiques. Unfortunately the reception of his work has tended to be partial and incomplete, creating a lot of misunderstanding with respect to his key concepts and theories. Today he is generally represented either as a theorist of nationalism – one of the 'founding fathers' of nationalism studies – or as Bauman calls him, 'the master of metaphor', a reference to his witty style of writing.

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As a result, much of his philosophical, anthropological and historico-sociological work has been neglected.

The aim of this book is to rectify this foreshortened reception of Gellner's contribution, calling attention to the many and varied contributions he has made to social and political analysis. We aspire to shed light on the broader scope of Gellner's work by showing how the questions he raised and the ideas and analyses which are his legacy to us are as relevant today as they were at the time of their inception. In other words, our aim is to go beyond the image of Gellner as a theorist of nationalism or a witty essayist so as to emphasise the contribution he has made in other areas of research. For example his queries on Islam and modernity may have much to offer in understanding the social dynamics of our post-9/11 world; his philosophical doubts on relativism and the nature of cognition could provide invaluable insights on the nature of modern thinking; and his macro-historical analyses of social transformation from the agricultural polyglot empires to the industrial monoglot nation-states and beyond provide fruitful insights regarding the form, content and structure of global change today. However, none of this is to say that Gellner had the last word on such burning questions. The tone of this introduction – deliberately acquiescent and uncritical as it is – might indicate that we will be paying homage to Gellner's thoughts on sociology, anthropology and philosophy. Nothing of the sort. Following this brief review of Gellner's life-work, the studies in this book chart a sociological, philosophical and anthropological critique of Gellner's position. Although the majority of contributions build on Gellner's legacy or work within a broadly Gellnerian perspective, none is oblivious to the ontological, epistemological or socio-historical imperfections of Gellner's arguments. As George Lichtheim (1965) pointed out so long ago in his review of *Thought and Change*, even when you remain unconvinced by Gellner's solutions you are always struck by the degree of originality and the relevance of the questions he asks.

### **The structure of the book**

This book has been divided into three parts. In the first part, entitled 'Civil society, coercion and liberty', we analyse the circumstances of emergence of modern industrial society and the way in which they provided the unique conditions necessary for freedom of thought through the institutions of civil society. Relative to these debates there is a Gellner who, like the great classical sociologists (Durkheim, Simmel and Weber), is fascinated by the transition to modernity. However, there is also a less sanguine Gellner who is driven with a burning intensity by a

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quest born out of the Holocaust. Like Bauman, he wishes to understand the specific aspects of modernity which allow for freedom of thought, because he is acutely aware that modernity not only has a liberating potential but, equally, can destroy freedom with a thoroughness which traditional societies could never have dreamt of, even in their most totalitarian moments. In the second section, entitled 'Ideology, nationalism and modernity', we pass under the cloud of these totalising tendencies. Nationalism represents a system of thought, an ideology that is unique to modernity, which creates the conditions necessary for mass extermination of peoples within the state and mass mobilisation against the enemy externally. However, this is not a simple story of good and evil. Modernity is like a Janus head with faces that are both opposing yet inseparable. According to Gellner, nationalism was necessary for industrialisation and, more ominously, from some of the chapters in this work it emerges that it was also a precondition for democracy. In the last section, 'Islam, postmodernism and Gellner's metaphysic', we juxtapose three systems of thought. According to Gellner, the genesis of modernity is derived from a specific form of openness that is historically unique. Like nationalism, Islam is functionally commensurable with modernity but unfortunately both ideologies have a predisposition to closure. Their functionality entails that once modernity has come about, or has passed its stage of genesis, there is no sociological reason why these closed forms of thought might not be more successful than the open spirit of Enlightenment reason. This concern is compounded by the fact that, in the historic heartland where Enlightenment reason developed, the spirit of openness has become radicalised into a form of relativistic nihilism. Postmodernism is the outgrowth of the same kind of modern communitarian thinking that resulted in nationalism in early modernity but which, in advanced modernity, has combined with a misguided radicalisation of Enlightenment openness. Islam presupposes a fusion of fact and value that leads to dogmatism, while postmodernism entails a relativism which renders falsification impossible. Islam is sociologically compatible with modernity, as a kind of functional equivalent of Protestantism. In contrast, while most forms of contemporary liberalism are normatively robust defences of openness, they are sociologically weak because they suggest a disenchanted world devoid of belonging. While postmodernism recognises the significance of community, it is philosophically incapable of defending modernity because of its implicit relativism. In contrast to these ideologies, Gellner's intellectual quest is driven by a desire to develop a metaphysic which has the capacity to constitute a philosophically robust defence of liberal openness while, simultaneously, being sociologically defensible.

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In historical sociology there are two dominant schools of thought: those who see history in terms of historical continuity and those who view it as characterised by discontinuity. The former view history as an incremental evolution towards the present, while the latter think of history as constituted of layers of social life which are qualitatively different. To borrow an image from Foucault, the discontinuists view history in the manner of an archaeological site in which there is a stone age, a bronze age and an iron age layer each of which is clearly distinct from the others. Most conventional historians belong to the former school while historical sociologists tend towards the latter. There is a theoretical reason for this. Most sociology (with the notable exception of methodologically individualist stances, such as rational choice theory) presumes that social life is systemic or relationally constituted. This assumption need not be as strong as in structural functionalism, but the sociological imagination is premised upon the idea that social order is reproduced through unintentional effects, which feed back to create the contextuality of social action. When a social actor reproduces structures, that act of structuration entails drawing upon a contextuality of action which, while the unintended effect of intentional action, shapes the conditions of possibility for felicitous structuration practices. Of course, one does not have to be determinist in this. It may be the case that a specific actor within a traditional society may shape his or her actions premised upon an individualist orientation, but what is determined is that other actors within the system will lack the background interpretative horizon to react appropriately, and so the exceptional individualist remains an anomalous or deviant actor. Consequently, certain characteristics cannot develop on their own. Freedom of thought presupposes individualism, which is premised upon weak social ties, which presupposes that social order is no longer sacred and so on. In the continuist vision of history, freedom of thought might be viewed as a long process of conflict between free thinkers and those of a closed mind-set. According to this view Socrates, Galileo, J. S. Mill and Solzhenitsyn would be part of a continuous movement. To the discontinuists, on the other hand, freedom of thought became possible only because of fundamental changes in social order as a whole. Even if it is acknowledged that such individuals are necessary for freedom of thought, they are not considered a sufficient condition.

In the first chapter, Alan Macfarlane begins by outlining Gellner's perception of the unique conditions particular to modernity which made liberty possible. Central to this was the separation of spheres of social life. The pursuit of power became confined to the political sphere, wealth to the economy, social warmth to kinship, and the sacred became confined

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to the realm of religion. Out of this division arose ‘civil society’, which is a realm within which freedom can flourish free from domination by the specialists in coercion, religious dogma or tradition. This separation of spheres was a unique phenomenon which is not the normal condition of humankind. In Gellner’s interpretative horizon this separation constitutes a fundamental discontinuity both with the past and also, in the present, with communist and Islamic societies where this separation has not taken place.

The discontinuist view of history tends to be holist, in the sense that social configurations are relationally self-constituting. The separation of spheres presupposes the individualised self of Protestantism and the division of labour of capitalism, where the economic activity becomes separated from private affective life. It also presupposes an economy which is sufficiently productive so that the specialists in coercion can be ‘bought off’. This productivity is premised upon innovation, which is conceptually impossible if the individualised self is not free from custom and superstition. So the circle from separation of spheres to civil society, to liberty, to Protestantism, to individualism, to innovation, to productivity, to dominance of the economy over the polity and clergy, to freedom and so on, is complete.

Characteristically such a view of history has difficulty providing conceptual space for half-way stages. However, in this chapter Macfarlane shows that the advent of civil society partly owes its emergence to a half-way historical phenomenon, which is between traditional society and modernity. On the basis of the research of F. W. Maitland, Macfarlane shows that the English phenomenon of the ‘Trust’ is such an intermediary institution which is neither, yet both, *Gemeinschaft* and *Gesellschaft*. The Trust creates a unique set of rights around the institutionalisation of what is essentially a fictitious person. As such, it straddles the divide between community and association, status and contract, and mechanical and organic solidarity – the oppositions that divide traditional from modern society. Because it is an intermediary stage it could survive in the feudal world while, at the same time, creating the contractual preconditions for civil society. The Trust allowed the personal rights of feudalism to become transposed into the property rights of industrial society and it allowed religious institutions, clubs, trade unions and insurance companies to gain a legal standing as separate entities which had rights, as freestanding entities, which were separable from the particular rights of the individuals who were their members. This created the preconditions for the separation of spheres essential to modern liberty.

Having established the significance of intermediary institutions to modern liberty, Macfarlane looks at their future. Gellner argued that the