ERNEST GELLNER

Ernest André Gellner
1925–1995

ALTHOUGH ERNEST GELLNER had a successful academic career in Britain, becoming a member of the British Academy in 1974, his work was not properly understood. The fact that he was a brilliant polemicist, genuinely believing that there were devils at his back, tended to obscure his positive views. Of course, he had distinct reputations in different fields, notably as anthropologist, student of Islam, sociologist, theorist of nationalism, and philosopher. If this made him a latter day *philosophe*, seeking to understand modernity with whatever tools were to hand, little recognition was given to the presence of the metaphysic that lent unity and strength to all his work. As that metaphysic was based on the intense personal experience characteristic of a Central European exile of Jewish background, it is scarcely surprising that it centred on questions of identity.[1]

I

The infamous *Familiantengesetze* of 1726 and 1727 had limited the number of Jewish families in Bohemia, one consequence of which was the

[1] Gellner stressed this himself, early and late. See chapter three, 'Metamorphosis', *Thought and Change* (London, 1964) and his 'Reply to Critics', in J. A. Hall and I. C. Jarvie, eds., *The Social Philosophy of Ernest Gellner* (Amsterdam, 1996), p. 628. Note that Gellner referred to himself as an exile rather than an émigré in J. Davis, 'An Interview with Ernest Gellner', *Current Anthropology*, 32 (1991), 64.

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movement of Jews to the countryside, beyond the reach of the limited powers of the early eighteenth-century state. Although these laws were not rescinded until 1848 (with full emancipation coming only in 1867), the *Toleranzpatent* of 1781 improved the life chances of Jews in cultural and educational terms. Reform Judaism took hold, and the most prominent strand of Jewish society initially sought to assimilate into the world of German liberalism. The emergence of national conflicts made matters much more complex.[2] The Germans of Bohemia were anti-semitic and ever more ethnically nationalist—particularly when they became a minority in the city that changed from Prag to Praha as rural Czechs moved in to man a booming industrial economy.[3] Relations were not much better with the Czechs. In 1846 a Bohemian Jew, Siegfried Kapper, wrote several poems in Czech calling upon his fellows to identify with Czech culture. This overture was dismissed by the Czech national writer, Karel Havlíček-Borovský, who insisted that 'anyone who wanted to be a Czech must cease to be a Jew'.[4] Despite this rebuff there were several more Jewish attempts to open links to the Young Czech movement, often as the result of nationalising pressures from Czech intellectuals. Many more chose to keep their heads down, often by processes of half-accommodation—learning Czech whilst making sure their children could function in German. A smaller number turned to Zionism, amongst them Max Brod, the novelist and the biographer of Kafka, and Hans Kohn, the first great theorist of nationalism. This Zionism had rather more to do with the search for identity than it did with encouraging active plans for emigration to Palestine because anti-semitism, though present, was not as vigorous as in Poland or Russia. This was a world, in a nutshell, in which identities were in flux—and always less inherited than gained as the result of choice or constraint. No wonder that it produced so many of the great theorists of nationalism.

Gellner's parents were secularised German speakers of Jewish background who moved to Prague in their youth. Rudolf was born in 1897, one of nine children—all of whom had Germanic names that

[2] H. Kieval, *The Making of Czech Jewry: National Conflict and Jewish Society in Bohemia, 1870–1918* (New York and Oxford, 1988) and *Languages of Community: The Jewish Experience in the Czech Lands* (Berkeley, 2000); S. Spector, *Prague Territories: National Conflict and Cultural Innovation in Franz Kafka's Fin de Siècle* (Berkeley, 2000).

[3] G. Cohen, *The Politics of Ethnic Survival: Germans in Prague, 1861–1918* (Princeton, 1981).

[4] E. Mendelsohn, *The Jews of East Central Europe between the World Wars* (Bloomington, 1987).

demonstrated their loyalty to the empire.[5] The family was poor, but culturally rich: the eldest sister Hedwig, who served as the organiser of the Zionist office in Prague before becoming a senior civil servant in Israel, read Schiller to the younger children at the kitchen table.[6] Gellner's mother, Anna Fantl, born in 1894, came from a less intellectual but slightly more economically secure background. But Perry Anderson's claim that the European intellectual exiles who came to Britain rather than to the United States at the end of the Second World War tended to the right in politics as the result of the loss of their estates or property has marginal relevance to Gellner.[7] There were tensions between the parents. Anna had Zionist views, whilst Rudolf, when held prisoner near Lake Baikal during the First World War, became a communist. But Rudolf's revolutionary enthusiasm soon faded, and the family became deeply loyal to Masaryk's new republic. For one thing, Jews were well treated in Czechoslovakia, albeit Masaryk's preference for political integration rather than total assimilation indicated both an element of personal unease and political calculation—namely, that of diminishing the size of the German population.[8] As ethnic tensions remained, the standard quip soon became that there were Czechs and Slovaks, but the only real Czechoslovaks were the Jews.[9] Interwar Prague was also exceptionally vibrant. The city had German and Czech universities, and it was home to Ukrainian and Russian émigrés and exiles, amongst them Roman Jakobsen, Rudolf Carnap and Albert Einstein.

Ernest Gellner was born on 9 December 1925. He was raised in the Dejvice quarter, a new middle class area far removed from more recognisably Jewish areas of the city. Gellner grew up speaking Czech to his sister and German to his parents because their efforts to learn Czech were never completely successful. Gellner remembered the meetings of many Czech intellectuals in the apartment, amongst them the sociologists Josef Navrátil,

[5] This point was made by Gellner in an interview recorded in J. Musil, 'The Prague Roots of Ernest Gellner's Thinking', in Hall and Jarvie, *The Social Philosophy of Ernest Gellner*, p. 31.

[6] Ernest Gellner's uncle Julius wrote a memoir (now in the possession of Susan Gellner) sometime in the 1970s dedicated to his grandson, Marc Gellner-Ward, entitled *England Receives Me as a Human Being* from which this information is drawn. Several of the brothers and sisters gained doctorates, and a full range of views was present in the family—from Zionism to Marxism, and with loyalties shown either to the German or the Czech nation

[7] Perry Anderson, 'Components of the National Culture', *New Left Review*, 50 (1968), Gellner admired this brilliant essay, but insisted—in his 'Reply to Critics', p. 624—that his insecure middle class background excluded him from the pattern described.

[8] Kieval, 'Masaryk and Czech Jewry', *Languages of Community*, chapter nine.

[9] Mendelson, *The Jews of East Central Europe,* p. 149.

the last director of the Masaryk Institute, and Karel Kupka, who worked in the Institut des Études Slaves in Paris, and who wrote several articles on Max Weber.[10] Gellner went to two schools in Prague. His primary school was at the edge of the park where one might meet the President on his rides if one was lucky.[11] The philosopher-president's portrait was hung in every class room, and his belief that democracy, though created in the West, was the inevitable wave of the future was deeply influential.[12] The school was Czech, and this led to a particular scene that Gellner would recount in later life. After the singing of a popular song, he put his hand up in class and said that he knew a different set of words, and then sang a German version. This was received with sufficient coldness that he never made the same mistake again. He then attended the Prague English Grammar School. There may have been calculation here on the part of his parents: one of Rudolf's sisters had married an Englishman, and this in the end did help the acquisition of visas to enter Britain.

Despite love of Prague and deep immersion in Czech culture, including his ability to play thirty Czech folk songs on the harmonica, national identity and personal security were not something to be taken for granted.[13] At the age of eleven Gellner would systematically miss out one word at random from the oath to Czechoslovakia taken as the flag was raised at his summer camp, less out of disloyalty than because he felt it too early to commit himself.[14] In the late 1930s fears that Prague would be bombed caused his mother to take the two children to Příbram, a small town in central Bohemia where her kin ran an ironmonger's shop. He later recalled President Beneš (whose actions he excoriated all his life) announcing that he had a plan to cope with the crisis, but subsequently resigning and flying off to Switzerland. 'In Czech, the word plan is the same as the final part of the word aeroplane, and the joke went around—yes, he had a plan, an aeroplane.'[15] Nonetheless, the family was in Prague when the Germans arrived in March 1939, and it was only with difficulty and considerable trauma that the dangerous journey across Europe into exile was made.

[10] Musil, 'The Prague Roots', p. 32.

[11] Gellner, 'Foreword' to Eva Schmidt-Hartmann's *Thomas G. Masaryk's Realism: Origins of a Czech Political Concept* (Munich, 1984), p. 7.

[12] 'The Price of Velvet: Thomas Masaryk and Václav Havel', *Budapest Review of Books*, 2 (1992).

[13] Gellner, 'Reply to Critics', pp. 624–5.

[14] Davis, 'An Interview with Ernest Gellner', *Current Anthropology*, p. 63.

[15] Gellner, 'Munich in Prague', *The National Interest*, 13 (1988), 118.

Gellner finished his secondary schooling at the St Albans's County School for Boys, a grammar school. He arrived at the age of seventeen as an Open Scholar at Balliol College, Oxford in the Michaelmas Term of 1943. He had decided to study Modern Greats, that is, the combined course in Philosophy, Politics, and Economics. His tutors, respectively in economics, philosophy and politics, were Thomas Balogh, A. D. Lindsay, the liberal anti-fascist and expositor of Hegel, and Frank Pakenham, the Catholic anti-fascist who later became Lord Longford. He made friends with Paul Stirling, who was to introduce him to social anthropology at the London School of Economics, and with John Hajnal, later to become a distinguished demographer and colleague at the London School of Economics, who later recalled Gellner saying repeatedly at the time that 'it was a disaster to be a Jew in modern Europe'.[16]

After just a year at Oxford Gellner joined the Czechoslovak Armoured Brigade, aged eighteen. He saw active service, including the experience of being under fire when the Brigade besieged Dunkirk, and took part in victory parades in Pilsen and in Prague. But Czechoslovakia had effectively been liberated by the Red Army. The four books he carried with him—George Orwell's *Animal Farm*, Arthur Koestler's *Darkness at Noon*, James Burnham's *The Managerial Revolution*, and Cyril Connolly's *The Unquiet Grave*—attest to his claim never to have held Marxist views.[17] His own earliest philosophical enthusiasm was for Schopenhauer, and he later described his early and avid interest in Sartre and Camus.[18] Doubtless, this interest in existentialism partially explains his attendance in Charles University for a term, for he was able to listen to the lectures of Jan Patočka (for which he did not in fact much care).[19] Still, he did not feel at home, despite having dreamt about Prague constantly during his first period of exile.[20] He was appalled at the manner of the expulsion of

[16] Interview with Hajnal, June, 1998. Hajnal suggested in that interview that this might have represented Jewish self-hatred, a trope described by S. L. Gilman, *Jewish Self-Hatred: Anti-Semitism and the Hidden Language of the Jews* (Baltimore and London, 1986) and by P. Mendes-Flohr, *Divided Passions: Jewish Intellectuals and the Experience of Modernity* (Detroit, 1991). No supporting evidence for this claim has come to my attention; general considerations, noted below, militate against it.

[17] Gellner cites the books in 'Return of a Native', *Political Quarterly*, 67 (1996), noting proudly that the books were left behind, as pioneering pinpricks in the Iron Curtain.

[18] 'Period Piece', in *The Spectator*, 37 (1975).

[19] Ernest Gellner, 'Reborn from Below: The Forgotten Beginnings of the Czech National Revival' (Review of Jan Patočka, *Co jsou Češi? Was Sind die Tschechen?*), *Times Literary Supplement*, 4702 (1993).

[20] Davis, 'An Interview with Ernest Gellner', p. 63.

the Sudeten Germans, even though he fully understood the motives behind this piece of ethnic cleansing. His later conviction that the fate of national minorities usually reduced to either expulsion or assimilation, was very probably rooted in his experience of the fate of both the Czech Jews and the Czech Germans. He was a witness to moral devastation and to a new occupation. In the fragments of a report entitled 'No Winter's Tale' that was never published, and that appears to be from the years 1946–8, Gellner described seeing Red Army officers billeted in the family home, which must have been traumatic no matter how detachedly he presented himself.[21] The text shows his partial contempt for the Czechs at that moment, noting the 'cheerful attempt by everyone to exculpate as many friends [from the charge of collaboration with the Nazis] as possible by any means at hand'. He was also shocked at his fellow Jews' complicity in their own fate, trying 'to solve the enigma of the passivity with which people, knowing what was in store for them, went to death with no attempt at resistance or escape, even the young and the vigorous'. He saw power changing hands both inside his own Brigade as well as the society at large, and came to feel that Czechoslovakia was in for as long a period of oppression as that which it had suffered at the hands of the Counter Reformation. There was significant and authentic local support for communism, and limited active opposition. The Czechs had no doubt that Germany would revive, and no faith that the West would protect them from that revival, quite naturally given their experience at Munich. This made them disposed to appease their own communists as the lesser evil, especially in light of the fact that they were expelling their own Germans. Gellner later placed part of the blame on the legacy of Masaryk, in so doing deploying Karl Popper's criticism of historicism. The Czechs had been taught to base their morals on historical evolution, and merely transferred their loyalties to communism once democracy failed: 'The truth is both ironic and bitter, but inescapable: Masaryk's philosophy of history did eventually lead to 1948.'[22] He went into exile again, not expecting to return.

[21] The allusion in the title is to the character in Shakespeare's 'The Winter's Tale' who believes that Bohemia has a coastline. (The allusion also provides the title for D. Sayer, *The Coasts of Bohemia: A Czech History* (Princeton, 1998)). Gellner's Papers are now housed in the London School of Economics. For permission to use them and to quote from them, my thanks go to Susan Gellner. It is worth noting that there is considerable overlap at key points between this piece and 'Return of a Native' written fifty years later.

[22] Gellner, 'The Price of Velvet', p. 122.

II

At first sight, he re-adapted to English society without great difficulty. He was a brilliant student, and benefited permanently from a close reading of Kant and from a more general absorption of the tradition of British empiricism, especially the writings of Hume and Russell. He was immediately attracted to Popper's *The Open Society and Its Enemies*, as is evident from the critical letter he wrote to Popper in August 1946—to which Popper sent an immediate and interesting reply.[23] In 1947 he obtained a first class degree and was *Proxime accessit* (runner-up) in the John Locke Scholarship in Mental Philosophy. These credentials allowed him to start his academic career at Edinburgh University as Assistant Lecturer in Philosophy. After two years he moved to the London School of Economics as an Assistant Lecturer in Sociology with special reference to Ethics. Further, he was still close to the Oxford philosophers by whom he had been educated, going regularly in the early 1950s to present papers. He was in correspondence with the then dominant figures in philosophy in Oxford, including Iris Murdoch, J. H. Urmson, Richard Hare, Isaiah Berlin, and Stuart Hampshire. Gilbert Ryle's letters from Magdalen College, Oxford make clear that he knew Gellner well, and it was in *Mind*, of which he was then the editor, that Gellner's first article appeared in 1951.[24]

Nonetheless, Gellner was in fact not at all at ease, the increasingly clear realisation of which eventually led him to rebel against the world he had joined.[25] Most immediately, the ethos of defusing great philosophical questions, treating them as mere puzzles that flowed from linguistic bewitchment, stemming from the philosophy of the later Ludwig Wittgenstein and from his proselytiser J. L. Austin particularly irritated Gellner. He gradually came to believe that Wittgenstein and Austin rested their philosophies of language on views of the nature of society that were unexamined and mistaken. Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations* had argued that there was no escape from linguistic forms of life which

[23] Both letters will be available in a revised edition of I. C. Jarvie and S. Pralong (eds.), *Karl Popper's* The Open Society *after Fifty Years* (1st edn., London, 1999; rev. edn. forthcoming).

[24] Gellner, 'Maxims', *Mind*, 60 (1951).

[25] Many pages of jottings, often aphoristic in character, survive in the Gellner Papers, London School of Economics. These 'Notes', almost certainly from the mid 1950s until the early 1960s, show Gellner working out positions that he would thereafter hold. Some of the material was used in his first two books, *Words and Things: A Critical Account of Linguistic Philosophy and a Study in Ideology* and *Thought and Change*.

were in some sense self-contained and self-validating. Gellner regarded this as question-begging rather than question-defusing. Instead of feeling duty-bound to assess the world and its perplexities, Oxford philosophers had come to develop facile recipes that maintained that there were limits to all such assessment. As Gellner had seen diversity in cultural and national affairs in the most visceral way, he naturally felt that evaluation and choice were mandatory. Relativism for Gellner was always a problem rather than a solution.[26] Some of his worries can be seen in his earliest work. 'Use and Meaning' already makes the point, to become standard in Gellner's repertoire, that philosophical problems could not be solved or dissolved by spelling out the logic of a particular culture.[27] For the *raison d'être* of some cultures was that of self-improvement, and therefore self-transformation, making them so to speak schizophrenic in their very core. 'Ethics and Logic' tried to describe, not least by sympathetic reference to the existentialism of Kierkegaard, how very confused, contingent and uncertain are our identities.[28]

Behind these worries about linguistic philosophy was a much more general assault on the complacency of British intellectual culture. A long unpublished manuscript, 'Conservatism and Ideology', took particular aim at the work of Michael Oakeshott and Isaiah Berlin.[29] He suggested that the very idea of a conservative theory is self-contradictory: either a social order works for reasons of tradition or we have to calculate how to behave. In any case, 'traditions are manipulations of the past (not indeed generally actual fabrications) for the purposes of manipulating the present and propping up current arrangements'. He saw Berlin's work as 'always the same': the 'failures of past celebrities dragged together to justify not trying'.[30] Further, Berlin's absorption of others, Gellner felt, could be deeply misleading: Berlin's John Stuart Mill, for example, was much too tolerant and relativist, a view which distorted Mill's concern to

[26] This formulation is used especially forcefully in his 'The New Idealism', in I. Lakatos and A. Musgrave (eds.), *Problems in the Philosophy of Science* (Dordrecht, 1968).

[27] Gellner, 'Use and Meaning', *Cambridge Journal*, 4 (1951).

[28] Gellner, 'Ethics and Logic', *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, 55 (1955).

[29] Gellner, 'Conservatism and Ideology', Gellner Papers, London School of Economics. Since several versions of this manuscript exist, many corrected, it seems likely he considered it important. It is worth noting in this context that his admiration for the work of Ayer went hand-in-hand with bemusement that the inherent radicalism of logical positivism has been so emasculated by British life as to have changed nothing. On this see especially Gellner, 'The Crisis in the Humanities and the Mainstream of Philosophy', in J. H. Plumb, ed., *The Crisis in the Humanities* (Harmondsworth, 1964).

[30] Gellner, 'The Notes'.

find general principles, and his hard-headed willingness to support direct social programmes of progressive transformation.[31] The crux of their intellectual disagreement was that Gellner did not believe that liberalism could or should be defended by stressing the 'incommensurability of values', Berlin's most prominent theme. 'If that is so, it is hard to see', Gellner wrote later, 'in what sense policy could ever be rational, any more than accountancy would be possible if it were to be carried out simultaneously in a set of mutually inconvertible currencies.'[32] Berlin's 'value-pluralism' was relativist, and in his view relativism opened the door to irrationalism. One could not tolerate everything, especially the counter-enlightenment, if one wished to be a serious liberal.

It seems likely that Gellner was angered that a fellow intellectual of Jewish origin, a fellow émigré from the disaster zones of Europe, could so easily accept and propagate such a cloistered view of the world. Unpublished notes reveal something of his feelings about his own Jewish background:

> We mid European Jews—exactly like man according to existentialism—choosing attributes, being given none. Human situation, only somewhat more so. Unfortunately, it is of the essence of those attributes that they are not chosen but given. If chosen, are somehow false. Not surprisingly, a mainly descent-based society values givenness of attributes more than endeavour, contrary to Kant.
>
> Being a Jew is also like human condition, in that there is no correct solution.
>
> And authenticity—sociologically spurious concept (related to alienation)—all roles are contingent and are seen as necessary; also there is a regress—Jean-Paul Sartre ask[s] one to [be] an authentic Jew (for instance), but why not be authentically one not wishing oneself [to be such], etc., etc.? Many roles incorporate own rejection.[33]

If a desire to belong, to be at home in the world, a sense of what we might call the 'communitarian temptation', is present here so too is the conviction that it was not generally available, especially for European Jews. Gellner clearly felt that Berlin was too much of a figurehead for British society, making it look more liberal than it was in reality. This is not to

[31] Ibid.

[32] Gellner, *Reason and Culture: The Historical Role of Rationality and Reason* (Oxford, 1992), p. 135.

[33] Gellner, 'The Notes'. Gellner did not often write about his Jewish background, a notable and revealing exception being 'Accounting for the Horror' (Review of E. Young-Bruehl, *For Love of the World*), *Times Literary Supplement*, 4140 (1982).

say for a moment that Gellner scorned or hated his Jewish background. But he was not religious, as was made apparent by critiques of varied arguments against belief made throughout his life.[34] Equally importantly, he made no attempt to hide his own background. He would have fought for Israel in 1948 had the war lasted longer, and thereafter said that he was prepared to die for Israel—albeit he always felt sure that the manner of its creation would lead to a 'tragic, perhaps insoluble confrontation with the Muslim world'.[35]

It took several years for Gellner to turn unease into attack, to take his stand against the hegemonic culture of the time—and in effect thereby to give up any real chance of being accepted within the world he had joined. Self-confidence seems to have come for at least three reasons. First, a successful second marriage to Susan Ryan and life with their four children seem to have provided an element of personal stability that had previously been lacking.[36] Secondly, he found something of a home as a doctoral student in anthropology at the London School of Economics, working on the Berbers of Morocco under the joint supervision of Paul Stirling and Raymond Firth. It is as well to say immediately that there was absolutely no split between the anthropologist and the philosopher. Indeed, an amusing strain within his fieldwork was the habit of asking questions about concepts derived from Wittgenstein to the tribesmen he was studying.[37] Differently put, fieldwork allowed him to work out exactly why Wittgenstein's assumptions were sociologically naive. Finally, he immersed himself in intellectual worlds outside Britain, most notably that of France—with particular connections to their philosophers of science and their North Africanists, and with a close personal tie to Raymond Aron whose work he much admired.

The end result was *Words and Things*, the attack on linguistic philosophy that made his name when Bertrand Russell sparked a debate—conducted at first in the correspondence columns of *The Times* but later

[34] A notable instance were comments addressed to L. Kolakowski's, *Religion*, in 'God, Man and Nature', *Sunday Times*, 28 Feb. 1982.

[35] Davis, 'Interview with Ernest Gellner', p. 67.

[36] The first marriage was to someone similar to himself, Laura Hertzstein, a Jewish exile from Germany who had lost all her family in the Holocaust, and was deeply traumatised as a consequence.

[37] He asked his tribesmen, for example, what they would do if confronted by twins when seeking to fill the last place in a posse. He records their amusement, and draws the moral that humans are often less concept-fodder than culturalist theories presume. For this story see, Gellner, *Saints of the Atlas* (London, 1969), p. 127. It is worth noting that the Gellner Papers contain a very large amount of material about Islam, including very extensive field notes.

becoming quite general—by criticising Gilbert Ryle's refusal to review the book in *Mind*. His attack had considerable impact, but the resentment created by his references to 'the narodniks of North Oxford' ensured that he was thereafter more or less excluded from the mainstream philosophical community. The book itself was always hard to read, and it is now dated. But this is not true of the sparkling essays about the philosophy of social science written at the same period in which Gellner spelt out an alternative to the idealism and relativism to which he was opposed.[38] At a general level, he was surely right to insist that concepts are not always, so to speak, foundational: meaning does not always make the world go round. To the contrary, concepts and values are quite often derived from other, more basic social processes: military victories and revolutions obviously have the capacity to change styles of thought, as too do changes in modes of production. More specifically, the insistence on the necessity and possibility for causal analysis in social and historical understanding rested on two sets of observations. On the one hand, belief systems were not seamless wonders, possessed of instructions as to how every facet of life should be lived.[39] The realisation that belief systems are loose and baggy monsters, replete with options, brings causal analysis back in since it becomes necessary to ask about the circumstances which lead to particular sections of a belief system gaining appeal for particular social actors. On the other hand, Gellner resolutely insisted that certain universal physical properties underlie the practice of social inquiry. We know about the nature of beliefs in adoption, say, precisely because we have a physical model of kinship at the back of our mind.[40]

There is a sense in which *Words and Things* was a distraction, a negative assault on error. Gellner's own position was spelt out in *Thought and Change*, a key work that contains the seeds of most of the books that followed.[41] Gellner's metaphysic is clearly expressed here in the form of a paradox. On the one hand, no philosophical position is truly grounded

[38] The two classic pieces are 'Concepts and Society', *Transactions of the Fifth World Congress of Sociology* (Washington, 1962) and 'The New Idealism'. These and related pieces were collected as *Cause and Meaning in the Social Sciences* (London, 1973).
[39] Gellner, *Legitimation of Belief* (London, 1975), p. 156.
[40] Gellner, 'Ideal Language and Kinship Structure', *Philosophy of Science*, 24 (1957). This article led to a prolonged debate, details of which can be found in I. C. Jarvie's complete bibliography of Gellner's writings, in Hall and Jarvie, *The Social Philosophy of Ernest Gellner*.
[41] An interesting appreciation of the impact of the book is offered by R. Szporluk, 'Thoughts about Change: Ernest Gellner and the History of Nationalism', in J. A. Hall, ed., *The State of the Nation: Ernest Gellner and the Theory of Nationalism* (Cambridge, 1998).

since each has a set of assumptions that can be, as he wittily and powerfully demonstrated, questioned. For instance, utilitarianism really makes sense only within a world accustomed to calculation—being wholly useless as a guide to choosing that world in the first place. Further, Kant and Hume thought they were describing human nature but in fact their thought, he later stressed, reflected a very particular social milieu.[42] On the other hand, the precise fact that we are fundamentally at sea, lost without direction means that the impossible must be attempted. Gellner insisted that this had been the position of the classic tradition of Western epistemology, and he showed considerable respect for one tradition within it, that of empiricism—for all that he based much of his argument upon the uses of doubt. But the core of his argument was absolutely historicist. The cognitive conventions of modern epistemology might not be grounded in any complete and abstract way, but they were intimately connected with the creation and maintenance of an affluent society, both desirable and desired, in which human decency was at least a possibility. A neo-episodic 'right is might' evolutionary argument was used to underwrite certain styles of thought and action. We choose our style of life and cognitive theory at the same time, as part of a single package.

This idiosyncratic philosophical justification was but one element of the book. For Gellner also offers the clearest positive statement within his work as to the nature of our social condition by describing 'the modern social contract'. A social order will be and should be considered legitimate, he insisted, if it provides affluence and leadership co-cultural with the rest of society; these principles are designed to satisfy the conditions of industrialisation and nationalism. It is noticeable that this formulation does not privilege political liberty, for all that the book makes clear how much Gellner values this. The fundamental reason for this is that the transition to the modern world is so radical that the very notion of consent makes no sense. This is a point on which he did not change his mind:

> What one consents to depends on what one *is*, and what one is, in the end, springs from the society which has formed one. Could a vote have been taken in the late Middle Ages, on whether mankind was to move onwards to a secular and industrial world? The question would have been unintelligible. Those who were capable of thought at all endorsed the world they knew . . . The changes that have taken place since then have given us a humanity which, in the main, prefers itself as it now finds itself to be. But which third man, encapsulated in both, or independent of either, could possibly choose *between* them, and

[42] Gellner, *Reason and Culture*.

> endorse that transformation 'democratically', by consent. There is no such third man. He cannot possibly exist.
>
> *Fundamental changes transform identities*. Yet without a single, persisting and somehow authoritative identity, there is no one available to give his full consent to a radical transformation . . .[43]

An essay linked to *Thought and Change*, 'Democracy and Industrialisation', insisted that societies in possession of political liberty were lucky.[44] They had created the modern industrial world slowly, endogenously, and without central planning, allowing them to avoid the concentration of power mandated elsewhere by the need to force industrialisation so as to secure legitimacy from the production of affluence. A corollary of this view was blunt dismissal of the sociology implicit in neo-classical economics. The first transition might have been helped by the workings of the laissez-faire principle, but, when it became obvious that industrialisation could be engineered, plan replaced market as inevitable political necessity. The success of Marxism was seen within this frame, in Weberian terms as an ersatz Protestant ethic capable of serving as an ideology for economic development. He clearly found it surprising that Comteanism had not been more successful, but came to interpret the 'revival of Islam' in similar terms, as a doctrine whose scripturalism and disciplinary tendency led it to gain prominence because of the developmentalist needs of the postwar era. Once all this has been said it is crucial to repeat that much of his sociological work concerned the chances for soft political rule. *Thought and Change* had suggested that there were few reasons why liberty would be taken very seriously by politicians seeking to forcibly modernise their societies.[45] In consequence, his attention focused on the possibility of liberalising societies once they had industrialised. An early account of such processes concerned the Prague Spring.[46] But the processes were seen to be at work generally, in Spain, Turkey, and Brazil quite as much as in Eastern Europe.[47]

The book closed with an analysis of humanist intellectuals, most obviously those of Wittgensteinian persuasion. Gellner wholeheartedly endorsed C. P. Snow's thesis that there were two cultures, but added to it a no-holds-barred attack on the humanist side. These intellectuals failed

[43] Gellner, *Plough, Sword and Book* (London, 1988), pp. 193–4. Cf. pp. 249–57, which ends by saying that we had to be tricked into the new world.

[44] Gellner, 'Democracy and Industrialisation', *European Journal of Sociology*, 8 (1967).

[45] Gellner, *Thought and Change*, pp. 115–19.

[46] Gellner, 'The Pluralist Anti-Levellers of Prague', *European Journal of Sociology*, 12 (1971).

[47] Gellner, 'From the Revolution to Liberalisation', *Government and Opposition*, 11 (1976).

to appreciate the importance of the revolution of our time in large part because they feared the diminution of status created by the loss of their monopoly of literacy. Such figures were becoming an irrelevance to the real workings of society, mere cultural entertainers. An absolutely crucial part of Gellner's intellectual effort was involved at this point. The measure of certainty that could be found in modernity was small and spare. In this matter Gellner was a loyal follower of Max Weber's insistence that there is an opportunity cost to modernity, that science brings comforts at the cost of removing moral certainty. This adherence to 'the disenchantment thesis' lay behind his many attacks on spurious attempts to bring us in from the cold.[48] Of course, all this can be put in positive rather than negative terms. In effect Gellner was proposing a morality, that of a rather spare stoicism. On the one hand, we had to live with less given that atttempts to have the world make complete sense had led to such disaster. On the other hand, his deepest loyalties were to Kant, to a world in which we have to find our way precisely because it lacks any ultimate meaning or coherence.

III

Once Gellner had taken his stand, and articulated his basic position, he became extremely productive over the course of a long academic career.[49] The most important institutional base for this career was, from 1949 to 1984, the London School of Economics. Within the Sociology Department he was in turn assistant lecturer, lecturer, reader, and Professor of Sociology with Special Reference to Philosophy. The last slightly odd title was apparently designed to appease Morris Ginsberg, who belatedly came to recognise that Gellner did not share his evolutionist views, and who therefore opposed his promotion on the grounds that he was not a

[48] A particularly striking example is Gellner, 'The Re-Enchantment Industry, or, The Californian Way of Subjectivity', *Philosophy of the Social Sciences*, 5 (1975).

[49] This productivity was seen especially clearly in his essays, many of them written as that rare creature in British life, namely a public intellectual. These were collected in several volumes, including *Cause and Meaning in the Social Sciences*, *Contemporary Thought and Politics* (London, 1974), *The Devil in Modern Philosophy* (London, 1974), *Spectacles and Predicaments* (Cambridge, 1980), *Relativism and the Social Sciences* (Cambridge, 1985), *Culture Identity and Politics*, *Encounters with Nationalism* (Oxford, 1994), and *Anthropology and Politics* (Oxford, 1995).

real sociologist.[50] In 1979 Gellner changed departments, becoming Professor of Philosophy with special reference to Social Anthropology in the Department of Logic and Scientific Method. This move took place in reaction to the appointment of Donald MacRae to the Martin White Chair in Sociology.[51] The fact that this indicated a long-standing personal feud should not obscure the fact that Gellner benefited enormously from the London School of Economics. If the impact of the social anthropologists, particularly Firth and Schapera, and of Popper was constitutive, relations with Elie Kedourie, John Watkins, Imre Lakatos, Ronald Dore, John Hajnal, Tom Bottomore, I. M. Lewis, and many more left traces in his work.

Gellner finished his doctoral thesis in 1961, but it only appeared as *Saints of the Atlas* in 1969. It is without question a classic representative of the Malinowskian tradition of social anthropology. If the particular thesis of that book—that saints provided crucial mediation services allowing tribes to co-exist in relative harmony in a social world bereft of any overarching leviathan—was highly specialised, Gellner's later *Muslim Society* sought nothing less than to offer a general account of the workings of the classical heartland of Islam.[52] The core explanation of a cyclical movement characteristic of pre-modern Islam was derived from David Hume's *A Natural History of Religion* and Ibn Khaldun's fourteenth-century *Muqadimmah*. This element of his general sociology claimed that Islam was especially suited to modernity. Traditional societies faced with the power of the West were, he believed, deeply torn: to westernise was to spurn one's heritage, but to admire one's past was to condemn one's fellows to backwardness. The fact that the high tradition of Islam stressed discipline and literacy made it possible to avoid that choice, thereby allowing it to become, as noted, an ersatz Protestant ethic. Given the impact of Islam in recent years, it is scarcely surprising that Gellner's sociology of Islam received enormous attention, with fierce controversies developing about 'orientalism', the explanatory power of segmentation

[50] Davis, 'An Interview with Ernest Gellner', p. 67.

[51] Gellner, 'No School for Scandal' (Review of R. Dahrendorf, *LSE*), *Times Literary Supplement*, 4808 (1995). This is a fully fledged account of Gellner's own views of the character of the London School of Economics, as well as a barely disguised attack on MacRae.

[52] It is important to bear in mind that further fieldwork was more or less ruled out by the onset of osteoporosis from the late 1950s—a severe affliction he dealt with courageously by trying to pretend that it did not exist.

within Morocco, and about the very possibility of producing a single model for the core of a whole civilisation.[53]

Although Gellner had absorbed the spirit of nationalism in his youth, his insistence that most nationalist myth was false was massively enhanced by witnessing debates amongst Moroccan intellectuals in the late 1950s.[54] Still, he might not have been driven to attempt a general theory of nationalism but for his desire to refute the intellectualist interpretation put forward in Elie Kedourie's *Nationalism*.[55] If Gellner argued at all times both that nationalism was modern and the result of social structural change, there were significant changes in his explanatory account. *Thought and Change* made most of the role played by the native intelligentsia who, finding their mobility blocked at home despite their training in the metropole, had every reason to turn to nationalism. In contrast, the much longer treatment given in *Nations and Nationalism* concentrated in a far more abstract way on the manner in which the national principle was 'required' in order for industrial society to work.[56] Despite the brilliance of the account, and the great success of the book, the functionalism of the argument came in for much criticism.[57] Perhaps that was one reason for a final extended treatment of the subject that paid significantly more attention to historical and geographical variation.[58] But there was a second reason. When he began going regularly to the Soviet Union in the 1970s he was initially exhilarated to see how great was the explanatory power of his concepts when applied to the Soviet rather than the Austro-Hungarian empire. Those concepts suggested that some degree of national secession was inevitable—and that new nations would strive to be homogeneous, the hideous logic of which was to find your own state or join another (if they would let you in). In the last years of his life he

[53] His views about orientalism were first directed against B. Turner ('In Defence of Orientalism', *Sociology*, 14 (1980)) but this was followed by a dispute directly with the creator of the concept, Edward Said, that took place in the columns of the *Times Literary Supplement* following Gellner, 'The Mightier Pen? Edward Said and the Double Standards of Inside-Out Colonialism' (review of E. Said, *Culture and Imperialism*), *Times Literary Supplement*, 4690 (1993); the debate between Gellner and H. Munson on the applicability of the segmentary principle to Morocco is contained in Hall and Jarvie, *The Social Philosophy of Ernest Gellner*; the most important critique of the model as a whole is S. Zubaida, 'Is there a Muslim Society? Ernest Gellner's Sociology of Islam', *Economy and Society*, 24 (1995).

[54] Gellner, 'The Struggle for Morocco's Past', *Middle East Journal*, 15 (1961).

[55] E. Kedourie, *Nationalism* (London, 1960).

[56] Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism* (Oxford, 1983)

[57] See most of the papers in Hall, *The State of the Nation*, perhaps especially those by B. O'Leary and D. Laitin.

[58] Gellner, *Nationalism* (London, 1997).

was forced to think prescriptively rather than descriptively because he feared that the collapse of the Soviet Union might lead to as hideous a period of ethnic cleansing as had marked Europe from the late nineteenth to mid-twentieth century. The end result of these thoughts was an interpretation of the political theory of Malinowski, set in contrast to the views of Wittgenstein, which led Gellner to hope for some new combination of cultural autonomy and political centralisation.[59] The nobility of the attempt was perhaps not matched by the effectiveness of the solutions proposed. Fortunately, the collapse of the Soviet empire has not, to this point, resulted in catastrophes similar to those that marked Gellner's own life.

If the work on nationalism is in part a critique of one colleague at the London School of Economics, the treatment given to psychoanalysis in a sense spells out the basic view of another. *The Psychoanalytic Movement* is Gellner's most Popperian book in that it goes to great lengths to describe falsification-avoiding mechanisms at the core of the therapeutic encounter.[60] Gellner had in fact wanted to do fieldwork amongst the psychoanalysts, but his application had been refused. Still the book bears the marks of a sociologist in that its basic concern is less to confirm or debunk than to explain the astonishing success of an ideological enterprise. If one element of such success was the way in which psychoanalysis positions itself between causal reduction and meaningful analysis, another was the extent to which it could give pastoral care in a world bereft of much religious comfort. The book was very successful, and it marked something of a development in Gellner's views. For he here adds to the opposition he had noted between enlightenment and re-enchanters a vivid appreciation of the naturalistic tradition of thought derived from Nietzsche. By and large, the fact that our inner lives do, in Gellner's view, operate on the lines noted by Nietzsche makes the world of enlightenment at once more fragile and more important.

There is a sense in which *Legitimation of Belief*, which outlines his fully worked out philosophical position most thoroughly, represents his final coming to terms with the influence of Karl Popper.[61] The emphasis on open-mindedness in the world of Popper is attacked on the grounds that basic cognitive standards must be in place for criticism to have bite

[59] Gellner, *Language and Solitude: Wittgenstein, Malinowski and the Habsburg Dilemma* (Cambridge, 1998).

[60] Gellner, *The Psychoanalytic Movement, or, The Cunning of Unreason* (London, 1985).

[61] Gellner, *Legitimation of Belief*.

and so to be effective. Gellner here goes beyond the mere assertion in *Thought and Change* that science works to accounting for why this is so. Brilliant use of anthropological material allows for renewed appreciation of the character of empiricism and of mechanism, and of the way in which these selectors of information work together to produce high-powered knowledge. *Plough Sword and Book* is a companion volume in that its most vital pages try to explain why these selectors were adopted in the first place.[62] The account given stressed two stages, that of the opposition of the world religions to magic in general and, in very Weberian guise, that of the particular character of the Judaeo-Christian tradition. But *Plough Sword and Book* contains much more than that, most notably a trinitarian philosophy of history centring on accounts on the functioning of pre-agrarian, agrarian, and industrial societies. The book was in part a riposte to the categories of Soviet Marxism, in which Gellner had intense interest at this time—mostly, however, so as to gain further information about the possibilities of liberalising this form of modern authoritarianism.[63] In general the book was perhaps the most elegant and faithful of all restatements of key Weberian themes. To his regret, neither *Legitimation of Belief* nor *Plough Sword and Book* had the impact he had wanted.

From 1984 until 1993 Gellner became the William Wyse Professor of Social Anthropology at the University of Cambridge. The participatory style of administration of that university irritated him a good deal, making the appointment somewhat troubled. Still, he enjoyed being with anthropologists, whose concerns clearly mark *Culture and Reason*, a powerful account of the basic structure of western philosophy. Further, his reinvigorated concern with the nature of concepts and community led to interesting speculations about the origins of society.[64] To be set against this was the discovery that idealist and relativist views were gaining headway within anthropology, something he sought to prevent in a noted polemic on *Postmodernism, Reason and Religion*.[65]

But the last years of his life were dominated by changes in Central and Eastern Europe. He spent a year in Moscow in 1989–90, and combined fieldwork there with short trips to Georgia and to Belarus, and longer

[62] Gellner, *Plough, Sword and Book*.
[63] Gellner, *State and Society in Soviet Thought* (Cambridge, 1988).
[64] Gellner, 'Origins of Society', in A. C. Fabian, ed., *Origins: The Darwin College Lectures* (Cambridge, 1988).
[65] Gellner, *Postmodernism, Reason and Religion* (London, 1992).

ones to Estonia.[66] His interest naturally focused on the chances of the erstwhile social bloc becoming liberal. In this context he was far more optimistic about the chances of Central Europe than of Russia itself, both because ethnic cleansing had taken place and because forty years of socialist rule looked to be far less deleterious than the seventy suffered by the metropole itself. These insights, and many others, appeared in *Conditions of Liberty: Civil Society and Its Rivals*, published in 1994 to considerable acclaim.[67] By that time Gellner was back in Prague. For shortly after his return from Moscow he was visited by Ivan Havel who brought with him a personal request from his brother Václav to assist in the creation of a Central European University to be funded by George Soros. He responded immediately, teaching part time from 1991–3 and on a permanent basis for the rest of his life. Although there were frustrations involved in working for a fledgling institution (resolved in part when he was given his own Centre for the Study of Nationalism), there was undoubted pleasure at being in Prague. Naturally enough he observed the Velvet Divorce of Czechs and Slovaks with considerable interest. This was a split of which he approved, in large part, as he considered that this was the only way in which a felt inferiority of Slovak intellectuals could be removed. Considerable amusement was obtained from observing the conflict between President Havel and Prime Minister Klaus, the one seen as a representative of the Frankfurt School and the other as an adherent of Milton Friedman.[68] Nonetheless, he remembered the multicultural Prague of his childhood, and could not but contrast it with a uniform world bereft of Germans, Jews, and Slovaks. There was irony here. His theory of nationalism makes much of the necessity for homogeneity as the base on which industrial success can be built. Nonetheless, he loathed the lack of diversity, and sought to oppose the claustrophilia of the Klaus government by increasingly making contacts with Czech intellectuals. But he died of a heart attack in his apartment in Prague on 5 November 1995 before these links could truly bear fruit.

[66] Gellner, 'Faith and Ethnicity in Eastern Europe', *Daedalus*, 119 (1990).
[67] Gellner, *Conditions of Liberty: Civil Society and Its Rivals* (London, 1994).
[68] He was acute on Klaus, noting well before it became obvious that his radicalism was largely rhetorical, that is, that little was in fact done to undermine the social safety net to which the Czechs had long been accustomed.

IV

Gellner's life and thought have very great interest for they show a particular reaction within the world of Central European intellectuals of Jewish background that so greatly contributed to modern social thought. He differed from Karl Popper in moving beyond the condemnation of nationalism to an appreciation of its necessity—something that was very much a part of his understanding of, even attraction to, the need that many feel to belong to some greater unity. But at the same time, he was an acerbic critic of warm and cosy, meaningful and coherent worlds, regarding them as repulsive. The identity provided by modern knowledge was spare, although to this was added 'an ironic cultural nationalism'. His combination of a few deeply held universal beliefs in combination with a good deal of relativism about the morals of any particular society is reminiscent of Montesquieu. The position was maintained with such immediacy that there was an aura of charisma about the man that resulted in the creation of something of a tribe of his own, in part peopled by the very large number of doctoral students he supervised. Further, he was often as brilliant a lecturer as he was a writer, the creator of crisp clear models that unquestionably encouraged thought and often generated considerable controversy.[69] Time will tell how much he is read in the future. If much of the power behind his arguments and polemics came from his intermingling of sociology and philosophy, it nonetheless makes sense here to distinguish the two areas for a moment. For it may well be that Gellner's philosophic achievements are ultimately more convincing than his account of our social circumstances, despite the brilliance of the varied set pieces involved in the latter.

Legitimation of Belief still stands out against the intellectual current because of its defence of critical monism against pluralism. If the book itself offers an account of the way in which empiricism and mechanism work to select information, his full position was only revealed in companion essays.[70] The brilliance of his argumentation derived from embracing, rather than trying to hide from, the criticism that cognitive strategies are not neutral because ontologically pure, but rather social conventions. Gellner's point was that empiricism can be, should be and

[69] Gellner admitted his liking of such models when interviewed by Davis, 'An Interview with Ernest Gellner', p. 71.

[70] 'An Ethic of Cognition', in R. S. Cohen, P. K. Feyerabend and M. W. Wartofsky, eds., *Essays in Memory of Imre Lakatos* (Dordrecht, 1976).

indeed is *best* defended once this is taken into account. As a cognitive ethic it has on its side an effectiveness which sets it far above its rivals. Positivism is thus best, as he put it, for Hegelian reasons.[71] This takes us more generally to his liberalism. This was made particularly fruitful in being aware of enemies on two sides. On the one hand, Gellner was a superb critic of monolithic belief systems, whose pretensions and ambiguities he deflated continually and effectively. But this did not make him an unqualified defender of tolerance, prepared to endorse Pascal's view that truth is just different on the other side of the Pyrenees.[72] He found relativism of this sort morally repulsive because it was hypocritical: some guarantee was needed that tolerance was being extended only to those prepared to be tolerant themselves. Gellner thus insisted that certain minimal shared rules are necessary within which choice can then hold sway. To hold such a position is to entertain an honourable ambivalence that was certainly present in his work. On the one hand, his work can be seen as telling us about our world, so that it can then be better defended against such enemies as fascism. On the other hand, the attempt to provide criteria by means of which to choose between the social worlds provided by modern ideologies is a sign of a continued search for universalism, for reasons that will appeal to all human beings regardless of context.

The claim that he makes about our social contract seems now open to question. For one thing, the centralisation of power does not necessarily lead to successful industrialisation. This becomes quite obvious once we think of dictatorships that have proved to be merely predatory, whilst a far more negative view of socialist industrialisation is now surely necessary. Equally, it is not easy to see what role authoritarian rule played in the successful industrialisation of a country like Korea: a whole set of conditions were in existence that made that development possible, and the extent to which authoritarianism helped or hindered is by no means clear. Perhaps the most sustained assault on the logic of his position is that of Amartya Sen who has demonstrated that—at least in some cases—voices from below can aid in social and economic development.[73] For another, change in the socialist bloc did not have the character predicted by Gellner. This was less a slow decompression from above than a radical

[71] Gellner, 'Positivism against Hegelianism', *Relativism and the Social Sciences*.

[72] 'The Dangers of Tolerance', *Government and Opposition*, 6 (1971) and *Postmodernism, Reason and Religion*.

[73] A. Sen, *Development as Freedom* (New York, 1999).

collapse, in part because atomisation under socialism deprived a liberalising elite of partners with whom to strike accords. The importance of the work on nationalism, in contrast, is scarcely open to question. Still, his account is open to the charge of being somewhat too socio-economic in character. Further, there may be something to the view that liberalism can influence the character of nationalism-rather than just being a beneficent possibility once the national question has been resolved. His analysis of Muslim society has been criticised along somewhat similar lines, that is, for presuming that Islam was everywhere the same.[74] There were certainly problems with Gellner's position, most notably with the view that Muslim societies were benefiting from an ideological option seen in Weberian guise as a puritanical ethic conducive to development. It is beyond my capacity to assess the extent to which Islam is more diverse than Gellner realised, or the extent to which it may yet become so. But a general consideration does arise at this point. Gellner was a remorseless critic of the replacement of analysis by hope. It may be that Islam will develop more options, some of which may be more liberal, but Gellner's work does at least remind us that the best is not necessarily the real. Similarly, nationalism may be contained by liberalism, that is, the granting of voice may yet militate against exit, but this may not happen—an appalling prospect, of course, given that the main route to social homogenisation for the majority of states in the developing world can only be savagely violent. Furthermore, it may yet be possible, as so many modern social philosophers wish, to change our identities in such a way as to provide a greater measure of belonging within modernity. At this point Gellner was hugely sceptical: he mercilessly exposed the urge to re-enchantment in varied philosophies, insisting both that complex social organisation did not easily have an elective affinity with moral unity and that the occasions on which this been tried had caused disaster.

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[74] Zubaida, 'Is there a Muslim Society?'.