ENGLISH

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A MODERN PHILOSOPHE: ERNEST GELLNER (1925-1995)

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Ernest Gellner was one of the major thinkers of the postwar world–with such distinct reputations as anthropologist, Islamicist, philosopher, theorist of nationalism and advocate of liberalism that his achievement is that of a modern "philosophe". As most of his intellectual career was spent in the West, an introduction to his thought may be of use to readers of **KRITIKA & KONTEXT**.

It is impossible not to see a biographical element at work in Gellner's insistence on the need for a radical rethinking of our place in history. Both his parents were German-speaking and of Jewish background: once in Prague, they changed their allegiance, from German to Czech, to accommodate themselves to the way in which sheer demographic weight created a new form of society at the end of the nineteenth century. Of course, this shift in identities was not total: allegiance often remained to German as a world language, whilst anti-semitism placed limits on imagined belonging–making zionism a further existential option. It is scarcely surprising that this world drove Gellner to think about nationalism, for it had the same effect on Hans Kohn, Karl Deutsch, Eugen Lemberg and Miroslav Hroch.

In Gellner's case the need to rethink identity and position was much exacerbated by the war and its aftermath. The family's loyalty to Masaryk's republic was sufficiently strong to have kept them in Prague until after the German occupation, with the escapes that followed being exceptionally hazardous. After a year at Oxford, Gellner served in the Czech Armoured Brigade at the end of the war; taking part in the victory parades in 1945 in Plzen and Prague. But everything in the city he loved so much had changed for the worst: the Jews had been killed, and the Germans were being viciously expelled. Aware that the latter act would draw the Czechs into the Russian orbit, and through fear of German revenge, Gellner opted in a matter of months for the life of an emigre; convinced that Czechoslovakia would enter a period of darkness similar to that which followed defeat at the Battle of the White Mountain in 1618.

After finishing his studies at Oxford, he lectured briefly in Edinburgh, then spending his formal academic career at the London School of Economics (1949-84) and Cambridge (1984-93). His work in all these places broke out of disciplinary boundaries, in large part because it was marked by a sense of moral urgency. What then were Gellner's conclusions? How exactly did he characterise the conditions of our existence? Many of his most striking arguments and polemics came from an awareness of the intermingling of sociology and philosophy; most famously in the marvellous initial assault in Words and Things (1959) on the social complacency that underlay the hegemony of linguistic philosophy. Still, it 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 (1974) still stands out against the intellectual current because of it 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.[1] The brilliance of his argumentation derived from embracing, rather than trying to hide from, the criticism that cognitive strategics are not neutral because they are not ontologically pure, but rather social conventions. Gellner's point was that empiricism can be, should be and 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 for Hegelian reasons.

This takes us more generally to his liberalism. This was made particularly fruitful thanks to his 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. 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 ambivalence – wholly honourable, in my view – 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.

Of course, Gellner's dislike of relativism was based quite as much upon the way in which he felt that it could distort the understating of our social condition. Here his arguments against idealism, against any uncritical acceptance of the view that meaning makes the world go round, retain enormous force, but for all that they did not sweep everything before them. At a general level, he was surely right to insist that concepts are often derived form other, more basic social processes: military victories and revolutions obviously have the capacity to change styles of thought, as 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. This is made particularly clear in his classic monograph on Saints of the Atlas (1969); a particularly amusing sections of which see Gellner asking tribesmen questions derived form Wittgenstein as to the completeness and cogency of their system of concepts. The realization 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.

His own philosophy of history was first adumbrated in Thought and Change (1964), the sociological sections of which were later much expanded and somewhat modified in Plough, Sword and Book (1988). The baseline for very much of his inquiry was the claim made in the earlier book that our social contract rests, "and rightly rests", on meeting the conditions of industrialism and nationalism. This is a very severe formula, entirely characteristic of a mind whose addiction to crisp models always encouraged thought. In terms of Gellner's own work the formula is in fact positively misleading. For the insistence that forced industrialisation and nationalizing practices entailed authoritarian rule was counterbalanced by passionate inquiry into the chances for liberalisation once the transition to modernity had been made. This accounted for his very active interest in societies as diverse as Brazil, Turkey and Spain, and it stands at the back of his continual participation in changes within state socialism. Gellner's work stood out in arguing for many years that change within socialism was possible: ideological coherence might well be replaced with more pragmatic, technocratic leadership–thereby allowing for a controlled decompression of power. It is only fair to say immediately that change within socialism did not, as Gellner came to realise, take place in this way. Authoritarian capitalism finds it relatively easy to soften rule for a reforming elite and can strike bargains with forces in civil society. When Gorbachev tried this formula he encountered failure due to the absence of real civil society groupings with whom he could cooperate, (destroyed by Tsarism as much as by marxism,) sure of their ability to control their own forces. This failure left Gellner very worried in the last years of his life. He was by no means certain that the breakdown of the last great empire would be progressive, being deeply struck by resemblances to Weimar Germany.

Of course, his attention was particularly concentrated on nationalism within postcommunist society, and it was in order to study them that he returned to Prague in 1992 to direct a Centre for the Study of Nationalism within George Soros's Central European University. The years in Prague had attendant dif-

ficulties, the most interesting of which concerned unease at the Czech intellectual scene. For all his enjoyment of the struggle between Havel and Klaus, the respective proponents of hermeneutics and monetarism, he found the latter's move to a claustrophile society, prepared to abandon everything to the East in its rush to join the European Union, distasteful–leading him to work hard to make links to the Czech Academy and to Charles University designed to diversify opinion.

The claim that he makes about our social contract seems now open to question. For one thing, the centralization 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 industrialization of a country like Korea: a whole set of conditions were in existence that made the development possible, and the extent to which authoritarianism helped or hindered is by no means clear. The importance of his 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. Balkan nationalism surely has nothing to do with industrialism, whilst the force driving much of European nationalism was that of geopolitical conflict. 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. The attempt to homogenize territorial space in the late twentieth century has brought, as he well knew, untold misery–which might, at least sometimes, have been avoided had constitutional and federal arrangements been considered from the start. Differently put, we can at least hope that Ukraine will survive, for all that the developmental tasks of Hungary, the Czech Republic and Poland are much eased thanks to the ethnic cleansings of Hitler and Stalin.

A general consideration arises at this point. Gellner was a remorseless critic of the replacement of analysis by hope; that is to say, his work does at least remind us that the best is not necessarily the real. 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 homogenization for most of the 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 has been managed had caused disaster.

1) 'An Ethic of Cognition', his Spectacles and Predicaments (1978), 'Sitivism against Hegelianism' in his Relativism and the Social Sciences (1985).