

# DISENCHANTMENT WITH DISENCHANTMENT

John Hall

One of the figures who contributed greatly to post-war intellectual culture—and who thought deeply about communism, its ending and the possibilities for this social world was the Czech/British philosopher and anthropologist Ernest Gellner. The following passage—from ‘The Rubber Cage: Disenchantment with Disenchantment’, from his collection Culture, Identity, and Politics, Cambridge, 1987—exemplifies one strand of his intellectual contribution. He loathed shoddy and loose social and political theorizing, and was a merciless critic of the relativism which so often marked it. He distinguishes here between areas of rigorous thought, and the widening arena of sloppier intellectual production.

## THE RUBBER CAGE

Ernest Gellner

The icy intellectual discipline of rationality applies in the first instance to *design* and in the second instance to the *production* of the industrial artefacts. The modus operandi, the style and spirit of the individuals and organisations responsible for these two crucial aspects of our society, must exemplify that responsible and orderly *Geist* in which Max Weber discerned the progenitor of our world, and which is displayed by the free entrepreneur and by the bureaucrat alike.

But: with the growth of affluence and automation, the number of workers and of man-hours devoted to design and to actual production goes down, above all in proportion to the total. The working week shrinks, leisure expands; evenings, weekends, and the period of ‘education’ all grow larger. Education itself is markedly unrigorous and lacking in discipline. Within working hours and within the working population the tertiary, service sectors expand, and the proportion of people actually engaged in production goes down. Leisure, work in the



tertiary sector, and a good proportion of labour in the productive sector as well have a certain feature in common: they all consist of using or serving machines, the control of which becomes increasingly more simple and *intuitive*. By an 'intuitive' control I mean one whose operation seems more or less self-evident, if not to any human being whatever, then at any rate to one brought up in the ambience of industrial gadgets.

Consider that hackneyed but appropriate symbol of the modern human condition, the motor car. To design a new model requires, no doubt, a fair amount of Cartesian thought; so, in some measure and a different way, does the supervision of its production, or its repair. But the *use* of it does not. The principle involved in using a steering wheel, an acceleration pedal, and a braking pedal, are so simple and obvious that even to spell them out seems pedantic. But the point is that the number of people involved in designing or producing motor cars is small and possibly shrinking. The amount of repair work involving thought – the elimination of possibilities which is involved in locating and correcting a fault – is probably also going down, given the tendency to replace entire units rather than repair them. But whilst the number of car users continues to augment, what follows? The activities requiring Cartesian thought are diminishing (both as a proportion of the population and as a proportion of the time of individuals), whilst the activities calling only for easy, intuitive, near-self-evident responses are increasing.

If this is a valid generalisation – and I find it hard to have serious doubts about its truth – it would be odd indeed if the state of affairs it describes were not also reflected in our cosmology.

This of course is precisely what we do find. The interesting feature of the contemporary scene is not so much whether it is religious, revolutionary, conservative, etc. It is, at different times and in different places, all these things. What is interesting, and to a large measure shared throughout, is the kind or style of religion, protest, conservatism and so on which we encounter. A certain similarity of spirit pervades otherwise quite diverse movements, and ranges from the abstract heights of formal philosophy to the earthy immediacy of youth culture and pop stars. One can hardly substantiate so wide-ranging a generalisation, but one can illustrate it. My choice of examples is of course governed by what I happen to be more or less familiar with, and it does not claim to be more than illustrative.