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ERNEST GELLNER AND THE CONDITIONS OF THE EXIT¹

Ernest Gellner was born in 1925 in Czechoslovakia, the son of a Jewish journalist turned business man. The family lived in Prague until the German occupation of 1939, when they moved to England. In 1949 Gellner obtained a first class degree in Philosophy, Politics and Economics at Oxford. He then went to Edinburgh for two years on an assistantship in philosophy and became a lecturer in Sociology at the London School of Economics. At the L.S.E. he became attracted to anthropology, where Bronislaw Malinowski's influence was still strong. He visited Morocco in 1954 and soon began his fieldwork for an anthropology Ph.D. subsequently published as **Saints of the Atlas** (1969). In 1962 he received a Personal Chair at the L.S.E. as Professor of Sociology with Special Reference to Philosophy. He wrote a number of works and collections of essays connecting anthropology, sociology and philosophy. He also continued his studies of Islamic societies, making eight field-work visits to Morocco and publishing **Muslim Society** in 1981. Gellner became Professor of Social Anthropology at Cambridge in 1984 and retired in 1993. He died suddenly of a heart attack in Prague on 5th November 1995.

Gellner's life had produced a set of contradictions which remind one of our earlier thinkers and help to explain how he revived an interest in the riddle of modernity. Jiri Musil describes the first clash. 'During his childhood in Bohemia...Gellner experienced the last remnants of the old, traditional world, saw the Czech countryside, real villages and farmers...Yet parallel to this, he lived in a dynamic city that in his lifetime became one of the new metropoli of Europe. He could not miss the contrast.' Musil points out that it is this which differentiated him from almost all of his colleagues. 'He did not live only in an urban environment from his early childhood as did most of his later British or American colleagues who studied industrial societies.' Musil believes that 'The others could not be very directly aware of the "metamorphosis", because they were already beyond the great divide.... Gellner's knowledge of Czech agricultural and industrial society... allowed him to understand better what transpired in European societies from the eighteenth century to the present.'²

The early clash between eastern and western Europe in his upbringing was reinforced by at least three further intellectual and social experiences which heightened his awareness of the peculiarities and precariousness of our civilisation. One of these was his professional interest in the great philosophical watershed between the **ancien regime** and modernity which took place in the eighteenth century and particularly in the Scotland he had experienced in Edinburgh and read about in his beloved David Hume. Here Gellner found a specification of the foundation of the new world and all its strangeness, which was given further precision by his other mentor, Kant.

The second reinforcement came from his professional involvement with Islam. This provided him with

¹ The 'Conditions of the Exit' is a section title in Gellner, **Plough**.

²Musil in Hall & Jarvie, **Gellner**, 42-3

an invaluable counter-model. He approvingly quoted Tocqueville on the fact that 'Islam is the religion which has most completely confounded and intermixed the two powers...so that all the acts of civil and political life are regulated more or less by religious law.'³ Islam made Gellner deeply aware that the mixing of religion and politics is the normal state of mankind: their separation in certain parts of the world is a recent peculiarity. The way in which Islam functions despite this lack of separation continued to puzzle him. Islam 'exemplifies a social order which seems to lack much capacity to provide political countervailing institutions or associations, which is atomized without much individualism, and operates effectively without intellectual pluralism.'⁴

Thirdly, there was Gellner's continuing interest in the only other major 'totalitarian' or 'closed' system that existed for most of his lifetime, communism. Whereas Islam embeds politics within religion, the Soviet world tried to embed economy, society and religion within the polity. He wrote that 'Under the Communist system, truth, power and society were intimately fused.'⁵ The collapse of this closed world provided Gellner with the chance to undertake a post-mortem. The surprise and opportunity perhaps helps to account for the fact that some of his most inspired writing occurred in the last six years of his life, after 1989. As he himself put it, 'It is this collapse which has taught us how better to understand the logic of our situation, the nature of our previously half-felt, half-understood values. We now see the manner in which they emerge from the underlying constraints and strains of our condition. It provides a better way of understanding society and its basic general options.'⁶ Thus Ernest Gellner was well placed to see that there is a riddle. In trying to solve it he elaborated and synthesized many of the Enlightenment themes.

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One characteristic of the emergence of 'modernity' is the growth of rationality or the disenchantment of the world. There is a 'radical discontinuity' which exists 'between primitive and modern mentality'.⁷ This is 'the transition to effective knowledge', which Gellner described many times.⁸ This is, of course, not unlike the work of Popper and Kuhn.⁹ But Gellner's stress is on the fact that 'The attainment of a

³Gellner, *Muslim Society*, 1

⁴Gellner, *Liberty*, 29

⁵Gellner, *Liberty*, 137

⁶Gellner, *Liberty*, 210

⁷ Gellner, *Plough*, 42

⁸ For example, see Gellner, *Legitimation*, 169,173.

⁹ Popper, *Open Society* and Kuhn, *Scientific Revolutions*.

rational, non-magical, non-enchanted world is a much more fundamental achievement than the jump from one scientific vision to another'. Popper 'underestimates the difficulties' of establishing an Open Society.¹⁰

In a number of his earlier works Gellner developed the idea that the separation of cognition or thought was just one example of the most fundamental characteristic of the great transformation, that is the effort to separate and balance the deepest forces in human life - the pursuit of power (politics), wealth (economics), social warmth (kinship) and meaning (religion). Gellner noted that in the majority of human societies, there is no separation of institutions. For instance, in tribal societies there is no distinction between economic and political.¹¹ But 'Under capitalism, this unity disappears; productive units cease to be political and social ones. Economic activities become autonomous...' This separation of the economic from the political and social is one of the important features of western industrial capitalism. 'The really fundamental trait of classical capitalism is that it is a very special kind of order in that the economic and the political seem to be separated, to a greater degree than in any other historically known social form.'¹² He asked how it was that 'Production replaces Predation as the central theme and value of life?'¹³

This separation of spheres, where politics, economics, religion and kinship are artificially held apart, is the central feature of modern civilization. None of the institutions is dominant. There is no determining infrastructure, but a precarious and never to be taken for granted balance of power. This, Gellner believed, was the key to the difference between Islam and the West. 'The difference would seem to be less in the absence of ideological elements than in the particular balance of power which existed between the various institutions in that society.'¹⁴ We have 'In the polity, an unusual balance of power, internally and externally...'¹⁵

This insight is synthesized and given coherent expression as the central theme of **Conditions of Liberty**. In the majority of agrarian societies, as in Communism, nothing is separated, so 'political, economic, ritual and any other kinds of obligation are superimposed on each other in a single idiom.'¹⁶

¹⁰ Gellner, **Legitimation**, 182.

¹¹Gellner, **Muslim**, 36-7

¹²Gellner, **Spectacles**, 285

¹³Gellner, **Plough**, 158

¹⁴Gellner, **Muslim**, 6

¹⁵ Gellner, **Plough**, 277

¹⁶Gellner, **Liberty**, 7

Feudal society in the West saw a partial separation. There was the start of a separation of religion and politics. Ancient society was 'eventually replaced by a new order, one in which the Christian separation of religion and polity made individual liberty thinkable.'¹⁷ However the process was a slow one for Gellner believed that the political and economic were still fused together until feudalism collapsed. 'In feudal society, as political and economic strata are conspicuously visible and manifest, indeed are legally and ritually underwritten, it would seem everything is clear. There is no pretence. There is also no separation. There is only one social order, political and economic. There is no talk of Civil Society as distinct from the state.'¹⁸ Yet, mysteriously, out of this unified world, emerged something new, a separated world. This is the world of 'Civil Society'.

The peculiarity of the separation, and the fact that its implementation hung in doubt in the latter half of the eighteenth century, he noted as follows. 'Civil Society is based on the separation of the polity from economic and social life ... but this is combined with the absence of domination of social life by the power-wielders, an absence so strange and barely imaginable in the traditional agrarian world, and found so surprising and precarious by Adam Ferguson.'¹⁹ The separation of politics and economics became entrenched and 'this separation is an inherent feature of Civil Society, and indeed one of its main glories.'²⁰ Indeed this is the defining characteristic of Civil Society, which 'refers to a total society within which the non-political institutions are not dominated by the political ones, and do not stifle individuals either.'²¹ The separation is complete. 'The emergence of Civil Society has in effect meant the breaking of the circle between faith, power and society.'²²

In many ways this is a cogent re-statement of many of the insights of earlier thinkers. What is special is not the thoughts in themselves, but the fact that they were written recently, during the second half of the twentieth century, when most of those around him had forgotten the riddle. Gellner restated the earlier vision in a new form. The new world has become so much part of the air we breathe that the shock felt by Montesquieu, Hume, Smith and Ferguson, or of comparative strangeness best exemplified in Weber, has been forgotten by most of us. Islam and the Soviet bloc, and perhaps memories of Czechoslovakia before the Second World War, constantly reminded Gellner that none of this is to be taken for granted, that it is indeed not the 'normal' condition of man.

A living experience of different worlds also made Gellner more aware than many of the cost of

¹⁷Gellner, **Liberty**, 10

¹⁸Gellner, **Liberty**, 55

¹⁹Gellner, **Liberty**, 212

²⁰Gellner, **Liberty**, 80

²¹Gellner, **Liberty**, 193

²²Gellner, **Liberty**, 141

disenchantment. The insulation of various spheres of life has its own costs as well. Although it allows people to think freely and to act rationally it is, of course, caught in the deeper contradiction that the real world is not separated into watertight compartments. We have to believe that religion and politics, morality and economics, kinship and politics are separable and can live amicably alongside each other. But the garment is thereby torn apart arbitrarily; reality is a seamless web, as people living in the majority of human societies have realised. Marx recognized this in his concept of alienation, Durkheim in anomie, Weber in disenchantment. Gellner adds his own voice in elaborating these contradictions.

Based on his experience in Islamic and Communist societies, and his reading of history and anthropology, Gellner suggested that if we looked at the last ten thousand years of human activity we could discern a powerful law which seemed to govern agrarian societies. The law was that they were bound to hit a ceiling where political violence curbed economic growth. Gellner put this law as follows. 'Material surplus generally, though not universally, makes for political centralization. And although political power and centralization in agrarian society is fragile, often unstable, it is nevertheless extremely pervasive.'²³ This is because 'The moment there is a surplus and storage, coercion becomes socially inevitable, having previously been optional. A surplus has to be defended. It also has to be divided. No principle of division is either self-justifying or self-enforcing: it has to be enforced by some means and by someone.'²⁴ It is also the case that 'Wealth can generally be acquired more easily and quickly through coercion and predation than through production.'²⁵ Consequently we find that in agrarian societies it is the warriors who are the highest group: 'specialists in violence are generally endowed with a rank higher than that of specialists in production.'²⁶ It is a world of competition, violence and scarcity. Thus 'Roughly, the general sociological law of agrarian society states that man must be subject to either kings or cousins, though quite often, of course, he is subject to both.'²⁷

From our vantage point at the end of the twentieth century, we can see that this is a tendency, rather than an iron law. There have been temporary and short-term exceptions, but Gellner's chief interest was in the major exception when something very unusual happened. 'Certain societies, whose internal organization and ethos shifted away from predation and credulity to production and a measure of intellectual liberty and genuine exploration of nature, became richer and, strangely enough, even more effective militarily than the societies based on and practising the old martial values. Nations of shopkeepers, such as the Dutch and the English, organized in relatively liberal polities, repeatedly beat nations within which martial and ostentatious display, dominated and set the tone.'²⁸ This is the miracle,

²³Gellner, **Anthropology**, 35

²⁴Gellner, **Anthropology**, 33-4

²⁵Gellner, **Anthropology**, 161

²⁶Gellner, **Anthropology**, 161

²⁷Gellner, **Liberty**, 8

²⁸Gellner, **Liberty**, 32-3

and it happened in north western Europe, at the very time when the Enlightenment thinkers started to analyse it. : 'Once only did the balance change definitively, under exceedingly favourable circumstances - eighteenth century England...'²⁹

Not only was there sustained economic growth, but the natural tendency towards growing absolutism and greater stratification and the suppression of free thought, were all simultaneously broken. The escape from the domination of thought by the political and religious powers was extraordinary. 'The dependence of the individual on the social consensus which surrounds him, the ambiguity of facts and the circularity of interpretation are all enlisted in support of the fusion of faith and social order. This is the normal social condition of mankind: it is a viable liberal Civil Society, with its separation of fact and value, and its coldly instrumental un-sacramental vision of authority, which is exceptional and whose possibility calls for special explanation.'³⁰ Equally strange was the escape from the tendency towards 'caste'. Thus the 'astonishing egalitarianism of modern society...has inverted the long-standing and seemingly irreversible trend of complex societies towards ever-increasing social differentiation and accentuated, formalized hierarchy.'³¹

Of course the escape may only be temporary, just as it is fragile. The open and expanding society was very nearly snuffed out by the Second World War. Only very recently has it become obvious that the other option, communism, is unlikely to take over the world.

Thus Gellner had specified a puzzle, the exit of one part of the world from the apparently closed circle of agrarian political systems. He saw the sociologist's central concern as the need to 'explain the circuitous and near-miraculous routes by which agrarian mankind has, **once only**, hit on this path; the way in which a vision not normally favoured, but on the contrary impeded by the prevailing ethos and organization of most human societies, has prevailed...it is most untypical. It goes against the social grain.'³²

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One condition of the exit from agrarian civilization, lies in the development of religion. Like Weber, Gellner did not suggest that Protestantism intentionally or directly caused capitalism. Firstly the famous ascetic virtues of hard-work, honesty and accumulation were an accidental by-product of the Reformation. Part of what Protestantism did was to push to one extreme a general tendency in much of western Christianity towards an attack on a magical and ritual embededness. Some of the explanation for the growth of an unusual thought style in the west from early on lies in Christianity, that is to say 'the impact of a rationalistic, centralizing, monotheistic and exclusive religion. It is important that it was hostile to manipulative magic and insisted on salvation through compliance with rules, rather than loyalty to a

²⁹Gellner, **Liberty**, 169

³⁰Gellner, **Liberty**, 140

³¹Gellner, **Liberty**, 109

³²Gellner, **Plough**, 204.

spiritual patronage network and payment of dues.³³ Gellner outlined this great transition which occurred over two thousand years ago with the development of Christianity out of Judaism.

Over time, this asceticism, the tension between the material and spiritual world, tended to become overlain in Catholicism with a world of miracles and magic. Protestantism was the extreme attempt to restore it to its original anti-magical cleanliness.³⁴ This movement towards a 'disenchanted' world is an ideal background for orderly science and orderly capitalism.

Gellner argued that two revolutions were needed. The first was to separate thought from the material world and put it into the hands of the clerisy. The second separation, between the forces of coercion and those of cognition, between rulers and clergy, was equally important. He argued that 'It is hard to imagine perpetual and radical cognitive transformations occurring in a society in which the old alliance of coercive and clerical elements continues to prevail. They would suppress and smother it.'³⁵ How then did this second revolution occur?

Gellner suggested that something odd happened in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, which set thought free from its previous embedding in politics. For example, 'Descartes proposed and pioneered the emancipation of cognition from the social order: knowledge was to be governed by its own law, un beholden to any culture, any political authority.'³⁶ This first emancipation, which the Counter-Reformation had tried to crush, only became firmly established after the eighteenth century Enlightenment. Religion restricted its claims to areas which 'do not prejudge the results of free and empirical inquiry'.³⁷

Puzzling on how mankind escaped from the joint domination of priests and kings, Gellner developed the idea that it was because the clerics and the rulers fell out with each other. The 'normal' situation in agrarian civilizations was described by Durkheim, who 'sketched out what is really the generic social structure of agro-literate societies, namely government by warriors and clerics, by coercers and scribes.'³⁸ Yet this Caesaro-Papist concordat, the tension between Church and State is a peculiarly western characteristic as compared, for instance, to India or China. Gellner quotes Hume's explanation for the toleration in England and Holland; 'if, among Christians, the English and the Dutch have embraced principles of toleration, this singularity has proceeded from the steady resolution of the civil

³³Gellner, **Anthropology**, 36

³⁴Gellner, **Anthropology**, 39

³⁵Gellner, **Plough**, 132.

³⁶ Gellner, **Plough**, 122.

³⁷ Gellner, **Devil**, 117-8.

³⁸Gellner, **Anthropology**, 37

magistrate, in opposition to the continued efforts of priests and bigots.³⁹ But why were the civil magistrates opposed to religious extremism?

The key, Gellner suggested, may have been in the stale-mate between a powerful Church and a powerful State, both seeking a monopoly yet neither able to obtain it. The separation of, and rivalry between, these two categories of dominators may well constitute one of the important clues to the question of how we managed to escape from the agrarian order. Priests helped us to restrain thugs, and then abolished themselves in an excess of zeal, by universalizing priesthood.⁴⁰ It also appears likely that the religions of both Holland and England represented reactions to Rome, conceived of as a foreign, dominating, institution.

The second thread of Gellner's explanation lies in the relation between the political and the economic.⁴¹ His first premise, as we have seen, is that as societies develop into what we call 'civilizations', predation (politics) will dominate production (economy) and constantly restrict its development. It is a kind of Malthusian law of power. If through some accident or discovery, wealth is increased, it will lead to a rise in predation which will force mankind back to that world of violence from which momentarily it seemed to be freeing itself.

Of course, from time to time, the relations of production and predation are reversed, and there is a period of economic and cognitive growth, as in Greece or the Italian city states. Under favourable circumstances, power had very occasionally moved from thugs to traders even in earlier periods: but as long as there was a kind of ceiling on economic development, the shift did not proceed too far and either reached a limit beyond which it could not go or was eventually reversed.⁴² In general, looking over the long history of mankind up to the middle of the eighteenth century, it seemed true that 'political considerations trumped economic ones and the economic side of life simply could not be granted full autonomy - in other words, a market society was impossible - because the economy was so pathetically feeble.'⁴³ The normal tendency was for wealth-producing oases to be over-run by the surrounding

³⁹Gellner, **Liberty**, 45

⁴⁰Gellner, **Anthropology**, 58

⁴¹ He draws heavily and explicitly, though critically, on the ideas of Adam Smith and other Enlightenment authors here. For example, see his interesting long discussion of Adam Smith's theory concerning the reasons for the decline of violence, the effect of cities etc. in Gellner, **Culture**, 19-27.

⁴²Gellner, **Anthropology**, 168. It is obvious that both the word 'thug' and 'trader' are considerable over-simplifications. Many 'predators' are far from naked thugs, and as important as trade is production of wealth, manufacture, which Gellner tends to lump with 'trade'.

⁴³Gellner, **Liberty**, 169

military powers, as happened in Italy, southern Germany or the Hanseatic League. 'Commercial city states are a fragile rather than a hardy plant. Why should the free merchants of north-west Europe fare any better than their predecessors who lie buried in the historic past?'⁴⁴

How was the 'stability or stagnation of productive forces - which, all in all, applies to agrarian society ... eventually replaced by a permanently growing economy'?⁴⁵ Adam Ferguson had noticed, like Adam Smith, that it was happening, yet 'He does not adequately analyse the distinctive conditions which have led in modern north-west Europe to the subordination of coercers to producers.'⁴⁶ He does not explain how it was that 'under the new dispensation, the relative attractiveness of production and coercion changed. It is no longer more honourable to become rich by warfare rather than by trade.'⁴⁷ The subduing of political by economic power was the great triumph. 'Marxism made it a taunt that the bourgeois state was merely a kind of executive committee of the bourgeoisie: that this should ever have become possible is perhaps mankind's greatest social achievement ever.'⁴⁸

Gellner explained the sudden dramatic switch by invoking a new, special, factor, namely the development of technology and science. As the change began, the important thing was that there was technological growth, but that it was not too obvious. 'So early development may well have depended on the relative feebleness rather than the power of innovation. In fact, by the time the new world emerged in full strength, and its implications were properly understood, it was too late to stop it. It had been camouflaged by its gradualness, and that was made possible by the relatively non-disruptive nature of its techniques.'⁴⁹

Smith and Ferguson's pessimism had been well founded given the history of mankind. Yet both Smith's economic and Ferguson's political pessimism 'came to be invalidated by the same factor, by the tremendous expansion of productive power consequent on the impact of scientific technology.'⁵⁰ In the

⁴⁴Gellner, **Liberty**, 73

⁴⁵Gellner, **Anthropology**, 167

⁴⁶Gellner, **Liberty**, 68

⁴⁷Gellner, **Anthropology**, 168

⁴⁸Gellner, **Liberty**, 206. Here again Gellner lumps trade and manufacture together too simply. It is also not clear, in the light of 'corporate raiding' and other devices in the stock market that predation has indeed been subordinated.

⁴⁹Gellner, **Anthropology**, 131

⁵⁰Gellner, **Liberty**, 79

eighteenth century, a phenomenon whereby 'commerce and production ... take over from predation and domination' for the first time in history perpetuated itself because it was 'accompanied by two other processes - the incipient Industrial Revolution, leading to an entirely new method of production, and the Scientific Revolution, due to ensure an unending supply of innovation and an apparently unending exponential increase in productive powers.⁵¹ Thus the 'entire shift from valuation of coercion to valuation of production was only possible because, rather surprisingly, indefinite, sustained, continuous technological and economic improvement **had** become possible.⁵²

A method was devised by which a country could rapidly become rich by increasing production, which meant that it was also able to become politically dominant. Technological expansion became a virtue, rather than a threat. The successful were not those who pursued the straight path of predation, but those who put much of their energies into production. 'Astonishingly, the regime in which oppression and dogmatism prevailed was not merely wicked, but actually weaker than societies which were freer and more tolerant! This was the essence of the Enlightenment.⁵³ Thus **sustained and unlimited** expansion and innovation ... finally turned the terms of the balance of power away from coercers and in favour of producers. In the inter-polity conflict, no units managed to survive and to continue to compete if their internal organization was harsh on producers and inhibited their activities or impelled them to emigrate.⁵⁴

Thus the 'fittest' were now those who espoused that mix of openness and technological progress whose model was England. The economic and even military superiority of a growing society then eventually obliged the others to follow suit. Natural selection secured what rational foresight or restraint had failed to bring about.⁵⁵ In pursuing this argument, we can see Gellner considering themes which were elaborated by Montesquieu and Adam Smith. The great difference is that Gellner can see the longer term outcome, can add the industrial revolution, and can even see a modern re-run of the process in the collapse of communism in the face of the open capitalist west.

Why then did the change occur first in western Europe? Here Gellner elaborates a theme which also echoes the Enlightenment theorists. It could happen because Europe was split into a number of medium-sized states. Usually an improvement in technological power will strengthen domination 'But in Europe the process was taking place within a multi-state system, and the thugs were unable to use growth to strengthen themselves everywhere at the same time and to the same extent. The various thug

⁵¹Gellner, **Liberty**, 73

⁵²Gellner, **Anthropology**, 168

⁵³Gellner, **Liberty**, 33

⁵⁴Gellner, **Anthropology**, 169

⁵⁵Gellner, **Liberty**, 74

states were also engaged, as was their habit and joy, in conflict with each other. Those which had tolerated or were for one reason or another obliged to tolerate, prosperous and non-violent producers in their own midst, suddenly found themselves **more** powerful - because endowed with a bigger economic base - than their rivals.⁵⁶

In huge absolutist Empires, predation will eliminate production. 'But in a plural state system, in which other states prosper dramatically and visibly, the throttling and throttled systems are in the end eliminated by a social variant of natural selection. In a multi-state system, it was possible to throttle Civil Society in some places, but not in all of them.'⁵⁷ The continuous growth produced by science and technology not only provides an adequate 'bribery fund' to buy off the powerful, but it will also make it possible to solve the problem of keeping people in order without naked force. Thus it is also the basis for democracy. 'Only in conditions of overall growth, when social life is a plus-sum, not a zero-sum game, can a majority have an interest in confirming even without intimidation.'⁵⁸

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Yet Gellner's solution only picked up about half of the Enlightenment argument. It embraced the philosophical side, but only parts of the historical. One might think that this was because he was not an historian and this, of course, is part of the reason. But there is more to the omission than that. What exactly was missing can be seen if we compare his solution to that put forward by earlier thinkers. Gellner specified the problem well and saw that the solution lay in a theory of structural balances. But all the middle part of the Enlightenment solution, the contrast between China and Europe, the analysis of the Roman failure, the nature of the feudal contract and the feudal gate, the loss of the balance in much of continental Europe, the peculiar case of England and why it developed differently, and the consequences in America, all this is missing. He only picked up the Enlightenment clues again when he discussed the way in which the rich become the powerful, and in relation to the costs and dangers of the move from agrarian society.

There are several reasons why all of this middle section had become invisible even to an observer as acute as Gellner. Firstly, while he rejected much else, he did accept the basic evolutionary model that had developed in all of the social sciences. Its attraction for him was all the greater because it is, in fact, a simplified version of one aspect of the Enlightenment synthesis. The 'classic' four-stage theory of some of the Enlightenment thinkers, the hunter-gatherer, pastoral, settled agricultural, commercial, was simplified by Gellner into three stages, tribal, agraria, industria. This also roughly fitted with the growing anthropological divisions into 'Tribesmen', 'Peasants' and 'Modern'. Although Gellner was well aware of the difficulty of the move from agraria to industria, he accepted the 'before', 'during' and 'after' model. All societies were 'agrarian' up to the seventeenth century; then they began to be transformed. And basically all 'agrarian' societies were structurally similar - they had a 'normal' shape which he described in detail, a sharp hierarchy, position based on status, domination by lords and priests and so on.

⁵⁶Gellner, **Anthropology**, 167

⁵⁷Gellner, **Liberty**, 74

⁵⁸Gellner, **Liberty**, 31

Quite early in his intellectual life Gellner seems to have convinced himself that three-stage models are the best and that world history can be fitted into such a model. This became a dogma in his book on nationalism where he wrote that 'Mankind has passed through three fundamental stages in its history; the pre-agrarian, the agrarian and the industrial'. Or again he writes, 'My own conception of world history is clear and simple: the three great stages of man, the hunting-gathering, the agrarian and the industrial, determine our problems but not our solution'.⁵⁹ Trinitarians who subscribe to the 'elegant and canonical three' stages (Comte, Frazer or Karl Polanyi) are praised. In an interview in 1990 he admitted that 'What is true is that I very much like neat, crisp, models, and try to pursue them, and I would be very uncomfortable if I didn't have one.'⁶⁰

The difficulty is that such a model, if taken as a universal law of development, does determine not only the problems, but also the nature of the solutions. If we believe with Gellner that there are these three types, each distinct and different, it is indeed difficult to see how the movement from one to the next occurred. Attractive as three-stage theories are, they are probably an 'idol of the mind' in Bacon's sense. They are useful as organizing devices, showing some strong tendencies. But they are not laws of progress. We should treat all ideas of stages as, at the most, tendencies, as gauges against which we measure actual histories. If reified into necessary sequences and laws of development, they blind us to what actually happened.

Particularly significantly for us here is that part of Gellner's scheme dealing with the 'middle' stage of 'Agraria'. There is here a tremendous lumping together of differences in 'Agraria'. Here we seem to have everything from pastoral nomads to densely settled India and China, almost every conceivable kind of kinship system, numerous variations in religious and political organisation. If they are all lumped together or generically similar, it makes the emergence of modern industrial civilisation inexplicable. I suggested that once we allow for the possibility that, say, fourteenth-century England, though 'agrarian', was very different from fourteenth-century Bohemia, Ghana, Peru or China (or the approximate places where these names would later apply) then it becomes easier to assess what may have happened. Gellner in his reply to this suggestion re-asserted the structural similarity of all agrarian societies, a similarity which means that 'Agraria is doomed, by the very logic of its situation, to remain what it is'.⁶¹

One consequence of homogenizing the agrarian 'stage' can be seen if we examine Gellner's treatment of feudalism, the main area where he failed to follow the Enlightenment trail. Gellner realized that one of the quintessential features of modernity lies in its peculiar blend of status and contract. Gellner realized that modern civilization is based on the co-existence of both principles. A modern Civil Society has to have at least, temporary, flexible, communities, as well as individual choices. 'Civil Society is a cluster of institutions and associations strong enough to prevent tyranny, but which are, none the less, entered and left freely, rather than imposed by birth or sustained by awesome ritual.'⁶² In a central passage he

⁵⁹ Gellner, **Nations**, 5,114.

⁶⁰ In an interview with John Davis, May 1990, published in **Current Anthropology**, vol.32, no.1, Feb. 1991.

⁶¹ In Hall and Jarvie, **Gellner**, 663

⁶²Gellner, **Liberty**, 103

pointed out the tensions, peculiarities and contradictions. Modern man 'is capable of combining into effective associations and institutions, **without** these being total, many-stranded, underwritten by ritual and made stable through being linked to a whole inside set of relationships, all of these being tied in with each other and so immobilized. He can combine into specific-purpose, **ad-hoc** limited association, without binding himself by some blood ritual.⁶³ This is the peculiarity, the existence of a combination of all those nineteenth century dichotomies - Community and Association (Tonnie's), Status and Contract (Maine), Mechanical and Organic solidarity (Durkheim) and so on.

There is in fact a partial, but only a partial movement along these dichotomies. It is **this** which makes Civil Society; the forging of links which are effective even though they are flexible, specific, instrumental. It does indeed depend on a move from Status to Contract: it means that men honour contracts even when they are not linked to ritualized status and group membership. Society is still a structure, it is not atomized, helpless and supine, and yet the structure is readily adjustable and responds to rational criteria of improvement.⁶⁴ By some miracle, 'these highly specific, unsanctified, instrumental, revocable links or bonds are effective! The associations of modular man can be effective without being rigid!⁶⁵ The small company or football team or orchestra are examples of this. Yet the ability to hold people together and yet also give them freedom is very unusual.

Gellner he did not realize that there was something odd about feudalism, and particularly the form that developed in England. While recognising that the 'relationship between members of various levels in this stratified structure... are, ... ideally and in principle, , contractual' and 'even affirms a curious free market in loyalty', Gellner still believed that feudalism is 'governed by status and not contract.'⁶⁶ Thus he can compare a modern 'open, mobile, growth-oriented, modular social order' to a 'feudal or baroque' one, which is 'absolutist, status-oriented, anti-productive.'⁶⁷ It is thus difficult for him to see how strange and powerful feudalism was. If the major transformation which Gellner analyses is rephrased in other terms as the movement from status-based to contract-based societies, or from **gemeinschaft** to **gesellschaft**, then according to Gellner, feudal societies are still 'governed by status' and hence on the wrong side of the 'great divide'.

Yet the greatest thinkers on this subject are united in placing feudalism on the 'modern' side of the great divide. Montesquieu, Adam Smith and Tocqueville were all aware of the deeply contractual nature of feudalism. Their intellectual descendants, for example Sir Henry Maine and F.W.Maitland re-emphasized this surprising fact. It is worth repeating Maitland's famous comment on Maine that: 'The master who taught us that "the movement of the progressive societies has hitherto been a movement

⁶³Gellner, **Liberty**, 99-100

⁶⁴Gellner, **Liberty**, 100

⁶⁵Gellner, **Liberty**, 100

⁶⁶Gellner, **Plough**, 158

⁶⁷Gellner, **Liberty**, 148

from Status to Contract" was quick to add that feudal society was governed by the law of contract'. Maitland added his endorsement: 'There is no paradox here'.⁶⁸ In other words that very element of 'progress' and 'growth' which Gellner singled out is present in feudalism. Not only, as Gellner realized, was religion separated from politics, but politics and economics were already in a contractual relationship to each other. We already have the peculiarity he is searching for well before the eighteenth century.

Once we have accepted that the essence of feudalism is its contractual nature, and that this flexibility was widespread in the period after the fall of Rome, the puzzle becomes, as Montesquieu and Tocqueville realized, how to explain the fact that gradually over most of Europe, with the notable exception of England, contract turned back into status. Much of their work helps to solve Gellner's puzzle by showing that for peculiar reasons a contractual, relatively open, world was preserved in England within an advancing sea of 'caste' and political absolutism.

Gellner's third assumption lies in relation to his prime mover. For Gellner, as we have seen, the external factor which changed the world was the growth of science and technology. He seems to accept that they would grow naturally, as long as the conditions were appropriate. What he has done is to substitute 'science and technology' for Smith's driving mechanism, namely the division of labour. Indeed there is hardly any substitution, for Smith himself envisaged the growth of technology and knowledge as important constituents of the increasing division of labour.

If it could be assumed that science and technology will naturally grow if the brakes are taken off, Gellner's solution would be plausible. To use one of his favourite metaphors, all that was needed was to 'unthrottle' the system and release the negative forces which prevent 'natural' growth. If one allowed production a free rein, then the rest follows from the 'natural course of things'. Such an assumption means that Gellner's attention was focused on the traps and negative factors.

Yet we know that the puzzle is deeper than this. Possibly peace, easy taxes and justice, which can be read as short-hand for that separation of politics, religion and economics which is at the heart of modernity, are indeed necessary factors for sustained technological and scientific development. But we know that they are not sufficient. There are many counter-examples through history where, for instance, as in Tokugawa Japan, there were long periods of peace, relatively easy taxes and a firm and universal judicial system. Yet technology and science remained almost stationary. Something more is needed.

* * *

To our benefit, and with characteristic wit and width of vision, Ernest Gellner enumerated some of the 'conditions for the exit'. But by letting his mind rest, by invoking a 'natural tendency' for growth, all else being equal, he was unable to solve the riddle of modernity.

Gellner's solution to the puzzle, which he saw so clearly, lay half way between the Enlightenment and the Marxist answer. It had the surprise and contingency element of the Enlightenment, but added the total transformation of modes of production of the Marxist approach. Basically, what happened was an amazing, surprising, unlikely break-away of parts. Given his foreshortening of history and lumping, there was less chance of seeing earlier roots and continuities. For if everything was basically one lump, the chances of finding a solution to the emergence of something different were slim. If all was the same, why a sudden shift?

⁶⁸ Maitland, **History**, II, 232-3

Gellner admits that when dealing with such an improbable, contingent and complex set of events it is very unlikely that one will find an entirely satisfying 'solution'. 'The origins of industrial society continue[s] to be object of scholarly dispute. It seems to me very probable that this will continue to be so for ever'.⁶⁹ The 'first miracle had occurred when men for obscure reasons persisted in working a set of levers not yet known to work'. So that 'on one occasion and in one area, the message did prevail, thanks to very special circumstances: and the world was transformed for good'.⁷⁰ These remarks successfully capture the essential point about the uniqueness and lack of inevitability of the process. Miracles are as difficult to explain as accidents. 'The notion of a unified orderly Nature and an egalitarian generic Reason led, by a miracle we cannot fully explain, to an effective exploration and utilization of nature'; yet Gellner does attempt to explain the inexplicable, while implicitly recognising the impossibility: 'We have striven to explain how one society, and one only had, by a series of near-miraculous accidents...'⁷¹ escaped into modernity.

In his last months he continued to show his puzzlement. It had been pointed out that his approach 'makes the emergence of modern industrial civilisation inexplicable', to which he replied 'It is', drawing attention to Adam Smith's bafflement.⁷² He continued that while 'Agraria is doomed, by the very logic of its situation, to remain what it is. We know, in fact, that we have broken out of it: if the argument showing that this cannot be, has some cogency - which to my mind it has - then we must be puzzled concerning the nature of the explanation'.⁷³ He knew that it could not happen by accident, but nor can it happen by design. He agreed that the balance of powers is at the heart of the matter, but 'continue[s] to think that the conditions of Agraria militate against it so that an explanation over and above the random play of factors is required if it does happen... The providential balancing out of powers or institutions is a luxury which agrarian society cannot allow itself. It is not allowed to happen even by accident'.⁷⁴ Thus, right to the end, he was faced with an event which could not, should not, yet did happen.

⁶⁹ Gellner, **Nations**, 19.

⁷⁰ Gellner, **Plough**, 222,112

⁷¹ Gellner, **Plough**, 277,199

⁷² Hall and Jarvie, **Gellner**, 662

⁷³ Hall and Jarvie, **Social**, p.663

⁷⁴ Hall and Jarvie, **Social**, p.666