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## Ernest Gellner and the Mystery of Modernity

### The life.<sup>1</sup>

Ernest Gellner was in the great tradition of European thinkers. Poised between social systems, he was compelled to analyse the chasms that he straddled. Few writers in this century have been better placed to see and explain the peculiarities of modern industrial-capitalist civilisation. An overview of his life and career sets the context for his achievement and explains his unusual insight into the central problems of history, sociology and anthropology

Ernest Andre Gellner was born in Paris on 9th December 1925, the son of a Jewish journalist and editor of a law review turned business man from Czechoslovakia. The family lived in Prague until the German occupation in 1939, when they moved to England. After a period at school in Kentish Town, London, Gellner was sent to St. Alban's County Grammar School, from which he won a scholarship to Balliol College, Oxford. But his studies were interrupted when he left for a year to serve as a private in the Czech Armoured Brigade. He saw out the war besieging the German garrison at Dunkirk, which hung on till the very end. He then joined the victory parade in Prague and then returned to Oxford. In 1949 he obtained a first in P.P.E.

Gellner went to Edinburgh for two years on an assistantship in philosophy and became a lecturer in the Department of Sociology at the London School of Economics. He was already highly critical of his earlier discipline, Oxford philosophy, and began work on a book, **Words and Things** (1959) which would cause a great stir in the profession. It is described in Ved Mehta's **Fly and the Fly Bottle** (1965), based on articles in the **New York Review of Books**, an account which Gellner thought mendacious and offensive. He was also critical of the evolutionary sociology of Ginsberg and Hobhouse at the L.S.E., as well as Parsonian functionalism. There he became attracted to anthropology, where Bronislaw Malinowski's influence was still strong. In 1954 he went climbing in the High Atlas in Morocco, and thus began his fieldwork for an anthropology Ph.D. under Raymond Firth and Paul Stirling, subsequently published as **Saints of the Atlas** (1969).<sup>2</sup> This was a brilliant analysis of the way in which segmentary lineage systems and holy mediators maintained order in the absence of an over-arching state.

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 these disciplines, notably **Thought and Change** (1964), **Cause and Meaning in the Social Sciences** (1973), **Contemporary Thought and Politics** (1974), **The Devil in Modern Philosophy** (1974), **Legitimation of Belief**(1975), **Spectacles and Predicaments**(1979) and **Nations and Nationalism**

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<sup>1</sup> I am extremely grateful to David Gellner for a number of factual corrections which he has made to this account of the life. He has also helped me to clarify several points of interpretation.

<sup>2</sup> See preface to **Saints**; check date & circumstances XXX.

(1983). He also continued his studies of Islamic societies, making eight field-work visits to Morocco and publishing **Muslim Society** in 1981. He was made a Fellow of the British Academy in 1974.

Gellner came to Cambridge as William Wyse Professor of Social Anthropology in 1984 and was elected to a Professorial Fellowship at King's. He retired as Professor in 1993, but remained a Supernumerary Fellow of King's until 1995. He was Resident Professor and Director of the Centre for the Study of Nationalism in the Central European University of Prague from 1993 to 1995. During his period at Cambridge he was extremely productive, publishing **The Psychoanalytic Movement** (1985), **State and Society in Soviet thought** (1988), **Sword, Plough and Book** (1988), **Reason and Culture** (1992), **Postmodernism, Reason and Religion** (1992), **Encounters with Nationalism** (1994), **Conditions of Liberty** (1994) and **Anthropology and Politics** (1995). Two or three further books are said to have been written and may be published posthumously. He died suddenly of a heart attack in Prague on 5th November 1995.

One way to approach an understanding of this tremendously complex and productive man is to recognize that he lived out a set of contradictions. Indeed, as Perry Anderson observes, 'it is part of the interest of his work that it contains certain contradictions.'<sup>3</sup> The early clash between his Jewish, Czech background, and the world of an English grammar school and Oxford, was re-enforced by his later experiences. He constantly maintained a tension between 'closed' and 'open' systems of thought. Much of his life and writing constituted an attempt to combine 'Community' and 'Association', status and contract, to heal in himself the great nineteenth century dichotomies. He wanted to belong, to believe, to participate deeply in one or more communities, but admitted in an interview in 1990 that 'never having been a member of a community but having been on the margins of a number...', he felt both an outsider and insider.<sup>(1)</sup> Thus he rejected the advances of Marxism, Islam, psychoanalysis or any other encompassing belief system.

When he came to Cambridge he regretted the absence of more of a 'community' in the Department of Social Anthropology and at King's. Yet he also held what chances there were of fuller participation at arm's length. He played little part in the formal, committee life of King's, and likewise hated involvement in University administration, summing up his feelings in the same 1990 interview thus: 'And then administration at Cambridge is dreadfully participatory, and I prefer administration being done by professional administrators...' Although he felt he did begin to understand how the complex, feudal, system of Cambridge worked, he believed that it would take too much energy to change and improve it. He felt that he should use his energy productively where he could achieve something.

Another linked ambivalence lay in his attitude to relativism. At one level, much of his life was an attempt to preserve the certainties of the Enlightenment, to hold back the forces of relativistic unreason. For instance, one of his main problems with the relativists' position was that they denied the 'Big Divide', that is the enormous change at the time of the industrial and scientific revolution. We shall return to this, but it is worth noting that Gellner attacked both spatial relativism (making all the world one in space) and temporal relativism (overlooking the huge differences between past and present).<sup>4</sup>

It was mainly in relation to spatial relativism that he fought his deep battle against Wittgenstein's later philosophy which, as he saw it, was the ultimate relativistic faith. In the interview of 1990 he noted that 'Wittgenstein's basic idea was that there is no general solution to issues other than the custom of the community. Communities are ultimate...And this doesn't make sense in a world in which communities are not stable and are not clearly isolated from each other.' Gellner was not prepared to let each

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<sup>3</sup> Anderson, *Zone*, 200.

<sup>4</sup> I am grateful to David Gellner for high-lighting this point.

community dictate what was right. Even as a little boy he was aware of an inner light by which his community might be shown to be wrong. In the same interview in 1990 he told how in Czechoslovakia he went to a summer camp where the flag was raised and an oath of loyalty was sworn. He always missed out one word of the oath not because he had an intention of committing high treason, 'But I didn't see why I should close my political options so early. I didn't wish to bind myself. It seemed to me slightly premature, and I hadn't figured it all out.' In a way, he maintained this attitude throughout his life, hovering on the edge of Karl Popper's seminar, of circles of philosophers, sociologists and anthropologists. It was that ideal contradiction between participation and observation which is the essence of the anthropological method. But very few are able to carry it out consistently throughout their personal and professional life. It is this which made him a unique commentator on the West, Islam and the Soviet Union.

The central thread running through his many books and articles lay in his opposition to all totalitarian thought systems. In his youth he had watched Hitler over-run his own country, and the emergence of Stalinist Russia. When he drove to Prague in 1945 he carried Koestler's **Darkness at Noon** and Orwell's **Animal Farm** with him. He said that while he loved the 'Open Society' of the Scottish Enlightenment, 'As to the closed systems, I suppose I have a horrified fascination with them, having been throughout my life deprived of convictions and faith. People who have faith irritate me, fascinate me, and I would like to work out how they tick.'

His lifelong assault on Wittgenstein was part of this 'horrified fascination'. He then moved on to another closed system, Islam, which refused to separate power and cognition, politics and religion. 'Islam initially intrigued me because of its unintelligibility, given certain European assumptions'. Marxism and Freudianism were both 'part of the intellectual atmosphere in which I grew up' and there was a 'persistent inner dialogue' with them. This dialogue was expressed in his various books and articles on the Soviet Union, and his book on the **Psychoanalytic Movement**. In his later life, Gellner saw a return of the totalizing Wittgensteinian monster in another branch of what he termed the 'hermeneutic plague', namely, post-modernism. He launched a savage attack on a mode of thought both corrodingly relativist and absolutist in its way in **Postmodernism, Reason and Religion** (1992). In **Conditions of Liberty** (1994), with its sub-title, 'Civil Society and its Rivals' as an explicit homage to Popper, he specified and outlined his vision of the history and virtues of a plural, liberal, 'open', society. It is a brilliant book that synthesizes much of his life's work.

Let us briefly re-cap on the way in which his life's work and experiences put him in a position to contribute to some of the largest theoretical facing us today. In brief, as we shall see, Gellner had experienced the stark contrast between Open and Closed societies three times, once historically and twice in his own experience. It is no surprise that his specification of the uniqueness of modern western civilization should be so insightful.

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 of 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 an invaluable counter-model. He approvingly quoted De 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.'<sup>5</sup> Islam made Gellner deeply aware that the

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<sup>5</sup>Gellner, *Civil Society*, 1

mixing of religion and politics is the normal state of mankind: their separation in parts of the world is a recent peculiarity. The way in which Islam continued to operate effectively 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.'<sup>6</sup>

Thirdly, there was Gellner's continuing work with 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.'<sup>7</sup> Or, writing of Kolakowski, 'The underlying moral aspiration which he credits to Marxism is the abolition of the separation between the social and the political.'<sup>8</sup> 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 very best 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.'<sup>9</sup>

### **The heir of Max Weber**

As Perry Anderson correctly observes, 'of all the sociological thinkers of the subsequent epoch, Gellner has remained closest to Weber's central intellectual problems...none has addressed themselves with such cogency to the core cluster of his substantive concerns.'<sup>10</sup> Another way of putting this is to say that Ernest Gellner was asking the same question as Weber, namely how did the unique, modern western world emerge. And it was based on the same assumption, namely a vivid sense of the peculiarity and contingency, that is the accidental and 'miraculous' nature of this emergence. This is the heart of his shared problem and it is worth elaborating.

The repeated insistence on the uniqueness and lack of inevitability of modern western civilisation often takes the form of praise of Weber. Weber's **Protestant Ethic** 'is a masterpiece...for its superb sketch of what it is that distinguishes the modern world from the other possible and actual social worlds...he knew full well that the modern world was but one of many possible ones and very different from the others...'<sup>11</sup> Weber's central question was, 'what were the specific preconditions and consequences of this unique kind of man, who was also responsible for that fascinating monstrosity, the modern world?'<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>6</sup>Gellner, *Liberty*, 29

<sup>7</sup>Gellner, *Liberty*, 137

<sup>8</sup>Gellner, *Liberty*, 58

<sup>9</sup>Gellner, *Liberty*, 210

<sup>10</sup>Anderson, *Zone*, 198

<sup>11</sup>Gellner, *Muslim*, 89

<sup>12</sup>Gellner, *Legitimation*, 191

This reality of the 'uniqueness of the West' is one of the ironic consequences of a new and less Europocentric vision. We have had a 'very odd and distinctive historic development...'<sup>13</sup> Thus Gellner, like Weber, realized that 'We are an aberration which can only be understood by investigating the other, more typical social forms.'<sup>14</sup> Looked at historically, what has happened is a mystery and a miracle.

One part of that mystery is the emergence of Civil Society. 'This was the mystery: here there was an effective central state which, while acquiring such great power, nevertheless did not pulverize the rest of society, rendering it supine and helpless. A society emerged which ceased to be segmentary - either as an alternative to the state, as a mode of efficient statelessness, or as an internal opposition to the state or in part its ally - and yet was capable of providing a countervailing force to the state. All the logic of past social forms militated against the mere possibility of such a phenomenon, but all the same it did emerge. That is the mystery of Civil Society.'<sup>15</sup> Other aspects will emerge in the discussion below.

The consequence of this unique transformation are immense. Western industrial-capitalist society is 'without any shadow of doubt, conquering, absorbing all the other cultures of this Earth'.<sup>16</sup> The single occasion when men escaped from the embedded pre-industrial world has 'transformed the entire world',<sup>17</sup> for the 'modern industrial machine is like an elephant in a very small boat...[it] presupposes an enormous infrastructure, not merely of political order, but educationally, culturally, in terms of communication and so forth'.<sup>18</sup>

What then is this unique and unprecedented civilisation, and how does it differ from all its predecessors and the two major alternatives today, Islam and communism? Much of Gellner's work, in numerous volumes, is concerned with specifying this, so it is impossible to do more than single out a few of the most important theories.

One central theme is the growth of rationality or the disenchantment of the world. There is a 'radical discontinuity' which exists 'between primitive and modern mentality'.<sup>19</sup> This is the 'transition to effective knowledge', which Gellner describes many times. There is 'the great transition between the old, as it were non-epistemic worlds, in which the principles of cognition are subject to the pervasive constitutive principles of a given vision, and thus have little to fear, and a world in which this is no longer possible', a

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<sup>13</sup>Gellner, *Sword*, 59, 44

<sup>14</sup>Gellner, in Baechler, *Europe*, 3

<sup>15</sup>Gellner, *Liberty*, 86

<sup>16</sup> Gellner, *Plough* pp.200.

<sup>17</sup> Gellner, *Plough*, pp.277.

<sup>18</sup> Gellner, *Spectacles and Predicaments: Essays in Social Theory*, Cambridge 1979, pp.288.

<sup>19</sup> Gellner, *Plough*, p.42

'fundamental transition indeed'.<sup>20</sup> This is, of course, not unlike the work of Popper and Kuhn. But Gellner's stress is on the fact that 'the attainment of a rational, non-magical, non-enchanted world is a much more fundamental achievement than the jump from one scientific vision to another'. Popper 'underestimates the difficulty' of establishing an Open Society.<sup>21</sup>

Again, some of the most illuminating statements come in the exposition of Weber's similar work. The modern world of rationality has two central features: coherence or consistency, and efficiency. Coherence means, 'that there are no special, privileged, insulated facts or realms'. Efficiency means, 'the cool rational selection of the best available means to given, clearly formulated and isolated ends'. This is 'the separation of all separables...the breaking up of all complexes into their constituent parts...'; it creates 'a common measure of fact, a universal conceptual currency...all facts are located within a single continuing logical space...one single language describes the world...'<sup>22</sup>

Put in another way, 'rationality' means that spheres have become sufficiently disentangled for the mind to move without constantly bumping into wider obstacles created by impenetrable barriers whether of religion, kinship or politics.

In a number of cases Gellner provides an account of what he thinks modern scientific rationality means. In rough outline, for instance, it means that 'there are no privileged or a priori **substantive** truths. (This, at one fell swoop, eliminates the sacred from the world.) All facts and all observers are equal. There are no privileged Sources or Affirmations, and all of them can be queried. In inquiry, all facts and all features are separable: it is **always** proper to inquire whether combinations could not be other than what had previously been supposed. In other words, the world does not arrive as a package-deal... but piecemeal.' The effects are enormous. 'No **linkages** escape scrutiny...breaking up of clusters fosters critical revaluation of world-pictures. This re-examination of all associations destabilizes all cognitive **ancien regimes**. Moreover, the laws to which this world is subject are symmetrical. This levels out the world, and thereby 'disenchants' it, in the famous Weberian expression.<sup>23</sup> Or, in another way of looking at it, 'Kant's ethics are reducible to the obligation to be rational, where rationality is, in essence, conceptual **orderliness**, the refusal to make exceptions (e.g. for cognitive claims), the determination to treat like cases alike (whether in moral choice or in cognitive explanation), and to unify them, as far as possible, in an orderly system.'<sup>24</sup>

The advantages of this new cognitive system, when linked to technology, is undreamt of health and wealth for many. The system is to be found in societies which 'have not only been markedly more successful in their cognitive endeavours, but also been associated with social orders more attractive and acceptable than their rivals.'<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Gellner, *Legitimation*, pp.169,173.

<sup>21</sup> Gellner, *Legitimation*, p.182.

<sup>22</sup> Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism*, Oxford 1983, pp.21,20,22,21

<sup>23</sup> Gellner, *Postmodernism*, 80-1.

<sup>24</sup> Gellner, *Postmodernism*, 83.

<sup>25</sup>Gellner, *Culture*, 181-2.

Yet this 'freedom of thought' is, of course, bought at a price. Gellner takes from Kant and Weber, among others, his analysis of the consequences of this disenchantment. The modern world 'provides no warm cosy habitat for man...the impersonality and regularity, which make it knowable are also, at the same time, the very features which makes it almost...unadaptable'.<sup>26</sup> Our world is 'notoriously a cold, morally indifferent world'. It is notable for its 'icy indifference to values, its failure to console and reassure, its total inability to validate norms and values or to offer any guarantee of their eventual success...'<sup>27</sup> The open predicament is one where logical consistency and openness is bought at the price of social and moral inconsistency. We are simultaneously strictly rational and open-minded, and totally lost and confused. Within the new world 'there also is and can be no room either for magic or for the sacred'.<sup>28</sup> 'Revelation offers one vision and science offers, not another, but 'none'.<sup>29</sup> Weber had been aware of all of this. 'He also made plain the cost of such a world. The price of the separation and levelling of all elements, the full utilization of the potential involved in uniting all concepts in a single orderly logical space, and obliging them to disassociate and re-associate at our convenience, is considerable.

Science depends on the separation of fact and value, and the ending of that comfortable endorsement of social arrangements to which mankind had become habituated.<sup>30</sup> Thus 'One of the bitterest and most deeply felt, and alas justified, complaints against science is, precisely, that it disrupts morality.' Unlike previous learning, it does not 'serve to underwrite social and political arrangements, and to make men feel more or less at home in the world and at ease with it', even if they failed to control it. 'Past belief systems were technically spurious and morally consoling. Science is the opposite.'<sup>31</sup>

Yet we cannot go back to innocence. '**The** central fact about our world is that, for better or worse, a superior, more effective form of cognition does exist...' Thus 'the simple fact is that a form of knowledge exists, known as science, which appears to possess a number of astonishing characteristics...'<sup>32</sup> Thus the 'world we live in is defined, above all, by existence of a unique, unstable and powerful system of knowledge of nature, and its corrosive, unharmonious relationship to the other clusters of ideas ('cultures') in terms of which men live. **This** is our problem.'<sup>33</sup> This 'atomised, cognitively unstable world, which does not underwrite the identities and values of those who dwell in it is neither comfortable nor

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<sup>26</sup> Gellner, *Legitimation*, p.184.

<sup>27</sup> Gellner, *Plough*, pp.64-5

<sup>28</sup> Gellner, *Plough*, pp.66

<sup>29</sup> Gellner, *Grove*, 239

<sup>30</sup> Gellner, *Grove*, 42

<sup>31</sup> Gellner, *Postmodernism*, 59.

<sup>32</sup> Gellner, *Grove*, 238

<sup>33</sup> Gellner, *Postmodernism*, 60.

romantic.' All we can do is realize that it is mistaken to believe that 'the price need not be paid at all, that one can both have one's romantic cake and scientifically eat it.'<sup>34</sup>

What has happened is that thought, cognition, has been set free from its usual masters - politics, religion or kinship. We are open to all thought and to all doubt. God is dead, the father is dead, and the king is dead. We are our own masters, to think what we please. The barriers are down and everything is levelled onto one plane (as Simmel described the effects of money). This is one feature of 'modernity' for Gellner. The fact is not in doubt, even if the causes are disputed, for 'though the explanation of the scientific miracle is not available, or at any rate is contentious, the reality of the miracle itself is not.'<sup>35</sup>

In a number of his earlier works Gellner develops the idea that the separation of cognition or thought is just one example of the even deeper and most fundamental characteristic of the 'miracle', that is to say the effort to separate and balance the deepest forces in human life - the pursuit of power (politics), wealth (economics), 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: 'in acephalous or near-acephalous segmentary society, what you own and what you can effectively defend can hardly be distinguished.'<sup>36</sup> 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 one 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.'<sup>37</sup> In this situation, 'Production replaces predation as the central theme and value of life.'<sup>38</sup>

The second major separation is that between religion and politics. We saw earlier that the uniting of these two is the hallmark of Islam. But in the modern West, perhaps partly because 'a kind of potential for political modesty has stayed with (Christianity) ever since those humble beginnings'<sup>39</sup>, politics is not embedded in religion or in economics. The famous Weber-Tawney thesis concerning the separation the separation of the market from religion is largely endorsed: 'the separation of the economics from other aspects of life, in other words the untrammelled market, is highly eccentric, historically and sociologically speaking.'<sup>40</sup>

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

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<sup>34</sup>Gellner, *Culture*, 181-2.

<sup>35</sup>Gellner, *Grove*, 3

<sup>36</sup>Gellner, *Muslim*, 37

<sup>37</sup>Gellner, *Spectacles*, 285

<sup>38</sup>Gellner, *Plough*, 158

<sup>39</sup>Gellner, *Muslim*, 2

<sup>40</sup>Gellner, *Spectacles*, 286



infrastructure, but a precarious and never to be taken for granted balance of power. This, Gellner believes, is 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.'<sup>41</sup> We have a polity with 'an unusual balance of power internally and externally.' This 'miraculous political and ideological power of power in the non-economic parts of society made the expansion possible.'<sup>42</sup>

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.'<sup>43</sup> 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.'<sup>44</sup> Yet Gellner believed that the political and economic were still fused together. '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.'<sup>45</sup> Out of this emerged something new, a separated world. This is the world of 'Civil Society'. 'In the West the transition from a social system which at least pretended to be a fully moral order, in which cosmological and moral verities blended with the realities of daily life and underwrote them, to a functional pragmatic compromise where such a faith is no longer available or at least not taken seriously, was a complex and slow process.'<sup>46</sup>

The peculiarity of the separation, and the fact that it hung in doubt in the latter half of the eighteenth century where it formed the central interest of the Enlightenment philosophers, including Adam Ferguson, is noted as follows. 'Civil Society is based on the separation of the polity from economic and social life (from, in effect, Civil Society in the narrower sense, i.e. the social residue left when the state is subtracted), 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.'<sup>47</sup> The separation of politics and economics becomes entrenched and 'this separation is an inherent feature of Civil Society, and indeed one of its main glories.'<sup>48</sup> Indeed this is

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<sup>41</sup>Gellner, Muslim, 6

<sup>42</sup>Gellner, Legitimation, 184

<sup>43</sup>Gellner, Liberty, 7

<sup>44</sup>Gellner, Liberty, 10

<sup>45</sup>Gellner, Liberty, 55

<sup>46</sup>Gellner, Liberty, 142/3

<sup>47</sup>Gellner, Liberty, 212

<sup>48</sup>Gellner, Liberty, 80

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.'<sup>49</sup> The separation is complete. 'The emergence of Civil Society has in effect meant the breaking of the circle between faith, power and society.'<sup>50</sup> This is the necessary background, for instance, for the growth of science, for 'Inquiry into truth and commitment to the maintenance of the social order are separated.'<sup>51</sup>

This is a fascinating specification of the problem. The unique and peculiar nature of modern civilization needs to be explained. How did it emerge? Once and once only did part of mankind escape from the Malthusian world of 'misery' into the cold sunlight of a 'rational', expanding, but divided civilization.

Critics might argue that there is nothing particularly new here. It is true that if we add together the best insights of the Scottish Enlightenment, Durkheim, Weber and Marx, and then add Ibn Khaldun, we might have independently arrived at the same conclusions. What is unusual is that Gellner has rescued this vision. The new world has become so much part of the air we breathe that the shock of newness felt by 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, have constantly reminded Gellner that none of this is to be taken for granted, that it is indeed not the normal condition of man.

An 'open' society is a miraculous, unique and precarious phenomenon. 'That all men are created equal and independent' is far from being a universally 'sacred and undeniable' truth. As Gellner forcefully puts it, 'The American Declaration of Independence is one of the most comic and preposterous documents ever penned. Yet Thomas Jefferson was not, in any technical or ordinary sense, a fool.'<sup>52</sup> The explanation for this puzzle is then given. 'America was born modern; it did not have to achieve modernity, nor did it have modernity thrust upon it. It has, at most, a rather hazy recollection of any "ancient regime".'<sup>53</sup> Most of the world was not so fortunate and Gellner's own experience of three 'Ancien Regimes', that is to say all of the world as he conceived it to be before about 1500, and then Islam and Communism since, made him deeply aware of the strangeness of 'modernity'. He elaborates the difficulty of many of us, not just Americans, in realizing what the problem is when he attacks postmodernism. 'Individualism, egalitarianism, freedom, sustained innovation - these traits are, in the comparative context of world history, unusual, not to say eccentric; but to Americans they are part of the air they breathe, and most of them have never experienced any other moral atmosphere...No wonder that Americans tend to treat these principles as universal and inherent in the human condition.'<sup>54</sup>

A living experience of different worlds also made Gellner more aware than many of the 'cost' of disenchantment which again makes his work so reminiscent of Weber. The 'insulation' of various

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<sup>49</sup>Gellner, *Liberty*, 193

<sup>50</sup>Gellner, *Liberty*, 141

<sup>51</sup>Gellner, *Liberty*, 142

<sup>52</sup>Gellner, *Grove*, 18

<sup>53</sup>Gellner, *Grove*, 18

<sup>54</sup>Gellner, *Postmodernism*, 52.

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 the majority of human societies have realised. Marx recognized this in his concept of 'alienation', Durkheim in 'anomie'. Gellner adds some further dimensions to these contradictions.

We have seen already the Kantian clash between a cold mechanistic controllable world, and the desire for social cohesiveness. Put in another way, 'the world in which we think is not the same as the one in which we live...the colder the one, the more fanciful the other, perhaps.' Hence the manifestly irrational features, romantic love, obsession with nature and feeling, modern paganism and astrology, and so on. There is a huge contradiction between the orderly, rational 'society', and the arbitrary, bizarre, random 'culture'. As we have gained logical cohesiveness, so we have lost social cohesiveness. We live in a 'cognitively powerful, and socially disconnected' world. This insight Gellner partly owes to another of his sources of inspiration, Ibn Khaldun, who showed that you 'could have communal, civic spirit, or you could have civilization - but not both.' Indeed Gellner suspected at the end of his life that 'there is a law which affirms that social and logical coherence are inversely related.'<sup>55</sup> Here is the tragedy of the expulsion from Eden. We can either live in ignorance and nakedness in the Garden, or taste of the forbidden fruit of the knowledge of good and evil and begin our weary but materially rewarding pilgrimage.

### **The normal tendency and the unlikeliness of the escape**

Gellner's experience as an anthropologist and observer of Islam and Communism made him more aware than most of the normal tendency towards exactly the opposite situation to that which has actually emerged. His views on this are best understood if we look at his three-phase model. After the first freedoms of hunter-gatherer societies, there arose tribal societies. These are 'segmentary communities, cousin-ridden and ritual-ridden, free perhaps of central tyranny, but not really free in a sense that would satisfy us...'<sup>56</sup> The 'escape' from this into the first 'civilizations', based on states and settled agriculture, only led humans into a deeper pit. The increases in technological and social efficiency were 'also a tremendous trap. The main consequence of the adoption of good production and storage was the pervasiveness of political domination. A saying is attributed to the prophet Muhammad which affirms that subjection enters the house with the plough. This is profoundly true.'<sup>57</sup> Thus 'An improvement in technological power on its own may simply strengthen domination...'<sup>58</sup> Indeed it is almost certain to do so. 'It helps us out of the first kind of social order, the system of ritually sanctioned roles, which might generically be called Durkheimian', but then 'Political centralization generally, though not universally, follows surplus production and storage.'<sup>59</sup> People were thus caught between two forms of domination. 'Traditional man can sometimes escape the tyranny of kings, but only at the cost of falling under the

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<sup>55</sup>Gellner, Grove, 36

<sup>56</sup>Gellner, Liberty, 12

<sup>57</sup>Gellner, Grove, 33

<sup>58</sup>Gellner, Grove, 167

<sup>59</sup>Gellner, Grove, 35

tyranny of cousins, and of ritual.<sup>60</sup>

The exceptions to this tendency are at the margins. There are various kinds of situations where centralized domination does not occur, where some kind of balance of power engenders participatory and egalitarian polities. Nomads, some sedentary peasants in inaccessible terrain, and sometimes also trading cities, all exemplify this. But the overwhelming majority of agrarian societies are really systems of violently enforced surplus storage and surplus protection. These systems can vary in all sorts of ways, from collective tribal storehouses to governmentally controlled silos.<sup>61</sup> There is one great exception, however, and this has transformed our world. While in general the 'pattern of human history, when plotted against the axis of equality, display a steady progression towards increasing **inequality**', this only happens 'up to a certain mysterious point in time'. At that point 'the trend goes into reverse, and we then witness that equalisation of conditions which preoccupied Tocqueville'. Gellner quite rightly asks 'What on earth impelled history to change its direction?'<sup>62</sup>

This was a question, as we have seen, which pre-occupied Montesquieu and Smith and indeed much of Gellner's inspiration came from his reading of the great European social theorists, from Machiavelli through to the Enlightenment. He believed they were right in their portrait of agrarian civilizations. The general situation of agrarian society does indeed have all the features which the Enlightenment attributed to medieval darkness: because faith is obscurantist, intellectual life is most often miserable, and economic improvement generally non-existent. Because there is no economic growth, limitation of available resources makes the general situation Malthusian, and so the perfectly rational concern of everyone is with their position in the structure, rather than with its overall performance.<sup>63</sup> The belief system was obscurantist. Inevitably ruthless competition leads to oppressive and tyrannical political systems, in as far as tolerance would simply lead to the replacement of rulers by rivals, who would not be so foolish as to repeat the weakness of their predecessors. The Enlightenment was right in the picture it drew...<sup>64</sup>

Gellner's only disagreement with the Enlightenment view was as to the causes of this tendency. The Enlightenment thinkers were 'misguided' in their 'starry-eyed illusion that it was all an avoidable mistake. It was nothing of the kind: it was inscribed in the nature of things.'<sup>65</sup> Or again, 'What the Enlightenment failed to see was that this situation was not the consequence of stupidity and befuddlement, but the inevitable corollary of certain basic features of agrarian society: the presence of an important but limited surplus, where expansion was possible, in the main, only through the acquisition either of more human subjects or of more land.'<sup>66</sup>

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<sup>60</sup>Gellner, *Liberty*, 7

<sup>61</sup>Gellner, *Grove*, 35

<sup>62</sup>Gellner, *Culture*, 91.

<sup>63</sup>Gellner, *Liberty*, 207

<sup>64</sup>Gellner, *Liberty*, 207

<sup>65</sup>Gellner, *Liberty*, 207

<sup>66</sup>Gellner, *Grove*, 166

The normal tendency is 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.'<sup>67</sup> This is because 'The moment there is 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.'<sup>68</sup> It is also the case that 'Wealth can generally be acquired more easily and quickly through coercion and predation than through production.'<sup>69</sup> Consequently we find that in the stage of agraria it is the warriors who are the highest group. 'In medieval Spain it was said that war is not merely a more honourable but also a quicker way to wealth than trade. This principle is very widely, even if not universally, recognized throughout the agrarian world: specialists in violence are generally endowed with a rank higher than that of specialists in production.'<sup>70</sup> It is a world of competition, violence and scarcity. People 'organize in such a way as to protect themselves, if possible, from being at the end of the queue. So, by and large, agrarian society is authoritarian and strongly prone to domination. It is made up of a system of protected, defended storehouses, with differential and protected access.'<sup>71</sup> Thus 'Fairly centralized, hierarchical and oppressive societies, in which the elimination of rivals has led to the concentration of power' tend to be common. Agrarian societies are not likely 'to lead to an ethos of 'production', let alone one of economic and technical innovation.'<sup>72</sup> This is a stage where there is 'centralization' which 'grinds into the dust all subsidiary social institutions or sub-communities, whether ritually stifling or not...'<sup>73</sup>

This is the vale into which mankind sank with the rise of 'civilization', and it is the world which communism whether in Russia, Cambodia or the 'Great Leap Forward' tried to resurrect. 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.'<sup>74</sup>

This is the normal tendency. The problem is that if it is not just a piece of folly as the Enlightenment thinkers argued, that could be overcome by 'reason' and 'light', but was actually a trap inscribed into the very nature of agrarian civilization, how is it that we have escaped? The trap lay in the two central features of agrarian societies. 'Between them, these two traits - the existence of a stored surplus and, all

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<sup>67</sup>Gellner, Grove, 35

<sup>68</sup>Gellner, Grove, 33/34

<sup>69</sup>Gellner, Grove, 161

<sup>70</sup>Gellner, Grove, 161

<sup>71</sup>Gellner, Grove, 34

<sup>72</sup>Gellner, Grove, 160

<sup>73</sup>Gellner, Liberty, 12

<sup>74</sup>Gellner, Liberty, 8

in all, the absence of technological amelioration - entail the pervasiveness of systematic coercion.<sup>75</sup> Such coercion would in turn prevent any technological or economic amelioration. It was a circular process.

The rule of priests and kings is the normal, apparently inevitable, state of affairs. It is 'the normal social condition of mankind. It is foolish to expect anything else. Then, on one occasion, something rather strange and 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 English, organized in relatively liberal polities, repeatedly beat nations within which martial and ostentatious display, dominated and set the tone.'<sup>76</sup> This is the miracle, and it happened in north-western Europe, at that very time when the Enlightenment thinkers started to analyse it. The two are related. 'Throughout human history, societies have had to give priority to considerations of maintenance of order and security over considerations of enhancement of production. In any case, they seldom had the latter option. In other words, political and religious organization on the whole dominated purely economic elements. Once only did the balance change definitively, under exceedingly favourable circumstances - eighteenth century England..<sup>77</sup>

The event was totally unexpected and even those who lived at the start of it saw no way out of the agrarian trap. Thus the greatest analyst of the ways to promote the wealth of nations in the new dispensation, Adam Smith, saw that the escape was impossible. Gellner quotes Wrigley as summing up their views that 'Societies might reasonably expect to make progress to a plateau of economic prosperity well in advance of that attained in feudal times, but had no hope of indefinite progress.'<sup>78</sup> Gellner comments that '...what Adam Smith and his successors were doing was not explaining the new dispensation but, on the contrary, proving that it was impossible, that it simply could not happen.'<sup>79</sup> Ferguson noted that the emergence of Civil Society was unprecedented and had 'certainly never been foreseen by mankind'. Gellner comments that 'It does indeed go against the normal, natural order of things.'<sup>80</sup> It could not be a conscious decision, for the possibility was not there. 'Initially, of course, there was no question of doing it collectively because there was no question of doing it "knowingly" at all: the possibility that it could be done - that quite so radical an improvement of the human condition was feasible through human effort - wasn't present to men's minds, at any rate sufficiently to lead to collective effort.'<sup>81</sup>

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<sup>75</sup>Gellner, Grove, 161

<sup>76</sup>Gellner, Liberty, 33

<sup>77</sup>Gellner, Liberty, 169

<sup>78</sup>Gellner, Grove, 126

<sup>79</sup>Gellner, Grove, 126

<sup>80</sup>Gellner, Liberty, 68

<sup>81</sup>Gellner, Thought, 140

Yet despite the fact that the laws of agrarian society, and the thoughts of its greatest analyst, declared that there was no way out of the trap, something strange happened: 'sustained (perpetual) economic growth is, for reasons conclusively established by Smith and his fellows, impossible, but industrialization is the name of the impossible process we now know to have occurred, in defiance of the considerations and expectations of the classical economists.'<sup>82</sup> Not only was there sustained economic growth, but the natural tendency towards growing absolutism and stronger stratification and the suppression of free thought, all these were simultaneously broken. The escape from the domination of cognition 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.'<sup>83</sup> 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.'<sup>84</sup>

How was it that 'the normal social condition of man in the traditional world - government by fear and falsehood' came to be felt to be 'illegitimate and avoidable'?<sup>85</sup> How did a society emerge in which although, as there have to be, there are entrenched paradigms or 'prejudgments' which 'alone makes social life and order possible', these prejudgments were 'made milder and flexible, and yet order was maintained? How was this miracle attained?'<sup>86</sup> It was indeed miraculous for 'almost everything in the ethos, and in the balance of power of the society, generally militates against the possibility of an explosive growth in either production or cognition.' The Agrarian Age was 'basically a period of stagnation, oppression and superstition', all these were reversed as one civilization miraculously 'escaped'.<sup>87</sup>

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 to be object of scholarly dispute. It seems to me very probably that this will continue to be so for ever'.<sup>88</sup> The first miracle had occurred when men for obscure reasons persisted in working a set of levers not yet known to work'. 'On one occasion and in one area, the message did prevail, thanks to very special circumstances...'<sup>89</sup> These remarks successfully capture the essential point about the uniqueness and lack

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<sup>82</sup>Gellner, *Grove*, 129

<sup>83</sup>Gellner, *Liberty*, 140

<sup>84</sup>Gellner, *Liberty*, 109

<sup>85</sup>Gellner, *Liberty*, 33

<sup>86</sup>Gellner, *Liberty*, 32

<sup>87</sup>Gellner, *Plough*, 103, 22

<sup>88</sup> Gellner, *Nations*, pp.19.

<sup>89</sup> Gellner, *Plough*, pp.222,112

of inevitability of the process. Miracles are as difficult to explain as accidents. 'The notion of a unified orderly Nature...led, by a miracle we cannot fully explain...'; 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...' <sup>90</sup> escaped into modernity.

He does this while recognizing that the victory of the new world may only be temporary. It was very nearly snuffed out in the Second World War. 'It was a geographical and historical accident that an offshore island and two essentially extra-European powers eventually destroyed this option.[i.e. fascism] The outcome of the war was not a foregone conclusion and, but for complacency, folly and politically pointless excesses on the part of the temporary victors, it might well have gone the other way.' <sup>91</sup> Only very recently has it become obvious that the other option, communism, is not going to take over the world.

Let us look at his explanation, written within the great tradition of Enlightenment speculation. Gellner observed that 'On one occasion and within one particular tradition, however, one special Reformation was much more successful than the others, and transformed the north-western corner of one continent sufficiently to help engender an industrial-scientific civilization.' He sees 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.' <sup>92</sup>

In a passage which applies to his own work as a man who devoted much of his life to understanding his East European roots, he continues that the 'Enlightenment was the reaction to this success, above all amongst its less successful and envious fringes; it strove to understand the economic and social success of the first modern societies, and to make possible their emulation...' <sup>93</sup> Or, putting it in other words, the Enlightenment 'became an inquest by the unreformed on their own condition, in the light of the successes of the reformed. The **philosophes** were the analysts of the under-development of France....In Edinburgh and Glasgow, thinkers tried to explain the changes which had already happened; in Paris, to call for changes that ought to happen.' <sup>94</sup> Continuing in the tradition of Montesquieu, Hume, Smith, Ferguson and others, what did Gellner suggest was the explanation for this curious transformation?

(7800 words)

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<sup>90</sup> Gellner, *Plough*, pp.199,277.

<sup>91</sup>Gellner, *Plough*,243.

<sup>92</sup>Gellner, *Plough*, 204.

<sup>93</sup> Gellner, *Postmodernism*, 90.

<sup>94</sup> Gellner, *Plough*, 115.