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ERNEST GELLNER: 1925-1995

Ernest Andre Gellner was born in Paris on 9th December 1925, the son of a Jewish lawyer from Czechoslovakia. The family lived in Prague until the German occupation in 1939, when they moved to England. 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 was at the siege of Dunkirk, 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, as described in Ved Mehta's **Fly and the Fly Bottle** (1965). 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 with the L.S.E. mountaineering society 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). 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 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** (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), **The Concept of Kinship** (1986), **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) and **Conditions of Liberty** (1994), **Anthropology and Politics** (1995). Two further books are said to be in press and will be published posthumously. He died peacefully in Prague on 5th November 1995, leaving his wife Susan and his children David, Sarah, Deborah and Ben.

One way to approach an understanding of this tremendously complex and productive man is to recognize that he lived out a set of contradictions. 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.⁽¹⁾ 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..." He never felt it was worth his energy to understand how the complex, feudal, system of Cambridge worked. It was one tribe too many.

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. Thus his deepest battle was against Wittgenstein's 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 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 what made him a unique commentator on the West, Islam and the Soviet Union.

Yet however strong his dislike of relativism and his warnings against being too 'charitable' to the 'irrational' in other societies, in relation to his two major encounters with other civilizations he found himself forced into a relativist position. During the Rushdie debate, he found himself defending Islam against the demands for absolute freedom put forward by many western intellectuals. He argued that one society should not be measured by the yardstick of another - a slide towards relativism he would have castigated in others. Or again, in a posthumous essay on the break-up of the Soviet Union, he provided an elegant and sad lament for the too-rapid destruction of a system which he hated, but which he nevertheless saw gave moral dignity to its members. He thought it should have been allowed to alter from within, and much more slowly. The difficult middle position he tried to maintain is summarized in his sermon in King's College Chapel in 1992 when he described the world as divided into fundamentalists, relativists and 'Enlightenment Puritans'. He saw himself as falling in the last category - in many ways itself a contradiction in terms.

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 a synthesis of much of his central thought in **Conditions of Liberty** (1994), explicitly referring to Popper in its sub-title 'Civil Society and its Rivals', he provided a brilliant specification and defence of the 'open', liberal society.

Yet there is a contradiction here also, for while attacking all complete and neat systems, Gellner himself wished to create an over-arching theory. His own life, poised between thought systems and cultures, had put him in an unique position to appreciate the 'great transformation' of modernity. This he described in the 1990 interview as follows. "The difference between the agrarian religious world and the industrial scientific one has always been for me absolutely central to understanding the world." "The emergence of an open system in north-western Europe...is a central fact about the world, about the human condition. There have been transitions from societies based on a stable technology, a stable faith, hierarchical organization, cultural stratification, and all the rest of it to societies based upon economic growth, a kind of universal bribery fund with a commitment to secure material improvement. That involves an unstable occupational structure, which in turn involves a measure of egalitarianism, a homogeneous culture, because people have to communicate with each other, which involves nationalism." This he thought was "the enormous transition which I think is the central fact about our world" and was "my central preoccupation".

In trying to solve this question, Gellner was in many ways the greatest successor to Max Weber. As Perry Anderson observed, "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." (2) Another way of putting this is to say that Gellner was asking the same question as Weber, namely how did the unique, modern, western world emerge. And the question 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 their shared problem.

They also shared an ambivalent view of the consequences of the transformation. What happened has now changed the whole world and nothing is the same. But while liberating many from physical misery, there is a poison in the fruit. There is the Weberian awareness of the cost of the 'disenchantment'. The modern world 'provides no warm cosy habitat for man...the impersonality and regularity, which makes it knowable are also, at the same time, the very features which makes it almost...uninhabitable.' (3) 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..." (4) 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. We are our own masters, to think as we please. The barriers are down and everything is flat and equal. Yet "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...is considerable. The price, of course, is the separation of fact and value, and the ending of that comfortable endorsement of social arrangements to which mankind had become habituated." (5)

Like Weber, Gellner saw that the best way to approach the problem of the mysterious emergence of modernity was to set it against the 'normal' tendencies in agrarian societies. People usually fuse religion and politics, politics and economics, kinship and economics and so on. It is in the gradual separation of these fields, their balance and tensions over time, that the clues to the peculiar developments since the sixteenth century in one part of the world will be found. One part of Gellner's central analysis revolved around the Weberian themes of the relations of religion and politics and he gives a brilliant up-date to the Weberian thesis by expanding and subtly refining the famous arguments concerning the role of Protestantism. The essence of the argument is that the unresolved tensions between enthusiasm (Protestantism) and 'superstition' (Catholicism) finally led to a stale-mate which allowed tolerance and the Civil Society to emerge, a theme which he also took up from his mentor David Hume.

The other main area where Gellner sought an answer was in the relation between politics and the economy. All hitherto existing states had put domination or predation before production. The central event of the eighteenth century was that for the first time production, in the shape of the industrial and scientific revolutions, became more powerful than predation. Up to that time all societies had been caught in a kind of Malthusian trap, but one in which power rather than reproduction was at issue. If a society accidentally or through design built up an improved technology and economy this would increase the power of the rulers, who would then use it to increase predation. The final position, as in the Malthusian argument, would be a higher level trap or ceiling, with 'misery' increased. Only by the miraculous change in the balance between the technologies of production and predation in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries did mankind for the first time escape from this trap.

It is impossible to do justice to the elegant and witty arguments which Gellner uses to advance these theories. He has achieved the nearly impossible, having taken Weber's ideas on several steps. That he did not reach even further is the result of several aspects of his life and work which it is worth mentioning as a guide to those who wish to try to stand on the shoulders of these giants.

Part of the reason lies in his tendency to seek for too firm and neat models. In the 1990 interview 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." He tried binary models, which he applied to the opposition between modern/pre-modern, nationalism/pre-nationalism, the west and the rest. All of these were a little too stark. The trinitarian models he used, particularly in **Sword, Plough and Book** (1989), viewing the development of societies through the three stages of Hunter-gatherer (sword), Agrarian (plough) and Industrial (book), is likewise over-neat. If he had treated these stages as models in Weber's sense, in other words ideal types against which to measure reality and exceptions, he would have provided an even more suggestive synthesis. As it is we have a tri-partite totalitarian system to be placed alongside those of the other great systematizers.

Another part of the reason for his failure to get even further in understanding the underlying dynamic of social change lay in a certain euro-centric bias in his thought. It would perhaps be too much to expect someone who had mastered three academic disciplines and gazed deep into three civilizations to spread himself even further. But his attention was deliberately averted from those civilizations in South and East Asia which had provided such rich material for Max Weber. Gellner's brief encounter with Buddhism, Hinduism and Japanese civilization was full of misunderstanding and even revulsion. For instance, he commented in the 1990 interview that "Nepalese Buddhism horrifies me in a different kind of way." He partly justified his lack of interest as a way of leaving 'Asia' to his son David Gellner to work on, but there were no doubt other reasons as well. Deeper involvement in a non Judaeo-Christian, Islamic and Indo-European world would have refreshed his thought and perhaps undermined some of those certainties which at times make his work too rigid. Experience outside that tradition would also have allowed him to use the comparative method to test his hypotheses about the 'conditions of the exit' from Agraria.

Finally, one might note a slight imbalance between his internal cogitations and his encounters with the

hard external world of 'facts'. Gellner was a great admirer of detailed ethnographic work in the Malinowskian tradition and greatly enjoyed his Berber fieldwork. He always encouraged his students to undertake deep participant observation and holistic studies. Yet he himself only undertook such work in one society, though he regarded some of his work in the Soviet Union in 1989-90 as a kind of ethnography. As Marc Bloch long ago reminded us, there is always a danger of floating off to such a high level of generality that one loses touch with the real complexities of everyday life. This was a temptation to which, at times, Gellner may have succumbed.

Returning to the man himself, it is clear that one of the reasons why Gellner's attacks on others caused such irritation was because he tended to treat his opponents in their social and personal context. He saw their concepts as merely one aspect of their lives. This broke a recent English tradition of tending to keep the private and the public apart. Instead he returned to the techniques of irony and satire of Pope and Dryden. Given this approach, it does not seem unfair to end by showing a little of Gellner the man.

Something that struck most people was the contradiction between the acerbic and often cruel debater, and the enormously kind and gentle human being. At the personal level, as his numerous friends and pupils could witness, his life was full of little acts 'of kindness and of love'. He was also extremely generous with his time, possessions, support. At times he felt that all this natural kindness might be taken as a sign of weakness, so he used to try to justify it as a Machiavellian strategy.

Memory of his roots made him an extraordinary modest person, self-deprecating, humble and somewhat shy. Although his large forehead and reflective manner proclaimed the intellectual, many students were amazed to find that the unassuming man they had been talking to at a party was the great Professor Gellner. Yet when he turned from the private to the public, when he lectured or wrote he sounded like an Old Testament prophet, full of certainty and authority and verging on the edge of arrogance. He hated pomposity and was the most equitable and egalitarian of people, treating students, strangers and others all alike. Yet again there was a contradiction for he freely admitted to social snobbery and his desire to be a member of the best clubs.

He was an urbane person who loved Prague and other cities. Yet he also loved the countryside. He rejoiced at having to register as a 'peasant' when he bought his house in Italy. There, drinking rough wine under the vines in the lavender-scented terraces, he seemed entirely at ease. He relished the challenge of mountains and whether in the High Atlas or the Himalayas, pushed his body against the wilds. He enjoyed sailing and canoeing. All these physical efforts seemed to be part of his obstinate battle against the crippling **osteoporosis** which increasingly affected him and kept him in constant pain during the later part of his life.

The obstinacy, which showed itself in physical exertion, was a very strong characteristic. Once he had decided on a course of action, it was almost impossible to dissuade him. This obstinacy was a trait which again one found in his writing. He was under enormous pressures to be quiet, to accept the blandishments of snobbery and power. But like a mischievous boy, he refused to conform.

He saw himself as a secular Puritan, a descendant of Jan Hus and an opponent of the Counter-Reformation. In the 1990 interview he admitted that "I have deeply internalised the values of the puritan wing of Abrahamic monotheism." His chief weapons against the monsters of power were rational, calm, logical, learned thought, combined with irony and satire. He was a devastating opponent because of his sense of humour and sense of the ridiculous.

A final series of contradictions lay in his sense of loneliness, reserve and shyness on the one hand, with great warmth and an out-going nature. He was intensely proud and protective of his family and depended hugely on his wife Susan, whom he married in Gibraltar in 1954. He made innumerable friends and was an inspiration to generations of students through his writings and lectures.

Gellner's writing was always lively and often brilliant, going straight to the heart of complex and important matters with an awesome combination of philosophical, anthropological and sociological knowledge. His use of concrete metaphors was often startling and made one see things in a new way. He could be a marvellous lecturer - lecturing without notes from an inner store of memories and associations. His brilliance and the carefully arranged structure in his mind are well illustrated by the story of how on one occasion he came to give a lecture on the famous 'isms' of sociological theory and was just embarking when a student pointed out that in fact this was the second of a series on Islamic politics and religion. With a one-minute pause, he proceeded to give a brilliant lecture on that subject.

In many ways Gellner was a 'hedgehog' who knew 'one big thing', namely that the great puzzle is the unexpected emergence of the open, expansive, modern world. Yet he was perhaps too much of a fox, who is interested in many smaller things, to be able to provide more than a tantalizing glimpse of an answer. He does not seem to have developed any sophisticated system of annotating books which would allow him to accumulate knowledge. He thus relied largely on his own intuition and memory. This gave him the freedom to move very fast, to concentrate on the problems of the moment. Thus he was a superb essayist and controversialist. Yet the longer and deeper work which would be needed to answer his fundamental questions, requiring detailed evidence from a wide range of sources, systematically gathered, could not be approached in this manner. The notebooks or indexes of a Darwin, Marx or Frazer do not exist. Perhaps he tended to write too fast, work too hard, to be too easily side-tracked, to love controversy too much. Yet he is certainly one of the major intellectual figures of the second half of the twentieth century, a name and reputation which will live on in the history of thought. In the man and in the writing one felt the touch of genius.

Notes and references:

- (1) Interview with John Davis, May 1990, published in **Current Anthropology**, vol.32, no.1, Feb. 1991.
- (2) Perry Anderson, **A Zone of Engagement**(Verso, London, 1992),p.198.
- (3) Gellner, **Legitimation**, p. 184.
- (4) Gellner, **Plough**, pp.64-5.
- (5) Gellner, **Anthropology and Politics**, p. 42.

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