Ernest Gellner as Anthropologist[1]

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I

Ernest Gellner was a cosmopolitan by conviction, by early formation, and by unfortunate historical destiny. He was born eighty years ago, in 1925, in Paris, but into a German-speaking Czech Jewish family. Growing up in Prague, he attended the English grammar school. In 1939 the Gellner family escaped the German invasion and moved to England, where Ernest attended grammar school and won a scholarship to Balliol College Oxford at the age of seventeen. After a year he left Oxford to join up with the Czech exile army and saw action with the Czech Armoured Brigade in northern France. Demobilised in Prague at the end of the war, he spent half a term at Prague University but quickly concluded that the Communists were assuming absolute power for what he guessed would be the very long term, and he rapidly departed, for the second time, to England, where he completed his degree in philosophy, politics and economics at Oxford.

In 1951 he was appointed as a philosopher in the department of sociology at the London School of Economics. (The professor of sociology, Morris Ginsberg, believed that sociology and philosophy were closely allied.) Gellner had, however, become discontented with the exclusive practice of philosophy.

> I wanted to find out more about the real world [he told an interviewer, John Davis]… any philosophy on its own was too abstract, and I wanted some intellectual activity with an empirical content. When I came to LSE it was quite an ideal place in which to observe the social sciences, and I fairly quickly came to the conclusion that social anthropology was the most interesting, and certainly

[1] This paper was presented as a keynote address at a conference held at Krakow University in October, 2005, *Ernest Gellner – Theoretician of Modernity.*

also the one to which I was temperamentally the most suited.[2]

There were other personal reasons for the appeal that anthropology made to him. His hobby was mountaineering, and climbing in the Atlas mountains in Morocco he had become curious about the Berbers. Also, he had come to the conclusion that with the establishment of the State of Israel, relationships between Jews and Muslims were going to be very difficult, for a very long time, and so he wanted to understand something about Islam. He conducted ethnographic research in the Atlas mountains at intervals over several university vacations and during a sabbatical term, and gained a doctorate in social anthropology for a thesis that was later published under the title *Saints of the Atlas.*

II

A philosopher in a sociology department, a part-time but increasingly committed social anthropologist, Gellner became a truly interdisciplinary figure. However, he never felt at home with the LSE sociologists. Nor did he desire to teach straightforward philosophy to philosophy students. He hoped to move to the LSE anthropology department but was blocked by one of the professors, Raymond Firth. In 1979 he accepted the chair of social anthropology at Cambridge. This was his first appointment in the discipline. On his retirement in 1991 he became director and resident professor of the Centre for the Study of Nationalism at the Central European University, where he continued his indefatigable writing, lecturing and travelling. He died of a sudden heart attack in Prague in November 1995, at the age of seventy, immediately after flying back from a meeting in Budapest.

Although Gellner was exceptional as a philosopher in having a serious professional involvement in the social sciences, it is also true that when he approached the social sciences it was very much as a philosopher. He treated the grand theories in sociology and anthropology as particular instances of classical philosophical positions. His central premise was at once philosophical and ethnographic. All cultures may be equal on some measures, but they are not equal in their understanding of the world. The cosmopolitan and polyglot culture of science had a unique authority. Based on reason and observation,

[2] John Davis, 'An interview with Ernest Gellner', Current Anthropology, 1991, 32:1, p. 66.

the scientific method uniquely delivers reliable knowledge and technological gains. Science is available to all, and virtually all the people of the modern world aspire to enjoy the fruits of technology. These truths had a sociological implication of great historical importance. Science and technology are breaking down the old agrarian communities, and will condemn to the scrap-heap the modern states that fail to deliver the goods of industrialisation, most dramatically the former Soviet Empire.

The scope of Gellner's anthropology was therefore extremely ambitious. Its centre-piece, his theory of human history, remained constant throughout his career. (It is presented most fully in *Plough, Sword and Book: The Structure of Human History*, 1988). All grand models of history play around with three key elements – power, wealth, and belief. In Gellner's view the prime mover in historical change was a great transformation in knowledge. Europe was remade by the scientific revolution, and this revolution spread all over the world. Science travels everywhere, and wherever it goes it precipitates a great rupture in human history.

An autonomous, objective activity, science delivers a progressively more accurate understanding of a discrete natural world. Through its translation into technological advances, it delivers the material goods. Yet the inevitable triumph of science did not guarantee that society would improve. Science and reason flourish only in carefully bounded enclaves. Outside, the forces of unreason rule. Short-term economic calculation blinds our rulers to the long-term consequences of their actions. Science stimulates the development of better machines, but it is not necessarily the ally of democracy. And although industry will eventually free most people from want, it will not free us from coercion. Indeed, once we have enough to live on in comfort we must be re-programmed to want artificially, in order to keep the machines running. Gellner's optimism about scientific progress was therefore combined with social and political pessimism. He even speculated that our rulers might soon have to support new religions if they are to remain in business.

Nevertheless the scientific revolution, and perhaps even more powerfully the industrial

revolution that (Gellner supposed) must follow it have profound social and political consequences. Once science is institutionalised in a society, that society becomes modern, industrial, secular – and nationalistic. This was latterly perhaps Gellner's best-known thesis: that industrial and secular modern societies would inevitably become nationalistic. Agrarian societies were stratified, culturally plural, religious. Their stability was guaranteed by the limited horizons and repetitive experience of local communities. Industrial societies had to foster a complex division of labour, labour mobility, universal literacy, competitive individualism, and cultural homogeneity. Only a nationalist ideology, or perhaps a puritan version of Islam, could motivate the political arrangements necessary to manage these great social changes.

Gellner always liked models, the sharper the better, and in particular he liked models that divided everything into two or three contrasting elements, and which introduced a certain dialectical progression. Marx had invoked a revolutionary change from feudalism to capitalism, driven by technological change and class conflict. Gellner posits a great divide between static agrarian societies and open, industrial societies in which reason (or at least science) precipitated revolutionary change. I suspect that these two ideal types, agrarian and modern society, were connected in his imagination with the contrast, still real enough in his boyhood, between the largely agrarian old world of the Austro-Hungarian Empire and the new rational, scientific, industrial, nationalistic societies that were ushered in by the intellectuals who had occupied the tables of the Viennese coffee-houses before the Great War. (And although he was an apostle of science, Gellner rather regretted the passing of that tolerant, rickety old world.)

If Gellner's theory of history was rooted in his background, so too, though less obviously, was his philosophy. The key influences on his theoretical position were two great gurus of the London School of Economics, both also (hardly accidental, this) Central European intellectuals: Karl Popper in philosophy and Bronislaw Malinowski in social anthropology. Malinowski had died in the United States in 1942, but his ideas were still being propagated as gospel in the LSE anthropology department, under the leadership of his faithful protégé Raymond Firth. Popper was very much present still in the flesh, and

Gellner was a regular visitor at his seminars but not a member of the inner circle of believers, and while he revered Popper as a philosopher he did not much like him as a man, and detested the fact that he imposed a rigid orthodoxy on his followers, creating a closed society in defiance of his own precepts. Gellner liked to repeat the old LSE joke that Popper's masterpiece *The Open Society and its Enemies* should have been called 'The Open Society, by one of its Enemies'.

I once described Gellner in print as a social anthropologist of the school of Malinowski, and a philosopher in the tradition of Popper. He sent me a note to say that was just about right, but I now think it was really rather misleading. Gellner's philosophy was infused with a strong element of Malinowskian functionalism. He was greatly concerned with the uses to which ideas were put. Philosophies had a life of their own in society, which could be grasped ethnographically. (According to David Gellner, he said he had learnt this from the LSE anthropologists.) His scandalous first book, *Words and Things*, published in 1959, was a devastating critique of Oxford linguistic philosophy and its inspiration, Wittgenstein. The scandal, however, was that he was not content with a conventional philosophical critique. In his final chapter he argued that there could only be a sociological explanation for the enthusiastic embrace of this impoverished philosophical system by so many Oxford dons. Linguistic philosophy shored up the smug conservatism of its acolytes. It appeared to confirm their confidence that they simply knew what was right: that their common sense was the best guide to truth. Other systems of ideas were again treated both sociologically and philosophically. He analysed Islam as a pattern for living. Then he showed how politics shaped scientific thinking, in his accounts of Soviet Marxism. But in each case he refused to treat the cosmologies of his subjects simply as ideologies, in the conventional manner of ethnographers. Each had also to be evaluated as a philosophy, its premises and arguments evaluated in the light of reason.

If he was an anthropological philosopher, Gellner was, equally, a very philosophical anthropologist. He took Popper's account of science and asked not only what it implied for politics – on which he tended to agree with Popper – but also what consequences the

scientific revolution had for societies. He agreed with Popper that science was a unique intellectual enterprise and that there was a huge gap between scientific thinking and any other kind of thinking. He also accepted Popper's prescription for the scientist. Ideas should be allowed to flourish luxuriantly and wildly, but they become useful only when they have been culled by a series of rigorous tests. Like Spartan infants, hypotheses had to be exposed to nature. Only the fittest would survive. A hypothesis was valuable if it was open to refutation. It must therefore be clearly and unambiguously phrased. 'It is not obvious to me that, because the world is a diverse, complex and tortured place, which it is, that only cumbersome and ambiguous sentences can do it justice, and that clarity is some kind of intellectual treason. . . . I can accept neither a murky relativism nor a semiotic mysticism.'[3]

His formulation was, however, less demanding than Popper's. A theory should 'be more or less compatible with available facts; or at any rate, it is not blatantly in conflict with them. It explains them better than any available alternative, and it suggests further ethnographic, historical and other enquiries. As a good Popperian, I ask no more of theories.'[4] Popper thought that the only reliable way to test hypothesis was through scientific experiments, but Gellner was again more permissive. When it came to social processes, the facts that he trusted most were delivered by participant observation in the tradition of Malinowski. He once quoted the observation of a famous British traitor and Soviet agent, Kim Philby, who remarked that a spy who only collects documents is no use at all. After all, a document could be a ploy in some bureaucratic game, or it may languish in a file if some general finds it inconvenient. 'What *is* valuable is to be able to speak informally and at length with the members of the embassy in question, and to get a real feel for the way they habitually and naturally think. Once that is understood, it becomes easy to interpret even minor signs that are not confidential.'[5]

Popper and Malinowski spoke to him so strongly, perhaps, because he shared something of the same background. Like Gellner himself, Popper and Malinowski found a second

[3] *Anthropology and Politics*, p. 25.
[4] *Anthropology and Politics*, 1995, p. 43.

spiritual home at the LSE. But more fundamentally, they were all the intellectual progeny of Franz-Josef's Vienna, that extraordinary school of all our modernities. Gellner remarked that Malinowski's Krakow and his own Prague were intellectual suburbs of Vienna. His account of modernity is rooted in his understanding of the Austro-Hungarian empire in its last years. Characteristically, his imposed a striking dichotomy on that world. 'The basic polarity in Vienna and in the Hapsburg empire was between two theories of knowledge, two theories of the world – two theories of everything.' [6] Very characteristically again, he identified each of these intellectual movements with a social milieu.

> Roughly speaking, the Hapsburg Empire was torn between the cosmopolitan liberalism of the higher bourgeoisie, and the nationalist and socialist leaning of the ethnic groups, including the German speakers. The philosophical expression of the former interest was the ideal of an Open Society, individualist and cosmopolitan, an idea elaborated and made famous by Popper. The latter interest expressed itself largely in the romanticism of *Gemeinschaft*, of a closed community suffused by intimate affective relations, and delimited by an idiosyncratic culture which sustained those relations and endowed them with rich symbolic expression. It found its sacrament in the village green and festival, not in the free market, whether of goods or ideas. Hayek and Popper, of course, voted for *Gesellschaft,* or the Open Society.[7]

Gellner was also firmly of the Enlightenment party. Politically he was a liberal. Like Popper, he was an open society man and a cultural pluralist, though not, of course, a cultural relativist, since he was committed to the view that science offered a model for rational discourse that could cross cultural boundaries. And the opponents against whom he battled throughout his career were also identified with their Viennese prototypes, Freud and Wittgenstein. Freud stood for the pseudo-scientist, the shaman.[8] The later Wittgenstein spoke for the anti-scientists, the relativists. They were the enemies of

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[5] *Anthropology and Politics*, 1995, p. 17.
[6] Davis, Interview with Ernest Gellner, pp. 69-70. Cf. Gellner, *Language and Solitude*.
[7] *Anthropology and Politics*, p. 13. Cf. *Language and Solitude.*
[8] *The Psychoanalytic Movement: The Cunning of Unreason*, 1996.

rationality and universal values. The same enemies, in new guises, haunted him throughout his career. He often remarked on the irony of his life that even when he switched disciplines and became an anthropologist he found that Wittgenstein dictated the intellectual fashion, and he had to struggle against the extreme relativism that he identified with Clifford Geertz and later with the post-modernists.[9] He was once more following in the footsteps of Popper. Overshadowed by Wittgenstein in 1920s Vienna, Popper fled to the UK only to find that after the War Wittgenstein became the darling of English philosophers.[10]

Some people crossed over from one party to the other. Gellner claimed that Wittgenstein began as an apostle of universal logic. When he recognised the flaws in that position he could conceive of only one alternative, which was the ideology of the other Viennese party. So he adopted an extreme version of peasant-worshipping Austro-Hungarian cultural relativism. Gellner admitted that the later Wittgenstein gave quite a good account of how thought and language operated in a closed, traditional society. The error of the later Wittgenstein was to assume that the same model applied to modern systems of ideas, and especially to science. Gellner, however, much preferred the men who crossed the floor in the opposite direction, the romantics who became partisans of the Enlightenment. Thomas Masaryk was a political hero of his, and he wrote a fine essay on the Catholic priest Alois Musil, a cousin of the author of *Der Mann ohne Eigenschaften,* who became a fine ethnographer of the Bedouin, a sympathiser with Islam, and an Enlightenment Puritan at last.[11]

According to Gellner, it was Malinowski who most creatively bridged the great Austro-Hungarian divide between the romantic relativists and the heirs to the Enlightenment tradition.[12] Malinowski was brought up a romantic. His father studied peasant folk-lore in Carpathian villages for nationalistic reasons. But Malinowski wrote his thesis on Mach.

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[9] This argument is made repeatedly in his work, but see especially *Postmodernism, Reason and Religion*, 1992.
[10] I owe this point to David Gellner.
[11] See 'Lawrence of Moravia', chapter fourteen of *Anthropology and Politics.*
[12] See *Language and Solitude: Wittgenstein, Malinowski and the Hapsburg Dilemma*, 1998.

He rather admired the tolerant multi-ethnic late Empire of Franz-Josef. And he adapted the tradition of nationalist folk-lore studies to the investigation of exotic others, the Trobriand islanders, whom he represented as living within a seamless traditional culture while somehow at the same time operating in much the same way as the most hard-nosed and individualistic Viennese man of affairs. All this spoke to Gellner.

III

Ten years after his sudden death, how are we to evaluate Gellner's anthropology? The most influential feature of his grand theory of history is no doubt the argument he makes about the role of nationalism in modernity. I think that this is debated more by political scientists than by anthropologists, which is, no doubt, a comment on contemporary anthropology rather than on Gellner.

He made two ethnographic studies. The first, on the Berbers of the Atlas mountains, is one of the most stimulating ethnographies in the canon, a match, I think, for Edmund Leach's *Political Systems of Highland Burma.* Gellner situated the Berbers in the modern history of the Moroccan state in an exemplary fashion, still exceptional in anthropology. He delivers here one of the most sophisticated accounts of how segmentary societies work. There are interesting parallels with Leach's own account of segmentation in the Kachin region. Gellner published one of the most sophisticated critiques of *Political Systems of Highland Burma*, which he represented as an exercise in philosophical idealism, but he was clearly impressed by the substantive analysis.[13] And like Leach's masterpiece, *Saints of the Atlas* is ethnographically rather impoverished, but richly suggestive. His Berber study also gave Gellner an insight into the workings of practical, modern Islam and allowed him to become an influential commentator on contemporary Islamic societies. His second ethnography, of the demise of Marxist theory

[13] 'Time and theory in social anthropology', first published in 1958, collected in *Cause and Meaning in the Social Sciences.*

in the Soviet Union in the age of *perestroika*, was really more an intellectual commentary on a system of ideas than an ethnographic account of the social situation of a changing ideology. It is valuable for its insight into Soviet anthropology, less useful as an ethnography of Soviet intellectuals.

Personally I find that it is his essays to which I return. Always stimulating and enormously enjoyable to read, I generally find them richer than I had remembered, and often persuasive.[14] With the exception of his excursion into kinship theory,[15] few are exclusively or technically anthropological. However, they are rewarding reading for any thoughtful anthropologist. Many revert to the great struggle in which he engaged for forty years, against relativism. In the 1990s a number of British social anthropologists were greatly influenced by the post-modernist movement that swept American cultural anthropology. One of the British converts, David Parkin, gave a talk to the British Association of Social Anthropologists in which he accused Gellner (and, I am pleased to say, myself) of being like fundamentalist *mullahs* because we opposed this wave of extreme cultural relativism. That wave has passed, however, leaving few ripples in its wake. Its European supporters are now busy with other causes. Gellner must be granted some of the credit for this encouraging development.

However, perhaps Ernest Gellner's most enduring lessons lie elsewhere. The first is that anthropologists and philosophers need one another, and that both can benefit from clear thinking, elegant prose, wit and style, and the courage to stand out against passing fashions. Second, neither anthropology and philosophy can be divorced from politics. Both must engage with the world. In *Anthropology and Politics*, published shortly after his death, he concluded: 'We need an anthropology which does not make a fetish of culture, which recognizes coercive constraints as resolutely as conceptual ones, and we must return to the real world which does not treat conceptual [constraints] as self-

[14] Most of his essays were regularly collected and published in book form. See, e.g. *Cause and Meaning in the Social Sciences*, 1973; *Spectacles and Predicaments*, 1979; *Relativism and the Social Sciences*, 1985; *Culture, Identity and Politics*, 1987; and *Anthropology and Politics*, 1995.
[15] *The Concept of Kinship*, 1987,

explanatory.'[16] Amen to that.

I am grateful to David Gellner for his comments on a draft of this talk.

[16] *Anthropology and Politics*, p. 26.