

Ernest Gellner: An Intellectual Biography

Catherine Hezser finds that John A. Hall's biography of one of the most prominent social anthropologists of our time provides fascinating reading on issues and debates which are still of utmost importance.

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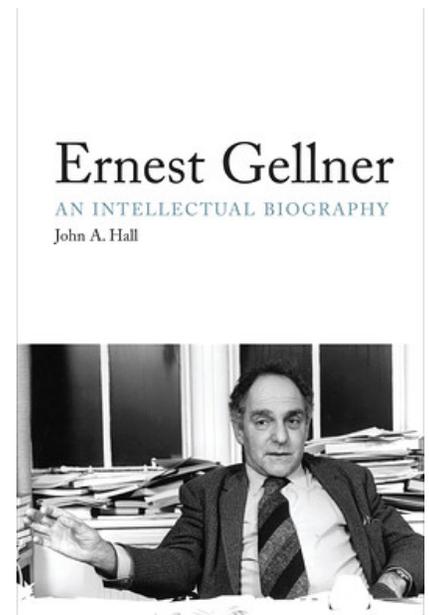
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For more than twenty years the social anthropologist and philosopher Ernest Gellner (1925-95) was one of the most prominent, prolific, and controversial professors at LSE. His own life experiences as a Czech Jew who became a British citizen and moved back to Prague in his final years had a major impact on his views on nationalism, modernity, and personal identity. Wherever he was, he felt like the quintessential outsider who could not fully identify with any one culture or society: Jewish but entirely disinterested in religion, Czech but wary of both nationalism and Marxism, British but not posh and class-conscious like other Oxford students, he chose intellectual honesty over easy belonging, clear-cut identity, and simple categorization. John A. Hall's excellent biography succeeds in drawing connections between Gellner's life and work, between concrete experiences and theoretical analyses and models. Hall, who is professor of comparative historical sociology at McGill University in Montreal, Canada, knew Gellner personally and had access to the Gellner family archive in addition to his writings.

Gellner grew up in Bohemia at the time of the early Czech republic, when the leaders tried to create a Czech national identity amongst their subjects. The time was marked by nationalism and industrialisation, phenomena which greatly interested Gellner and became the focal points of his thinking. Belonging to a later generation of Bohemian Jews than Kafka, Gellner experienced both German and Czech nationalism but could imagine belonging to Czech culture, despite his family's loyalty towards the Habsburg empire. Gellner maintained that for Jews of his generation three possibilities existed: assimilation, Zionism, or cosmopolitanism. He knew that all three options were problematic and never fully adopted one of them. He saw the attempt to return to particular cultural roots as an illusion, since these cultural roots were almost always invented and romanticised by those who propagated them. He accepted the tension that existed between ethnonationalism and cosmopolitanism, being aware of the power and weakness of both of these movements.

When the Sudetenland became part of Nazi Germany in 1938, his family left Prague for England. The expulsion of the Sudetendeutschen and the killing of Jews in the Holocaust convinced him that the fate of national minorities were either assimilation, expulsion, or death. Towards the end of the Second World War he joined the Czech army but returned to Britain when communists took over. He was intellectually interested in Marxism but opposed to communist ideology. At Oxford, he became a "natural anthropologist" (30), an outside observer of the societies in which he lived.

Gellner's major contribution to scholarship is the socio-economic analysis of nationalism. His book,



Nations and Nationalism (Oxford, 1983), was declared one of the hundred most influential books written since the end of the war. In this book he offers a general theory of nationalism which connects nationalism with industrialisation. He believed that nationalism, that is, the creation of a fictive homogeneity amongst people who lived in one territory, was created at the end of the nineteenth century because the social and cultural units of the past could not support modern societies. Modernity functionally required the nation state, which was absent from most of history. Tribes and peasant communities were too small, empires such as the Habsburg and Ottoman empires too large to support industrialisation and to bring about affluence and a high standard of living. National homogeneity was necessary for the success of a society, since it enabled economic flexibility, development, and welfare spending.

Gellner's theory has been criticised as functionalist and optimistic. It was developed at the time of reconstruction after the Nazi period. Critics have claimed that (forced) homogeneity does not always lead to progress and affluence (cf. the Soviet Union and African states). In the Balkans, homogeneity led to territorial divisions, expulsions and killings. There seems to be a certain contradiction between Gellner's optimistic view of nationalism before and after the Second World War and the way Jews were treated by the Nazis during the Third Reich, when assimilation was not an option and the extinction of a whole population group was based on believed ethnic dissimilarity only. The claim that a modern state needs full cultural homogeneity to succeed can also be challenged from other perspectives: India, for example is successful as a state-nation rather than a nation-state. Diversity is recognized and a limited measure of unity sufficient. Similarly, contemporary British society is culturally and ethnically diverse. One could almost argue against Gellner that (post-)modern societies need to be diverse rather than homogeneous to adapt and succeed globally.

Another major focal point of Gellner's studies is Islamic society. He has, in fact, been named a social anthropologist of religion on the basis of his studies into Moroccan Berber groups in the 1950s and -60s and North African Muslim society in later years. In his book, *Muslim Society* (Cambridge, 1981) Gellner developed a general theory of Islam. He argued that Islam survived and was immune to secularisation because its ideology was stronger than the political life of any particular Islamic state. Social change in a particular region did not challenge the normative basis. He used Algeria as a model for Islamism as a substitute for industrialisation and secularisation. In contrast to European nation states, Islamic society entered modernity through its high tradition of law, literacy, and discipline. These traditions made it secularisation-resistant. Critics have pointed out that Gellner essentialised Islam, that he presented an a-historical theory which did not pay sufficient attention to differences amongst Islamic societies. The view that modern Islam is a functional equivalent of nationalism without undergoing industrialisation and secularisation fails to point us what modernity in Islam really consists of.

Gellner was very much opposed to all kinds of relativism and "value-pluralism" and accused fellow scholars (e.g., I. Berlin) of too liberal views. A liberalism which tolerated the incommensurability of values was considered wrong, since it could not express revulsion against certain practices (e.g., slavery, female circumcision, torture). Similarly, post-modernism allegedly led to relativism. He polemicalised against E. Said's *Culture and Imperialism*: Muslim society was not held back by western orientalist ideology, as Said claimed. Rather, western imperialism was inevitable on the basis of certain technological advances which Islamic societies lacked.

John A. Hall's biography of one of the most prominent social anthropologists of our time provides fascinating reading on issues and debates which are still of utmost importance. The author provides a clear and detailed account of the development of Gellner's thought and critical assessments of his arguments and theories. The book can be recommended to anyone interested in politics, anthropology, and socio-economic theory. The text is supplemented by some photographs and a general index but lacks a bibliography.

Catherine Hezser is Professor of Jewish Studies in the Department of the Study of Religions at SOAS. She received her Ph.D. from JTSA, New York and a Dr. theol. from the University of Heidelberg. [Read reviews by Catherine.](#)

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