John Hall, *Ernest Gellner: An Intellectual Biography*
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THE GADFLY

Ernest Gellner died in Prague, the city of his childhood, in 1995, leaving a colossal intellectual legacy: some twenty books, two of them posthumous; a mass of articles, scholarly or journalistic, many of them provocative and polemical; all displaying his distinctive, scintillating intelligence. Gellner's range across topics and disciplines was remarkable and yet his thought displays considerable unity. Its foundations are most fully laid out in the second of the posthumous works, *Language and Solitude: Wittgenstein, Malinowski and the Habsburg Dilemma* (1998). Reconstructed from manuscripts by his son David, this is a work of synthesis: the closest Gellner came to an intellectual autobiography. It brings together philosophy, anthropology, and an interpretation of the Central European context of his upbringing, by juxtaposing the ideas of his lifelong *bête noire*, Wittgenstein, with those of Malinowski, a figure whom Gellner greatly admired, and whose work helped inspire his own turn from philosophy to anthropology.

The 'Habsburg Dilemma', according to Gellner, evoking their contrasting responses, amounted to a confrontation between atomists and organicists that 'meshes in with the alliances and hatreds of daily and political life'. The contrast was between what he called the 'atomic–universalist–individualist vision' and the 'communal–cultural vision'. He portrayed Wittgenstein as trapped within this opposition, veering unwittingly from one pole to the other. His early logical atomism expressed 'the solitude of the transcendental ego' seeking an account of 'what the world looks like to a solitary individual reflecting on the problem of how his mind, or language, can possibly "mean", i.e. reflect, the world'. By contrast, his later philosophy transplanted 'the populist idea of the authority of each

distinctive culture to the problem of knowledge', concluding that 'mankind lives in cultural communities or, in [Wittgenstein's] words, "forms of life", which are self-sustaining, self-legitimating, logically and normatively final.' Malinowski, on the other hand, escaped the tyranny of this dichotomy; he was able to combine radical empiricism with a penchant for ethnographic fieldwork, a scientific approach to anthropology with a 'functionalist and romantic sense of the unity and interdependence of culture'. As for language, Malinowski allowed (though later mistakenly denied) that—though use-bound and context-linked—it properly strives in scientific and philosophical contexts to be context-free. And as for nationalism, he argued that the only hope was to 'limit the political power of nations, but permit, indeed enhance and encourage, the perpetuation of all those local cultures within which men have found their fulfilment and their freedom', thus 'depriving boundaries of some of their importance and symbolic potency'.

These positions came to be Gellner's own, as John Hall amply illustrates in this highly successful intellectual biography (although paradoxically *Language and Solitude* is one of the few works that Hall rather scants). Descended from secularized German-speaking Jews—his father had to learn Czech after the creation of the new Czechoslovak state—Gellner migrated to England in March 1939, at the age of thirteen. He went to school in St Albans and thence to Oxford, his degree interrupted by wartime service with the Czech Brigade besieging Dunkirk, and a brief, formative return to Prague under Soviet occupation. There followed a successful academic career, first briefly in Edinburgh, then for thirty-five years at the LSE, then to Cambridge and finally back to Prague in 1993. Gellner claimed to have benefited from his early life experiences. In an interview with John Davis he remarked that 'not having had a faith, I think I do understand . . . what Descartes and Hume and Kant were about, namely, the struggle to establish the foundations of knowledge', and '[n]ever having been a member of a community but having been on the margins of a number gave me an understanding of . . . what the yearning for community is all about.' And in a 'Reply to Critics' he recalled that from the Prague of his youth he had retained a memory of the difference between urban intellectuals and 'ideal man as conceived by the populist romanticism which was dominant in literature, art, even politics and philosophy', and that this had had considerable bearing on his decision to do fieldwork, and on his choice of location for the latter:

> When I first saw Berber villages of the central Atlas, each building clinging to the next, the style wholly homogeneous, the totality crying out that this was a *Gemeinschaft*, I knew at once that I wanted desperately to know, as far as an outsider ever could, what it was like *inside*.

It is clear that his life experience led him, as Perry Anderson observed, to a far less intense and exalted view of national allegiance than that of Max Weber, another figure who loomed large in his intellectual firmament. What Gellner favoured was the limited, liberal nationalism of Masaryk's Czechoslovak Republic, namely,

> the acceptance of 'forms of life,' from styles of food, handshakes and wallpapers to political rituals or personal relationships—but an acceptance which no longer endows anything with an aura of the absolute, but is ironic, tentative, optional, and above all discontinuous with serious knowledge and real conviction. In this limited sphere of 'culture,' relativism is indeed valid. In the sphere of serious conviction, on the other hand, relativism is not an option open to us *at all*.

Here we see Gellner's life-long commitment to an 'ethics of cognition' dedicated to 'the notion of culture-transcending truth', defended in his *Legitimation of Belief* (1974), according to which, as he wrote, 'all ideas, data, inquirers are equal, cognitive claims have to compete and confront data on terms of equality and they are not allowed to construct circular, self-confirming visions'. If we want to acquire 'powerful knowledge' we must, in Hall's words, 'act on the assumption that the world is regulated by cold, orderly, impersonal laws'. This view of legitimate knowledge, centring on science and its applications, excluding cognitive hierarchies and authorities (influenced by another figure he admired, Karl Popper), was the basis for Gellner's successive attacks across the years upon relativists, idealists, subjectivists, interpretivists, social constructionists, ethnomethodologists, postmodernists and other exponents of 'local knowledge', from Peter Winch to Clifford Geertz—inheritors all, he thought, of the errors of the later Wittgenstein, endorsers of locally prevailing commonsense. It also led him to be what Hall calls 'the scourge of re-enchantment theorists'. But admirable as it may be, this defence does raise a huge problem, namely that of values, which, Gellner concedes at the end of *Language and Solitude*, are 'instilled by contingent and variable cultures'. Are these not 'part of the sphere of serious conviction'? Is there not a problem here for the 'Enlightenment Fundamentalist Rationalism' that Gellner espoused in his *Postmodernism, Reason and Religion* (1992)? After all, the Enlightenment thinkers whom he held in high regard were universalists, one and all, about morals. And, as Hall remarks, 'the world of relative standards' was 'a world utterly unacceptable to Gellner.'

Hall's very considerable achievement is to have brought both Gellner and his ideas to life. He does the former by drawing upon a wide range of personal memories and interviews; archival materials, including a remarkable set of early aphorisms that Hall calls 'The Notes', and which prefigure

later developments in Gellner's thinking; and, not least important, academic gossip. His treatment of Gellner's ideas is equally adept: the writings are discussed in sequence and placed in their intellectual contexts, Hall carefully reporting on—and frequently engaging robustly in—the controversies they have engendered, and documenting their reception. The ideas thereby come alive not so much through exposition (which tends to be elliptical) as in confrontation. It is a tribute to Hall's skill as an intellectual biographer, uniting empathy and critical distance, that Gellner's distinctive voice is present throughout—as are his failings and limitations.

Gellner's political outlook was, initially, liberal, social-democratic and, as he wrote to Anderson, 'deeply Philistine'. He was 'ready to pay the price of vulgarity for peace, reasonable diffused prosperity and equality. If God obliged me to choose for mankind, giving the option of living in a universalized Vienna of 1975 or 1905, I think I would, albeit with some private bitterness, be obliged to opt for 1975.' He became more conservative and tolerant of inequalities over the years (even, according to his daughter Sarah, enamoured of Margaret Thatcher), though not less liberal, reacting against post-1968 left intellectuals and later—and more anxiously and fearfully—against post-Soviet nationalism and Islamic fundamentalism. Hall records his dislike of hermeneutics, Marxism and Catholicism; the pillars, Gellner thought, of Charles Taylor's thought. But his attitude to Marxism was complex. He was impatient with what he saw as Western Marxists' idealist according of causal primacy to cultural factors, but was fascinated by, and supportive of, Soviet anthropologists' efforts to rescue Marxist theory by investigating transitions between modes of production. One significant dimension is almost entirely absent from Hall's account—namely Gellner's attitude towards, and views about, women. Except, that is, for one telling anecdote about his response, after many careful evasions, to an insistent line of feminist questioning at the American Anthropological Association about why he had paid no real attention to the role of women in historical development in his *Plough, Sword and Book* (1988). Hall writes that his 'penchant for speaking his mind—assuring the questioner that he liked women, but that they had nothing to do with historical development—caused mild uproar.'

Of his character the memories of friends and colleagues tell a consistent story. Ronald Dore, anxious on his arrival at the LSE, recalled that it was 'from Ernest that I learned not to give a damn about disciplinary tribes. He was a *franc tireur* of the disciplines, a zestful poacher who cocked a snook at all fences and gamekeepers.' His LSE colleague, David Glass, remarked that 'he did not know if the next revolution would come from the right or the left, but that Gellner would be the first to be shot in either case.' And Tom Nairn, a colleague in his last days in Prague, recalled him being 'irrepressible and in no way diminished, right to the end. Certainly conversations last year

showed the same mixture of disrespect, malicious humour, deep insight and spiky, somewhat conservative, rectitude as twenty years before.' He loved, his biographer notes, to collect and retell jokes. Some of the best, I am convinced, he invented, such as the following. 'Have you heard the latest news about Bourdieu? He has decided to abolish the first syllable of his name.'

Gellner began his career as a philosopher but had already half-left the disciplinary tribe when he joined LSE's sociology department, from where, in turn, he became an anthropologist. His first, explosive entry into public view was with his *Words and Things: A Critical Account of Linguistic Philosophy and a Study in Ideology* (1959). This was a largely satirical denunciation of what he saw as the complacency of Oxford philosophers, deriving from the later Wittgenstein, 'dissolving' philosophical problems by appeal to 'ordinary language' usages and 'leaving everything as it is'; and their lack of curiosity about the world and the findings of the sciences. It was also an anthropological study, portraying them as 'the Narodniks of North Oxford', purveyors of 'a philosophic form eminently suitable for gentlemen.' The book was a *cause célèbre*. Bertrand Russell wrote a laudatory preface, Gilbert Ryle refused to have it reviewed in *Mind* and a flurry of philosophers responded to its charges in letters and reviews. (Another personal anecdote, for the record: I recall seeing *Jumpers,* Tom Stoppard's satirical play about academic philosophy, with Gellner and asking him what he thought of it. His response was: 'It's all publishable.').

Aside from the fun, Gellner developed a highly interesting argument in his essay on 'Concepts and Society', in contention with Winch and others, concerning the social function of conceptual ambiguity and contradiction, in which he cited the Berber concept of *baraka*. Gellner's central claim was that one must, as Hall writes, 'go beyond symbol and expression', assessing the world within from an external standpoint; and that it is 'the very falsity of certain beliefs' that 'makes possible an investigation into the ways in which they are sustained'. Hall argues that it was this insight that 'allowed him to become a brilliant sociologist of belief.' The two books *Thought and Change* (1964) and *Legitimation of Belief* (1974) are largely programmatic, rather caricatural works in which this assessment can be judged, the latter setting out the 'ethics of cognition' referred to above, through a bold 'mapping of modern epistemology'. It is, in my view, better vindicated in later applications, notably in his fine study *The Psychoanalytic Movement* (1985). Gellner also in these years took his distance from Michael Oakeshott's attack on rationalism and, far more fiercely, expressed his life-long contempt for Isaiah Berlin's style of thought, his view of Jewish identity and his value pluralism.

The turn to anthropology had come in 1953, with the doctoral research that would eventually become *Saints of the Atlas* (not published until 1969), pursued under the supervision of Raymond Firth. This lay at the origin

of much of Gellner's later substantive work, deploying Evans-Pritchard's theory of segmentation and Ibn Khaldun's theory of the tribal circulation of elites—linking tribal solidarity and urban life. It incited his central interests in modernization and development, in constructing a model of Muslim society, and in nationalism. These last three concerns can indeed be seen as having generated his major substantive contributions, helpfully categorized by Hall in chapters respectively titled 'The Shape of History', 'The Sociology of Islam' and 'A General Theory of Nationalism'.

The key text for Gellner's account of modernization is his philosophy of history, *Plough, Sword and Book*. Most important here is his theory of the transition from *agraria* to *industria*—of the escape from a world where access to reality was as if from a 'multi-periscope submarine' to the modern world of standardized knowledge, graspable as if by 'jaws' (the rather awkward metaphors are Gellner's). There is—yet another metaphor—a 'big ditch' dividing the pre-modern from the modern. The book offers, in essence, a generalized Weberian account of the rise of the West. It posits, not any evolutionary logic but rather what Hall calls a 'curious concatenation of circumstances', of mutually shaping factors. Ideology played a decisive causal role, which took a benign form because pre-existing political pluralism restrained theocratic dreams, embraced toleration and encouraged the investigation of nature and economic growth. Cognitive power and its mass diffusion had a crucial part to play in this story, in which what Gellner called 'generic Protestantism', de-sacralizing the world, strongly encouraged scientific method by 'turning the orderly facts of its creation into the only evidence of its own design.' (The 'rigid and austere deity had no cognitive favourites and would not disclose its secrets capriciously to some.') This led to a mutual interaction of cognitive and economic growth. In marshalling the various criticisms and elaborations to which this account has been subject, Hall rather half-heartedly defends it against the charge of Eurocentrism —though it *is*, of course, Eurocentric—and focuses on what he calls its 'traces of Saint-Simonianism' and the influence of Raymond Aron—another pivotal figure for Gellner—that suggest 'a potential for modern industrialized society to stabilize, to find some point of rest'. But, Hall rightly argues, 'the modern world cannot be understood without recognizing the dynamics of capitalist society.' Gellner assumed that corporatist arrangements were always going to be available and, in general, his account—from which geopolitical factors are altogether absent—seriously underestimated the permanent instability of capitalist society.

Gellner's sociology of Islam, most fully set out in *Muslim Society* (1981), offered a model of Islamic civilization transcending the life of any particular state. The model incorporates Ibn Khaldun's theory of the circulation of elites and what Gellner called 'Hume's sociology of religion'—positing

a perpetual pendulum swinging between enthusiastic monotheism and pluralist superstitions—and the anthropological theory of segmentation. Gellner thought that Islam had the capacity to provide an *ersatz* protestant ethic by 'unhinging the pendulum' and thus adapting itself to modernity, thereby resisting secularization. Focusing on its high tradition of law, literacy and discipline, his argument was that 'egalitarian scripturalism is more suited to a mobile technical society than ascriptive, mediationist, manipulative spiritual brokerage.' He envisaged Islam's survival in conditions of emulative industrialization, with scripturalism at its centre, sloughing off the peripheral styles as superstitions and unworthy accretions. Hall cites Patricia Crone's defence of the model as identifying a 'syndrome', manifested by 'the holy men of the tribal Middle East', which 'arises from the dispersal of power characteristic of segmentary organization.' But, first, how is this account to be squared with the 'big ditch' view, according to which science is necessary for economic growth? And, secondly, as Hall argues, Gellner plainly commits the double sin of over-generalizing and of essentializing modern Islam. It also, he further rightly claims, fails to account for the poor economic performance of many Muslim states because it excludes the impact of geopolitics and, indeed, of political factors in general.

It is, however, Gellner's 'general theory of nationalism', first and most clearly set out in *Thought and Change*, that is his most striking positive achievement. It is, indeed, a general theory and all the more vulnerable for that (a Popperian virtue Gellner welcomed). Nationalism, he claimed, arises under conditions of uneven development, when centralizing empires—'Megalomania'—alienate and humiliate linguistic minorities —'Ruritanians'—while seeking to modernize them, leading them to seek nation-states. Here is his most careful formulation:

> Political and economic forces, the aspirations of governments for greater power and of individuals for greater wealth, have in certain circumstances produced a world in which the division of labour is very advanced, the occupational structure highly unstable, and most work is semantic and communicative rather than physical. This situation in turn leads to the adoption of a standard and codified, literacy-linked ('High') idiom, requires business of all kinds to be conducted in its terms, and reduces persons who are not masters of that idiom (or not acceptable to its practitioners) to the status of humiliated second-class members, a condition from which one plausible and much-frequented escape route led through nationalist politics.

This formulation was intended by Gellner to show that his theory is genuinely causal and not functionalist, in the illicit form of proposing that needs generate what satisfies them—a charge to which he was often subjected and from which Hall largely and, I think, justifiably absolves him. He also shows how Gellner's account contrasts favourably with others, such

as that of Elie Kedourie, with its focus on the decisive role of ideas, and that of Anthony Smith, for whom a primordial ethnic core is essential for a modern nation-state's success and viability. ('Some nations', Gellner wrote, playing on theological debates over the existence of Adam's *umbilicus*, 'have navels, some achieve navels, some have navels thrust upon them . . . it matters little. It is the need for navels engendered by modernity that matters.') Hall observes the central place that Gellner's theory occupies in the field of studies of nationalism but charges, once more, that it pays insufficient attention to geopolitical conflict and, most significantly, he adduces grounds for doubting Gellner's abiding assumption that cultural and linguistic homogeneity are necessary for societal success under modern conditions.

Hall concludes his book by reflecting on Gellner's response to the conflict between the demands of scientific rationality, which claimed his 'greatest allegiance', and the communitarian appeals of nationalism, which he sought to understand and explain: the Habsburg dilemma of *Language and Solitude*. He believed that the latter could and would be tamed as the logic of 'industrial society' unfolded but, at the end of his life, worried that this might not be so within the Islamic world. There can be no doubt about the continuing urgency and relevance of these questions. Through Hall's excellent book Ernest Gellner forces us to address them anew.