



Book Reviews

Ernest Gellner and Modernity

Michael Lessnoff

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Ernest Gellner was the ultimate maverick. He was a world-travelling intellectual, with an extraordinary range of academic relationships ranging across Europe, West and East, the former Soviet bloc and the Islamic world. His education and career were in Britain, at the LSE (first among sociologists, then philosophers) and then Cambridge (as Professor of social anthropology). Born in Prague, he returned there in his last years to pursue and promote his favourite topic: the study of nationalism. He was a sociologist–anthropologist–philosopher–political theorist (in any order you care to choose), whose prolific writings range from fieldwork in North Africa to the philosophy of history and whose distinctive style veers from the magisterially speculative to the sharply polemical. At 8 years after his untimely death, his contribution stands ripe for assessment.

The task is indeed challenging and Lessnoff rises to it. His book conveys just the right mix of appreciative admiration and judicious, occasionally sharp, criticism to do its subject scholarly justice. Inevitably, given that subject, his study is selective. It is a measure of Gellner's achievement, and no criticism of Lessnoff, that swathes of Gellner's work go unnoticed here: his writings about anthropological theory, on kinship for instance, and on anthropologists, such as Fraser and Malinowski; his penetrating and empathetic commentaries on Eastern European and Soviet politics and society and on the work of oppositional Soviet social scientists; his case studies of the impact of colonialism and industrialism on various Muslim societies; and innumerable essays and reviews that range from 18th-century materialism to a famous battle with Edward Said and a memorable discussion of the life and thought of Hannah Arendt.

Lessnoff's focus is on Gellner's work in philosophy and the social sciences. He thinks his most important work, which summarizes his 'bold and sweeping' theory of history, is *Plough, Sword and Book*. In that work, Gellner seeks to show how production, coercion and legitimation interact across three great ages or stages of human history: hunter-gatherer, 'agro-literate' and modern industrial. Lessnoff calls it a 'masterpiece of insight and lucid exposition', which he, in turn, summarizes and compares with 'other theories of modernity', raising various difficulties with Gellner's claims, such as those



that arise out of the work of Goody, Macfarlane and others, and relating the theory to that of Max Weber (although I think he and Perry Anderson go rather far in believing that Gellner is Weber's most important successor in the second half of the 20th century). He pursues a similar course in discussing Gellner on nationalism, setting this, which is perhaps Gellner's most original and lasting theoretical contribution, alongside other theories of nationalism, and raising both empirical and theoretical objections to Gellner's explanation, not least its undeniably functionalist character. Lessnoff is less than fully convinced by Gellner's account of nationalism and nation-formation and by his account of Islam: in both cases, he, rather plausibly, suggests that Gellner gives too one-sided a view of their congruence with modernity. Lessnoff's chapter on Islam is perhaps the least satisfactory. He finds Gellner's analysis of Islam's relationship to modernity 'superficial' and his comparison between 'High Islam' (which Gellner famously contrasts with 'Folk Islam') and Protestantism to be 'one-sided, to the point of being misleading.' These criticisms are plausible enough but need deepening from a more informed scholarly perspective.

Gellner believed that Islam is inhospitable to, even incompatible with, civil society — a claim of real interest and ever-greater topical importance in our time. Gellner's rather thin account of civil society, liberal democracy and the market are adequately treated and there is a welcome defence of Rawls against Gellner's intemperate and unsympathetic hostility, although Lessnoff brings out clearly Gellner's persistent theme of philosophers' ignorance and wilful (but perhaps professionally necessary) neglect of the social conditions of their own theorizing. However, Lessnoff rightly points out that Rawls is by no means ignorant and neglectful of this issue.

It is indeed this issue that runs through the chapters on Wittgensteinian philosophy and relativism, in which Lessnoff addresses a continuing obsession of Gellner's: confronting, satirising and seeking to refute relativistic thinking by exposing both its temptations and its absurdities and, as he thought, harmful consequences. He presents Gellner's first encounter with this theme in his critique of Peter Winch and his later rumbustuous confrontation with post-modernist writers (and he might have added to the story Gellner's criticism of interpretative anthropology à la Geertz). Gellner was a fierce anti-relativist, who thought that the cognitive superiority of modern science, viewed, as Lessnoff shows, through largely Popperian spectacles, is beyond question and that to question it is both intellectually frivolous and socially and political harmful. However, Gellner never really addressed the troubling questions of moral or ethical relativism, and it is a pity that Lessnoff neither notices nor addresses this failure.

Finally, there is a chapter on Gellner's critique of Freud and psychoanalysis, which Lessnoff thinks 'contains one of his most sustained and impressive



critiques — a masterly polemic which, at the very least, calls for a reply.’ This is somewhat exaggerated: apart from the distinctively Gellnerian polemic, the elements of the case advanced (spurious claims to authority, comparisons with religion, lack of evidential support, unfalsifiable theoretical claims) have been widely made elsewhere and have been endlessly replied to, to no-one’s satisfaction. Gellner’s polemic is great fun — a feature of most of his writing, ever since his first book, *Words and Things*, which offended Oxford philosophers and brought Bertrand Russell to its defence. This feature of Gellner’s writing is worth remarking upon. How many philosophers and social scientists are actually fun to read?

What we have here, then, is a fine, well-crafted, reliable and seriously critical presentation of what are, arguably, the central constituents of Gellner’s oeuvre. Gellner celebrated the cognitive and economic successes of modern industrial society, he offered an original but inevitably partial theory of nationalism as the appropriate framework for such society, and accounts of liberal–democratic civil society and of Islam as alternative forms of such society, and he developed a theory of world history of which it is the culmination. He also attacked ideas and movements that he saw as obscurantist, calling himself a ‘humble adherent’ of ‘Enlightenment Rationalist Fundamentalism’. And he did all this in prose that is, usually, a joy to read. No mean achievement.

Steven Lukes
Department of Sociology,
London School of Economics.