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# Gellner on Modernity<sup>1</sup>

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**Peter Skalník**

*University of Pardubice, Czech Republic*

Ernest Gellner was one of the greatest social science theorists of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Wide agreement exists about this opinion. However, if we think about the main theme of his work, a lively discussion might ensue. Modernity without any doubt is one of the strongest candidates for this role of the catch-all theme in Gellner's work. In his abstract for the St. Petersburg panel, John Hall mentioned that Gellner's theory of modernity is 'troubling' because it is based on the premise that 'the transition to modernity involved fundamental change in identity, akin to that undergone by Gregor Samsa in Kafka's *Metamorphosis*'. According to Hall, Gellner apparently believed and argued that this decisive break in human history was closely linked to 'utilitarian/liberal/rational standards' which would work only in certain social conditions. Whereas Hall doubts the general applicability of Gellner's thesis, the publication of Lessnoff's book makes very much clearer the quality and quantity of the implications of Gellner's ideas concerning modernity. Already, in the Acknowledgements (p. vii), Lessnoff stresses the polymathic character of Gellner's *oeuvre* but hastens to add that that would imply a lack of focus in it then 'nothing could be further from the truth'. Rather it is not easy to find people with enough breadth of knowledge to be able to appreciate the depth and expanse in Gellner's work.

Lessnoff divides his book into nine chapters, each dealing with a distinct aspect of Gellner's work as it relates to modernity. After the introduction, we find chapters on Gellner's theory of history, nationalism, politics in modern society, Islam, Wittgenstein and linguistic philosophy, Freud and psychoanalysis, relativism, cogni-

tive ethics and the philosophy of science and finally an overall assessment of Gellner's contribution to the understanding of modernity.

In the introduction, Lessnoff starts with the agreement among the writers of obituaries about the originality of Gellner's thought and style. Lukes for example held that Gellner was 'a maverick and a gadfly' who wrote simultaneously with 'profundity and wit'. Lessnoff apparently grasps the omnipresence of wit in Gellner's work for he repeatedly and approvingly refers to Gellner's irreverence towards received truths and authorities. Gellner was a polymath in the age of specialists 'who refused to confine himself within the boundaries of any specialism' and therefore risked to be ignored by all specialists (p. 5). After reminding the reader about the scandal caused by Ryle's refusal to review Gellner's first book on and against linguistic philosophy, Lessnoff aptly characterises Gellner's position at the end of his career as a *doyen terrible*, 'a prophet of, and for, modernity' (p. 6). The unifying theme of modernity was not however, apparent until *Plough, Sword and Book*, his most ambitious and most important book, appeared in 1988, almost thirty years after his first volume. In this work subtitled 'The Structure of Human History', Gellner explains in detail how modern society, based on 'economic and cognitive growth' emerged. Gellner's writings on nationalism and Islam and to much extent also on civil society can be seen as those 'for' modernity, whereas the polemical works such as *Words and Things* and *The Psychoanalytic Movement*, and perhaps also *Postmodernism, Reason and Religion* (1992) deal with 'betrayals of modernity'. The positive expositions of Gellner's philosophy such as *Legitimation of Belief* (1975), or, *Reason and Culture* (1992) were written in support of critical rationalism, scientific empirism and materialism, i. e. 'cognitive bases for modernity'.

Lessnoff stresses that Gellner was not only an analyst of modernity but also one of its 'most passionate and cogent champions' who embraced all its ingredients: scientific rationality, liberal polity, industrial economy, and even consumerism. In his dual role of 'analyst and defender of modernity', Gellner was obliged to take issue with the question of relativism in social science. As a phi-

losopher and defender of modernity he is 'logically committed to absolute standards of truth and morality' (p. 8). Lessnoff mentions that Gellner was neither a conservative but also nor a revolutionary ideologue. He cherished the liberal order of which Britain was the best example during his active career.

At this stage we should note with regret that Lessnoff apparently did not see much point in Gellner's long-term preoccupation with Soviet anthropological and other social thought nor with his interest in Malinowski as not only the founder of social anthropology but also namely the champion of non-politicised cultural identity. This choice might suggest that Gellner's attitude towards Marxism as another, competing, theory of modernity is considered by Lessnoff as being of lesser importance within the realm of Gellner's thought<sup>2</sup>.

The second chapter on Theory of history explains why it was so important for Gellner to explain the logic of human history. Industry and science and their institutions are essential to modernity but the combination with civil society and liberal pluralism is not that essential. To reach an understanding of these prerequisites one has to analyse the processes which led to modern social forms. Marxism was a theory of history which, in its stress on the role of forces of production and the dependence of power and ideology on economy, was a kind of competitor of Gellner's theory. The latter also accords an important role to economy but argues that politics and ideology are independent factors. Coercion plays an especially central role in Gellner's theory of history.

Plough, sword and book are the symbols for the three factors which make up the structure and indeed development of human societies. Social legitimation of beliefs, i. e. society's cognitive system, is the necessary accompaniment of both production and coercion. Legitimation is however more important in pre-modern societies where cognition is based on belief more than on independent scientific knowledge. Modern society, in Gellner's conception, is actually an industrial-scientific society. Industrialism is based on the discovery of natural science as a major factor in increasing production which outstrips the growth of population.

The first phase, i.e. hunting and gathering, was characterised by a particular cognitive use of language which Gellner calls multi-stranded, i.e. meanings are assigned according to the complexity of the society in which the division of labour is not highly developed and most individuals performs multiplicity of roles. Most important here are the referential function of language and thinking on the one hand, and the affirmation of social loyalty or Shared Concept Affirmation on the other. In practice, Lessnoff explains, this affirmation of shared concepts, i. e. central norms and moral expectations, is 'imprinted into the minds' of the members of each society thus securing compliance to moral and social conformity. 'Socialization and cognition are fused in one solemn, often repeated process' (p. 13). So it happens in primitive society whereas in the modern society it is the other way around: logical coherence combines with social incoherence.

Durkheim spoke about anomie, Weber rationality and disenchantment. Lessnoff adds that in primitive people's morality is morality of the whole society. 'Morality, the social norms and social hierarchy form a single package' (p. 14). In our modern situation, however, the moral and cognitive orders do not work together, no facts are sacred and all are vulnerable to the evidence. Lessnoff mentions Gellner's dictum that 'evidence is king'. No beliefs and concepts in modern society are permanent and therefore facts must be divorced from values. Facts are cold but they are parts of an infinite cognitive growth. Gellner, according to Lessnoff, dubs the previous pre-modern cognitive regime as self-indulgent and ethically inferior (Gellner's 'ethic of cognition').

Now, how could the primitive society have evolved into a modern one? Gellner argues that there was no direct change, but a gradual transition through three stages, the first involved the so-called neolithic revolution, which made possible an increase of wealth by agricultural production. This in turn was accompanied by a considerable increase of population and the emergence of two specialised classes of people: rulers and priests. The first class specialised in coercion, the other in ideology. The invention of writing and of the construction of a state organization in the service of these classes gave birth to the agro-literate society. Agro-literate

states or empires were large but not over-centralized. The priesthood became the doctrinal *clerisy* in Gellner's terminology. Literacy and priesthood became inextricably linked. The result eventually was the emergence of both high culture and peasant folk culture, the first literate, the second illiterate, ritualistic and oral. The cognitive aspect of folk culture was not very different from the primitive hunter-gatherer society. It was a new single-stranded cognitive style of the literate priesthood, which led eventually to natural science. It was made possible by giving preference to what Gellner called 'Shared Concept Affirmation', which was used as a device for social control leading to codification and unification of thought.

Lessnoff explains that Gellner found out that the literate, high culture of agro-literate society turned the previous communal religion into the cult of the transcendent, the promise of salvation included. The role of 'intolerant monotheism' in this transition should not be underestimated. Lessnoff however remarks that Gellner hardly explains how modern scientific world-view replaced that of scriptural religions. On the other hand, Gellner pays much attention to economic change towards modernity because it was strongly opposed by the power structure of agro-literate society. This power structure is dominated by what Gellner calls 'thugs'. 'Naked power was in these societies a much surer way to wealth than was production' (p. 18). Because surplus wealth was usually expropriated by the power thugs, people were not eager to make the economic effort necessary for further economic growth. If they earned wealth, then they either used it as an entry ticket into the club of coercers or to gain prestige by donation to the church. Lessnoff concludes that Gellner tells us that the economic revolution which brought about modernity 'could not result from economic motives'. How though has production replaced predation as the central theme and value of life?, ask both Gellner and Lessnoff.

Weber's protestant ethic answer does not satisfy Gellner who stresses the need to explain how rule of law and security of property developed and prevented the coercive thugs from appropriating the wealth of producers and traders. The right question, a much more difficult answer! According to Lessnoff, Gellner offers only

suggestions to this riddle. Absolutism got rid of the autonomous power of smaller thugs, the feudal nobles. Why does not an absolute monarch become an absolute thug? Gellner's answer is a 'bribery fund' which expands rapidly with the improvement of productive technology. The wealth thus created was available for buying the consent of the old rulers, at least in western Europe. Luckily, the aristocracy was also not a closed caste. This fact allowed it to 'marry the new wealth instead of seizing it' (p. 20) and tax it only after it had multiplied.

The predatory state turns into a law-abiding one. The country (Britain) and the continent (Europe) first to execute this transition were also the mightiest and the most capable of dominating the rest of the world. This superiority of the industrial over the pre-industrial is not only political but in Gellner's view also cognitive and moral. However, there is a price to be paid for all this: 'disenchantment' of a scientific value-free universe and the 'iron cage' of social discipline imposed by both bureaucracy and the market. Gellner thus develops further the Weberian theory of modernity. Instead of Weber's iron cage, the bars of Gellner's cage are made of rubber and enable 're-enchantment'. In this connection the idea of *rattrapage*, or catching up is interesting. Gellner shows that this concept first appeared in the writings of the French encyclopaedists when France still awaited its revolution. Marxism is a follow up of this first intellectual attempt at *rattrapage*. Paradoxically, it has been successful in the backward countries instead of the most advanced ones. Besides, Marxism, backed with scientific rhetorics, promised a better alternative to industrial capitalism, in effect a faster developmental path. Here Gellner was right, Lessnoff writes, whereas he was wrong about the true relation of Marxism and modernity which became obvious once the Soviet Union collapsed. However Gellner admitted his error on this point. One should perhaps add that China does combine the Marxist catching up ideology with capitalism and the resulting hybrid may still bring some surprises to the world.

Another concomitant of the path to modernity was the separation between the state and church which in some European countries enabled decentralization of power, unheard of in the countries

of Oriental despotism. The disunity among the thugs enabled the commercial bourgeoisie to gain considerable power in trading city-states or in the representative assemblies where nobles sat along with the members of bourgeoisie. Yet, the rule of law and security of private property which goes back to the Romans, prepared the ground for modernity in no less measure. To this, sustained technological advance of the West must be added. This occurred long before the industrial revolution due to the 'absolute separation of the divine and the natural'. The latter is a human resource, manipulable by work effort and indeed by work ethic. Specific new patterns of kinship order emerged, based on bilaterality, typical for Europe after 300 AD. As Goody argued, this new kinship was due to Christianity's teachings regarding marriage. Instead of lineage and clan, the individual family became ever more important. This also liaises with Macfarlane's finding about early emergence of individualism, at least in England. As it seems then, the miracle of modernity could have started in some societies much earlier than did the industrial revolution.

In the third chapter, devoted to nationalism in Gellner's work, Lessnoff at first discusses modernity and the theories dealing with it. Once some societies reached modernity, the then pre-modern societies faced the problem of *rattrapage* or catching up. Even before the middle 19<sup>th</sup> century this problem was subject of a book entitled *The National System of Political Economy* written by the German economist Friedrich List who rejected Adam Smith's doctrine of the free market. List called for the protection of young (read: German) industry by the state which should lead the industrialisation. In this point List was a German nationalist: 'between each individual and entire humanity... stands the nation' (p. 30). List's work inspired the establishment of the Zollverein, i.e. customs union among various German states which served as a basis for the later unification of Germany. According to Gellner, List was a different kind of nationalist because he was not a romantic. He did not look back but forward, towards modernity and industrialisation. The latter was to serve the nation and nationalism. For Gellner, it is of course the other way around: nations and nationalism are in the service of industrial economy. List perhaps did not

fully understand nationalism. However, among the nationalists he was closest to its substance. Nationalists almost never understand its substance because they usually are primordialists. They believe that nations are eternal and natural human communities. For Gellner, nations are expression of one certain phase of history and of one type of society, i. e. they *are* the modern industrial society. Nationalism creates nations.

Nationalism is a political doctrine according to which the state as a political unit and nation as a cultural unit must coincide. If there are more than one nation on the territory of one state or if one nation is divided into two states, the principle of nationalism would be abrogated. The worst alternative is when the ruling class in a state belongs to another nation than the population or its majority. A nation is a large group of people sharing the same culture, namely language, and who consider the shared culture a reason for political unification. This congruence emerges only in the modern industrial age. Industrial society is entirely different from the agrarian society, because it is based on continuous innovation. Instead of preceding stability there is now geographic and social mobility, homogenisation of culture. In substance it is an egalitarian society even though it is based on a far-reaching specialisation. Uniformity of language and total literacy ensure that the high culture is accessible to all. Gellner however does not examine today's explosion of popular culture which is an expression of the globalisation of culture and is supranational. The religious protestantism which presupposes literacy is a precursor of capitalist modernity. The state guarantees at least primary and later also secondary education for all. Status, income and self-respect of every individual depend on the mastery of the literate culture. The merger of political and cultural units, which includes the emotional identification of the individual with his culture, creates a nation. Therefore nation, according to Gellner (and Lessnoff), is the consequence of functional necessities of industrial society.

According to Gellner, nationalists do not know what they are doing and they often do the opposite to what they claim. They prefer folk culture and peasant virtues but at the same time they create a high culture, spread by school system and codified to enable bu-



reaucratic communication. They use the idiom of *Gemeinschaft* even though they belong into *Gesellschaft*. In other words, the mobile anonymous society simulates the closed, cozy community. In spite of this false consciousness of the nationalists, they played a substantial role in the formation of nations. This, according to Lessnoff, is a mystery endowed with contradiction because Gellner simultaneously asserts that modern nations are the product of nationalism and the consequence of industrial society. Why, for example, did industrialism not lead to the creation of one single nation around the globe? Gellner answers that nations had to be built from states and cultures which existed before the nation. That is why the plurality of nations. Already Ernest Renan understood that it is first necessary to forget tribal and regional differences so that nations could emerge. Today there are about 200 states but several thousands of cultures. Nationalists may create nations so to say out of nothing (Estonians are one example, and one could add the Afrikaners, at least to some extent). The '[M]odern world is a world of nations because it is an industrial world, and an industrial world has to be a world of nations' (p. 34) but which nations succeed depends on many conditions and circumstances.

Well-known are the four 'time-zones of Europe' which try to account for the variety of nationalism but also the different conditions of industrialisation. The Megalomania versus Ruritania story is one of the variants. Gellner believes that discrimination of Ruritani-ans in the industrial centres of Megalomania led them to form a nationalist movement. Lessnoff concludes that Gellner reached two conclusions about nations: that they are the products of both industrialism and nationalism. Industrialism creates general conditions but nations emerge only where nationalism emerges. Gellner, however, missed the alternative in which nationalists desire nations in places where the industrial conditions are not met. Nationalists are motivated culturally, not economically. Industrialism would not mind having all Ruritani-ans assimilated into the Megalomanian culture and language but it happened differently. One might add that eventually Austro-Hungarian Megalomania disintegrated because the different cultures begot different economic elites which in turn desired their own state. Much later still even these successor

states disintegrated into much smaller states due to the same mechanism. Nevertheless, Lessnoff admits, Gellner's theory is correct because there is enough congruence between 'what nationalism does, and what industrialism wants' (p. 39).

Yet, the mechanism of change remains unexplained. Gellner argued that his theory is causal, because without the mentioned congruence 'life is hell' as it is filled with 'perpetual humiliation' (p. 40). Questions remain. Why does such a humiliated person not choose to adopt the dominant language and identify with the culture of the majority and why does this person readily find a political movement to adhere to when his original quest is cultural? According to Lessnoff it is the functionalism of Gellner's thinking which is responsible for the difficulties in answering these questions. It explains the success of nationalism but not its origin.

Lessnoff introduces other theories of nationalism such as Anderson's, Smith's and Nairn's. It appears that at least in westernmost Europe, where the existence of nations predated nationalism which in turn may have been a reaction to the early successes of industrialism. But this is not valid for Italy and Germany, the cradles of nationalism directed not against British industrialism but French military and cultural imperialism. Lessnoff agrees that there is lot of paradox in the relation between nationalism and modernity but he believes he can complement Gellner and Nairn in this point. While industrialism is a production of the Enlightenment, nationalism romantically transcends it. 'Both... call for a universal and uniform literate culture' (p. 49) but political democracy is still another ingredient of modernity. Nationalism is a populist doctrine and therefore somewhat democratic. What is however needed in Gellner's opinion is liberal democracy. It is 'precisely government by discussion, debate and argument, in principle embracing all sections of the body politic and all points of view' (ibid.). Common language enables it.

Chapter four further develops the section on nationalism by discussing civil society as a foundation of a modernity born out of industrialism. Gellner, according to Lessnoff, views civil society as a liberal society. In *Conditions of Liberty* Gellner explains that civil society is a set of institutions outside the government which

are 'strong enough to counterbalance the state', in effect they represent 'social and political pluralism'. But the latter is not anything like pre-modern pluralism where escape from the tyranny of rulers meant another tyranny, that of 'kin group and of communal religion', or of another feudal lord. Civil society exists only in the modern world where a strong state is counterbalanced by the pluralism of non-state organisations. Lessnoff admits that Gellner did not explain the emergence of civil society otherwise than by referring to a kind of miracle where state admits competition while it holds the monopoly of coercive power. Again the Gellnerian concept of Social Bribery Fund is instrumental in buying the ruling political class so that it allows the emergence of civil society. 'Liberal society... developed in the West as a corollary of industrial capitalism, whose independence from the state was its necessary condition' (p. 53).

The liberal pluralist state was an unintended coincidence... What makes liberal society free is not absence of rules but its openness, in the sense of Popper, meaning 'open to criticism, challenge and change'. There rests its potential progressiveness, not in a command system of the Soviet Marxist-Leninist type. Lessnoff uses three pages to explain why and where, according to Gellner, the communist doctrine was wrong. For quite some time Marxism-Leninism seemed to Gellner as 'a collectivist substitute for the "Protestant ethic" of Calvinism' (p. 55) materialised in the undeniable successes of the USSR. Its collapse, according to Gellner, was caused by economic determinism, which as we saw was wrongly conceptualised as a determining force of history. Instead, history was rather dominated by those who held politico-military power.

According to Lessnoff, Marxism-Leninism was close to capitalism and civil society in its stress on economic forces. But paradoxically, Marxism-Leninism made power-holders to rule over producers and thus eventually 'destroyed' economic dynamism. The result was something like an anti-modernizing Counter-Reformation and certainly not a revolution. This 'real' communism also killed the work ethic which it had, at least in theory, shared with Calvinism. Market was substituted by a planned economy which in turn produced sleaze: 'it was Brezhnevian sleaze, not Stalinist terror, that discredited the system' (p. 57). Whereas terror

was explainable as an indispensable part of revolution, corruption was not found in the Marxist-Leninist theory. A viable civil society was for example very difficult to create in the post-Soviet period, more difficult than in post-Franco Spain. What has increased in the post-communist Russia and its former satellites was nationalism. While Gellner saw nationalism as an inevitable feature of modernity, civil society was only a possible trait.

In Lessnoff's interpretation, Gellner championed open (civil, liberal) society and politico-liberal pluralism. Democracy was not the same as civil society. Gellner was rather skeptical about democracy as it seemed to him as impossibility when institutions and culture shape people. Only less important things can be decided upon democratically. For example people could not vote about the transition from totalitarianism to democracy as it would go against all their values: 'liberal pluralism is more important, and more meaningful, than popular sovereignty' (p. 59). In other words liberal pluralism gets stronger through democracy but democracy does not, cannot and should not enable people to rule. Here Gellner is Popperian according to Lessnoff but he (Gellner) goes beyond Popper's piecemeal reform when admitting that violent revolution is sometimes necessary. But Gellner does not believe that a truly democratic revolution is possible, any more than a democratically-chosen transition to modernity. Yet, Lessnoff objects, the globalisation of information may make democratically – chosen modernisation a possibility. The case of Central and Eastern Europe after 1989 may supply evidence for this suggestion.

The quest for social stability makes totally rational social order impossible. Some structures are and must be arbitrary. This is connected with the question of a degree of openness which would not lead to the destruction of social order. There must be, in Gellner's opinion, a considerable degree of social consensus or balance between both honest shared faith and honest doubt. Extremes would be a recipe for disaster as irreconcilable views lead to the use of violence.

In order to make this consensus possible, a welfare state based on industrialism must be built. For the first time 'a morally decent society' would be possible (p. 62). But this is not the society of

social contract in Rawls' sense. Gellner thinks that the social contract is an absurdity and sociologically naive because it is a culturally biased value judgment presented as a universal. Here Lessnoff objects and defends Rawls as not being ethnocentric. Neither is Rawls naive about the value of consensus in a modern pluralistic society.

At this point, according to Lessnoff, we must ask about Gellner's own political views, and more precisely whether Gellner considers civil society to be a universally valid form. Gellner did not agree with Fukuyama's liberal democratic end of history. He could envisage further developments such as highly successful economies combined with authoritarian political order. Japan's case showed that industrial feudalism was possible, at least for a time. The modern social condition may not necessarily contain openness, liberal politics and democratic institutions. One could add that especially China's future would show new features of modernity which Gellner might have had in mind. The impossibility of incessant growth may also lead people to demand the 'return to a stable, hierarchical kind of society based on status rather than contract' and civil society would then be 'no more than a transient phase of human history' (p. 67). Equally, if the 'desacralised liberal state' gets rejected by its own beneficiaries (the case of Parisian students in 1968), the decency of liberal order, so naively taken for granted by some conservative contemporaries of Gellner, may be seriously in danger.

The liberal order, adds Lessnoff, has but 'feeble ideological resources' as it rests, as we have seen, on doubt and uncertainty (p. 68). Gellner takes up the 'counter-culture' and popular culture of our times and argues that they are 'a natural product of contemporary capitalism' (p. 70). He connects the decrease of working time, increase of leisure time, slow disappearance of physical labour, affluence and resulting consumerism which all allow for a less strict social discipline. Life is easy and relaxed, the Weberian iron cage is gone, its bars are now softer, as if out of rubber, says Gellner. The symbol of it all is the motor car, according to Gellner. With it we enjoy 'self-indulgent lifestyles' combined with 'self-indulgent thinking' (the counter-culture!) and the world become re-

enchanted. For many this is a meaningful universe, not the 'cold hard universe of science'. In addition to popular culture there are also 'self-indulgent phantasies' of 'modernist Marxism', postmodernism, 'modernist religion'. Even the philosophy of Wittgenstein, which he so vigorously criticised since his entry into the academic and public limelight, is for Gellner a kind of re-enchantment. The danger of ideological re-enchantment consists in ability to undermine the 'cognitive foundations of modernity', and therefore, adds Lessnoff, liberal politics of civil society. Nonetheless, Gellner does not condemn consumerism as such. What is more dangerous is the unending development of weapons, especially in the time that peace is no more based on MAD (mutually assured destruction) balance between the two superpowers. The proliferation of weapons of mass destruction might indeed result in widespread blackmail through these weapons and eventually lead to 'collective destruction'. Only 'Consumerist International' (or non-Holy Alliance), a world authority of reasonable 'unbelievers', not only liberal but also mere wealth-seekers, China included, could prevent the danger of potential blackmailers and make the world safe.

It is Islam which is discussed in chapter five of Lessnoff's book. After Nazism, communism and left-wing dissent lost their potential to be a challenge for civil society, Gellner views Islam as the only world religion which has been 'almost totally successful in resisting the secularizing forces of modernity' (p. 74). Islam is an 'absolute moral community' which functions well without intellectual, and indeed political pluralism. It is based on religious self-sufficiency, religious equality which ranks it as number one among protestant religions. Its protestantism is located in the High Islam, severely monotheistic, urban and literate in its nature. Less protestant, and also numerically minor is the Folk Islam which Gellner studied in the field in Moroccan mountains. The spiritual leader in Folk Islam is a saint called *sufi*, *marabout*, a mystic mediator with the divine for the sake of community. The difference between the two styles of Islam was overcome in their mutual quest for religious purity which in turn might endanger the rule of Muslim political rulers. Gellner took a lot of inspiration from Ibn Khaldun who wrote of the circulation of elites as a result of tribal rural inva-

sions driven by religious zealotry. Autocracy remained but personnel changed in the pre-modern Islamic states. Now that western modernity has arrived into these countries, not only has Folk Islam lost its role but Islam was facing the problem of *rattrapage* of the wealthy and powerful West. The solution seems to be not to emulate but purify. In other words Islam, i.e. whole of it, would embrace High Islam and blame Folk Islam for its hitherto backwardness. In other words it is fundamentalism (Gellner also uses 'rigourist reformism') which is the modernizing force in Islam. ('Western observers totally misunderstand the situation when they see fundamentalism as an extreme form of traditionalism' [p. 78]).

According to Gellner the *shirk* or superstition of Folk Islam is a more important enemy of Islam than is the West. There are objections to Gellner dichotomising of Islam. For example Sufism has its literary forms, especially poetry and philosophy but this does not change anything in that fundamentalism is a very suitable response to modernity. As Lessnoff summarised it, reformist Islam provides universalised high culture not unlike the way modern society provides it in the West. In effect it performs the function of nationalist movements. It is also egalitarian, sober, orderly, puritan and moral like Protestantism. Why then Islamic countries do not perform better economically? This question is not answered by Gellner.

Lessnoff reminds the reader that Gellner underestimated or ignored Islam's warrior ethos, its non-separation of the religious from the secular and the specific nature of the Islamic state. It was Weber who explained belligerence, especially that form known under the name of *jihad* as a device for imposing Islamic rule. Therefore fundamentalist Iran requires soldiers to 'spread the rule of God's law throughout the world'. Warrior virtues suppressed economic virtues, discipline and obedience were superior to enterprise, trade and hard work: 'orthodox Islam did not or could not establish a powerful counter-ethic to that of the ruling warrior class' (p. 82). The consequence is, adds Lessnoff, that the economically successful would rather join the politico-military elite than continue to amass wealth which could at any time be expropriated by that elite. Gellner seems to forget that 'security of prop-

erty and rule of law are also essential to economic progress' (ibid.). This is in stark contrast to the situation in Western Europe where it is civil society which most marks modernity. Lessnoff agrees with Perry Anderson when he charges that Gellner overlooked the incompatibility of Islam as a traditional religion with modern science and mass consumption. For Anderson, the Iranian revolution is not an expression of congruence of Islam with modernity but rather of a conflict with it. Gellner's optimism about Islam's propensity for modernity has received a blow here and Lessnoff quite justly comments that Khomeini's rationalism, as described by Gellner, is 'a rationalism of hair-splitting scholasticism and pettifogging legalism, which is quite compatible with extreme obscurantism' (p. 89).

Chapter six of Lessnoff's book deals with Gellner's criticism of Wittgenstein and other linguistic philosophy of the time. It was Gellner's evergreen, for the last time exposed, in contrast to Malinowski's anthropology, in his posthumous book *Language and Solitude* (1998). This work however barely finds its way into Lessnoff's analysis. Briefly, Gellner described the post-Wittgensteinian linguistic philosophy as a child of messianism and complacency, a manipulation of language, an anti-intellectualism 'inherent in upper-class English culture' (and based in Oxford!).

Wittgenstein doctrines, according to Gellner, were not in tune with any 'effort to reform and improve... concepts and beliefs', it was a denial of serious thinking (p. 95). Unlike Gellner who sees religion in conflict with science as the cognitive mode of modernity, Wittgenstein equals them as just two language-games. In effect Gellner views Wittgenstein as hostile to the scientific worldview. In *Language and Solitude*, Gellner suggests 'genetic connection' between romantic nationalism of late Habsburg empire and Wittgenstein's philosophy of self-sufficient forms of life, the latter being a substitute for nation. Gellner's exchange with Peter Winch, a Wittgensteinian philosopher of social science, is of interest to social anthropologists.

It concerns Zande witchcraft, which according to Winch is real, because what is real is determined by the sense of the language of witchcraft. There, according to Gellner lies the quintessence of Wittgenstein's linguistic philosophy. For Gellner, however, cul-



tures are 'highly unequal in cognitive power' and witchcraft is not just another science. Winch's views are close to the anthropologists who believe in the existence of pre-logical thinking. Such anthropologists (for example Evans-Pritchard and Leach) are, according to Gellner, 'profoundly mistaken'. If they think that religion and everyday life are distinct 'forms of life' or religion and social relations just the same, they thereby suppose that 'all functioning conceptual systems are necessarily rational'. They disregard 'intellectual progress through the discovery of incoherence and irrationality' (p. 105). For Gellner the saints he studied in Moroccan Atlas mountains do various useful things like mediate for peace but their social position is nevertheless based on false beliefs that they were divinely appointed and endowed with magical powers, etc. These beliefs are 'obviously unscientific' and thus 'cognitively inferior to science' (p. 106).

Another case which Gellner took to task is psychoanalysis (chapter 7). His book *The Psychoanalytic Movement: The Cunning of Unreason* is, after *Words and Things*, another polemic with very influential though at least equally false theory as is Wittgenstein's philosophy. Gellner, explains Lessnoff, is not aiming at the intellectual shortcomings of the psychoanalytic doctrine but rather at explaining why it was so popular and influential that it reached the quality of a movement. This movement entered various human activities, including language, art, literature, science. It is much more than a doctrine.

Gellner shows that the success of psychoanalysis is not based on scientific evidence. If the key traits of modernity are economic affluence and the scientific mode of cognition then the problems of modern society differ from those which preoccupied the pre-modern humanity. The openness of modern society brings along 'pervasive anxiety' in relations among people. Neither religion nor science help much as a solace and comfort. Even Marxism as a collectivist creed does not offer 'pastoral care'. What is however fascinating is the scientific view of man as a part of nature. And Freud offered 'a fully naturalistic account of man' (p. 114), pretending that it conforms with the scientific ethos of modernity. At the same time psychoanalysis functions as a religion because it

offers both pastoral care and salvation through therapy. The Unconscious is an evil, daemon or devil which has to be explained and removed. All this is claimed in the name of science yet the procedure reminds us of religion.

Gellner argues that psychoanalysis responds well to the assumptions and needs of the modern man. Yet, Freud cannot be credited for the discovery of the unconscious, understanding of its workings, nor for developing an effective therapeutic technique. Even if Freudian claims are 'groundless and false' (p. 118) people believe in it. The explanation is that Freudianism is well equipped to evade falsification in the Popperian sense. Only a psychoanalyst trained by another psychoanalyst (the pedigree starts with Freud himself) can 'outwit' the Unconscious. The theory is never to be blamed for a failure in therapy. It is either the un-cooperativeness of the patient or external circumstances. To Gellner and Lessnoff this 'cognitive elitism' is 'emphatically not scientific' (p. 122) as '[N]o scientific theory can be treated as a revelation of final truth, handed down whether by God or by Freud' (p. 126).

The longest chapter seems also the most important. Its topics are relativism, cognitive ethic and the philosophy of science. Lessnoff presents Gellner as a defender of science. However there is some tension between the philosopher and the social scientist in one person. The main question is whether science is a 'uniquely accurate method of acquiring knowledge' or just one of many efficient alternatives. Gellner was an enemy of relativism as it was, in his view, equal with cognitive nihilism. Lessnoff asks whether Gellner succeeded in 'slaying the relativist dragon with the sword of scientific truth' (p. 129). The answer is yes and no. The world is knowable but given the complexity of human predicament in modern society, reason is not omnipotent and omnipresent. As science is value-free it cannot validate values. That is a task for religion, for example.

Lessnoff also explains the points made by Gellner about the falsity of postmodernism. For example he points out that Gellner emphatically disagrees with the assertion that science is a tool of imperialists or capitalist ruling class. Science, especially natural science, is translatable into any culture and as such does not respect

any specific culture. It is compatible with all cultures while moulding all cultures into conformity with itself. 'So far as human cultures are concerned, it is totally egalitarian – it is open to all [and] eagerly embraced by all' (p. 139). How can it be proven that relativism is wrong because its method is wrong, because it is not true that 'any culture is wedded to a particular method' (p. 140)? How can it be proven that Feyerabend is wrong when he says 'anything goes'? Gellner offers holism and historicism as his counter-arguments in favour of the scientific world-view. If industrialism creates a morally decent society then science and empiricism are its concomitant cognitive style. This modern positivist 'package-deal' is also 'historically dominant'. Lessnoff reminds us that already in 1975 Gellner concluded that people chose 'a style of knowing and a kind of society jointly'. There are lots of problems with these findings. If humans are part of nature and subject to causal laws then there might be no distinction between rationality and irrationality. Gellner shocks us when he connects what he calls 'suicide of reason' with the amorality of Nazism. If we are not rational animals then we might well be only animals. Nazism is the fulfilment of the proposition that man is part of biological nature which includes aggressive self-assertion of the predatory animal.

Therefore Gellner proposes another option based on Popper's concept of falsifiability. Among the various world-views, science appears to be unique because it is vulnerable to evidence, because it does not subscribe to one and only picture of the world. All theoretical structures are 'accountable', says Gellner. Therein rests an 'ethic of cognition' where evidence is supplied independently. Religion – and we may perhaps add linguistic philosophy, psychoanalysis, Marxism, relativism, postmodernism – , all these world-views accept only themselves as judges in their own case. They are 'faith-systems' (in Gellner's phrase) because they claim the monopoly, source and criteria of truth. Lessnoff completes this thought by saying that hiding behind deliberately unfalsifiable theories means 'cognitive cowardice, dishonourable and unworthy' (p. 144).

To conclude his longest chapter, Lessnoff stresses Gellner's empiricism which, along with other things, eliminated 'the cognitive style characteristic of pre-scientific societies, in which truth

was made dependent on authority'. The reason for embracing science is exactly because empiricism and science 'placed the criterion of truth outside social control' (p. 147). Such philosophy of science is also a political philosophy because Gellner admitted that our knowledge is not final. The cognitive humility of science puts it above other cognitive styles which all claim that they know what the structure of the world is. 'Empirical science may not be "true", but it seems more likely to yield truth than any alternative' (p. 150). Lessnoff, along with Gellner phrases the modern cognitive achievement. 'We moderns are uniquely privileged to live in a world in which "real, culture-transcending knowledge *does* exist"' (p. 151). This knowledge is provisional, ever-changing, 'profoundly unsettling'. In comparison with nature, society has not been adequately understood and explained by the scientific method. For these reasons there are always many rebels against modernity. 'Nevertheless, to rebel against the truth will not help us' for we moderns 'have much to be thankful for' (ibid.).

In the final ninth chapter Lessnoff summarises the achievement of Ernest Gellner as far as theory of modernity is concerned. Gellner was strongly influenced by Karl Popper's views on science and open society to which Gellner added a historical-sociological explanation culminating in the modern pluralistic and knowledge-seeking society. The works of Durkheim and Weber help Gellner to understand both religion and economics in closed societies. Gellner's contribution is the proof that 'modern Western capitalism made possible modern open (or 'civil') society' (p. 153). The maintenance of social order, according to Gellner requires both coercion and legitimation. In closed societies, under the conditions of economic scarcity, specialists in coercion were allied with those specialised in legitimation which allowed them to maintain a society both unequal and unjust. Only capitalist industrial technology (propelled by science) made possible 'huge increase in wealth' and thus a 'decent society' (ibid.). In addition once science becomes 'the dominant mode of cognition, the social system is necessarily left open to moral and rational criticism' (p. 154). This thesis about science's crucial role in 'opening' society is best expressed in *Plough, Sword and Book*, 'a masterpiece of insight and lucid expo-

sition' (ibid.). *Legitimation of Belief* connects philosophical and political-social justification of science and *Conditions of Liberty* presents the political framework for 'moral progress inherent in modernity' (ibid.). Lessnoff considers these three books the most original in Gellner's work. Other books in which Gellner attacks 'betrayers of modernity' such as linguistic philosophy, psychoanalysis or postmodernism and relativism are 'extremely valuable' (ibid.).

Lessnoff is more critical of Gellner's contributions concerning modernity in relation to nationalism and Islam. They seem to contain 'as much error as truth' in Lessnoff's view. Gellner appreciates the historical role of religion in building the path to modernity but argues that 'religion no longer has a legitimate cognitive role' (p. 155). Gellner has no respect for intellectual or moral bickering of religious modernists. In all that Gellner is a successor of Max Weber. Lessnoff adds that religion nonetheless provides norms and values for society, and consolation for the individual faced with the abyss of mortality. This has nothing to do with truth as revealed by science. But loss of faith, adds Lessnoff, 'has not made us less moral' (p. 156). Actually the freedom of critical intelligence enabled 'significant moral progress' (ibid.). Gellner, however, is convinced that we should accept the truth even if it is not consoling. This is an honest solution and a way toward the best use of the opportunities for happiness that are most abundant in liberal modern society.

Lessnoff's book is written in a very condensed form which does not facilitate the rendering of its message. However, the density of contents does not prevent the author from writing clearly and methodically. His sustained effort to understand and explain Gellner's thought in its multidimensionality is honest and successful. The present writer is convinced that Lessnoff's exposition is not just an interpretation but one close to truth in the Gellnerian meaning of the term. It is a critical book which nonetheless does justice to Gellner's genius and originality. It is only hoped that Lessnoff's *Ernest Gellner and Modernity* will gain more students of Gellner's legacy and inspire more research in the many directions which Gellner's passionate pursuit of truth helped to open to inquiry. It should also be noted that Lessnoff takes pains to present the theo-

ries which became the targets of Gellner's incisive and witty criticism adequately and fairly. The overall positive tone of Lessnoff's book does not make of its author an apologetic or follower of just another prophet but rather proved that the author is an independent analyst whose opinion was appreciated by the reader.

### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Michael Lessnoff, *Ernest Gellner on Modernity*. Cardiff: University of Wales Press 2002, viii+177 p. The writing of this review article was made possible by grant A8111001 from the Grant Agency of the Academy of Sciences of the Czech Republic.

<sup>2</sup> For a discussion of Gellner's encounter with Soviet Marxism and of his latest book *Language and Solitude* see other two my contributions in this special number.