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# Gellner's Encounter with Soviet *etnografiia*<sup>1</sup>

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## ABSTRACT

*This paper attempts to evaluate Gellner's interest in Soviet **etnografiia** during the 1970s and 1980s which culminated with his one year stay in Moscow in the middle of Gorbachov's era. As is well known from his published works, Gellner was interested in Soviet scholars' theories of primeval society (**pervobytnoe obshchestvo**), in their theories on the emergence of the state (including the question of nomadism), and of course in the notorious Bromley's theory of **ethnos**. Through examination of Soviet **etnografiia**, Gellner also tried to understand the nature of the Soviet brand of Marxism. The paper will examine the balance of pros and cons of Gellner's attitudes towards Soviet-Marxist (and non-Marxist) theories as they appear in **etnografiia** and his attempts to find channels of communication and some kind of common language bridging the gap between Soviet and Western scholarship, between **etnografiia** and social anthropology.*

## INTRODUCTION

The present paper asks and tries to answer a seemingly simple question: what did Gellner understand and what did he not about Soviet *etnografiia* and Soviet Marxism? As is well-known, Gellner was not only an anthropologist but also a philosopher and a sociologist. Actually his training in philosophy preceded that in anthropology. Even though Gellner's early philosophical writing was 'an attack on linguistic philosophy' (Gellner 1959, 1979), his main

thrust was arguably directed at the cracking of the puzzle of 'modernity' (Lessnoff 2002). Therefore he soon became interested in social philosophy, and in the philosophy and sociology of history (Hall and Jarvie 1996). I think that it is intriguing that the voluminous Hall and Jarvie collection does not include any discussion of either Gellner's engagement with Soviet Marxist philosophy of history or with Soviet *etnografiia*. His main book dealing with the logic of world history, and possibly his best, is *Plough, Sword and Book* (Gellner 1988; cf. Musil 2001; Lessnoff 2002), which is a clear exposition of Gellner's 'trinitarian' concept of three historical steps from foraging society through agrarian society to modern industrial society. Curiously enough there are practically no references to Marxism nor Soviet Marxist *etnografiia* in this book.

Gellner's next theoretical statement on contemporary world historical developments, namely *Conditions of Liberty* (1994), tries to answer the question of the defeat of Marxism and its 'really-existing' Soviet and East-Central European incarnations without reference to his fascination with Soviet *etnografiia*. These omissions of reference to the achievements of Soviet *etnografiia* so eloquently and consequently reviewed by Gellner for almost two decades make the question about the real place of Gellner's encounter with Soviet *etnografiia* in his overall work fully justified. Was this encounter a passionate but marginal pastime for him, or an episodic academic preoccupation framed by the very history of the late Soviet system (with the result that once the bubble burst it ceased to be interesting)?

Gellner grew up in Prague, Czechoslovakia, and escaped from German-Nazi power in April 1939 at the age of 13 and a half. Because of his personal background Gellner was highly motivated to understand communism and other totalitarianisms more deeply. By the nature of his academic training he soon became interested in social theory as it was practiced in the Soviet Union (to some extent also in other communist-ruled countries), i. e. as Soviet Marxist brand of historical materialism. Through his specialization in social anthropology Gellner's main interest with things Soviet logically became Soviet *etnografiia* which he considered 'the approximate equivalent of social or cultural anthropology in the West' (Gellner 1980: ix).

Gellner's first direct contacts with *etnografiia* took place in the early 1970s (cf. Gellner 1973, 1974). Curiously, these were the first years of détente in the cold war between the USA and the USSR following Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968. This period coincided with a change of guard in the Moscow and Leningrad branches of the Mikloukho-Maclay Institute of Ethnography of the USSR Academy of Sciences. This change in personnel was accompanied by a shift in research priorities. The previous emphasis during the directorship of S. P. Tolstov, an archeologist of Khorezm (L. P. Potapov was his deputy in the Leningrad branch and a specialist on Siberian shamanism), was the reconstruction of primitive society (*pervobytnoe obshchestvo*) and had much to do with the Marxist theory of historical materialism. *Etnografiia* was defined as mainly dealing with the reconstruction of the history of society and culture prior to the Soviet period (Gellner called these researchers 'Primitivists').

The new definition of *etnografiia* as the study of ethnoeses was coined by I. V. Bromley (originally a historian of early feudal Croatia), fairly soon after he became the director of the Institute of Ethnography of the USSR Academy of Sciences in 1966. This definition was not easily incorporated into the Marxist framework ('Ethnosists' in Gellner's rendering). To enter the new field physically, Gellner had to deal with the Ethnosists who held power in the institute while he was, at least initially, more interested in the Primitivists. Gellner's encounter with Soviet *etnografiia* ended rather abruptly with the disappearance of the Soviet Union at the end of 1991.

As I mentioned already at the 1998 Gellner symposium in Prague (organized by the French Centre for Research and Study in the Social Sciences and still unpublished), during his lifetime Ernest Gellner experienced four prolonged field encounters with foreign cultural environments, which were de facto fieldwork experiences (Skalník, f. c.). The first encounter took place in Great Britain which was the country of his refuge from Nazism (1939–1944) and where he settled permanently after the war. The second, Morocco during the 1950s and 1960s, was the scene of Gellner's formal anthropological fieldwork. The third encounter happened to be intermittent in the Soviet Union during the 1970s and 1980s. This cul-

minated with a one year stay (1988–1989) in the Mikloukho-Maclay Institute of Ethnography of the USSR Academy of Sciences in Moscow (Gellner 1992). Finally the fourth fieldwork encounter was his re-socialisation in Czechoslovakia/Czech Republic (1992–1995) when he was the director of the Centre for the Study of Nationalism located at the Prague campus of the Central European University.

Gellner produced two books on Soviet academic topics. One was a collection of essays presented by various Soviet and Western scholars at the Burg Wartenstein symposium of 1976 (Gellner 1980), the other containing only Gellner's essays on 'Soviet thought' was published just prior to his one year sojourn within the walls of the Mikloukho-Maclay Institute of Ethnography. Whereas the first volume contains Gellner's Preface and his very important essay on Soviet Marxist philosophy of history as expounded by Iuriy Semionov (reprinted as chapter seven in the 1988 volume), the second volume is mostly composed of different review articles of (from Gellner's viewpoint important) Soviet publications dealing with various aspects of Soviet Marxist views on pre-capitalist historical development. Only one essay, though very strategic, analyses Bromley's *ethnos* theory.

Gellner's Soviet field experience was limited to the academic environment, which fascinated him by its almost sacred atmosphere of the *uchenyi*/scholar/learned man, must have reminded him of theological seminars in the university colleges in Britain (Gellner 1974, 1988: 1–17). This was further made attractive to him by the then mandatory adherence of all Soviet scholars to the Marxist doctrine of society. In the West, Marxism was at that time considered interesting up to the point of fashion (Gellner called it 'long-haired' Marxism), at least among quite a few anthropologists and other intellectuals. It is therefore regrettable that, after 1991 the year of the sudden demise of the USSR and the virtual end of the Soviet Marxist social theory, Gellner did not conclude his Soviet fieldwork by a comprehensive report or a monograph. He only published a short report in a little-known journal.

I asked him about the reason for this on several occasions but he was evasive. I assume that the most important reason for this omission (which otherwise was uncommon in Gellner's work) was

his realization that, with the disappearance of Soviet power as a balance to the power of the West (Fukuyama's 'end of history'), the somewhat bizarre attractiveness of *etnografiia* was gone as well. Obviously, by the early 1990s there were many much more fascinating topics to be tackled: such as the breakup of Czechoslovakia, the nationalist war in Yugoslavia, the emergence of civil society and democracy in the former Soviet-bloc countries. Curiously, Gellner did not try to explain the disintegration of the USSR, nor did he go back to his earlier assessments of the Soviet *ethnos* theory in order to find out what was wrong with it and why it failed to predict 'ethnic' conflict and nationalism in the republics and regions of the disintegrating USSR (Gellner 1988a; cf. Skalnik 1990).

### **WHY WAS MARXISM INTERESTING FOR GELLNER?**

Gellner's main concern was to make sense of the emergence of modern industrial society. The communist *tour de force*, the accelerated development of industrial modernity from roots quite different from those of the West was interesting for Gellner. Was the Soviet attempt at socialism and communism something new in the human history or was it a hoax destined to failure? There was no obvious answer to this question in the 1970s and 1980s. Hence Gellner's ambition to find something inspiring in Soviet Marxism as an underlying ideology capable of providing a purportedly scientific justification for practical methods.

In the Preface to the Burg Wartenstein volume, Gellner explained his reason for studying Soviet *etnografiia*. It was on merit 'as anthropology or as historical sociology' but also because it illuminated the intricacies of Soviet (Marxist) thought, of how 'social and philosophical problems are conceptualised in the Soviet Union'. He mentioned four major issues. The first was the relationship between production and coercion. Gellner maintained that coercion was omnipresent in human societies and engendered economic inequality. Similarly, culture might also be an independent factor. Marxism maintained the opposite. According to it the economic base determined the political and cultural superstructure. The second issue is closely related as it concerns the typology of human societies. Gellner is concerned here with the opposition

evolution versus Weberian Herrschaft-domination (Gellner calls it gate-keeping). Semionov answered in an original way by applying the law of human development to the total of historical process, not individual cases. Third, Gellner believes that the nature and role of ethnicity is 'supremely important – theoretically and practically'. It seems to him that Bromley's insistence on *ethnos* as subject matter of *etnografiia* and Semionov's version of Marxism, imply that 'ethnicity becomes historically necessary, instead of contingent' (Gellner 1980: xv). And fourth, Bromley's re-orientation of *etnografiia* from primitive society towards *ethnos* enables the study of contemporary ethnicity in the USSR. Ethnicity in its *ethnos* guise is manifested through culture which is understood as leisure and intellectual activities. In the specific Soviet framework, the manifestation of a new 'Soviet culture' is what is being studied by ethnographers.

Khazanov (1996/1997) wrote that Gellner was fascinated by Marxism without ever adhering to it. His concern was to find out whether the inconsistencies of classical Marxism-Leninism would lead to some theoretical research and to a confrontation of new ethnographical data with the fairly ossified historical materialism. My thesis is that he found his answers in some works of researchers who were dealing with the theory of primitive society and stages of socio-economic development (*formatsii*) rather than in the *ethnos* of the Bromley school. When Khazanov mentioned to Gellner that the end of the USSR was inevitable, Gellner, according to Khazanov, said that he did not wish the multinational Soviet Union to disintegrate and disappear from the world map. The reason for this, it seems from the available evidence, lay in the fact that Gellner was not much interested in practical politics. In *Conditions of Liberty* he maintained that the failure of communism was in its economic and military inefficiency and did not dwell on the ethnic explanation.

It is certainly true that the analysis of Marxist scholastic dogmas fascinated Gellner. On the other hand, Gellner's important work on nationalism was telling him that Bromley and his colleagues might have something important to say. But again, Gellner was more interested in the Soviet theory of *ethnos* than the practical implications of reified ethnicity à la Soviet. So there was a kind of

split in Gellner's encounter with Soviet *etnografiia*: between his passion for historical reconstructivism on the one hand and a pragmatic interest in Bromley's school on the other. Gellner did not realise how an incorrect analysis of real ethnic processes prevented the Bromley school from grasping its own inadequacies. He was fascinated by its seeming formal difference from the dogmatic Stalinism (one should not forget that Stalin was, after all, the author of *Marxism and the National Question*) without noticing that it was equally unable to cope with the reality of national self-determination movements within the Soviet Union.

Probably the very last stage of the encounter under review took place in London in early April 1989 during the conference 'Pre-modern and Modern National Identity in Russia/USSR and Eastern Europe', organised by the London School of Slavonic Studies, where both Gellner and Bromley were present. The bankruptcy of Bromley's theory was by then obvious, but in London he still tried to style himself as a reformer of his own theory. Bromley could not, however, explain the Armenian-Azerbaijani conflict over the Nagorno-Karabakh. Neither was he able to accept the parallel of his theory with the *ethnos* concept of the South African *volkekundiges* about which I read a paper at the same conference (cf. Skalník 1988). Gellner was listening to our lively exchange but did not criticize openly either Bromley or any other Soviet delegate present at the conference. His taciturn attitude was all the more puzzling when we realize that just few days earlier, many of us, including Gellner, were together in Paris (without Bromley even though a whole Soviet delegation was there), where an overall stocktaking of Soviet *etnografiia* took place (Berelowitch 1990).

It was in Paris where Vladimir Kabo, then the leading Soviet specialist on hunter-gatherer societies, read in an excited voice a very different paper than he was supposed to read (every paper destined for international conferences had to be approved beforehand by the director, i. e. Bromley, and the scientific council of the institute). His speech was strong and condemning. At the same time Kabo praised Gellner and a few others, including myself, for showing the real situation in Soviet *etnografiia*, which for some time had certainly been far from monolithic (cf. Skalník 1981). Kabo criticised Semenov for further development of the long discredited matriarchal theory of Kosven in the representative three-

volume collection with a conclusive title *History of Primeval Society (Istoriia pervobytnovo obshchestva)* and published under the editorship of Bromley. Kabo contrasted the Paris meeting with that at Burg Wartenstein in 1976 where the Soviet delegation was presented as a bloc of monolithic thinking (cf. Gellner 1980). Now he attacked a repetition of the thesis on promiscuity leading directly to the formation of clan society (Kabo 1990: 164). Not too long after the Paris meeting Kabo was able to leave for Australia, where he was well received. Whereas the London conference remained unpublished, that in Paris was published *in toto* by Berelowitch (1990). This collection was opened by a paper by Gellner.

There Gellner discussed his theory of history, starting with a reference to Danilova's famous paper from 1968 calling for a revision of five-stage theory of socio-economic formations. Gellner stressed the historicism (or historicism) of Soviet thought and he tried to explain how the Soviet and Western conceptions of history differ. He compared the current Soviet Marxist five-stage sequence of socio-economic formations (primitive, slave-holding, feudal, capitalist and socialist-communist) with the latest Western 'trinitarian' theory, i. e. a sequence of three stages, namely foraging, agriculture and industrial-scientific society. At the time of writing, in 1989, Gellner had already finished *Plough, Sword and Book* (Gellner 1988b) which he considered his best and most important work (it did not become so in the eyes of his readers though). No wonder that, later in his contribution to the Paris volume, he discussed the question of convergence between Western capitalism and Soviet-type industrialism. Thus Gellner arrived at the question of that primacy of factors in social evolution: was it economics or politics which determined the historical process?

Gellner reminds his readers that besides ideas and production there is another moving factor: coercion, i. e. the political sphere. Marxism denies primacy to politics and puts what Gellner called forces of coercion into the so-called super-structure and not among the forces of production. There, according to Gellner, lies the crux of the 'misunderstanding' between Marxists and non-Marxists. The latter tend to view coercion as part of the material, along with economic forces. He rightly explains that the problem which the Soviet Marxists saw in the purported existence of a sixth, Asiatic



mode of production, consists in that it is

a social order which contradicts, not merely the crucial Marxist thesis of the inherent instability of class-endowed societies, but also the view that power and coercion are parts of the super-structure. The Asiatic mode of production characterizes a society in which the political rulers do *not* reflect the interests of a pre-existent, economically defined class. The soldiers and bureaucrats who rule, administer and enforce a 'hydraulic' social order are themselves its beneficiaries, and only come into being *with it* [Gellner's emphases] (Gellner 1990: 149, cf. Gellner 1977b and 1984).

Gellner raises the question of the very foundation of Marxism which views political power as 'the mere handmaiden of pre-existing economic classes' and coercive mechanisms in society as part of 'super-structural reflection'. There he saw an interesting overlap of Marxism with contemporary Western idealism, which appears under the names such as hermeneutics, semantic and, one should hasten to add, postmodernism. These new directions in Western thought work with meanings as their basic concepts, viewed as an integral part of languages and culture. For them causal sequences or generalizations are not very interesting; it is more important that the meaning-systems should be explained because they allegedly direct human behaviour (*ibid.*). Gellner, however, did not say a word in his paper about his previous studies of Soviet *etnografiia* and their connection with his interest in reconstructing the beginnings of the human society.

### **GELLNER'S EXCHANGE WITH SEMIONOV**

These are also important questions in Marxism, especially as it was further developed by the Soviet ethnographers, namely Iuriy Semionov. According to Gellner (1988a: 137), Semionov wrote 'an elegant, coherent, beautifully argued and uncompromising defence of unilineal interpretations of Marxism' as a theory of human history. Gellner admired the philosophical realism of Semionov, who argued that socio-economic formations were not to be found in concrete societies, nor did they exist without them. According to Semionov the formations existed as 'the inner essences of concrete societies' (*idem.*, p. 139) which determined the development of

these societies. Semionov thus defends the unity of human history and its one-way development along the sequence of formations (for a comparison of the positions of Semionov and Kabo, see Skalník 1992).

According to Gellner, Semionov's theory posits that the unity of history exists expressed only in a generic sense, rather than being present in each individual society. To require that every society pass through all the stages of history or the full sequence of socio-economic formations is absurd, and Semionov's reformulation is original. Gellner found Semionov's argument 'entirely convincing' (*idem.*, p. 141). Indeed, contends Gellner,

[T]here was presumably never a time when slave-owners were required to hand in their deeds of ownership of slaves, and have them replaced by land-deeds to appropriate territory, carrying with them a given number of serfs, and corresponding military obligations to overlords, and so forth (*idem.*, p. 141).

Then, of course, Gellner had to ask: What is the purpose of formations and why is their sequence important when it does not apply to any concrete society in its full sense? Semionov's answer is what Gellner called the 'torch relay theory of history'. A new formation arrives when the most advanced and influential area enters the particular stage. The radiation of the torch-carrying society or societies would be such that the same stage need not be repeated or re-invented anywhere else. It is a kind of diffusionism in a Marxist veil. Semionov shows on the one hand that between the primitive society and socialist society there are many parallels, and on the other that in history the torch now goes to the Soviet brand of communism.

A similar fascination with creative orthodoxy and inconsistencies in the work of some Soviet Marxists is exemplified in several more of Gellner's articles collected in the 1988 book. Elsewhere in this special issue Kradin discusses the question of nomadism as treated by Gellner, and so there is no need to dwell on this topic here. Let us only mention that Gellner was fascinated by the attempts of Soviet authors, among them ethnographers, to force the data from non-European societies into the Procrustean bed of feudalism. Thus Gellner noticed interesting points in Lev Kubbel's

treatment of the state formation in Songhai (West Africa), where the state must have appeared before social classes. Nevertheless, Kubbel argued for Songhai's feudal character, but only after 'very thorough discussion of the arguments on the other side'. Kubbel's finding is that the transition from primitive tribal society straight to feudalism is to be explained by the lateness of this transition in West Africa. Africa in the first part of the second millennium was peripheral and the only influence it could be inspired by was feudalism, in its North African or Portuguese varieties. Gellner noticed that there was a strange contradiction between Kubbel's (and the general Marxist) stress on endogenous development and this obvious diffusionist statement. Again, however, Gellner apparently liked to discuss

the constraints and the flexibilities of Kubbel's conceptual scheme... the elegance of its deployment, its overall style, the manner in which it meshes in with the concrete material at his disposal, the symbiosis of sensitivity and metaphysics in it... and the way in which it overlaps with or diverges from some Western approaches (idem., p. 90).

For similar reasons Gellner took issue also with V. N. Nikiforov's influential book *The East and World History*. Nikiforov's position was clearly on the side of the Marxist five-stages, into which Asia did not fit. However for Gellner he was 'a distinguished, erudite, scholarly, pugnacious, fair-minded and committed' champion of the five-stage scheme (idem., p. 39). What fascinates Gellner is the idea expounded by Nikiforov that domination and exploitation first needed invention within the realm of primitive tribal communities before they could successfully be subject to diffusion to higher formations (conquest by one tribe of another, the spread of feudalism to slaveless society, the spread of capitalism and the aid of backward countries by socialist ones). Domination could not precede exploitation, which in turn had to be based on private property. Therefore too the Asiatic mode of production was impossible because it was based on domination without private property. Gellner evidently enjoyed this logic of 'the great passion play of history' without necessarily subscribing to it.

## **BROMLEY'S *ETNOS* AND GELLNER: MISPLACED IMAGES**

Above on I have quoted Gellner saying that the question of the nature and role of ethnicity is supremely important. What is however unfortunate is that the English rendering of 'ethnicity' is relational whereas *etnos* in Bromley's rendering is substantive. Does Gellner confuse ethnicity with *etnos* or would he rather like to see the two terms as identical or almost identical? I think that here Gellner did not think through the consequences of his interpretations. Elsewhere he goes as far as arguing that Bromley's *etnos* theory meant a 'minor revolution' within *etnografiia*. The latter seemed to him to be an analogy of Western social anthropology. The revolution consisted in the shift of the main research focus within Soviet *etnografiia* from the reconstruction of the primitive formation to ethnoses defined synchronistically and culturally. 'The revolution consists of making *ethnography* into the studies of *ethnoses*, or, in current Western academic jargon, into the study of *ethnicity*...' (Gellner 1988: 115). Gellner argues that this 'revolution' 'is of utmost importance for those preoccupied with nationalism and ethnicity' (idem., p. 116) and seems thereby to identify some parallels with Western anthropology. In Gellner's understanding the problematic of Bromley's *etnos* is not 'archaism-oriented', it is directed towards the present time, it is 'relatively synchronicist' and 'markedly universalistic', culture-oriented rather than structure-oriented, while the research methods are fieldwork or sociological, rather than historical reconstruction. If this were so, are Bromley and his followers still Marxists? Gellner rushes to defend the Bromley School on this crucial account: choosing relatively synchronistic and cultural research strategy by no means leads to rejection of evolutionist and structural orientation. Soviet *ethnografy* (ethnographers) do not bend away from Marxism and 'there is not the least indication' that they have 'the slightest wish or indeed the opportunity to do so'.

The main problem with Bromley's *etnos*, however, is its reified conceptualisation (cf. Skalník 1986, 1988, 1990). Bromley's main quest was to identify *etnos* with the main subject-matter of his discipline. It should be borne in mind that when he assumed the

position of the director of the Institute of Ethnography back in 1966, Bromley, as an outsider to *etnografiia*, had to justify his post by a quick feat which would attract the attention of his superordinates within the academy and the communist party leadership. This he did by turning attention to the very term *etnografiia* (cf. Khazanov 1990: 214). He argued that it denoted the description or study of ethnoses, or peoples, understood as bounded wholes. Thus *etnografiia* was not the study of ethnic features in societies but a science of societies conceived as ethnoses. Gellner was apparently too eager to find a common language with Bromley and presented his ethnos theory as 'relatively untitled... conspicuously important... of practical use... a legitimate area of study... comparatively unperilous' (Gellner 1988: 120–121). It may sound slightly ironizing, but Gellner means it: 'Yulian Bromley appears to be the man destined to lead the ethnographers towards the promised land of ethnos' (idem., p. 121).

Gellner is to some extent right that Bromley brought in some fresh wind by taking *ethnos* into the arena of Soviet *etnografiia*. Those whom he called Ideologists (such as Semionov) or Primitivists (such as Kabo) were keeping *etnografiia* among the disciplines preoccupied with archaic phenomena, which might be of use only when Soviet society would reach the classless communist utopia. In contrast Ethnosists, led by Bromley, seemed to promise to address a topical subject, namely the cultural pluralism of the multi-ethnic Soviet Union and its eventual transcendence. However Gellner was not naive about the substantive contents of Bromley's new doctrine. He did not believe that Ethnosists went beyond 'a typology of ethnic phenomena' and 'certain generalizations articulated in terms of that typology' and some 'concrete research strategies based on these' (idem., p. 125). If there is something new, at least within Soviet Marxist circle, then it is "the sheer stress on the existence of ethnicity" and 'a language in which to speak about it' (idem., p. 126).

Gellner realised that beyond this there was hardly any ground on which Bromley's theory could be useful. Because, as he clearly puts it, Western research on ethnicity centers on nationalism, and nationalism deals with irredentism and questioning the legitimacy of ethnic boundaries. Of course, Gellner concludes, it would be

undiplomatic to think of redrawing of political boundaries and ask questions like ‘Will Ruritania survive, despite the tension between its diverse ethnic groups? or inquire about the status of “groups which do and do not possess their own political formations, even though otherwise they are at the same “level of development”’. In other words, ‘the language for posing this question is now available, but we may yet have to wait for a full utilization of it’ (idem., p. 127).

As we know, the very nature of Bromley's theory, its analytical sterility and political helplessness, prevented any ‘utilization’ in the analysis of ethnic contradictions, conflicts, ethnic wars and the disintegration of ‘Ruritania’s’ such as the USSR, Yugoslavia and Czechoslovakia. Neither Bromley nor Gellner predicted these processes, which had much to do with ethnicity, but ethnicity as the politics of cultural difference, not *ethnos* as a static academic construct. While Bromley, facing the reality of exploding ethnic-driven conflicts, continued to repeat the same fallacies about the successful handling of the ethnic or national question in the USSR, Gellner indirectly admitted that he had been too optimistic about the ‘utilization’ of Bromley's theory. In December 1988 he wrote that ethnicity and nationalism were the most dangerous and uncontrollable aspects of perestroika (Gellner in TLS, 9–15 December 1988). Two years later, when talking about his one year stay in Moscow to an interviewer, Gellner said that Bromley had burnt his fingers by stressing the importance of ethnicity while denying that there was any problem with it in the USSR (Gellner 1992, cf. Gellner 1993).

## CONCLUSION

Ernest Gellner's encounter with Soviet *etnografiia* was an important episode in his academic career, but the place of this episode in his overall work is not properly understood. Lessnoff, and Hall and Jarvie chose not to include his fairly voluminous writings on the topic in their analyses of respectively Gellner's modernity studies and Gellner's social philosophy. This is certainly regrettable, because Gellner's choice to study Soviet Marxism and interesting trends within Soviet *etnografiia* were an integral part of his quest to understand and explain modernity and modern social thought.

The result of ignoring or avoiding this episode is that our understanding of Gellner's complexity remains incomplete. The exception seems to be the article by Berelowitch, who clearly understood that *ethnos* was not equal to Anglo-Saxon 'ethnicity' and that reified *ethnos* might just be another manifestation of the real concreteness of socio-economic formations à la Semionov (Berelowitch 1998).

On the other hand we should not overestimate the importance of Gellner's encounter with 'the Soviet'. His deep interest and sometimes even enthusiasm when dealing with Soviet Marxist thought was in no small measure inspired by his own idiosyncracies, namely his passion for things doctrinal and quasi-theological, and his quest to find some cracks in the Marxist monolith. There is a whole corpus of writing about the politics and culture of Czechoslovakia and Central Europe which, quite apart from his work on Soviet academia, testifies to these obsessions. The other reason why there is a definite limit to the importance of Gellner's writing about *etnografiia* and Soviet Marxism is his swift shift away from these dry theoretical preoccupations towards his authentic post-1989 fascination with civil society, nationalism, and ethnic wars in the 'third and fourth time zones' of nationalism, i. e. Central and Eastern Europe. After all, Gellner's analyses of nationalism and its role within modernity were in effect corroborated by these revolutionary changes while his work on Soviet Marxism and Soviet *etnografiia* had little or no resonance for the contemporary world.

## NOTES

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