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# The Words and Things of Ernest Gellner

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## **ABSTRACT**

*A thorough examination of Ernest Gellner's intellectual legacy raises important questions of both content and style with reference to academic thought and practice. This paper seeks to historically contextualise Gellner's work in relation to his life and times as one of the later 20<sup>th</sup> century's leading intellectuals. It considers some of the implications of Gellner's academic influence through reviewing the academic framework of his professional life and the analytical character of his writing style in the wider context of social science and particularly, the discipline of anthropology. The distinctly panoramic tendencies of Gellner's oeuvre are emphasized along with the rich variety of literary devices he employed in his intellectual crusades against linguistic philosophy, the reflective turn in social analysis, and post-modernist academic tendencies in general. In conclusion, it is suggested that Gellner's central legacy may be as much in his deeply principled approach to scholarly communication in its entirety, as in the more diverse details of his writing.*

## **INTRODUCTION AND REFLECTION**

After his death in Prague on 5 November 1995, obituaries duly appeared in the international media noting the influence of Ernest Gellner's thought on a diversity of intellectual fields including Philosophy, Sociology, Politics, History and Social Anthropology. As

such reference indicates, Gellner's lifework was of such wide scope that it 'could not be confined within national boundaries or within the bounds of any one academic discipline', as Edward Mortimer put it in *The Financial Times* (November 7). That the obituary from which this quote is drawn appeared on the second page of a newspaper which generally places obituaries in its later pages – and one which focuses chiefly on financial and business matters – is testament to Gellner's impact upon important ideas of the day in and outside of academia. Of greater importance to the present review of Gellner's academic legacy is not, however, a discussion of his specific contributions to intellectual enquiry but the very question (and nature) of lasting influence in the contemporary world of international academia. What is the legacy of Ernest Gellner? How might one historically situate his lifework within the wider context of academic life?

This contribution neither seeks to dissect Gellner's substantial theoretical oeuvre, nor will it attempt to critique its fundamental social and philosophical propositions at the level of macro-theory. Such analysis has already been conducted in *Transition to Modernity* (1992) and *The Social Philosophy of Ernest Gellner* (1996), two edited volumes which act as the foundation of a growing body of analysis and reflection (Hall 1998; Lessnoff 2002) paying tribute to Ernest Gellner's thinking. Instead, I will consider some of the implications of Gellner's academic influence through reviewing the academic framework of his professional life and the analytical character of his writing style in the wider context of social science and particularly, the anthropological literature. Such consideration is not without pitfall, for it implies a certain familiarity with Gellner's expansive circle of private and professional engagement that could be questioned on a number of levels. In this sense, it is appropriate to admit that my personal knowledge of Gellner was a direct function of being one of his last – and quite possibly the very last – doctoral student to finish their dissertation under his supervisory guidance. While we had many conversations during this period of acquaintance (between 1989 and his death), the many of our exchanges were limited in scope and duration. This was not only because of the essentially pedagogical relationship between us, but

also due to his inimitable style of conversation: succinct to the point of brevity, logically penetrating to the exclusion of excess notation, and intellectually elegant in the extreme.

Gellner's students (and colleagues) found his sheer intellect daunting; very few of them were able to easily negotiate his habitual long silences whose lack of direct reciprocal exchange frequently ran against the norms of conventional conversation and made even the most senior of his colleagues nervous at times. Nevertheless, for those willing to engage him directly on matters both academic and mundane, the rich rewards of his contribution were both abundant and unselfishly offered. In conversation, his few words would invariably encapsulate the very heart of a complex argument or the very crux of an intellectual dilemma, contradiction and/or problem. In this sense, the stylistic parallels between Gellner in conversation and Gellner on the written page were always striking to those who knew him well. He chose to employ few words in short sentences that eschewed the convolutions of jargon, never accepting the distinction that popular 'means accessible work in simple prose; 'scholarly' means specialized work in difficult prose' (Campbell 1996: 58). He liked to present his ideas through substantive analogies, metaphor and allegory, adopting an informal style that lacked nothing in intellectual depth but which often required considerable erudition from his audience in filling in the gaps of inferred knowledge.

The parallels between Gellner in conversation and Gellner's writing were reinforced by a habit of dictating both personal correspondence and professional/intellectual work into a dictaphone for later transcription. The major exception to this technical convention was his thoughtful practice of scribbling innumerable notes and postcards to colleagues, friends and students alike (Quigley 1996/7: 111). The combination of dictation and short format correspondence allowed him to maintain an extraordinary level of private and public written output that astounded his contemporaries. As a Cambridge colleague noted in a reflective article published soon after Gellner's death:

Like others, I was intimidated both by the force of his intellect and by the quantity of his output: year after year, at the

annual rite when Departmental reports were presented to the Faculty, the list of Ernest's new publications would be longer than those of the rest of the staff added together. Only at this point did we realise what our Professor had actually been writing about, and guess where he might be heading next (Hann 1996/7: 36).

Hann's observation brings into play connotations of scope and complexity that form an integral part of the challenge of assessing Gellner's academic legacy. In the discussion following, I suggest that this legacy lies almost as much in the *how* of his presentation as in the *what* of it. Two important parts of this 'how' are Gellner's personal history and where he chose to situate himself within the theoretical politics of scholarly life.

## **A FORMATIVE BACKGROUND**

Ernest André Gellner was born in Paris in 1925 but spent his early childhood in Prague. The Gellner family clearly possessed an intellectual character (Musil 1996: 32) that in some way can be said to be emblematic of the vibrant time and place where they lived. Masaryk's Czechoslovakia not only promised a certain degree of tolerance for a family such as theirs (where the mother was Jewish), but Prague at the time was also one of the intellectual capitals of a Central Europe at the forefront of academic endeavour.

While a young boy, Gellner attended the new English Grammar School in Prague. As Musil observes, the School combined Central European and English curricula, making use of young teachers from England in order to provide foreign language instruction at a native level (1996: 33). Consequently, young Gellner's early education was placed within a dual cultural framework; his later academic forays across intellectual boundaries and national traditions of scholarship would reflect a cosmopolitan ease that likely had some root in this diverse pedagogy as well as early experience of the heterogeneous Czech nation. During the 1930s, however, a variety of broad forces in Europe, notably an often romantically historicised nationalism, ethnic antagonism and the rise of Fascism, would have considerable effect on the Gellner family and its fortunes.

The intellectually sophisticated yet ethnically-charged nature of the young Czech nation had a great impact upon Gellner's formative thinking. Not least, it must have influenced his later interest in, and contribution to theories of nationalism (*pace* Hall & Jarvie 1996: 11). While he would become fascinated by the general notion of cultural diversity within a greater state (whether in the context of the Soviet Union which he disagreed with, or with the Habsburg Empire which continued to hold his admiration throughout his lifetime), Gellner could not but be affected by the harsh strains of racial prejudice that emerged throughout Europe. In an interview with John Davis, he considered Prague of that childhood time quite anti-semitic:

Very openly so in the working class, *nuancé* elsewhere. This was Kafka's Prague: tricultural, with two universities, a Czech and a German...Two universities and three cultures; and ethnic tension was certainly very emphatically a crucial part of my environment in Prague... (1991: 63–64).

Gellner's mention of Kafka is important in that this quintessential *Mitteleuropean* blends sharp humour into his work with a rare dexterity. Apart from Kafka, we know that a number of other Czech authors also held Gellner's attention at a young age (Musil 1996: 33). Many of them, notably the writers Jaroslav Žák, Jaroslav Hašek and Vítězslav Nezval, and the vaudeville playwrights Jiří Voskovec and Jan Werich, use humour as a way of conveying deep social criticism as much as providing entertainment. Perhaps not surprisingly, it is a similar levity that stands out as an identifying characteristic of Gellner's written style, and immediately sets it apart from the conventional dryness of scholarly fare. Musil suggests that the 'roots of Gellner's specific wit must undoubtedly be found in the remarkable mix of Czech and English humour that was a product of the grammar school and the broader Czech context' (1996: 32–33). Such humour, particularly that of the lampooning, satirical sort preferred by Gellner, not only gives his prose a lightness that provides balance for the intellectual depth of discussion, but it has also played an important part in ensuring the attraction of Gellner's work outside a specialist audience. Humour of this sort makes use of deeply incisive generalisation, particularly

in the form of abstracted stereotypes that elucidate the absurd mechanics of a given situation. As we shall see below, this dialectical relationship (between general representation and the examination of specific social process) has a prominent place in Gellner's work.

In 1939, the Gellner family was forced to flee Prague because of its Jewish background. In England, Gellner was enrolled at St. Alban's County School for Boys before receiving a scholarship to Balliol College, Oxford (Davis 1991:64). Although service with the Czech Armoured Brigade during the Second World War intervened in his university education, he would graduate from Oxford as its John Locke Scholar in 1947. In the course of his subsequent intellectual career such initial promise would be repeatedly confirmed; he would eventually hold five separate professorial chairs in three different disciplines (Philosophy, Sociology and Social Anthropology) in his lifetime.

## **OVER BOUNDARIES**

Gellner's first academic post was at Edinburgh in the Department of Philosophy – but he did not stay long. After only two years, he would move in 1949 to the Sociology Department of the London School of Economics (LSE), where he would spend most of his professional life. This move, not simply from one university to another, but from one disciplinary department to another, demonstrated a Gellnerian quality that would become his hallmark: a commitment to crossing intellectual borders. At the LSE, this talent would be formally recognised in Gellner's appointment as Professor of Sociology (with special reference to Philosophy) and, several years later, Professor of Philosophy (with special reference to Sociology) – before moving to the post of William Wyse Professor of Social Anthropology at Cambridge in 1984.

It is important to remember that such movement was not simply a question of professional choice at the time, but also an expression of the high esteem in which his colleagues held Gellner. This level of esteem can be understood in two ways: as recognition of achievement and as an acknowledgement of Gellner's standing as that rare polymath, the cross-disciplinary scholar. For Gellner, such recognition meant an enviable freedom to manoeuvre that is rarely

granted to contemporary academics whose work must increasingly be forced into the discrete niches of the new 'audit culture' (Strathern 2000) of universities.

As I have suggested elsewhere (Czeglédy 1996/7: 14), the characteristic Gellnerian disregard for disciplinary boundaries has considerable relevance for the increasing specialisation to be found in contemporary academia. This is doubly relevant with respect to Anthropology, wherein the twin frames of topical and regional expertise have become critical in the establishment (and bureaucratic assessment) of professional credentials. In contrast, Gellner would become pre-eminently known for his contributions to a diversity of key debates within academia: the philosophy of the social sciences, relativism, modernity, religion and the nature of nationalism. It is also the case that he would develop a considerable reputation in the study of kinship as well as supplying important insights into the history of Anthropology (through examinations of both Frazer and Malinowski). This degree of breadth reached into the realm of anthropological fieldwork as well, for after ceasing to conduct fieldwork in Morocco, he saw no reason not to conduct an anthropological investigation into the psychoanalytic profession. Refused formal entry as an investigator (see Gellner 1996: 679), he nevertheless made up for the lost opportunity in a biting denunciation of the Freudian tradition entitled *The Psychoanalytic Movement: Or the Cunning of Unreason* (1985a). In a twist of editorial fate that Gellner found immensely amusing, the subtitle for this publication was erroneously printed as 'The Coming of Unreason' in copies of the first edition!

In addition to such wide-ranging scholarship, and not withstanding his intense dislike of administration, it would be in the more bureaucratic realm of institutional leadership that Gellner would make one of his most vital academic contributions later in his career: the establishment of Western links with Soviet scholarship. This personal initiative, both intellectual and organisational in scope, would lead to an edited volume on comparative anthropology (Gellner 1980), a collection of essays (Gellner 1988a), and culminate in a year-long visit to the Soviet Union as a distinguished guest of its Academy of Sciences in 1989/90.

It is clear that, unlike many contemporaries known for specific areas of thought, Gellner's wide-ranging analyses invariably involved a scholarly ambit that refused to become locked within a strict set of disciplinary boundaries. In this sense, his intellectual inspiration had closer affinities to 19<sup>th</sup> century traditions of integrative scholarship than to those of the present day – notwithstanding the possibility that this analytical method may have been more than just an unconscious inclination on his part. By playing off a variety of identities relative to his audience – of sociologist amongst philosophers, philosopher amongst anthropologists, anthropologist amongst sociologists, etc., Gellner could adroitly use the cautioning tendencies of disciplinary limitation against exactly those colleagues who sought to pin him down on the grounds of narrow specificity.

### **AGAINST LINGUISTIC PHILOSOPHY**

The debut publication of *Words and Things* (1959a) secured the academic reputation of Gellner in a way that framed his later reputation as a theoretical polemicist. The volume was a coruscating attack on the tradition of linguistic philosophy championed by Wittgenstein, and which had become the dominant force at both Oxford and in England during the immediate post-war era. Gellner applied a sociological analysis to this linguistic philosophy and thereby sought to reveal the circularity of its arguments on cognitive representation. Not least, he emphasised that:

... Linguistic Philosophy is not a theory of the world *and* of language *and* of philosophy and of mind. These four are but aspects of each other; they mutually entail or insinuate each other (1959a: 26).

The success of *Words and Things* was assured when Gilbert Rye, the editor of the leading philosophical journal *Mind* refused to consider it for review on the grounds that it was generally malicious on an intellectual level and characterised philosophers as disingenuous (Hall and Jarvie 1996: 16). This evaluation was not entirely far from the truth. Gellner openly asserts in his Conclusion that:



Conceptual investigations are seldom or never separable from either substantive ones or from evaluation. The model on which the contrary assumption was based is false. A philosophy which systematically tries to insinuate such a model and to deny and camouflage its existence is a dishonest one, even if the dishonesty was not conscious in the minds of the individual philosophers concerned (1959a: 263–264).

Rye's decision led Bertrand Russell, who had contributed an Introduction to the volume (which agreed with Gellner's general position) – to reveal the editorial decision in a letter to *The Times* of London. The storm of public correspondence that followed the publishing of Russell's letter established Gellner's reputation as a controversial figure in and outside of academia. This notoriety appealed immensely to Gellner, firstly because it conveniently gave him greater leeway for cross-disciplinary manoeuvre, and secondly because it allowed him to express his anti-establishment leanings without sacrificing the weight of argument. As his friend and Cambridge colleague Alan Macfarlane noted after Gellner's death: 'his brilliance combined with a sense of fun made him a deadly enemy' (1996/7: 103).

The critical dimension to Gellner's first major publication would stay with him throughout his career and, at times, be as much a limitation as an advantage. A criticism that might be justifiably levelled at him is that for a mind of his stature too often his work involved an argumentative response rather than an original formulation. In turn, however, any such an accusation can be questioned on the grounds that instead of claiming a false and absolute originality he was always willing to accept and acknowledge the prior intellectual efforts of others and, thereby, demonstrate a rare standard of intellectual honesty.

Within the framework of academic politics, *Words and Things* produced a more personal result: its mixed reception within philosophical circles must have encouraged Gellner to reconsider any interest he had in pure philosophy in favour of other disciplinary trajectories. To a considerable extent, this choice meant Social Anthropology and its empirically grounded theory based on intensive fieldwork.

## ETHNOGRAPHY

Gellner's interest in social anthropology would have been clear to anyone reading the Acknowledgements to *Words and Things*. This included the personal notation that:

My philosophical debts are obvious or indicated in the text. But I should like to express my thanks to the members of the Social Anthropology Department at the L.S.E., who taught me how, without prejudice to its validity, one should see a set of related ideas and practices as a system of mutually supporting, and sometimes conflicting parts, and interpret it in terms of the services it performs and the conditions it requires in the social context of which it is a part (1959a: 7).

In spite of his intellectual training at a time when the functionalist school of British Anthropology was at its height, Gellner would never write in the overly authoritative and eminently etic style of mid-century anthropology. Instead, his preference for declarative prose led him to adopt a relatively informal, even conversational register. For example, he often begins paragraphs with an explicit reminder of himself as author/speaker:

*It seems to me* that anthropologists are curiously to concepts. They are not unduly charitable to individuals (1970: 42) [my emphasis].

He also makes use of conversational tags:

A man cannot take his professional status with him and invoke it outside the workplace. Status operates in office hours, *so to speak* (1997: 27) [my emphasis].

And the communication must take place not merely in a 'high' (i. e. codified, script-linked, educationally transmitted) code, but in some one definite code, *say* Mandarin Chinese or Oxford English (1997: 29) [my emphasis].

In a summary essay '*On Nations and Nationalism*', he goes further still connecting his argument with a strictly colloquial articulation:

Anyway, the feature, the consequence of this transition from society based on fear to society based on bribery is that

the new society is no longer hierarchical – it is of course unequal, but it is not hierarchical (1995a: 88) [my emphasis].

Yet simple as his conversational style is, it does not detract from the intellectual depth or seriousness of his argument. By writing as he does, Gellner does far more than present a surface argument, however. He suggests that ideas are in the end simple (but not simplistic). His approach emphasises a faith in an objective truth that can and should be directly accessed and expressed; intellectual explorations are simply a conversation about how the world works. They are not mysterious nor require mystification – anyone can be involved in discussing them.

This writing style is his *captatio benevolentiae* – the way in which he invites the reader in and gains their trust and good faith. It is a format that is against obfuscation, one wherein dialogue is an instrument in the Socratic manner, drawing the reader into his polemic in such a way as to become a (limited) participant. Limited in the sense that this participation is constructed within the framework of author/audience, as is most evident in the frequent (scripted) discussions that populate his work. But one example of this sort of device is an integral part of his discussion of Winch's relativistic idealism:

For the sake of argument we must now imagine at least two philosophers in such a world. One of them is a bad, pre-Wittgensteinian thinker. The other is a kind of proto-Winch... At this point, he encounters the Ur-Winch, who expostulates: 'My dear friend – you are quite misguided. You are doing nothing but mischief by trying to convert tribe A to the rituals and doctrine of tribe B...' (1973a: 65–66).

Gellner's interest in anthropology would be confirmed by a long series of trips to North Africa beginning in 1954. This field research would eventually become a doctorate in social anthropology under the joint supervision of Raymond Firth and Paul Sterling. Working amongst the Berbers of the High Atlas in Morocco gave Gellner a chance to indulge his passion for hiking (pursued while at Edinburgh) as well as develop his interest in religion by way of examining the local holy men and their religious cults. In addition, it earned him his ethnographic credentials. This research would

produce several short publications (e.g. Gellner 1957, 1959b) and a single monograph, *Saints of the Atlas* (1969), eventually leading into the wider analysis of Islamic society as a whole (Gellner 1981, 1985b).

Although Gellner readily accepted anthropology on a professional basis, he would never be completely accepted *as an anthropologist* by his anthropological colleagues. This position, both inside and outside of the discipline was one that he openly relished, always preferring to see himself as a critical outsider looking in rather than one inside of the establishment, academic or otherwise. On one hand, it was a position directly connected to his cross-disciplinary background and intellectual interests that refused to be pigeonholed. On the other, it can be linked to his use of a panoramic perspective during a specific period of time – when the majority of European anthropologists, in particular, were turning away from the comparative origins of the discipline in order to focus their attention on micro-level studies. While he did not disagree with the importance of ethnography – even defending (against philosophers) the validity of anthropologists drawing ‘conclusions from single instances’ (Gellner 1973b: 91) – by this time he was increasingly acting as a foil to particularistic tendencies in the social sciences.

Gellner's qualified marginality within anthropological circles also had much to do with his reluctance to continue practising the Malinowskian fieldwork of his Morocco years. This personal choice was in direct contrast to the anthropological mainstream where such fieldwork has been fetishised (Dresch and James 2000: 2, Allen 2000: 243). In this sense, Gellner's academic trajectory ran against the conservative grain of the empirical tradition of the British School, and against an accepted disciplinary current that Gellner (1995b, 1995c) himself would investigate, pointing out how Bronislaw Malinowski had succeeded in displacing James Frazer as the *primus pater* of the discipline. He understood this process of displacement as crucially involving the acceptance of the ‘Malinowskian myth of the “ethnographic present” ’ (1995b: 100), a myth founded substantially on the rejection of wider frames of

historical reference – particularly the macro-historical processes that so interested Gellner.

### **PANORAMIC PERSPECTIVE**

Kuper informs us that the professional generation of Malinowski's students 'hankered after comparison and generalization' (1983: 196). Ironically, it would be Gellner (the relative *parvenu* to anthropology at the LSE) who would provide such service perhaps more than any one of his immediate colleagues. For throughout his career, Gellner's penchant for cross-disciplinary forays invariably fused his argument with a distinctly panoramic perspective that bears special consideration in assessing his academic legacy. In this sense, Gellner's intellectual role as a macro-historical scholar is representative of previous generations that valued general social theory and the examination of over-arching historical process at least as much as (if not more than) the localised studies of a post-war generation of social scientists – particularly anthropologists. Thus, his analysis routinely incorporates a grand, theorising approach reminiscent of earlier theorists such as Adam Smith, Thomas Malthus, Karl Marx and, more notably (given Gellner's inclusion within Anthropology), James Frazer. It employs a sweep of history, declining to accept rigid frames of time or (even) place, instead preferring to address the greater vistas of culture and social process in a broad, brushstroke pattern that leaves much detail to the reader's erudition. Even where Gellner concentrates on pure ethnography this sensibility carries through, and the distinction between tenses is sometimes lost<sup>1</sup>.

Gellner's panoramic perspective is apparent in those passages of his work that centre around fundamental categorical distinctions, between low and high culture in *Nations and Nationalism* (1983), for example, or between what he calls the Relativists, Fundamentalists and Enlightenment Puritans in his essay on ideological contest (1995d). It is clear in a short essay on '*The Dangers of Tolerance*' where we find him skipping back and forth between centuries at will:

Compared with the nineteenth century, ours is an age of intellectual dishonesty. The nineteenth century did not invent

the modern version of the world, nor did it work out its implications. All that was already done in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries (Gellner 1974: 175).

Such a passage is in many ways but a condensed version of the historical scope that pervades the majority of Gellner's work. While the first sentence begins with a comparison of 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century (intellectual) honesty, by the third sentence the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries have already appeared. Characteristically, such reference to four separate centuries *in three sentences* (and a long-term process of intellectual development) – is made in a particular manner. This manner is that of implied knowledge, a method of condensed representation that lies far from the more detailed (and often more pedantic) sensibilities of so much of contemporary scholarship. There is no mention of exact people, places and activities in this sort of passage, and often little mention in the argument following – except where such specificity is unavoidable as a brief reference point for the main line of thought. In this sense, the emphasis of Gellner's writing remains philosophical throughout, for it concentrates on a clear line of reasoning and argument, and on the building of abstracted macro-social models – often with a tripartite nature, as Macfarlane (2000: 263) has pointed out. But most relevant of all, it deals with essentially large-scale historical processes confronting humanity at large.

As Nicholas Allen observes with direct respect to Anthropology, ‘...deeper historical process is very much a part of the discipline. Socio-cultural forms from the past are as much a part of our business as those of the present. It may sometimes be felt that whereas small-scale history is fine for anthropologists, world history is somehow contaminated by the ethnocentrism and errors of the Victorian evolutionists (2000: 248)’. Given the immediate opportunity, Gellner would have agreed with Allen's insistence on acknowledging the role of history in anthropology, and his own work firmly demonstrates such resolve time and again. True that at times it is prone to some evolutionist tendencies, for example, when he splits human history into a rather procedural hunter-gather/agrarian/industrial schemata (Gellner 1988b); but this mod-

elling is invariably conducted in the interest of argumentative generalisation rather than for the sake of hierarchical theorisation.

While Gellner's analytical interests were never those of a Lévi-Strauss interested in developing a universal theory of the mind, he was, nevertheless, deeply committed to understanding issues of the broadest reach. For him, this commitment can be said to have embraced two main trajectories in his career, one theoretical in nature and the other historical in character. The first of these two directions would involve his essentially philosophical reflections on the constitution of scientific theory, particularly with respect to the validity of Positivism in relation to Relativism (*e.g.* Gellner 1973c, 1985c, 1992). Not least, this major contribution has encouraged Jarvie (1992: 244) to consider him primarily a philosopher above all other disciplinary identities.

Gellner's second major intellectual commitment comprised his interest in devising a general theory of macro-social process, one which would encompass the grand march of human history and, particularly, the road to modernity (see Gellner 1988b, 1994). In this regard, Lessnof (2002: 10) sees Gellner as the pre-eminent theorist and champion of modernity, while Macfarlane (2000: 251–268 *passim*) has nominated him among the very last of a grouping of eminent social theorists to have grappled with the 'riddle of modernity'... and nearly succeeded. Irrespective of differing valuations regarding his primary academic contribution and/or his success, it is as difficult to separate Gellner's instinct for philosophy from his sense of history as it would be to separate his interest in anthropology from his examination of wider social process. Small wonder that when Francis Fukuyama (1992) proposed an 'End of History' and ironically (given the title of his book) returned macro-historical considerations to forefront of the popular imagination, Gellner was among those who were called upon to engage directly him in a public debate<sup>2</sup>.

For the most part, Gellner's analytical style always remained in high contrast to the more focused studies of his sociological and anthropological colleagues who would often retreat into ethnographic detail in order to curtail possible criticism of their work. To some extent they were right to do so – inasmuch as Gellner fre-

quently adopted logical shorthand for his own argumentation that was at times guilty of oversimplification and/or quick deduction. An amicable and two-sided exchange generated by this tactic of generalisation once occurred between Gellner and his friend and Cambridge colleague Chris Hann. The exchange centred on conclusions drawn by Gellner after a four day hiking trip in the Tatra Mountains of Poland. It began with a short article by Gellner (1984a) – writing under a pseudonym – in which he correlated an absence of mountaineers encountered during the hiking trip with state repression under communism. Hann's (1996: 59–60) completely reasonable criticism (in a much later published essay) pointed out that such inference was made without substantive ethnographic consideration. This observation led to a tongue-in-cheek rejoinder by Gellner in his 'Reply to Critics' at the end of *The Social Philosophy of Ernest Gellner*:

Hann impugns the quality of my fieldwork, and says it is redolent (sic!) of Frazer (who did his strictly from the arm-chair)... If this charge is allowed to stand unchallenged – bad fieldworker *and* Cold Warrior – I shall no doubt be expelled from the Association of Social Anthropologists and even fewer people will speak to me in my very progressive college. So, in self-protection, I must defend myself. At the first opportunity I would like to go walking with Chris, for four days, say in the Coolins or in some appropriate part of his native Wales, and count the number of climbing parties we find, even in bad weather. I look forward to such an excursion. The fact that [no climbing parties] were to be seen, during four full days, in the Tatras, allows no explanation other than the one I offered, and I stick to it (I expect I'll be expelled anyway) (1996: 678).

## THE MECHANICS OF ABSTRACTION

In several respects, the passage above is characteristically Gellnerian in its presentation, working on several levels at once. (1) It is both humorous and to the point. (2) It generally eschews academic jargon, instead focusing on simple diction and clarity of meaning. (3) It employs indirect reference, in this case with respect



to the status of methodology in anthropology. (4) It assumes knowledge, here with respect to Gellner's own interest in the position of James Frazer within the history of the discipline. (5) It makes inventive use of standard vocabulary, using metaphorical reference to the Cold War as template. In the process, meaning is not simply implied; it is condensed – without significant reduction of the logic involved. While these stylistic techniques do not by themselves encompass the wealth of Gellner's literary repertoire, they do point to one of his greatest strengths: an astonishing talent for expressing complex ideas in ordinary language.

In order to convey his analytical panoramas, Gellner frequently resorted to a high degree of abstraction as well as to various forms of logical compression in order to present critical ideas at a glance. He could do this not least because of his close reading of the greats of social philosophy, particularly Kant (Hall and Jarvie 1996: 13); additionally, even a cursory survey of his work reveals a strong knowledge of Hume, Freud, Marx and Smith, among others. Contemporaries trained in the canonical tradition of European scholarship found this classicism in Gellner particularly rewarding – although it proved difficult for readers without sufficient knowledge of the relevant background literature.

Six main literary devices feature in Gellner's compressed writing style. For the sake of illustrative simplicity, I will draw solely from *Nations and Nationalism*, not because this volume is an exception, but solely in order to exemplify the density of Gellner's style. First among his literary devices, titles parodying scientific discourse are often used to stand in for complex theoretical representations. So we find him combining satire with titular encapsulation in proposing the 'Wrong Address Theory' (of nationalism), a personal short-hand for how:

Marxists basically like to think that the spirit of history or human consciousness made a terrible boob. The awakening message was intended for *classes*, but by some terrible postal error was delivered to *nations* (1984b: 129).

Second, Gellner's writing employs a style of relatively broad (which is to say, inexact) referencing that at times frustrated his readers. Examples abound throughout his work, reminding us also

of the intrinsic limitations of compressed style in dictation. For instance, the concepts of Hegel, Marx, Weber, etc. are more often than not referred to in passing rather than by way of explicit reference; the assumption being that these ideas are both known and understood by the audience as much as by the author. Consequently, on the very next page (and for several following) we find Gellner discussing Kant's ideas on authority with respect to the individual and nationalism – without a single footnote or bibliographic reference (1984b: 130–134). Such (in)application curiously seems appropriate in much of Gellner's writing not because of its failures of acknowledgement, but because it is so in tune with the generalised tone of abstraction as a whole. Hence, we find Gellner reminding us of the (assumed) coherence of modern language and the social imagination, and then noting the relevant thinking on the subject simply by writing:

Likewise the unified and standardised, as it were metric world of facts, as conceived in the philosophies of Hume or Kant, is the analogue of the autonomous and equal collectivities of men in a mass society (1984b: 22).

Third, such referencing (or the lack of it) is often coupled with various levels of social and historical generalisation in order to generate Gellner's panoramas. Perhaps the most important of these is his avoidance of detailed examples in the historical and/or anthropological vein. Rather than carrying any sense of arrogance in Gellner's work, this dimension of his writing reminds us of his paramount concern with argument rather than detail.

Fourth, Gellner frequently uses neologisms – often hyphenated – and mostly to lampoon major scholarly figures and intellectual trends. But three pages on from the previous quote, he demonstrates his flair for joining humour, invention and insight by observing that:

From the viewpoint of a *crypto-romantic traditionalism* [my italics] which spurns such pursuit of external, 'rational' bases for the practices of life, which wishes to teach men to stay content within the limits of concrete praxis, to accept the contingency of history, and to refrain from seeking the illu-

sory comfort and support of extraneous and abstract ideas, Kant is certainly a deeply misguided figure... (1984b: 132).

Fifth, Gellner uses frequent capitalisation in order to both highlight and capture the essence of a major scholarly figure, cultural construct or theoretical paradigm. Some of his most inventive titles include the 'doctrine of the Big Ditch' (1992: 50–51), and the 'Jakob's Ladder' of evolutionary theories (1970: 29). In *Nations and Nationalism*, when discussing the Janus-like nature of nationalism, he tells us that:

It is Promethean in its contempt for political compromise which ignores the nationalist imperative. But it is also anti-Promethean, when it sees the nation and its cultural development which, just because it is concrete and historically specific, rightly overrides the abstract morality of the internationalists and humanists (1984b: 133).

Sixth, he employs concrete analogies in the service of his argument, an example of which may be drawn from the concluding chapter to the same volume, wherein Gellner illustrates his delineation of the phenomenon of nationalism by way of presenting us with the comparison of two ethnographic maps, the one painted by Kokoschka and the other by Modigliani (1984b: 139–140). While this example may not be as succinct (or humorous) as his more famous depiction of Wittgenstein's thought as a submarine (Macfarlane 1996/7: 103) or the appellation of Frazer as 'King Harold in the history of anthropological thought' (1995c: 116), it does succeed in communicating his ideas both forcefully and graphically, thereby giving his argument a verve that is both intellectually potent and impressionistic anchored in the memory of his reader.

These techniques of presentation infuse Gellner's writing with a distinctly cursive sensibility that few can match. And while such abbreviation may indeed lack detail at times – and is often frustrating in its lack of explicit reference beyond a scholar's surname – the elegance and overall force of his argument wins out. It is most effective in those pieces of writing that resolutely dealt with the broad sweep of social and/or historical process. Gellner was not unaware of this personal accomplishment, and he would have been

also just as aware of the academic acclaim that is garnered by those very few scholars who are able to produce grand narratives of human history. In a 1993 conversation with me he noted how he had once hoped (and expected) that his most panoramic and sustained piece of work, *Plough, Sword and Book* (1988b), would receive the greatest scholarly attention among his various efforts. To his chagrin, however, this volume remained overshadowed by the popularity of *Nations and Nationalism*, on the one hand, and the notoriety of *Words and Things*, on the other.

### **CONCLUSION: THE HERMENEUTIC PLAGUE**

Unfortunately, as Hall and Jarvie (1996b: 11) have observed, Gellner never took the time to write his own autobiography. Few anthropologists have done so in a full manner, with the notable exception of Robert Lowie (1959)<sup>3</sup>. Nor did Gellner pause to reflect on his own fieldwork in the vein of anthropological compatriots such as Bohannan writing disguised as Bowen (1954), Lévi-Strauss (1955), Powdermaker (1967), Mead (1972) and Barley (1983)<sup>4</sup>. For Gellner, neither circumstance is surprising given a sense of professional modesty reinforced by that particular English fondness for self-effacement that sharpens rather than clouds achievement. In his case, it may also have been fortified by a more visceral reaction to his experience of self-declared prophets in pursuit of a new order, whether fascist, communist or intellectual.

From at least one important perspective, such a level of self-analysis and assessment would have been both out of character for Gellner and contrary to his scholarly inclinations. That perspective (or rather set of academic sensibilities) is itself comprised of textual preoccupation, the reflexive tendency and the ultra-referential style that is generally labelled 'postmodernism'. It gripped the social sciences in general, and anthropology in particular, during the last two decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century at exactly the time that Gellner's public reputation reached new heights by way of the seeming demise of state socialism and the subsequent topicality of nationalism. As Gellner himself observed in interview but a half-decade before his death:

And the paradox, the joke, is, having escaped from philosophy to anthropology partly, certainly not totally but partly, to escape from linguistic philosophy, I find in my old age that the thing I was escaping from is now almost dominating anthropology: the hermeneutic plague, as I call it, which is partly inspired by Wittgenstein, has become very influential recently in anthropology. I think it's as misguided in anthropology as it was in philosophy. It is ironic that it seems to be following me (Davis 1991: 66).

This admission brings Gellner – and us – full circle, for the stand against linguistic philosophy that he originally expressed in *Words and Things* clearly returned to haunt him in the anthropological realm. By the 1980s, Wittgenstein's ideas had not only become normative within philosophical circles, but their force had spread throughout the social sciences, extending to anthropology chiefly by way of literary theory – as Gellner himself noted (1992: 23; 1998: 175). Along with similar publications, the appearance of *Writing Culture* (Clifford and Marcus 1986) and *Anthropology as Cultural Critique* (Marcus and Fischer 1986) generated an impact of tidal significance within the anthropological ranks. Not surprisingly, Gellner immediately positioned himself at the forefront of criticising this movement.

Gellner's criticisms of postmodernism played themselves out on a variety of fronts during the 1980s and 1990s. Generally, they were anchored in previous forays defending rationality and positivism in the social sciences (*e.g.* Gellner 1964). Although he was accused by Asad (1986: 162) of following in the footsteps of Oxford's previous anthropological orthodoxy with respect to 'cultural translation', his views nevertheless served to inject an important note of scepticism into European anthropology's more mitigated acceptance of postmodernist considerations. Such tirade did not endear Gellner to many of his international colleagues at the time – particularly the Americans among them who had taken up the twin banners of post-colonial critique and postmodernism with greatest fervour. Gellner's repeated attacks on relativism (*e.g.* Gellner 1985c) and on the literary and reflexive obsessions of postmodernism (*e.g.* Gellner 1992) peaked in a public war of words with Edward Said on the general subject of representation, eventually lead-

ing Marshall Sahlins to dedicate to Gellner the acute aphorism (and pun) that ‘[I]n anthropology there are some things that are better left un-Said’ (Sahlins 1993: 21).

For Gellner, the reflexive, self-questioning undertone to post-modern currents in anthropology fundamentally undercut the scholarly order of knowledge. In his own words, this shift from function and structure to meaning leads to obfuscation and mystification:

In the current intellectual atmosphere, one senses a feeling that the world is not the totality of things, but of meanings. Everything is meaning, and meaning is everything, and hermeneutics is its prophet (Gellner 1992: 24).

On the same page, in a tone of mischievous exasperation, he adds:

The Cartesian redoubt has been taken! We must distrust our subjectivity as much as our erstwhile claims to know the Other (Gellner 1992: 24).

Such personal distrust was simply not a part of Gellner's intellectual world. His training, his fieldwork, his decades of scholarly contemplation were always in the service of ideas – but not *at their service*. This is not to imply arrogance on his part; for Gellner's writing itself contradicts this. While it never takes explicit cognisance of the “loss of authority” in the vein of Marcus and Fischer (1986: 8) or displays a concern with ‘partial truths’ (Clifford 1986), neither does it take the overtly magisterial tone of an Evans-Pritchard (1940), whose classic account of the Nuer keeps the author withdrawn from the narrative and, as Geertz has recognised, provides a series of seemingly irrefutable ‘unconditional statements’ (1988: 63).

Gellner's authorial presence differs fundamentally from post-modernist concerns with subjectivity. Indeed, with the exception of *Words and Things*, which depends on the classically distanced first person plural pronoun (we), the overwhelming majority of his work employs the first person singular (I) in an explicit fashion throughout. Although this usage probably has more to do with Gellner's sense of written argumentation than anything else; it is

not to suggest that he ever considered ethnography inextricably entwined with autobiography in the manner of recent writers on the subject (see the contributions to Okely and Callaway 1992). His own opinion on the matter of such subjectivity was that:

I am not entirely clear about the attitude of the [post-modern] movement to the human subject: sometimes there seems to be an enormous preoccupation with him, so that a social anthropological study degenerates from having been a study of a society into a study of the reaction of the anthropologist to his own reactions to his observations of the society, assuming that he had ever got as far as to have made any (Gellner 1992: 23).

In this sense, neither Gellner's approach to anthropology nor his writing should be misunderstood as a throwback to the past; he was not some theoretical 'primordialist' (to use a term which he employed in another context) as he was sometimes painted to be. He never refused to consider the new directions made in the many disciplines to which he contributed. He simply disagreed with some of them, and did so in an unambiguous way that challenged his colleagues and the public alike. Perhaps because of his intimate knowledge of totalitarianism and its various attempts to cordon off the questioning mind, he was never afraid to put such disagreement into words and onto paper. As Bertrand Russell noted in his Introduction to *Words and Things*:

...the power of fashion is great, and even the most cogent arguments fail to convince if they are not in line with the trend of current opinion. But, whatever may be the reaction to Mr. Gellner's arguments, it seems highly probable – to me, at least – that they will gradually be accorded their due weight (Russell 1959: 13).

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Davis observes that there is some neglect in Gellner's writing with respect to marking empirical distinctions with a linguistic shift (Davis 1992: 213).

<sup>2</sup> This public debate took place in March of 1992 in London.

<sup>3</sup> Ruth Benedict (1959) did, for example, write a short autobiographical reflection in 1935 that was published in a posthumous collection of her work by Margaret Mead.

<sup>4</sup> It would have been particularly interesting to compare the Moroccan experiences of Gellner with Rabinow (1977).

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