

The Relevance of Gellner's Social Theory in the Contemporary World: Discussion on the Occasion of the Book Publication *Ernest Gellner's Legacy and Social Theory Today*

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PETR SKALNÍK

So, welcome all whom I have already greeted this afternoon. Thank you very much for accepting our invitation. And let me thank Zdeněk for arranging it technically, and also, hopefully, the follow-up will be a discussion on the research questions which we sent to you. The first question is: "Where does Gellner meet our needs and where not anymore?" The second question is: "What kind of theory do we need in order to grasp the current epoch when Cyberia substitutes Industria?"

So, it looks as if we will have eight or maybe seven speakers. In this case, you can speak for up to 7 minutes. I would say that is the maximum, and I will be kind of stopping you if you exceed the limit by too much. OK, so the first is Thomas and then comes David. And then I would like to ask Alan and then Guido, and then I and Adam Horálek or Adam Kuper, who is not yet with us either. And finally, Daniel Conversi and Zdenek Uherek, and perhaps I will add a few items. Anyway, so this is now. Thomas Hylland Eriksen is kicking it off.

THOMAS HYLLAND ERIKSEN

Now what I'm going to focus on in my brief introductory comments is really the areas in which Gellner's theory of modernity and nationalism and industrial

society does not really tell us what we need to know about the contemporary world and then others can supplement me by telling you what he does tell us that we need to know about the contemporary world. So, I have four points.

First is the theory of industrial society. We all know his concept of industrial society and changes in the production regime with repercussions for politics, and identity. It's not the information of society. It's not a theory about the role that digital information technology plays in shaping politics, economy, and so on. That is not his fault because the information revolution took off really seriously towards the end of his life and transformed not just communication, not just identity, but also the world economy. Obviously, when you say Cyberia, you know Cyberia is replacing Industria, it doesn't mean the end of industrial production. It doesn't even necessarily mean that a low proportion of people work in the industry, which it usually does, but not necessarily. But it means that information technology, digital information technology, is pervasive, is ubiquitous, and shapes industrial production as well as other things. Similarly, agriculture. Industrialisation did not put an end to agriculture, but it transformed it dramatically. You know, the productivity in American agriculture in the 19th century increased by something like 700 % owing to its mechanisation, standardisation, homogenisation, et cetera. It has not been the end. That just reminds us of the fact that it's not the end of industrial production, not the end of agriculture when Industria replaces the agrarian society, but it leads to a transformation of the organisational work and of production and of many other related phenomena that Gellner might have had something to say about, but he did. So, I would go now to the expression and, as many do, to think about the transition from the Gutenberg Galaxy to Steve Jobs and Mark Zuckerberg. One might begin with the machine community system.

Secondly, multiculturalism; he didn't have much to say about that. He really ends his story about nationalism, certainly in the 1940s, 1950s. I contributed to a book some years ago, *Ernest Gellner and Contemporary Social Thought*. Alan was there, and we discussed, among other things, the implications of migration complexity. But we, at the time, this was about 15 years ago, what we at the time spoke about identity politics and have had to invent a new word because it's that word has become transformed beyond recognition, but the quest for equal rights among minorities who are not prepared to become melted. They're not blue people. They were not going to be assimilated, but they demanded their place, the right to define or redefine or contribute to a redefinition of the national space. It is leading to anomalies, negotiations about boundaries, flux, pluralism, and much more uncertainty around the boundaries and the content and the myths and cultural attitude of the nation than long is given to believe by reading Gellner's

more simple stories about the transition from low culture to high culture et cetera.

Consequently, the network society. I think a term that was very popular while popularised by Manuel Castells just before the turn of the century in his massive work on the information society. The network society is leading to destabilisation and the reorganisation of labour, the replacement of the hierarchical enterprise with a looser, more federative way of organising work with implications for hierarchies and also for identity. There's a lot to say about this, and we can return to that later on.

Thirdly, and that really leads to multiculturalism. Still, Gellner did not so much think about it, are the demographic or social aspects of the new Europe but rather the cultural worlds of the new Europe. So, I'm using the terms creolisation and hybridity, new forms of complexity, fuzzy boundaries, flux, no stability; I mean, there's a general destabilisation of these boundaries that seemed very stable in frantic paths, work on ethnic boundaries, but also not in Gellner's, work on nationalism. Clearly, not to be the case.

Finally, the fourth point is about deterritorialisation. The digital revolution, which we still don't quite know and we probably never will in a decisive way, the effects, the impact of the digitalisation or the digital revolution on the way people identify, their loyalties, the political allegiances and so on. But the changes have probably been less dramatic than some of us predicted in the 1990s, and we thought of this probably when we read Gellner and others thinking that this is probably the end of nationalism because now people can't communicate seamlessly, instantaneously across the planet that did not happen. In fact, as some of our colleagues have argued, it could have led to the strengthening of nationalism by deterritorialisation. But quite clearly, it leads to the deterritorialisation of communication. Also, it leads to, or it implies it can imply a deterritorialisation of more material physical events in the outside world. Just as one example at the end. The so-called "War on Terror" in the early 21st century was where you were fighting an enemy, the West or the United States and eventually NATO. We're fighting an enemy which could not be located. Well, it was located, in some cases, in Afghanistan, which didn't help so much because it could have been anywhere and nowhere. It could have been in a flat in Hamburg; it could have been in another place.

So, these four points: multiculturalism, network society, creolisation, and deterritorialisation, are points that need a social theory that incorporates: the recognition of a more fluid and more ambiguous, and less clearly bounded world. My colleague Anthony Cohen many years ago suggested replacing the boundary with the frontier in a discussion of Frederick Barth, but he could also speak about

national boundaries. The frontier area is fuzzy, you know, it is vague, it is both inside and outside, where there is no either or, but both.

So, these are my final comments for the time being. I know I've been very negative. I'm still a big fan of Gellner, and I'm looking forward to hearing what the rest of you have to say.

PETR SKALNÍK

Thank you so much, Thomas. It was a kind of keynote address almost. Now David Shankland is the following speaker.

DAVID SHANKLAND

Good afternoon. It is a great pleasure to be here, and it is always a joy to be able to join in the seminar where Thomas is speaking.

I think we all remember. I'm sure, that eventually, Gellner, at one point in some exasperation in replying to his critics, said, 'Look, I really want to be criticised for what I did write, but not I didn't write because I honestly can't write everything'. And so, for example, he said: "I wrote a book that was called *Saints of the Atlas*, not *Lay Tribes of the Atlas*". I think really we do have to recall this. So vast is the scope of his writings, and so ambitious is his scheme, that it is tempting to fault him for not having the answer to all the problems that we might be faced with when puzzling about human society. We should, therefore, remember above all that he was trying to explain the emergence of modernity. Everything else he explored was, though significant and important, tangential to this great aim. His work, in spite of its breadth, was therefore rather focussed, and needs to be understood from this specific perspective.

So far as his relevance to today's thinkers is concerned, we might also recall that leaving aside the brilliance of his intellectual theories, he did quite often make succinct remarks about the way the world might turn out in the near future. So, for example, I'm sure, people will remember that he repeatedly said that he didn't understand why some dictator somewhere was not going to use nuclear blackmail in order to get his will, because this seemed to be such an obvious thing to do, and of course, we are seeing precisely that today. Another example might be his suggestion that new medical techniques might be difficult to scale, which means that there may emerge a new class hierarchy in medicine and health, dividing sharply the haves, and the have nots.

In passing, just a small note to Thomas's comments: Gellner also stressed that whenever he thought or wrote about boundaries, he did not mean to suggest that they were necessarily hard and fast, and that there could be gradual rather than sharp transitions. He said this repeatedly when he was debating with Clifford

Geertz over Moroccan society. But so far as the wider picture is concerned of his relevance to today's society, I think we should say, yes, the world is clearly changing and there is much that is new. Yet, social phenomena rarely disappear entirely, rather they are overlaid by new developments in palimpsest fashion. Thus, that we live in an information-technology dominated globalised world doesn't mean that nationalism disappears. It doesn't mean that changes within the Islamic world disappear. It doesn't mean that Gellner's general conceptualisation of the struggle that he conceived between totalitarian states and liberty (where, as I said in my chapter in the book, I'm very clear that he followed Popper closely despite his protestations), that doesn't disappear either. And so, I think that Gellner remains just relevant whenever we talk about all these issues.

Looking at these points in turn very briefly. The importance of nationalism. Absolutely, nobody who's living in Britain today could possibly escape the rise of nationalism in both Scotland and in Wales, which is slightly different. Although I've lived in Wales more recently than I've lived in Scotland, perhaps because I have Scottish ancestry, I'm more familiar with the Scottish situation. So, I shall leave Chris Hann to talk about the Welsh one, but as far as I can see, the Scottish situation is identical to that which Gellner outlined, so much so that it could have been taken from his works. Nationalists first of all spent decades, despite the evidence, saying that there was a conspiracy against the Scots because the English were depriving them of the necessary infrastructure to achieve modernity and affluence. This is this is a mantra which I heard year after year after year after year, from my teenage years, right up until my adult years. I'm talking here about the last couple of decades of the 20th century. And then, as the Scottish Nationalists began to take control in this century, they proceeded to begin to rewrite Scottish history to emphasise something which they felt was Scottishness, however fantastic and nebulous. And so, if you go to the Inverness Museum today, for example, it is a quite astonishingly blatant rewriting of history from the nationalist point of view. And then they try and win general electoral support for independence, based on an idea of Scottishness again, whatever that is. I really can't see any difference there from what Gellner is talking about. And I think equally when you look around the world it is possible to find equally other examples of that, such as in French Quebec. So yes, his nationalism arguments are just as relevant today as they ever were. The rise in totalitarian states that he was so conscious of, of course, we do not need to stress today so evident are they.

So, then I shall turn to the Islamic point because that is a huge part of his work, which is rather glossed over often. Ernest himself was less certain of this. When asked, he would say something like, "Well, you know, I believe in my nationalism theory about 80% of the time. But I believe in my Islamic theory about 70%

of the time". He was quite happy to be pinned down as having these specific doubts. But his general idea about Islam, that as a tradition it tends to retain literal belief I think is simply empirically borne out. Don't forget, his theories are often phrased in falsifiable ways. That was a characteristic of the way that he would put forward his ideas. His falsifiable point here is simple. It is that by and large Islamic countries do not move towards a secular form of government as they modernise, but they prefer to retain some kind of government which favours belief, and the support of faith is an absolutely integral part of almost any political party which comes into power or wishes to retain it. As far as I can see, this is absolutely the case for Islamic countries all the way from the east, right up into North Africa. This is the predominant trend, and also, the predominant trend is that by and large, individual belief in Islam is sustained even whilst the rest of the world's religions are secularising again, a point which Ernest very frequently made. It is falsifiable and absolutely is this case.

One can argue about the details. Gellner said that Turkey contradicted all his theories. But yet you know, it didn't. In the end, Turkey went just as much, as his wider theories would predict. He also said that as far as he was concerned, the Kemalist project in Turkey had failed, something that he maintained long before the present government came to power. You can always argue and say, well, you know, it's not as Islamic as, say, Iran, or it is not ostentatiously Islamic as say, another country, such as Morocco. Yes, there are always nuances but by and large, I think, he did believe, correctly, that he witnessed the systematic dismantling of the eastern European communist world, and a contrasting emergence of a much more Islamist one. However, much you want to argue about the about the details, this seems to be empirically the case.

What about his segmentary lineage theory? We all remember how he maintained this, in spite of opposition from almost everybody in the UK at least, although not so much on the continent. Well, again, all I can say is, that by my own fieldwork experience, this empirical emphasis on segmentary theories in Muslim societies is absolutely correct. The argument often suggested that he (and other British earlier anthropologists sympathetic to this approach) had made up their data I regard as absolutely fatuous. I certainly don't think that the ethnography in this case was made up. One can see examples of this in various locations, for instance in different parts of the Islamic world, of people identifying themselves in terms of patrilineages, and in turn see that this is absolutely integral to the running of society. One can see the way that that some of these patrilineages regard themselves and are regarded by their followers as being more holy than other patrilineages, because they have access to God which other people don't have, and you can see that these people are called to mediate in disputes. Again,

these are all falsifiable propositions. These days one can take a video camera and watch them in action as indeed the people that I work with have done to demonstrate their own cultural ways. They have even loaded onto YouTube their own ceremonies showing their own hereditary religious figures, which are called *dede*. If you want to look it up, please do. It certainly isn't a figment of our or their imagination. Is this still relevant? Absolutely. It's relevant precisely because these acephalous communities tend to become more oppositional in the transition to modernity, and in certain cases become more secular as they become part of the contemporary nation state. So, actually, the way that they encounter the modern world appears to be absolutely linked to their traditional social organisation. This means that in turn we can develop new theories of modernity, showing how it is connected to traditional social order rather than economic classes, which is something that of course Gellner himself would have found absolutely fascinating. Finally, so far as his historical sociology is concerned, what might be regarded as his grand project, clearly this will remain as long as there are those who are teaching or interested in the emergence of the modern world. But I shall stop there.

PETR SKALNÍK

Thank you very much. Thank you very much indeed, David. Now the third speaker is Alan Macfarlane. I would maybe call him Nestor or very experienced.

ALAN MACFARLANE

Thank you, Peter, and for organising it and good wishes to all of you. You did write to us and say we had between 5 and 10 minutes, and so I had made a talk for 10 minutes but if you get fed up, then you can stop me. But you did ask us to do up to 10 minutes, so I'm going to take the question where does Gellner meet our need and where does he not any more.

In terms of meeting our needs, I think his approach is the right one. His questions are the (particularly Scottish) Enlightenment ones. Gellner is in some ways the last of the great Enlightenment period of his hero David Hume and others like Adam Smith, Montesquieu, and later Enlightenment-wide thinkers like Max Weber. And so, he asks the big questions. What is the modern world? How did it get here? What can we do about its defects? What are its advantages? And those are the questions we should continue to ask. They haven't gone away, although many people narrow down to sub-questions within it. So, the approach in that way is right.

Secondly, the approach being so large requires more than one discipline. You can't label Ernest. He is obviously trained in philosophy and knows some philosophy. He was a Professor of Philosophy. He was a Professor of Sociology. He

was a Professor of Anthropology. And he spent quite a bit of time towards the end of his life writing about history. So, he brings in all the social sciences – not so much psychology – though he did want to be trained in that too. So, he's got the questions and the tools. He's got the question.

Gellner also has the background experience. He has done fieldwork not just in one place. His PhD in North Africa among the Berbers was one branch, so he knows about North Africa. He knows about the Middle East and Islam. He knows about Eastern Europe, coming from Czechoslovakia, and also working on the Soviet Union. And he knows a good deal about continental and Western Europe, including England.

Finally, he has an inquisitive, and even combative, approach. He doesn't accept anything as given. It's in the Cartesian-Humean tradition of distrusting orthodoxies of any kind. And his work is characterised by an undermining or questioning of many of what he would consider to be closed, cult-like, belief systems; post-modernism, psychoanalysis, Oxford linguistic philosophy, the Soviet system, even Islam. So, these four features make him a person who is still absolutely relevant.

We can also draw from some of his major conclusions and contributions. His work on nationalism, though limited, is still very relevant, particularly in showing that nationalism is deeply related to the social, economic, technological background from which it emerged. And his work is very influential and helpful in relation to certain branches of nationalism.

In terms of history, his idea of the great shifts, particularly from agrarian civilisations to industrial ones, is still the question we should be looking at. And he provides many insights into the mysteries of that change.

His work on concepts and society, I found deeply helpful. The idea that we don't just see the world head-on; that we live within a bubble or a surrounding set of filters which refract reality; that what we see is deeply shaped by underlying assumptions and cosmologies of which we are not aware. That is exactly how it is, and it was Ernest who explained this to me.

Finally, in relation to liberty, his work on the conditions of liberty, is, I think, brilliant. He is deeply aware of the importance, the uniqueness, the peculiarity of living within a world of liberty. The world he rejoiced in and found in the Scottish Enlightenment. So, Ernest has the basic preconditions for great work, which is a sense, as Adam Smith put it, of 'wonder and surprise'. And therefore he gave us a fresh view of almost everything he touched.

In terms of his limitations, Ernest was educated and brought up as a European, a part of the Euro and Anglo spheres. He never really engaged with the three quarters of the world which is outside the monotheistic belt of Europe and the

West of the Soviet Union and Islam. This is perfectly understandable. That's the way I was brought up, and that's how most western thinkers still remain. And although he did visit Nepal and Japan and Africa and elsewhere, he really never engaged in worlds outside the West.

Yet the world has changed, particularly since his sad, early, death at the age of 70 in 1995. We now live in a different world, in a global world where we have to try and understand not just the West but also the Rest. And not just small tribal societies in Africa or the Pacific, but great civilisations like Japan, China, or India. And for that, his background was not appropriate.

Ernest often reminds me of stories of Einstein, who had brilliantly outlined the basic laws of physics in the tradition of the Greek and Western scientific tradition, based on binary thinking and fundamental belief in the stability of the universe. And then, when Einstein was faced with quantum thought, he found it repellent and incomprehensible. God does not play dice, etc. Because the new micro-worlds described in quantum theory basically asked whether there was finally a stable universe out there. And though Einstein gradually accommodated himself to it, he found it undermining.

That's how, in discussions with Ernest and watching his reactions to things, I think Ernest felt about the cosmologies of the great civilisations, particularly of China and Japan, where you don't have a single God, where you don't have a single origin, where things are muddled and messy. There are endless contradictions, statements which are both true and false at the same time. There is far too much relativism, contextualism, which he was opposed to. And so, he rejected that. He had to keep his world tightly bound together in order to make sense of it.

Therefore, in a way, what we now have to do is subject Ernest to the same treatment that he applied to the many closed thought systems he dissected. That is to interrogate him, to realise that his system is also closed in certain ways, and it needs some opening out and fresh air brought into it. Not to destroy it, but to use his wisdom and wide and penetrating, and often amusing thoughts, to illuminate a world which is now filled with contradictions, global pressures and currents, which he was not in a position really to understand.

PETR SKALNÍK

Thank you very much, Alan. Excellent addition to our discussions. And we go to our historian, the only one who can be labelled that way, Guido Franzinetti.

GUIDO FRANZINETTI

Keith Hart has recently pointed out that while his 1973 article on the 'informal economy' is widely cited, very few seem to have read it, let alone discussed it.

This is the destiny of all classics: to be cited, but no longer actually read. In my experience, this is what has happened to Gellner's *Nations and Nationalism* (1983), at least in the historical profession. Everybody refers to Gellner. You can check it out on the Google Books Ngram Viewer, but I really do not know how many people actually read it, let alone discuss it.

My remarks are essentially negative, in the spirit that 'less is more'. The model for this discussion is Benedetto Croce's old article, "What is living and what is dead in the philosophy of Hegel" (1906).

I will give just two examples of things which in my view are redundant in Gellner's models. They are redundant from the point of view of the logic of Gellner's theory (as distinct from redundant from my personal point of view). The classic example is the reference to the French Revolution, supposedly seen as a key event in the development of nationalism. Gellner perhaps never formulated it so strictly in that way, but he certainly allowed this impression to be confirmed.

I think the best demonstration that of the fact that the reference to the French Revolution was not necessary in working out the model of nationalism was provided by his paper "The social roots of egalitarianism" (1979), which he presented again in 1984 at an LSE seminar (and then republished in *Culture, Identity, and Politics*, 1987). At the seminar he was duly attacked by one of his leftist critics for having neglected the role of the *idea* of equality. I think that exactly proves the point that the French Revolution was not a necessary condition for the model as a whole.

On a more similar vein, I would also argue that the distinction between ethnic and civic nationalism was not really necessary in his model. I believe Gellner simply bought it off the shelf from Hans Kohn. There is now an argument as to whether Kohn really believed in this distinction. I cannot go into that, but I would argue that this distinction was never really logically required, and certainly not before 1991. Starting in 1991, in a series of writings (and especially in *The Coming of Nationalism and Its Interpretation: The Myths of Nation and Class* (1992 in Russian, 1993 in Italian, 1996 in English). Gellner began to offer a more chronologically structured and detailed model of the development of nationalism, with the introduction of 'time zones'. This fact may have given some readers the impression of a shift from a deductive to an inductive perspective. While the new version was clearer than the previous one, it actually led to misunderstandings of the basic model, which remained strictly deductive.

None of this means that there is a shortage of topics on which it can now be argued that Gellner's views do not fit the facts, or that they have been superseded by events.

There is a whole discussion over 'civil society', and this has been argued widely for a long time; in particular Chris Hann has made repeated critiques. I would simply point out that this element was not very present before 1991. I am not saying it was not present. I am just saying that is a question of relative emphasis. I think the really big shift in emphasizing civil society came after 1989 or 1991.

I was going to say something on Gellner's views of Islamic societies, but Shankland has already said it, and much more effectively. I simply wanted to point out that while many commentators have argued that changes in Islamic societies have disproven Gellner's model, I would suggest that the jury is still out.

So, what instead remains valid in Gellner's theories? Again, if I have to choose, on the basis that less is more, first of all, his non-Marxist materialism. God forbid, we all know that nowadays materialism is not really very appreciated and never was in his day. Secondly, and more importantly, Gellner's argument on the absence of a Marxist theory of violence, which for me is a key in his understanding of Marxism. In turn, this absence leads on to the Marxist theory of the withering of the state, and ultimately to the absence of a proper Marxist theory of the nation (or the flaws in the attempts to elaborate one).

At another level, in historical studies the category of 'national indifference' has now attracted much attention. But this theory was in fact foreshadowed by Gellner in 1983 (as any attentive reading will confirm).

We could argue about many caricatures of Gellner's thinking but I would like to conclude on two general points.

Firstly, I would really like to encourage people to look into the East-Central European heritage of nationalism studies. I refer in particular to the Czechoslovak, Czech, and Slovak, Polish and Hungarian. There were plenty of things which Gellner neglected. He did not have time; he didn't know them. If he had lived longer, he might have discussed them. I think Gellner would also have brought something out of the discussions on Austro-Marxism. (As it happens, around 1940, in America, Feliks Gross tried to illustrate Austro-Marxist theories to Malinowski.)

Secondly, as Shankland has pointed out, Gellner was not writing history. I think part of the problem is the fact that his book appeared in the series called 'New Perspectives in History', so it was immediately read as if this was the ultimate solution to the problems of nationalism in historical studies. Of course, there were also other, more general misunderstandings, which I have tried to address in the paper for the Gellner Legacy conference. The problem was never that historians and social scientists neglected nationalism. In fact, since the First World War, even third-rate social scientists had been addressing it. The problem derived from the way in which it was framed.

PETR SKALNÍK

OK. Thank you very much Guido. And now we have Adam Horálek.

ADAM HORÁLEK

Hello everybody. Thank you very much for all your comments. I really enjoy this, and it takes me back to our conference and our book, and I really enjoy this discussion. What I wanted to talk about today is not really the topic I'm mostly concerned with. And that's Gellner's national and nationalism theory, but it is let's say, the general aspect of his writing. I will talk today from two short perspectives. The first as a teacher and the second one as the one who is developing the theory or the concept of ageing nationalism which I was talking about in my chapter in the book.

As a teacher I realised that the compulsory readings on Gellner's theory of nationalism is a not only educating about the nationalism itself, but I realised that Gellner's writing is completely different from writings which we usually use today for education. His broader concepts and his grasp for general abstraction which of course leads to some shortcuts and limitations but enable a great abstraction also for the reader. And that's what I think, Gellner is very important as an educational material, because it helps people understanding the broader connections and concepts and that is why I am using Gellner's papers mostly to teach not only on nationalism, but also on methodology and theory of anthropology in general. The nomothetic approach he is using in a way, of course, limited with his experience of Middle, or Central European and let's say Islamic world experience.

But I, but I think, it's not so limited. And that's my second thought I had for today. It is when concerning my theory of Asian nationalism, which I have very briefly introduced in my chapter. I'm talking about the two major concepts or phenomena going on today, and that's this rebirth of nationalism we are facing everywhere in the world and the second aspect is demographic ageing of populations which is creating the huge society of elderly people which are used and as a huge political power in many democracies and beyond democracies as well. The ageing population is a target topic for most politicians worldwide. Not only in the democratic world, but also China and my research in Taiwan is confirming that this ageing targeting the ageing population is a very big issue. And that is why I am critical or sceptical about talking about post-modernity. When reading Gellner, I think we have not passed yet to modernity. There is a lot of traditionality in our world still fighting modernity. So why post-modernity in a way? And this is actually the clash which I am studying now. When focusing on this ageing nationalism, the nationalism between older and younger generations, it's pretty much discourse, which can be raised on the borderland or on the frontier between Cyberia and

Industria. It can be the borderland between tradition and modernity. It can be, in many ways, discussion between Gellnerian and post-Gellnerian nationalism in many ways. When I was writing my paper and when we had a very nice discussion with Alan at the conference, I remember, we discussed much whether Gellner's theory can fit to that what was discussed as Asian nationalisms. As for China, I'm not talking today about China at all. In this context I'm talking about Taiwan because that's my major field of research at this moment, and I can say that the more I research for other sources, the more I have to go back to Gellner to understand many aspects of what's going on in current Taiwan quest for identity, quest for Taiwanese in in fight with the Chineseness which represent these two worlds in a way, and as I said, these two worlds can be labelled as modern and traditional, old and young, or Gellnerian and post-Gellnerian. So, my conclusion of my contribution today is that the more I do research in Taiwan, the more I realise that there are certain transcendent or generally relevant thoughts of Gellner's theory which can be still applied even today. So, thank you.

PETR SKALNÍK

Thank you very much. And now we are coming to the last two speakers who are on the programme. Daniele Conversi, are you there, Daniele?

DANIELE CONVERSI

What follows are some rather impromptu remarks. As you know, my chapter attempts to analyse through a Gellnerian perspective the human survival crisis we are entering, a crisis deeply rooted in industrialisation. It tries to make new connections where Gellner left off. First, one aim is to push the argument a little bit further and see whether a true connection can be established between Ernest Gellner's critique of post-modernism and the current prevalence of fake news, distortion, and misinformation, as these are all strictly connected to nationalism (Conversi, Hassan et al. 2023).

Secondly, the connection with nationalism is something which hasn't been sufficiently explored except perhaps in Conversi 2020, both in the relationship to climate change, and in the relationship to the spread of fake news, most often conveyed in the term 'populism' – 'populism' has remained for too long at the centre stage of this relationship in the Internet era.

I direct my investigation precisely to those two aspects of Ernest Gellner's thought. But an important challenge is to think in terms of their usefulness. The need is to contrast the postmodernist drift, still prevalent, although in renewed ways, in areas of the social sciences and geography. The risk remains the same, but amplified in the age of 'post-truth': considering everything a discourse, as

a narrative: that's a genuine problem, because if everything is a discourse, we do not know where the truth lies and so everything is subjected to a kind of deeply weakening relativism, which in this particular historical moment is more dangerous than ever.

My ideal intention is to link Ernest Gellner's critique of the 'linguistic turn' to the series of subsequent developments which comprise, the focus on discourse, narratives, words, and speeches and, – including discourse analysis. And extend this to the epidemics of 'fake news' and then to the current explosion of nationalism – as I have attempted to do recently, and finally, the stress of populism as political action rather than discourse. The current focus on populism prevailing in political science is particularly misplaced because what remains in the background is the 'nation' as a general and broader political framework.

The term 'Anthropocene' was coined in the year 2000, since then, the term has been incorporated into most of the social sciences, including history (Chakrabarty 2009): it has been submerged by criticism, but it is becoming increasingly insufficient to comprehend what is actually happening. My recent book (Conversi 2022), so far only in Italian, uses another concept besides Anthropocene: *planetary boundaries*, which include climate change as one of nine limits not to be transcended for the sake of the survival of life on Earth (Rockström, Steffen et al. 2009). But this is science. It really brings together hard data from the hard science, which means interdisciplinarity needs to be stressed as never before. The urgent need for interdisciplinarity also implies that we cannot survive as human societies if we continue keeping ourselves confined in any form of infra-disciplinary jargon – which Gellner would obviously slate.

As far as high fences are bureaucratically built around each existing discipline, disciplinary animals remain unyieldingly intent in protecting their territory and defend it tooth and nail.

But, if we do not attempt some incursions in areas which are outside our 'pertinence', as if afraid that a dog would bite us, knowledge cannot advance. Yes, we need to risk that a dog bites us!

This is the moment to rediscover the interdisciplinary passion and fervour which Gellner had when he brought together anthropology, sociology, philosophy and even psychology (in his critique of Freudianism) – as Alan Macfarlane mentioned earlier. This adds to his indispensable criticism of the mundane focus on appearance and the vagueness of the 'linguistic turn' – which is still deeply entrenched in all social sciences.

I would conclude that, while Ernest Gellner may have not won in this respect, we are now in the historical moment to take advice or notice of his message.

PETR SKALNÍK

Thank you very much indeed, Daniele for your important remarks. And now with the last speaker with announced contribution, Zdeněk Uherek. Zdeněk, floor is yours.

ZDENEK UHEREK

Thank you for inviting me. It is a great honour for me to contribute. The questions formulated by Thomas Hylland Eriksen and Petr Skalník inspire me, and I will join them in one answer, following my expertise as a social anthropologist and a teacher of courses on nationalism, migration, and urban anthropology. I could communicate with Ernest Gellner just at the beginning of the 1990s, especially at the Prague College of Central European University, which I joined as a senior research fellow of his Centre for the Study of Nationalism. It means at the time when he was enormously influential and had many followers and opponents. I see his theoretical thinking now as a type of narrative, and I am particularly interested in why he and his peers probably interpreted the surrounding world the way they did. I wonder why the discourse of the time led them to the narrative strategies they used.

First, I would like to emphasise that the works of Ernest Gellner had a necessarily, albeit unintentionally, political dimension and, at the same time, were embedded in a contemporary historical context. In Prague College, it was evident since only his presence here, and his interpretation of Malinowski's synthesis and Habsburg legacy for European thinking, was a strong intellectual signal encouraging students and academicians to concrete study directions. The state of knowledge at the time he lived and the overall socio-political discourse are present in his work, determine it and cannot be neglected, even though Gellner was very individualistic and, as Chris Hann once wrote, a swimmer against the mainstream academical current.

Ernest Gellner's theory of nationalism was formulated just after the Second World War when the democratic world was searching for an answer to the question of what social bonds and ties could have propelled the world into such horror and what social bonds could have created large-scale solidarity groups of people committed to joint action in the name of their nations. The concept of nationalism as this link has been suggested and elaborated in various forms by many writers. Gellner also was not the only person that connected modern thinking on nationalism with the spread of education, information, and modern media. In addition to the excellent Ernest Gellner and Benedict Anderson, we can also mention Karl Deutsch, George Orwell, John Armstrong, Herbert Marcuse and many others. A significant part of these authors emphasises the link of nationalism to

the emergence of civil society in the modern industrial epoch. In the Gellnerian interpretation, nationalism is necessary but temporal and has somewhere, like in Germany or Soviet Union, gotten pathological traits. The emergence of totalitarian regimes and warfare was not only a matter of nationalism but systemic failures when the principles of the French Revolution were not fulfilled, nor a robust social theory capable of elucidating social change was created. These failures had disastrous consequences and were viewed by Gellner and by many of his peers, at the time, as temporal failures of the past, just as nationalism is temporal and will be overcome by assumed developmental changes. Gellner's posthumously published book *Nationalism* apparently summarises something fading away. Its strong stress on discontinuous temporality results from Gellner's desire to clearly assign himself against the primordialist understanding of nationalism as something with much deeper roots. Later, frequently younger authors following Gellner no longer shared his discontinuous conception and theme of temporality so strictly. Eric Hobsbawm, with his proto-nationalism, Anthony Smith and his ethnosymbolism touched on the deeper roots of human sociability, which manifested itself in specific types of human behaviour in the industrial epoch.

The nationalism conceived as a project of cultural unification is problematic too. States frequently resigned to coherent cultural politics as well as other branches of social life. Publications of the postmodern era do not strictly weigh the concepts of nation, nationalism and the state so closely connected as Gellner did. Saskia Sassen expresses this when she writes about the denationalisation of the state. The nationalism of the 21st century is often perceived as a pathological behaviour that does not represent state interests and confirms Gellner's assumption of its temporality, at least in its sense of the word in the modern era. Many nationalisms were identified in societies like methodological nationalism, medical nationalism, global nationalism, and masochistic nationalism. It is clear that today states built inner cohesion on pluralities of principles where cultural unity and national sentiment are present but rarely dominant. Gellner perfectly described many elements of community building in the era of modernism and created an explanatory framework that was, and I believe still is, possible to interpret social events in the era of industrialisation and subsequent events, primarily through the prism of the experience and a discourse of the second half of the 20th century until approximately the 1980s.

At the time of the last editing of the publication *Ernest Gellner's Legacy and Social Theory Today*, the war in Ukraine had begun, and its course, the way it is being conducted, the attitudes of the states and the propaganda that follows it show that post-modernism and Cyberspace (Cyberia) can intervene effectively but does not change the content and principles of human behaviour.

The question of how the Gellnerian theory fits contemporary sociability can be raised again in a new light. Is the French Revolution and the turn of a series of nationalisms into totalitarian regimes part of a more profound logic? Gellner was creating sophisticated theoretical constructions. These were relatively closed narratives in which formative changes periodising human development into stages played a significant role. However, less visible stimuli also affect the forms of social mobilisation and human behaviour. Are there other constants and temporalities that social theory sometimes calculates with, but separately? The idea of a change in power arrangements or a technology change that mechanically alters human thought is also part of the modern epoch and a space for reconsideration. To integrate more organically into social theory purely anthropological elements, such as the consequences of differentials in the upbringing of children in different parts of the world, social memory transcending technological change, stereotyping, the idea of self-realisation, self-fulfilment in different societies, ideology, whose content is not necessarily tied to the media through which it is transmitted, the concept of happiness in particular communities, and other topics that are not unfamiliar to anthropology but are often not included in the explanatory patterns of general social theory are certainly themes that can move Gellnerian social theory out of the strict temporality and into broader social practices.

Ernest Gellner's generation needed to explain nationalism as temporality. It would be feasible now to explain nationalism as a temporal (or situational) representation of collective bonds with multiple continuities and discontinuities and self-reproducing solid potential.

PETR SKALNÍK

Thank you very much. The current burning issue is the Russian aggression in Ukraine, and when I listened to Daniele mentioning the role of fake news and the propaganda and all which goes with it, I was thinking of Russia of how to understand Russia. And Gellner also said that the Marxist theory of violence is somewhat missing, and perhaps we should give a kind of first word to Chris Hann because he hasn't yet spoken, and he said he would contribute to the discussion.

CHRIS HANN

Well, Peter, thank you. Thank you, I am sorry I was not able to formulate a contribution in advance, but I am so glad to have heard these rich presentations from friends and colleagues.

The Department of Social Anthropology in Cambridge in the 1970s and 1980s was led by two scholars with distinctive visions of world history. I was fortunate enough to know both, Jack Goody and Ernest Gellner, personally. They were

very different personalities, but Gellner drew on Goody's research on literacy in developing his own more abstract models of social evolution, including the onset of *Industria* and the nationalism that was concomitant. Anthropology has produced many excellent ethnographers; it has contributed to the cultural history of particular regions everywhere; but at its best it can also raise big questions about both the past and the future of human life on this planet. So, this is the first sense in which scholars of the calibre of Ernest Gellner are needed in the anthropology departments of the 21st century. (Alas, with intensified specialisation such polymaths are becoming increasingly rare. In my own generation, only David Graeber has met this need: a debate between Gellner and Graeber would have been a joy!)

There are bound to be complaints. Gellner's failure to attend seriously to gender relations in his corpus was noted during his lifetime (indeed, readily conceded by the man himself). Inadequate attention to multiculturalism and a deep-seated Eurocentism have already been noted by others in this webinar (Eriksen and Macfarlane respectively). I have criticised a certain idealisation of the conditions of industrialised democracy, a construction that was perhaps biased by the meritocratic social democracy of Britain's welfare state in its heyday. It is not just his aversion to Communism and to Marxist sociology, to the vocabulary of class struggle and modes of production. Gellner is not obliged to use words like *capitalism* or *neoliberalism* if he judges them to be dubious simplifications (suspicions I share). But even his own style of schematic theorising would benefit from a little more engagement with political economy. He seems not to have noticed the turn taken in 1980s Britain under Margaret Thatcher, let alone its deeper causes, and consequences that still shape British society today.

The weakening of the welfare state and rising inequality are related ideologically to the neoliberalism of Hayek, a connection that should have appealed to Gellner's abiding interest in the legacies of Austria-Hungary. But he did not follow this path. In his late work, he offered wishy-washy defences of an "embedded liberalism" (Ruggie) that was already being transformed by mass privatisation schemes (from 1990 in the East as well as the West). Gellner asserts that the economy must be decentralised, for otherwise there will be no innovation and consumer needs will not be met. At the same time, however, industrial societies need effective states to coordinate and provide infrastructure, as well as to offer a measure protection for the losers (not as a matter of right but out of a sense of decency). This seems inadequate (I wish I had had an opportunity to persuade Ernest that Karl Polanyi, another product of the late Habsburg cauldron, offers a socialist alternative to the Hayekian enthusiasm for spontaneous markets).

But I do not wish to end negatively. We also need Ernest Gellner today as the ironic self-proclaimed Enlightenment Fundamentalist, the scourge of relativism and all its associates, including post-modernism, postcolonial theory, and many more strands prominent in socio-cultural anthropology a generation after his passing. He was attracted to British social anthropology in the dying years of empire for a number of reasons, but the aspiration to provide rigorous models of social structure based on fieldwork was certainly one of them. Fieldwork is still our gold standard, but Gellner would surely condemn the contemporary focus on discourse and meaning at the expense of social structure and the dimensions of economy and force. He would deplore the weakening of comparison, the tendency to devalue the research that was undertaken under earlier forms of colonialism, and the identity politics that inhibit investigation by scholars external to the group in question. In short, were he to reappear today he would very quickly be a victim of “cancel culture”.

But just as you cannot *cancel* the solid accomplishments of colonial anthropology (it is because the quality is so high that you can re-read them critically), so the many contributions of Ernest Gellner remain a vital part of our history: from kinship theory to philosophy of history, from Berber ethnography to polemical interventions addressing the fads of the age. It is entirely appropriate that Gellner eventually turned decisively against Karl Popper, when he realised at the end of his life that the Popperian world was actually a closed one. Had he lived longer, I am sure he would have turned against the mantra of civil society as the panacea for the ills of postsocialism, and for similar reasons. Gellner revelled in the role of gadfly or maverick, but at the core there is a solid deference to the cumulative insights of empirical social science.

PETR SKALNÍK

Thank you so much Chris. Do you want to finish with this? Or anybody else?

ALAN MACFARLANE

I just wanted to come back to the main themes in Thomas's talks about ecology because I think this is another area where I suggested, if you understood the conflict in Ukraine, you have to rise up well above the two battling empires and their proxies. And I think the same is the case with world ecological problems. I am now simplifying enormously monotheistic religions of the West. I know Christianity at best has an exploitative and confrontational binary aggressive attitude towards nature. Genesis tells us that nature was created for man's purposes, and we have continued in that fashion that we don't actually feel involved in the natural world very directly. We see it as something which we can manipulate,

and capitalism exaggerates it. My encounters with the 3/4 of the world outside that Eurosphere, and Anglosphere, particularly in Nepal, but also Japan and China, is that the attitude is entirely different. In other words, there what has not occurred is the Axial Age, the axial division between two levels pushing one away and making this material world, the real world, and as a result is, where I work in the Himalayas, of course, they've destroyed their ecology and so on and so on to a large extent through various pressures. On the other hand, they do believe that every, every, object around them is part of them: that a rock, a tree, a stone, a waterfall, and having got below the level in Japan in my book on Japan, it's the same thing. Kami spirits. And in China, it's the same feng shui all sorts of entities. That worldview is totally different from ours, and I see it as a much more likely an avenue towards an integrated ecological vision because it does not create a battle, a fight between us and nature. It says nature is us, we are nature, we are part of it. So, all I'm basically saying is what I read from William Wordsworth when I was a child, and I believed in Wordsworth's childhood world. And thank you.

PETR SKALNÍK

Thank you. That was really an excellent kind of closing remark. And I would just add the question, what about the artificial intelligence is going to do with that, but that would be perhaps topic for another book. I think, David will have a discussion recently about this topic in the Royal Anthropological Institute. As a moderator, I would like to thank all of you. Good luck to you all, good health, and thanks a lot indeed. Bye bye.