

Gellner Revisited and Revitalised for an Age Languishing in Indifference and Relativism

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This monumental study on Ernest Gellner (1925-1995) illustrates (as if such were necessary) the breadth and scope of Gellner's thinking, of his erudition and his singular ability to dissolve the often-contrived borders between Sociology, Anthropology, History, and Philosophy.

Nearly thirty years have passed since he died, and in that relatively short space of time (one says 'short' because in the terms that he himself established, thirty years is not a long time), the world has changed so dramatically. Of course, it's a moot point whether it has changed for the better. Would today's world even have been recognisable for Gellner, or indeed one should ask, is it not because of Gellner, that the subsequent permutations of our global culture are at least decipherable?

Naturally, the question that comes to mind is whether one can still view Gellner as relevant to our age, and if so, how? This study edited by Petr Skalník provides a resounding reply in the affirmative, though let it be said, not easily so. The disciplines being deployed in this volume are so wide-ranging, incisive and profound – very much in keeping with the dexterity, *elan* and insight that characterise Gellner's approach to the pressing questions with which our varied cultures have had to grapple.

Gellner clearly was not one to have his mind put at rest by facile solutions, such as relativism or monolithic ideological sleights of hand that have brought misery to millions.

With Gellner straddling the various disciplines, this volume of over 600 pages, contains the contribution of a host of eminent scholars, each giving their own

response to a particular aspect of Gellner's variegated thinking, each emphasising that aspect of Gellner's thoughts which awakens each contributor's expertise. Gellner's study of Islam for example take us into the realm of Ibn Khaldun and his concept of *asabiyyah* or "group feeling" which in turn produces the ability to defend oneself, to protect oneself and to press one's claims, i.e., whoever loses his group feeling [*asabiyyah*] is too weak to do any one of these things'.

Further elucidation of this point is provided in Siniša Malešević's chapter, being just one example of the range of thought and probing that Gellner and his followers engage in. Malešević's chapter is complemented by further studies on how the application of a Gellnerian "formula" as it were can be applied to for example Turkey, a society that is at variance with many presuppositions that seek to make the Islamic world more accessible to Western oriented scholars.

In Chapter 16, for example, David Shankland has entitled his contribution Gellner: "Right and Wrong". In this rather more personalised account of his dealings with Gellner. In his chapter Shankland deals extensively with the nexus of Gellner's ideas where *Agraria* and *Industria* are at loggerheads with one another, in a way which seems starker in the context of the Maghreb.

The contributors variously give their own reading of the significance of Wittgenstein or more precisely "Wittgensteinerism" and the "narodniks" of North Oxford, who worshipped at the altar of Wittgenstein whose philosophy of language was excoriated by Gellner, leading in his view to the lamentable supremacy of relativism and post-Modernism. In the Preface to his *Postmodernism, Reason and Religion*, his views are most succinctly put across:

"Alliances crystallise, but their internal strains and inescapable disappointment inevitably provoke re-alignments, and no participant can really settle down in a stable liaison. It is all somewhat like the children's game of scissors, paper and rock: the scissors cut paper, the paper wraps the rock, the rock blunts the scissors. There is no stable dominance, only inherent instability. What are the three contestants?

- 1 Religious fundamentalism.
- 2 Relativism, exemplified for instance by the recent fashion of 'postmodernism'.
- 3 Enlightenment rationalism, or rationalist fundamentalism." (Page 13).

Here we have what all the contributors in one guise or another, are examining and thrashing out the permutations of Gellner's thought. One sees in the above Gellner's consistent faith in rationalism, the appropriation of 18th century Enlightenment values that in a sense restore his faith in the supremacy of that human faculty which functions as a bulwark against delusions of fundamentalism

(be they religious, Marxist or Fascist) and relativism, the latter which gives rise to the “anything goes” paradigm, and which is ultimately a lazy way out of engagement with whatever ails Mankind at any particular juncture. And, this is what makes Gellner’s thinking so compelling and where his forays into philosophy, history, sociology and anthropology put him in a sense in an unassailable position. His specialisations put him in a position to evaluate from various angles the fraught issues of our times. In short, for Gellner there are no short cuts. We have to study and understand, say, the cosy contradictions of the Habsburg empire, we have to examine the dichotomy between *Gesellschaft* and *Gemeinschaft*. In other words, Gellner is if nothing else thorough and unrelenting in his pursuit of truths, whether they be arrived at via history, sociology, philosophy or anthropology.

Seen thus, our scholars in this volume have primarily convinced us of their shared authenticity in their approach to the truths which Gellner extolled. Gellner is not one for facile solutions, and consequently any engagement with his ideas baulk at a superficial *Auseinandersetzung* of the parameters of his thought.

Chris Hann makes a cogent point when he says: “Nothing in the intellectual apparatus of Ernest Gellner equipped him to grasp the causes of post-socialist trends in political economy.” This notion has been referred to several times in the overall study of Gellner’s legacy. Of course, it would have been useful if Gellner had lived longer to see developments in Viktor Orbán’s Hungary or in Poland. However, the scope of his analysis is such that he better equips us to try to understand developments when Marxist fundamentalism gave way to market forces and when ethnic nationalism once again reared its head in post-socialist Europe. Ample examples of this can also be seen in the xenophobic atrocities that occurred in Rostock and Hoyerswerda in the former East Germany.

Alan Macfarlane’s view of Japan and the implicit need for a re-examination of the applicability of Gellner’s ideas to a culture suffused with idiosyncrasies. The example of Japan, moreover, serves the useful purpose of deflecting from self-congratulatory Western, or Mediterranean paradigms and balances the exemplification of former Habsburg territories. John Hall’s chapter, among other invaluable insights, also lends a certain intimacy to the discussion on Gellner.

As Chris Hahn points out: “Nowadays the inconsistencies in illiberal democracies are much more obvious. Just as the Popper of 1945 was no longer defensible in 1994, so the Gellner of 1994 cannot be defended in 2022 and modifications are called for”. His is a pithy observation and helps us to contextualise the limits that our moment in history impose on us, and especially on a strident thinker such as Gellner who by force of circumstance seems to have felt compelled to go into the various intellectual directions that he did. The thought of his staying any longer in Czechoslovakia after 1939, and not going to England, does not bear

contemplation, given his Jewish lineage. That said, Gellner's life reminds us of the happenstance of the lives of those who have contributed to and illuminated so much of our often fractious and discordant interpretations of the world.

Another aspect which sets this work apart are the commentaries which follow each of the chapters, where contributors are given the opportunity to comment on their colleagues' work. This is quite daring and not a widespread practice in multi-authored works. The presence of these commentaries would seem to suggest a thorough unity of purpose among all the contributors, namely to do justice to one of the 20th centuries greatest thinkers. *Ernest Gellner 's Legacy and Social Theory Today* will for many years to come be a definitive and indeed, an indispensable text on Gellner, combining as it does the work, inspired commitment and dedication of a host of sincere scholars, putting their erudition at the disposal of the academic fraternity and, in time, the wider public.

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