

Book Reviews

Ernest Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2006 (1st edn., 1983). liii+152 pp. £16.99 (pbk).

Over ten years after his death, Gellner's impact still remains unparalleled, but not unchallenged. Gellner's weight has been exerted both directly and indirectly, pressing other scholars either to acknowledge his contribution or to attempt alternative explanations. His most famous book, *Nations and Nationalism*, is now available in a second edition with a new extended introduction by John Breuilly.

Gellner famously begins by defining nationalism as 'primarily a principle that holds that the political and national unit should be congruent' (p. 1). This is the only clear-cut and unambiguous definition given in the book. All other concepts, from culture to industrialisation, from equality/egalitarianism to modernity, are used in a notoriously generic fashion as catch-all concepts.

In chapters 2, 3 and 4, Gellner advances his most well-known interpretation. The only significant change in the last few thousand years has been the passage from agricultural to industrial society. It is an unprecedented shift that has holistically affected society *in toto*, from its basic social relations to its overall political structure. Like most scholars of nationalism, Gellner is a hard-core modernist, his definition of modernity overlapping basically with industrialisation. More specifically, a standardised 'high' culture becomes the all-pervasive requisite of industrialism. However, only the state has the power to inculcate the new standard on an uprooted labour force. In the homogenising world of nation-states, only statehood can grant protection to small cultures facing constant threats of assimilation. Deeply entrenched in Europe's tragic past experience, Gellner sees no intermediate solutions, like federalism, power-sharing or multiculturalism. In the introduction, Breuilly (p. xvi) rightly criticises this line, bringing in the work of Austro-Marxist philosophers and political scientists (particularly Bauer and Renner), whose work has only recently been translated into English and thus made available to a broader public (mostly thanks to Ephraim Nimni's effort).

In chs 5 and 6, Gellner advances his famous characterisation of fissiparous 'Eastern' nationalism: State-enforced homogenisation, metaphorically identified as the Empire of 'Megalomania', provokes the reaction of those who have been either excluded, or opted out on their own choice in order to protect their own culture. In order to be transformed into a High Culture, the latter needs a political roof. The goal becomes the establishment of a small, but glorious and heroic 'Ruritania', the prototypical nationalist homeland. I shall note that Ruritania was not a Gellnerian neologism, as commonly believed by many scholars. In fact, Gellner took it *verbatim* from the writer Sir Anthony Hope Hawkins (1863–1933), who set his novel *The Prisoner of Zenda* (1894) in the fictional Kingdom of Ruritania.

The remaining chapters tackle various dysfunctions of Gellner's core functionalist thesis. Anticipating criticism, Gellner tries to identify the first set of a (potentially endless) list of exceptions by introducing various *ad hoc* explanations (like 'uneven development') and typologies (such as 'diaspora nationalism', time zones, and various stages).

Finally, by chapter 9, we come to appreciate Gellner's dispute with his LSE archrival Elie Kedourie. As a society-focused structural-functionalist, Gellner argued

that ideology played an insignificant role in the development of nationalism. Kedourie, a historian of ideas, had the opposite view. Obviously Kedourie did some clamorous mistakes, and Gellner easily picked these up. Particularly astonishing was Kedourie's description of Kant, the universalist philosopher, as a nationalist particularist. But Gellner omits to acknowledge Herder's key role, most probably because he was himself deeply Herderian, at least by assuming language as a core value of nationhood. In fact, by culture Gellner means almost exclusively language. To be precise, he uses the concept of 'High Culture'. This is a written, impersonal, context-free culture apt to be ordained and prescribed evenly upon a population by a uniform education system. It is a cultivated, 'garden culture', as counter to its 'wild' counterpart (pp. 48ff.). It is based on an elaborated code and sustained by specialised personnel and institutions of learning. It must be abstract, shared and normative. In other words, rules-bounded and rules-containing.

John Breuille first identifies Gellner's unique contribution, and then puts Gellner's argument to rest. He highlights three fallacies or criticisms (conceptual, empirical and explanatory) to which he adds a series of omissions. However, the list could have been much longer. In fact, the sheer amount of Gellner's generalisations may be far too great for the whole edifice not to crumble when confronted by facts. Yet, we are captivated by the explanatory power of Gellner's crystalline prose enriched by flowing sequences of causations. The reader is typically enchanted by Gellner's logical rigour as if mesmerised by the contemplation of an art masterpiece. No reality may actually be reflected there, if not the author's personal vision. But independently from the faithful evocation of reality, a true masterpiece can suggest a deep communion with the artist. Not casually, in the book's concluding summary we find a reference to art (pp. 132–3). Here he famously contrasts Kokoshcka's and Modigliani's pictorial styles to delineate the shift from agricultural to modern society – the former characterised by the coexistence and overlap of multiple colour dots, the latter by sharply demarcated colour fields which never intermingle.

An accurate bibliography by Ian Jarvie concludes the book (the only minor errors consisting in the spelling or transliteration of some foreign titles). Finally, the book's new 'industrialist' cover finally matches its content (the older cover being a seemingly unrelated painting of Florence's *Piazza della Signoria* inundated by Italian flags).

Of course, Gellner the rationalist, neo-positivist and universalistic social scientist would have abhorred any idiosyncratic account deprived of a universal grasp. But we should wonder whether we are dealing with a scholar or with a poet. The answer is probably both.

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Beverly Milton-Edwards, *Islam and Violence in the Modern Era*. Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006. 236 pp. £50 (hbk).

The 11 September 2001 ('9/11') attacks on the United States were a key event in the debate about the role of religion in international conflict, especially in the way that they focused attention on al-Qaeda's international religious terrorism and led to the subsequent 'war on terror'. For some scholars, analysts and policy makers – especially