Nations and Nationalism 5 (4), 1999, 565–575. © *ASEN 1999*

Review Article

Ernest Gellner as critic of social thought: nationalism, closed systems and the Central European tradition[1]

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Gellner, Ernest. *Language and Solitude: Wittgenstein, Malinowski, and the Habsburg dilemma*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998.

Modernity and nationalism are intrinsically linked. This verdict is shared by most scholars of nationalism, and even 'anti-modernists' subscribe at least partially to this view – although they prefer to focus on the doctrine's more ancient roots. But perhaps none better than Ernest Gellner (1925–95) has expressed this relationship with such a sharp rigour. For Gellner describes with powerful metaphors and 'mathematic' lucidity the emergence of nationalism following the shift from agricultural to industrial society. During this passage, the basis and legitimation of the social order mutuated from religious-theocratic to scientific-secularist forms.

More generally, nationalism is seen as a 'spontaneous' reaction generated by the industrial need for a semi-skilled mobile labour force, which requires a common education system in a common standardised language. The role of mass education is to produce homogenised, easily 'replaceable', individuals: in this way, the nation becomes basically a cultural enterprise. In other words, man needs to be re-rooted in a secured common culture, and the latter must be safeguarded and protected by the state.

Surprisingly, Gellner does not mention the role of the military as the ultimate arbiter of this steam-rolling process. In other words, coercion does not appear in the equation, and fatality takes its place.[2] There is hardly a mention of the terrifying, deeply unsettling role of mass conscription, not to speak of its uses in wars and mass murders.[3] Indeed, there is no critical view, as in George Mosse, of the 'nationalisation of the masses' (as distinct from nationalism) which *preceded* and accompanied the rise of totalitarianism (Mosse 1991). For Gellner, this is the result of some form of inescapable imperative, the imperative of modernisation, from which there is no hideaway.

Despite this mark of ineluctability, Gellner's understanding of nationalism was influenced very much by his 'open' approach, as well as by his

functionalist upbringing: the attempt to explain sociological phenomena by the role or function they play in building social cohesion. This rationalist attitude implied a *tabula rasa* of all ideological mumbo-jumbo and rigid dogmatism. This review article will identify Gellner's main philosophical variables, as especially recognisable in his posthumously published *Language and Solitude* (1998b), a further critique of Wittgenstein on which he was working in the months before his untimely death. However, the book will be seen as a continuation, if not culmination, of Gellner's relatively less known philosophical contribution.

Popper, Wittgenstein and Malinowski: a three-faceted Habsburg legacy

Three main contemporary thinkers are at the core of Gellner's philosophical vision and each played a different role in it. First, Gellner shared much with Sir Karl Popper's (1902–94) vision of open society, even though his relationship with the 'master' was sometimes critical and uneasy.[4] The underlying tenor in all of Gellner's philosophical and social critique was an attack against 'closed systems' of thought, that is, systems that cannot be falsified by independent, external criticism and whose analytical tools are especially bestowed on the followers on the condition that they share the basic assumptions of the 'faith'. His commitment for an open social science implied a fight against ideological inclinations in academia, hence against the periodical reemergence of non-falsifiable paradigms. In general, while adopting Popper's method of refutation, Gellner's concern was rather more for an open social science than for an open society. At the same time, his concerns for a 'free market' economy (as quite distinct from the concept of 'open society') were tinged by disenchantment verging on pessimism. For instance, in another collection of essays he pondered about ways to protect citizens against the excesses of the market (Gellner 1994). Like Popper, he was aware that a relentless spread of the market model of universal competition would bring social and ecological cataclysm – as untamed technological expansion would: 'quite possibly will lead to a total disruption of the environment and the social order' (Gellner 1994: 89).

In comparison to Gellner, Popper's political views were more openly manifested and outspoken. Whereas Gellner maintained a *de rigeur* political neutrality in his writings, Popper's commitment to the ideal of an open society was uncompromising, translating itself into actual political choices and public statements – he was an important influence in British Conservative thought during the Thatcher era. But Popper did not spare himself the risk of isolation as when, in Tory Britain's erstwhile Serbophile ambience, he was one of the forlorn voices to protest vehemently against the rise and consequences of Serbian nationalism – which for him portended the tragic denial of all the basic principles of an open society, inaugurating an

era of unprecedented horror. Amid the shallow scenario of British appeasement, in one of his last public statements Popper ventured to call for air attacks on Serbian forces to end the fighting, dauntlessly claiming: '[Serbian aggression] has to be stopped now, because the murder is going on now. It has to be stopped because of the future of mankind, not only of Europe.'[5] We can hardly imagine a similarly open statement coming from Gellner – even though he did share much of the same underlying liberal anxieties.

Second, Gellner's most corrosive attacks were directed against another Viennese-born philosopher, Ludwig Wittgenstein (1889–1951) – from Vienna, that city which 'for all the richness of its cultural life, seems on the whole to have been spared Hegelianism' (Gellner 1998: 124). The target was obviously the 'second' Wittgenstein, the Wittgenstein of the '*Philosophical Investigations*' (1953) and linguistic philosophy, rather than the 'first' Wittgenstein of logical atomism and the *Tractatus Logicus-Philiosophicus* (1921).[6] The former's total relativism relied on the negation that there can be words which have meanings by standing for inner experiences particular to the person who experiences them; the conclusion is that a philosophical conundrum grew out of misunderstandings of how language works (1995b: 20–6). Since his first writings, Gellner devoted much of his intellectual vigour to debunk what he perceived as the Wittgensteinian imposture. Such a programme of deceit 'recommended a collective infantile regression for all mankind' (1992a: 123). To Wittgenstein's linguistic relativism, Gellner preferred to oppose the innatism of Noam Chomsky, in whose theories of language he saw the antithesis of Wittgenstein, as well as 'an extension and continuation of Durkheim's critique of empiricism' (Gellner 1977: 421–4; 1979: ch. 5).

The confluence between absolute relativism (no possibility of communication) and what can be called 'third-worldism' (which included anti-colonial nationalism, anti-imperialism and kindred approaches) had exercised a deep impact not only on philosophy, but on other social sciences as well. For instance, the American anthropologist Clifford Geertz attempted to introduce in anthropology concepts borrowed from Wittgenstein, a move which Gellner strongly opposed (1995b: 20–6). Geertz argued that 'there was a connection between the lucid objectivity ... practiced by the British school [of anthropology] ... and that effortless domination which the British exercised over the empire on which the sum never set' (1998b: 174–7).

It was, however, in philosophy, with his very first book, *Words and Things* (1959), that Gellner initially voiced a radical attack on the Oxford school of linguistic philosophy – again sharing much of Popper's dislike for the futility of linguistic philosophy in general. In general, Gellner argued that Popper and Wittgenstein embodied two opposite visions of a declining Habsburg legacy. In contrasting ways, they both tried to explore new meanings of how to come to grips with the post-imperial crisis. Gellner attempted to identify the common roots of the two Austrian thinkers, trying

to account for their divergent, indeed opposite, conclusions. Wittgenstein's conceit of linguistic *gemeinschaft* was compared to Popper's vision of civic *gesellschaft* (this kind of dichotomy pervades Gellner's writings). Interestingly, during the 1920s both philosophers were on the fringes of the positivist Vienna Circle, whose 'logical empiricism' concentrated on the problem of meaning through the *verifiability* (or *verification*) *principle.* More succinctly, this view, fully developed in Wittgenstein's *Tractatus* and then totally abandoned by the 'second' Wittgenstein, argued that something is meaningful only if it is empirically verifiable by direct or indirect observation. Popper attacked this view thoroughly, arguing that the positivists' stress on the verifiability criterion failed the most elementary test. He emphasised that by pointing out that scientific laws are often not empirically verifiable.[7]

We have spoken till now of the influence (positive and negative, respectively) exercised by Popper and Wittgenstein. The third element of the triad also came from the Habsburg Central-Eastern European tradition: the Polish-born social anthropologist Bronislaw Malinowski (1884–1942) (Gellner, 1992c). Among all the anthropologists, it was Malinowski who solicited Gellner's most devoted admiration – although the two never met in person. Methodologically, the entire *functionalist* edifice which informs and sustains Gellner's encounter with nationalism, comes from Malinowski. What he called the

> Malinowskian revolution ... was born of transplanting East European practices to the West and endowing them with a Western rationale. A Western anthropologist had been a man inspired by Darwinism to explore the pre-literate history of mankind; an East European ethnographer was a man inspired by the love of his (often but half-born) nation to explore, codify and thereby protect its culture ... Malinowski took this populist-nationalist style of ethnic research, transplanted it from the Carpathians to the Trobriands, bestowed on it an ultra-empiricist and quasi-biological rationale which he had learned from Ernst Mach, and called it (at first in jest) *functionalism.* By severing ethnography from speculative history, however, he also separated it from its use as nationalist propaganda ... (Gellner 1995b: ix–x)

Gellner 'rediscovered' Malinowski's latest script, *Freedom and Civilization* (1944), as guarding some precious suggestions for the students of nationalism.[8] By rejecting both nationalism and cosmopolitanism, Malinowski partook of the Central European heritage of 'cultural autonomy' as an attempt to guarantee and protect cultural differences within the existing political order (hence, avoiding the pitfalls of both secession and state-centralism). Although this 'plan' was never historically implemented because of the rise of mutually destroying nationalisms, Malinowski suggested a crucial alternative and the embryo of a possible way out of the nationalist impasse.

As is known, Malinowski was himself a disciple of Sir James Frazer (1854–1941), his doctoral studies supervisor at the London School of

Economics. The latter's influence was much less pronounced in Gellner's writings – except perhaps in his work on kinship systems (Gellner 1987). In *Language and Solitude*, the positive role of Malinowski is comparatively assessed against that of Wittgenstein on an Habsburgic background. Wittgenstein comes out as totally disinterested in politics, unreflectively taking for granted the run-of-the-mill assumptions of his time and ambience (Gellner 1998b: 76, 85–76, 90–1, 145, 188). Malinowski emerges instead as a deeply concerned Polish citizen who recognised the merits of the Habsburgic policies of 'Indirect Rule' (as in the British system of imperial administration) and was worried about nationalist convulsions (*ibid.*: 143). But, although Malinowski was not a political nationalist, he remained a cultural nationalist at heart. This distinction is stressed by Gellner, who saw Malinowski's support for 'absolute cultural freedom of expression', the preservation of cultural distinctiveness and depoliticised cultural pluralism as the only human solution, 'the only one with some prospect of implementation without major loss of life' (*ibid.*: 144). At the same time, this stress on cultural distinctiveness and its detachment from political power implied deterritorialisation: 'Culture is not necessarily territorial, even though it imprints itself on the landscape' (*ibid.*).

Finally, Gellner postulates the possible influence of Malinowski's views about language on the 'second', born-again Wittgenstein (Gellner 1998b: 146, 155–6). Wittgenstein's formulations of these views certainly came later, hence the chances are that he was directly or indirectly influenced by Malinowski – even though he never acknowledged that. Yet, there was nothing new in these views: they were merely part of the prevailing *Zeitgeist* of the latter-day Habsburg empire and its aftermath. Malinowski's stature resides elsewhere: in his overcoming of Frazer as '*the* paradigmatic anthropologist', a move which constituted 'a complete break, a *coupure*' within anthropology (*ibid.*: 113). This was the radical passage from Darwinist evolutionary theory to the method of functional explanation, a paradigm shift which subsequently had an enormous impact on all other social sciences and political thought and informed Gellner's own reading of nationalism.

An anti-relativist crusade?

Gellner's rejection of relativist thought was part of a more general concern for the fate of British social science, in which he diagnosed the preponderance of a sort of 'expiation of colonial guilt'. Such an imperial legacy inhibited all internal debate as a malignant fog, hampering all possibility of rational scrutiny. The accompanying 'anti-rationalist' developments included hermeneutics, phenomenology (1995b: 20–6), ethno-methodology (1975b; 1979), existentialism (1979: ch. 4), interpretive anthropology (1995b: x), and, obviously, philosophic and linguistic relativism – the sum total of

which sanctioned a witless throw-back for social sciences. More generally, he criticised Marxism, ideological diffusionism, idealism, feminism, postmodernism and psychoanalysis (1993: 223). The founder of 'cultural studies', Raymond Williams, was branded as a 'Romantic organicist' of the Burke–Wordsworth–Coleridge line (1998b: 9), whose nostalgia 'attempted to romanticise the culture of an old working class' (a fact which, in itself, is not at all despicable, but must be acknowledged for what it truly is (*ibid.*: 10)).

Of the three possible ways of dealing with modernity (rationalism, fundamentalism and relativism), he placed himself firmly in the first team. Yet, his animus towards relativistic opportunism reached such proportions that he seemed to sympathise rather with the second element of the triad:

> Fundamentalism is in part a reaction to a kind of facile relativistic ecumenism, which ensures toleration and mutual compatibility by means of tacitly emptying faith of its content. It affirms that, on the contrary, faith and its content must be taken seriously, that it means what it says ... Unless the message is taken literally and seriously, it ceases to have that capacity to guide and orient, which is expected from it. (Gellner 1994a: 4–5)

In other words, his refusal of philosophical relativism led him to compare it unfavourably with religious fundamentalism, which he saw as an attempt to rescue the true faith from the fetters of relativist confusion, disarray and *laissez-faire* (a space and a view shared by rationalism).

Even though he did not write much about feminism, he often subsumed it under the rubric of postmodernism (a term he eventually disliked) (Gellner 1995b: 2; 1992a; 1992b). His remorseless and conscious use of androcentric generics ('he', instead of 'he/she' and so on) denotes a persistent refusal to conform personally to dominant vogues of 'political correctness'. Like nationalism, feminism was a belated response to the market's need for a replaceable, undifferentiated, moveable labour force, with its stress on uniform educational skills and the resulting all-pervasive ethics of equality. Feminism hence shared the same *weltanschauung* of nationalism, as parasitic of modernity's all-pervasive egalitarianism. Indeed, he reversed idealist assumptions in a single sentence: 'Modern society is not mobile because it is egalitarian; it is egalitarian because it is mobile' (1979: 271).

Among the illustrious, Gellner's critiques were targeted to Paul Feyerabend's (b. 1924) anti-methodological anarchism and his self-declared 'flippant Dadaism' (Gellner 1975d: 331–42). He attacked Jean-Paul Sartre's (1905–80) vagueness, inconclusiveness and 'third-worldism', and, in general, the other existentialists' deformation of reality.[9] At the very dawn of existentialism stood indeed Søren Kierkegaard (1813–55) and his empire of ideology (Gellner 1978: 3–4). Existentialism's fusion with phenomenology, especially in the early writings of Martin Heidegger (1889–1976), also attracted his criticism as informed by the much reprehended notion of 'self-

conscious existence' (*Dasein*).[10] In Popper's footsteps, Gellner also loathed Plato's 'nostalgia for a closed society' (Gellner 1994b: 129 ff.), and Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel's (1770–1831) dialectic idealism – the latter he defined as 'the most megalomaniac of all philosophers' (Gellner 1976: 33–49).

What was behind this onslaught on illustrious heads? Gellner fought an apparent crusade against sectoral jargon, factual imprecision, flagrant contradiction and conceptual befogging. A common thread unites all of the above criticism: it is an ardent and drastic commitment to open knowledge which induced a total rejection of closed systems. In this sense, we can say that Gellner was to the social sciences what Popper was to political philosophy. By virtue of his positivist legacy, Gellner was committed to crystalline clarity and diaphanous expositions. He could find no solace nor lucidity in the musing of self-righteous ideologists, be they of the left or the right. But the prize was reached at the cost of some contradiction and, in the field of nationalism, a powerfully simplifying and syncretic approach.

Yet, he also criticises Julien Benda's (1867–1956) naive vision that intellectuals 'should uphold eternal values and verities, and not go whoring after particular local identities, passions, interests, and cults' (Gellner 1992a: 129; 1994a: 47–58). But does not this critique negate a basic universalism which Gellner has often claimed to defend? Doesn't Gellner renege in this way on his own anti-relativistic ideals? Or, rather, is Gellner at heart not a sincere universalist? It seems that the attacks here are against the conception of an ideologically 'pure' intellectual, a figure conspicuously absent from our earthly human condition. It is also a defence against the pretence of extreme rationalists that rationalism can fix it all. About the 'clerics' and their *trahison*, he stated: 'It was precisely their effective commitment to rational thought, which led them to irrationalist conclusions' (Gellner 1992a: 131). It is interesting that he applied this wry disenchanted critique of pure rationalism as a panacea and ultimate belief system to the very case of Wittgenstein. The main problem for Wittgenstein was precisely that in his youth he so fervently and totally believed that language was *one* and universal, and that rational universal principles were behind every human phenomenon and philosophical endeavour, that the shattering of this belief led him to espouse precisely the opposite vision, the idea that absolutely nothing *is* or *can be* universal, and that philosophy itself is a series of noisy murmurs and strident noises generated by misconceptions about the nature of language. Gellner's own rapping of relativism implied a previous condemnation of the reaction to the phenomenon from which it sprang: similar to Romanticism, linguistic relativism arose as a response to the narrow and hidebound limits of Cold Reason. It was hence a warning against the idealisation (and idolisation) of reason. Indeed, from Wittgenstein's self-delusion erupted a new set of interlocking closed systems and the Viennese philosopher was simply the first to sell 'his followers a Closed-Community ethos ... packaged as an alleged revolutionary perception of

the true nature of language' (Gellner 1992a: 121). One may wonder whether this attack was particularly ferocious in view of Wittgenstein's intellectual volte-face from rationalism to anti-rationalism: and whether Gellner felt some acrimony for such an unacceptable betrayal of the rationalist 'camp'. But this was not the case, given the fact that Gellner was not a rational-positivist and rather viewed Cartesian rationalism as self-inflicted 'solitary confinement' (1998b: 43). Although Gellner often liked to oppose to the 'irrationalists' a critical reading of René Descartes (1596–1650), he was no neo-positivist. Despite his admiration for the Cartesian project of 'pure knowledge' (1992: 121; 1979: 148–63), he did not share an absolute faith in science, its utter incompleteness, plus 'a kind of amorality' or 'moral dullness'. From science, 'no closed, meaningful, reliable cosmos emerges'. Hence, science could not replace religion. In other words, Gellner did not subscribe to the Enlightenment thinkers' expectation of science as the ultimate saviour and a 'new religion' (1964: 123).

Gellner's lust for absolute truisms recalls, paraphrasing himself, Kant's 'Promethean' drive 'to steal the divine fire' and 'not be content with the makeshift accidental compromises contained in specific traditions' (1983: 132). This search led him to a kind of rational impatience or, to use his words, an apologia of 'Enlightenment Puritanism' or 'Fundamentalist Rationalism' (1995: 2; 1992a; 1992b). From this attitude we can derive his anti-relativist proclivity, often accompanied by a rejection of idiographic accounts in favour of a nomothetic, ultimate, all-embracing and all-clarifying vision.

In this sense, one of the least plausible of Gellner's claims may be his identification of the nationalists as 'fellow Prometheans' (Gellner 1983: 132). It is unclear if this also relates to the latter's contempt for localism and tradition, which, however, features prominently as one of the two faces of nationalism (its *gemeinschaft* face, to be precise). In Gellner's view, nationalism is certainly Promethean for its refusal to compromise. Does one have to be reminded of Fascism's *me ne frego*? Indeed, one would add, nationalism is Promethean for its intransigence and total devotion to an overriding universal principle, that of the nation, rather than for its search of ultimate truths and its impatience with partial verities. Doesn't this approach presage a *Nacht und Nebel* scenario (as Gellner himself characterised one of the 'stages' of nationalist development) (Gellner 1994: 26–7; 1995a)? This is certainly the ultimate effect of the nationalist 'simplification of the ethno-political map'. Finally, does this explanation portend some form of acceptance of this simplification as a lode to *realpolitik*?

Not so, at least in one crucial way: in his retreat into absolute individualism, Gellner holds an aprioristic faith in man's individual will and thought as the only repository of perennial values and ultimate truths (Kant's famed 'self-determination'). But nationalism is *the* anti-individualist enterprise *par excellence* and this proclivity is not easily reconciled with its

other Promethean half. Yet, it seems that only in this sense can it be 'condemned' and reprobated. There is no critique of the general pernicious effects of nationalism on a wider human scale, beyond its befogging effect on individual judgement.

Although Kantian at heart, Gellner did not entirely share Kant's belief that unrestrained commerce would unify mankind. Precisely as industries grew, economies developed and markets expanded, the most horrific tragedies of human history were consummated between two world wars, genocides, the first use of a nuclear weapon and the greatest forms of mass displacement ever experienced by human beings. We also know that Kant, like Hegel and most modern philosophers, based his proposition on bare dualism. Human society is divided into two camps: the trustees of the immanent community, the *cosmopolis*; and those who obstruct, fetter or retard its realisation. This is basically an opposition between the holders of the true faith and the heretics, between liberators and oppressors (Bull 1995: 26). And this fault line is reflected in most of Gellner's philosophical critique.

Gellner's anti-ideologism and aversion to profane politics has its roots in Kant's belief that 'possession of power inevitably corrupts the free judgment of reason' (Reiss 1970: 115). Gellner indeed believed that knowledge should be immune from power considerations. The study of nationalism hence requires the suspension of values in the pursuit of objective knowledge. The 'perfect' scholar should be uncontaminated by external influences, particularly power relations and interests, in order to advance in his/her scholarly endeavours.[11] All these aspects of Gellner's thought are brought together in *Language and Solitude*, and for the first time the relation between his philosophical formation and his theory of nationalism becomes transparent.

Notes

1 I wish to acknowledge Mark Notturnos's invaluable comments on Karl Popper's approach.

2 He nevertheless dedicated a whole book to the triadic relationship between production, coercion and cognition as the crucibles of all social transformations (Gellner 1991).

3 However, the calamitous consequences of technological advances and the spread of weapons of mass destruction amongst Third World dictatorships are indeed discussed in Gellner (1994b: 172–8). The specific case of Turkey's military establishment as self-proclaimed guardian of the 'Westernised' state is discussed in Gellner (1994a: 82–9).

4 As an anthropologist, Gellner could not share Popper's Euro-centric views, such as his stereotyping of tribal societies as ideally 'closed systems' (Gellner 1964: 84–5). Other grounds of criticism included Popper's personal approach and teaching methods, his excessively dense relationship with followers and his outspoken political views.

5 'Political guru urges Balkan air attacks', *The Independent* (London) (18 March, 1993: 6). We know how this and similar calls for intervention by important personalities fell on deaf ears.

6 On Wittgenstein, see, for instance, Gellner (1992a: 116–23; 1975a: 173–99).

7 Mark Notturno, personal communication.

8 On Gellner's view of Malinowski's view of nationalism, see also 'A non-nationalist Pole', in Gellner (1994a: 74–80), and see Gellner's contribution in Ellen (1988).

9 Sartrè took the brunt of the critique, while André Malraux, Albert Camus and others were not so systematically considered.
10 For a curious critique of Martin Heidegger, see 'The Nazi Jew-lover', in Gellner (1994a: 145 ff.).
11 In the social sciences, we have already seen the poststructuralist criticism of the supposed valueless scholar. Indeed, since the 1970s it has been accepted that all social science accounts are covertly biased (and increasingly overtly so).

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