

Ernest Gellner, 1925–1995

Ernest Gellner was born in Prague and came to England in 1939, where he attended school in St Albans before winning a scholarship to Balliol. He fought in the Czech brigade in France in 1944–45, and, in a rare biographical note, describes himself sloping off to the bookshops there and happening upon the writings of Camus and Sartre. He said of this moment: ‘End-of-war and post-war France was like the human condition, but a damn sight *more so*. If ever there was a situation when men could not find reassurance for their identity, dignity or conviction, this was it.’ This sense of living in a world without guarantees never left him.

Gellner arrived with a bang on the intellectual scene with the publication in 1959 of *Words and Things*, his witty and devastating attack on Oxford linguistic philosophy, and an important declaration of his own position and lifelong project. Where the Wittgensteinians asserted that philosophy changes nothing, Gellner was to insist throughout his work that on the contrary it had changed everything. His method in *Words and Things* was to attend to the broader context: he tried to formulate as definite doctrines, and to see from a sociological distance, positions which the linguistic philosophers deployed mainly by implication and example; and, he said, by cultural intimidation.

Gellner in a rather wicked way took up the idea of language as activity rather than description (his view that it was about truth was one of his main disagreements with them), and used it mockingly to characterize their evasive language-games. Seen from this distance (the distance, in fact, between the London School of Economics and Oxford), the Wittgensteinians were merely aristocratic conservatives, choosing to reduce troubling reality to the consensual judgements of the Senior Common Room. The LSE, three years later, gave Gellner a Chair in Philosophy, thus celebrating his Protestant and utilitarian challenge to high Oxford orthodoxy. It was an inspired appointment, as Gellner went on to write twenty or so further books, carrying forward into another generation a recognizably ‘LSE’ tradition of positivist sociology and philosophy.

The awkwardness of Gellner’s work for the academy

was that it continually crossed the boundaries between philosophy, sociology and anthropology. There were essential reasons for this, since he developed the argument, with increasing elaboration and clarity throughout his work, that it was philosophical ideas that had made the

difference in the ‘great transition’ to the modern world. It was the development of an atomistic, ‘granular’, value-free, and analytical stance towards nature which had made the Western scientific revolution possible. Progress had come, Gellner said, with his characteristic liking for popular, sometimes even vulgar, turns of phrase, from the rejection of intellectual ‘package-deals’ combining cognitive, aesthetic and ethical views of the world into seamless wholes. From the scientific revolution followed the technologies which have transformed nature and the physical conditions of life for the majority of people. Giving Weber a further secular turn, Gellner said that this transformation of world-view had been the achievement of the philosophers – Descartes, Hume and Kant – as well as of the scientists themselves. The philosopher whom the professional philosophers barely counted as one of their number assigned to their discipline a larger historical importance than they did themselves.

There is no doubt that Gellner’s was a radical philosophical project. He shared with *Radical Philosophy* an antipathy to merely technical philosophizing, and the view that philosophy was a virtually pointless pursuit without a consideration of its historical meanings and effects. His placing, most fully developed in *Plough, Sword and Book* (1988), of traditionalist and essentialist philosophies in hierarchical agrarian societies, and of the epistemological revolution as the basis of industrial and egalitarian transformation, is a major contribution to the sociology of knowledge, giving



explanatory force to typologies which in the work of one of his models, Karl Popper, were more prescriptive in intent. His own arguments for an 'episodic' model of the transition to modernity anticipated and influenced later versions of this position in macro-historical sociology.

Gellner shared *Radical Philosophy's* keen interest, at least, in the work of 'other' philosophical traditions – idealist, phenomenological and critical – but it is here, of course, that this journal's major differences with him began. Gellner was a consistent critic of what he saw as backsliding from the strenuous path of scientific rationalism. Existentialism, phenomenology, variants of Marxism, linguistic philosophy, the counter-culture, ethnomethodology, were alike castigated in Gellner's essays as attempts to 're-enchant' a world robbed of meaning by the procedures of systematic doubt, by the divorce of fact and value, and by the adoption of a 'modular' view of man. His critiques of these various positions were sharp, though mostly good-humoured – leftists might have made more of his liking for vigorous argument. Gellner seems to have been much more infuriated by condescension handed down from above than by dissenting voices from below. But his critiques, and his insistence on a plain clarity of writing, left little common ground with those struggling to make sense of new continental idioms with an idealist hue.

But there are saving graces to Gellner's vigorous critiques of 'left' or 'culturalist' positions. The first of these is Gellner's often candid acknowledgement of the problems which his adversaries addressed. For example, whilst he thought the value-free analytical method had been an effective means of understanding nature (he had little to say about environmentalism), he acknowledged the continuing difficulties of its application to the human sciences, whose purpose was unavoidably to provide coherence and meaning as well as truth. Whilst he criticized the arbitrariness of psychoanalytical procedures, Gellner nevertheless accepted much of Freud's account of innate human self-deception. Thus, whilst psychoanalysis was, in his view, invalid as a scientific procedure, its appeal was fully understandable. Even his hostility to Communism and Marxism did not inhibit him from observing that, since the Communist Party had been the only effective institution in the Soviet Union, the transition to democracy and capitalism in Russia might go better under its aegis than without it.

There is, however, a more substantive affinity between Gellner's position and that of leftist, and especially Marxist, critics of relativism. Gellner too was a materialist, though he stripped this perspective of monism, perfectionism or ideas of inevitability. Although he thought that the causes of modernization

lay in a change in the forms of thought, its most important effects, for him, were on the conditions of material life. Between a scientific view of nature which enabled the realities of scarcity to be overcome, and tradition-bound or irrationalist views of the world, there was in his view no serious contest. His liking for plain language and bold labels were consonant with his sense that on many important issues he spoke for the interests of the majority. He shared a version of the New Left idea that 'culture is ordinary'. (He contributed to *Universities and Left Review*.) And his view that what mattered most was people having enough to eat, and a government of their own kind, represented a commitment to human progress which was common in a generation shaped by the experience of war and reconstruction. One imagines him reading Orwell at the same time as Camus and Sartre.

It has often happened that intellectual émigrés to England become more English than the English in their idealization of empiricism, tradition, or supposed common sense. Gellner's critique of the Wittgensteinians implicitly took strong issue with this kind of complacent identification. But he also recognized and most of the time rejected these temptations when they came closer to home. His criticism of some of Popper's later ideas (in contrast to the earlier work that had greatly influenced him), which he saw as empty prescriptions and anathemas, exemplifies his insistence that one has to go on asking difficult questions, even if there seem to be no definite or satisfying answers to them. He seemed to have no desire to become the leader of an intellectual movement, or to acquire a following. He was unusually able to tolerate a commitment that was, finally, 'ungrounded'. On the one hand, we are the products of an epistemological revolution, he said, whose perspectives we can therefore scarcely doubt. Yet it is the nature of that revolution that all perspectives *must* be open to question, including one's own. He lived with this contradiction more steadfastly than most.

Gellner returned, of course, to Prague, to the Central European University, in the final years of his working life, while retaining his base in Cambridge. His last book, *Conditions of Liberty* (1994), is in part concerned with the prospects of 'civil society' in post-Communist Eastern Europe. Perhaps this return to the Czech Republic revealed one root of Gellner's independence of mind. This admirer of Descartes, Kant and Weber, and scholar and defender of Islamic religion and society, who believed that one must live both within and outside one's own particular culture, was a truly European intellectual. This has not been a common identity in England.

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