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Euclid of Cosmopolis

or The Importance of Reading Ernest

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Abstract: Ernest Gellner's writings on nationalism need to be read in the wider context of his thought as a whole. The key lies in regarding Gellner as a thinker who was interested in the possibility of understanding particularist sentiments and collectivist political loyalties which radically differed from his own individualistic cosmopolitan worldview. A richer interpretation of Gellner's life and thought emerges from this insight than from more superficial understandings of Gellner as a functionalist or a rationalist.

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What makes a thinker significant, among other things, is that his work possesses some measure of unity, and that it contains some central ideas which pervade and inspire the corpus as a whole.

Ernest Gellner [1985: 14]

Ernest Gellner is today best known for his work on nationalism.¹ Gellner's attempt to develop a general theory of nationalism has been criticised for many different (and sometimes tautological) reasons: the theory is *too* general, too Eurocentric, too a-historical, too functionalist, too economically determinist, too *reductionist* in its emphasis on the cultural homogeneity required by industrial society.² Even sympathetic interpreters of Gellner's ideas admit that "Gellner's theory is not a truly universal one" since it does not succeed in explaining specific cases of pre-industrial nationalism [Hall 1995: 12].

This essay does not seek to defend Gellner's explicit theory of nationalism against any of the particular criticisms mentioned above. Such a defence would be presumptuous, redundant (given the size of the Gellner *oeuvre*: four books and countless articles on the subject), and pointless, given the fact that many of these criticisms of the theory are quite genuinely justified by Gellner's own tendency to speak in Capital Letters, especially in his later writings on nationalism.

This essay does, however, claim that Gellner's writings on nationalism need to be read in the wider context of his thought *as a whole* and that only such a reading does jus-

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¹) Gellner "brought a formidably equipped mind to bear on *his main interests*: the nature of national identity and the links, especially in the Islamic world, between democracy and economic modernisation." (my italics) ["Obituary..." 1995]

²) While it is tempting to compile a list of critics of Gellner, a kind of anti-bibliography, as it were, it is sufficient here to mention only a few representative criticisms. Thus, for instance, Benedict Anderson's much quoted rebuke that "Gellner is so anxious to show that nationalism masquerades under false pretences that he assimilates 'invention' to 'fabrication' and 'falsity', rather than to 'imagining' and 'creation'." [Anderson 1991: 6] One of the more sophisticated discussions of Gellner's purported Eurocentrism can be found in [Mohanty 1989: 2].

tice to the complexity of Gellner's thought. The key lies in regarding Gellner as a thinker who was primarily concerned with the possibility of understanding a worldview which was radically different than his own.³ This essay argues that Gellner was embedded in an individualistic cosmopolitan worldview which he intellectually and politically endorsed, but that he also felt it necessary to go beyond his own cosmopolitanism and to try to understand holistic mentalities, particularist sentiments, and collectivist political loyalties which radically differed from his own.

I. Professor Ernest Euclid, F.B.A., M.A.E.

It is no doubt exceedingly presumptuous to compare oneself to Euclid, or to hope that Euclidean cogency is ever available in the social sphere.

My excuse is that I make the point with irony, and more in self-criticism than in vain-glory. The argumentation does seem to me to have Euclidean force, but I also note that the world we live in is only in part Euclidean.

Ernest Gellner [1993]

Leaving irony aside (for the moment), what makes an explanation of nationalism which links political legitimacy and the cultural requirements of industrial society 'virtually Euclidean in its cogency'? It is only fair to go through the theorem briefly before more closely examining the axioms and postulates involved.

A brief demonstration of Gellner's theory of nationalism, then, would look like this: A great transformation has taken place in the social conditions of humankind. Before the industrial revolution, society was agrarian, stable, and hierarchical. Above a plurality of insulated low (oral) cultures lay the strata of the agents of coercion and the priests of a high (written) culture. Modern industrial society, on the other hand, is grounded in the shifting sands of ever-evolving industrial technology and is meritocratic and egalitarian because it is mobile. The workforce of modern industrial society must be able to engage in a constant flow of context-free communication because work is primarily semantic. Modern industrial society, therefore, requires a homogeneous universal high culture which is made possible by a standardised educational system. The state is responsible for maintaining and protecting this literate now-*national* culture. The political structures of a modern industrial society are legitimated by their continued capacity to ensure sustained economic growth and to protect the culture which is the idiom of the society. Nationalism is the principle of political legitimacy which requires the congruence of political and cultural boundaries. Q.E.D.⁴

A 'proof' of this kind – coldly concerned with large-scale structural social changes and their ideological consequences – is necessarily liable to the charge that it fails to cap-

³) As Gellner points out, men "make themselves radically different pictures of reality. The crucial word in this assertion is 'radically'. Its full force is not often appreciated... There is no doubt whatever about the existence of rival decision-procedures, of terminal courts of appeal, in various styles of thought. In this sense, visions do differ radically." [Gellner 1987b: 166]

⁴) This particular version of Gellner's thought on nationalism, which I refer to as Gellner's *explicit* theory of nationalism, is developed at length in [Gellner 1983], and more briefly in the article mentioned above [Gellner 1993].

ture the most obvious feature of nationalism: the sheer *emotion* involved. Do people other than philosophers really kill one another because they are denied complete access to a context-free semantic code? One provocative Gellnerian answer to this would be: Yes, because we are now all of us *de facto* philosophers insofar as we are forced to participate in a universal ‘high culture’ that was once restricted to the priestly keepers of wisdom and truth. This sort of dispassionate riposte is of course infuriating, and, as with all infuriatingly cool intellectual responses, it is worth considering just why it is so maddening.

People probably do not become nationalists because they want better jobs. As Gellner himself writes, there is “no need to assume any conscious long-term calculation of interest on anyone’s part... It would be genuinely wrong to reduce these sentiments to calculations of material advantage or of social mobility.” [Gellner 1983: 61] There are two related reasons why such a reduction might be wrong: first, because it might simply be a factual error to think that people become nationalists because they want better jobs, and, secondly, because ‘sentiments’ and ‘calculations’ are incommensurate. Even (perhaps, especially) if self-advancement were blatantly a motive, a nationalist would probably heatedly deny it.⁵ One cannot read minds, let alone hearts. Furthermore, as Pascal put it, the heart has its reasons which the reason cannot know. And it is this general perception of emotion as a privileged, exclusive, and essentially subjective domain which makes intellectual analyses of nationalism *qua* sentiment seem so abstract, rarefied, and ‘functionalist’. The warm-blooded Romantic revolt against the rationalism of the Enlightenment, all over again, in microcosm.

But, for all his emphasis on the self-deluding ‘false consciousness’ of nationalism, was Gellner really so very lacking in sympathy, or, at the least, understanding for the essentially emotive aspects of the phenomenon? Was he altogether the Enlightenment rationalist? There are good reasons for thinking the contrary.

One reason lies on the level of rhetoric. Gellner stressed the ‘imagined’ quality of nationalism because he *came* to see that nationalism is not something that is simply natural. As he writes, the temptation to take nationalism as something self-evident

“is so deeply built into the modern condition, where men simply assume that culturally homogeneous units, with culturally similar rulers and ruled, are a norm whose violation is inherently scandalous. To be shocked out of this pervasive assumption is indeed something for which one must be grateful. It is a genuine illumination.” [Ibid.: 125]

Gellner’s seemingly exaggerated emphasis on the ‘imagined’ aspect of nationalism is not wilfully naive hyper-intellectual dismissal of genuine feeling. Rather, it is a deliberate rhetorical strategy which reflects his desire to transmit this ‘illumination’ to others. Elsewhere, for instance, describing Conor Cruise O’Brien as a ‘victim’ of nationalism, Gellner writes:

“...he has internalised, as initially most of us have, the key nationalist assumption – namely, that the nation is the natural political unit. Unlike some of us, he has not liberated himself from taking that assumption for granted... This presupposition pervades our particular world so much that most people presuppose it without realising that it is indeed a contentious assumption. They deem it as obvious and unproblematic as speaking prose. My own discovery that I was speaking prose, and that forms of discourse other than prose exist, I owe to Elie Kedourie...” [Gellner 1994a: 60]

⁵) Interesting recent research carried out by Gordana Uzelac suggests a strong correlation between nationalist sentiment and altruistic motives.

The analogy with prose is exceedingly apt. For in 'our particular world', in 'the modern condition', we do not speak in the classical alexandrines of Racine's characters (a lapse of taste which Kedourie, from Gellner's account, seems to have deplored); we are saturated in the 'context-free communication' provided by our daily news⁶ and our scientific texts, and our world is particularly prosaic.⁷ Yet Gellner clearly believes that it is at least possible to "liberate" oneself from assumptions that are taken for granted, to realise that 'forms of discourse other than prose exist', and the 'functionalism' of his own prose style when writing on nationalism is a rhetorical device designed to force readers to question their assumptions.

Why was Gellner so 'grateful' for the "discovery" that nationalism is not natural? Why did this philosopher turned anthropologist invest so much energy insisting on the essentially *ersatz* quality of nationalist feeling? This essay cannot possibly offer any definitive answers to such questions; however, it does seem fair to speculate on Gellner's motives, especially since these possible motives form another set of reasons for believing that Gellner was both less and more 'objective' than the objectivity of his rhetoric might suggest.

Although he liked to disclaim responsibility for the world, claiming, "I didn't invent this situation, I simply tell it like what it is" [Gellner 1987b: 184],⁸ it is obvious that Gellner was more politically involved than this seemingly disinterested disclaimer would suggest. Gellner was politically involved in several aspects of his person: as a private individual who believed in helping friends in political difficulties;⁹ in the social role of an eminent intellectual who often faced what he once nicely described as the choice 'To Sign or Not To Sign?' the various petitions of protest that were presented to him [Gellner 1994b: 55];¹⁰ and as a thinker who understood clearly and without illusions the complex interplay of power and thought, thought and moral feeling, moral feeling and political values, political values and the dynamics of power. As he once wrote of Václav Havel, one should not take "too seriously the Czech national motto, *Truth Prevails*. It cannot be relied on to prevail, even in the long run, and as Keynes said, in the long run we are all dead... Illusions will not do anyone any good." [Gellner 1994c: 127-128] Neither one's

⁶) The diffusion of 'print-capitalism' is, of course, central to Benedict Anderson's views on nationalism as well. Quoting Hegel's remark that newspapers serve modern man as a substitute for morning prayers, Anderson elegantly notes the doubleness of a process wherein secular routines and communities are sacralised just as previously sacred concepts lose their privileged hold on human minds. See Anderson [1991: 35-36].

⁷) Gellner was acutely aware of the disenchantment produced by the prosaic, wholly mundane character of the modern world: in one of his most perceptive (and wittiest) essays, he writes that, perhaps, "we are not disenchanted, or not nearly as much as consistently as we once supposed or anticipated; but perhaps we certainly *ought to be*." See [Gellner 1987a: 152].

⁸) This was also one standard defence he employed in post-lecture discussions.

⁹) Gellner was invariably modest about the extent to which he could and did help friends who were dissidents in the Soviet Union and the countries of Central and Eastern Europe; however, his friends were and are not stinting in their appreciation of his efforts. A moving eulogy to this effect was delivered by Anatoly Khazanov at the conference 'Our Current Sense of History: Essays for Ernest Gellner', held in Prague, 8/9 December 1995.

¹⁰) One might add a further choice 'To Visit or Not To Visit' regimes of dubious political nicety, a choice which Gellner also explores in [Gellner 1987c: 1-5].

own illusions, nor, for that matter, anyone else's. There are no easy answers and it is intellectually dishonest for intellectuals to pretend that there are easy answers.¹¹ The cardinal sin is the 'deliberate disregard of truth in the interest of loyalty to doctrine'. As his exemplar of this sort of intellectual dishonesty, Gellner repeatedly mentions Jean-Paul Sartre who "was brazenly willing to suppress the truth about gulags so as to protect his darling French working class from emotional discomfort." [Gellner 1994d: 169, see also Gellner 1994b: 57] The sheer savagery of Gellner's snarl at Sartre's 'brazen' suppression of the truth at first seems at odds with the recognition that truth does not necessarily prevail. But, far from leading to a cynical apathy, it is precisely this recognition of the fragility of truth which makes Gellner snarl in its defence. Truth "*cannot be relied on to prevail*" in the face of historical and political contingency, but it might prevail if enough people "simply tell it like what it is". In other words, Gellner tells the truth because he *wants* the truth to prevail. He is 'objective' because he is involved.¹²

This intertwining of objectivity and involvement lies at the heart of Gellner's philosophy of the social sciences. Gellner does not naively believe that truth is intrinsically persuasive nor that empiricist procedures for arriving at the truth can vindicate themselves purely on their own objective value-neutral terms. For Gellner, the quest for intelligible and consistent explanations of observable facts is justified, not simply because this sort of attempt to understand the world is grounded in a more plausible epistemology, but more importantly, because this sort of quest for truth is part of a vision of the world which is associated with a kind of society which is both morally preferable and pragmatically more successful. As Gellner writes, this "double validation is inelegant but inescapable. The endorsement of a vision by those already indoctrinated in it is also a bit suspect. This can't be helped." [Gellner 1985a: 66] For Gellner, the crucial point is that this kind of society, which both sustains and is in turn sustained by science, "seems richer, more fulfilling than the others, and also historically dominant. It seems to be winning and to be

¹¹) "It is not necessarily wrong to display doubt rather than conviction. It is not necessarily wicked to be less than clear about the limits of one's responsibility. It is not always wrong to be realistic about the situation and to refrain from Quixotry. The recognition of these difficulties is itself a duty. The tacit deployment of a model which fails to do justice to the seriousness of these difficulties is itself a kind of intellectual treason. The strident denunciation of the treason of the clerics, which pretends that our situation is far clearer and unambiguous than in fact it is, is itself a form of betrayal." [Gellner 1994b: 56] Yet, as Gellner also points out elsewhere, doubt and complacency are potentially linked in an infinite regress. In a virtuoso passage, he writes: "I cannot feel at home either with the holier-than-thou puritans (who never compromise at all) or the blase practitioners of *realpolitik*... Yet one must also try not to be complacent, even at the second level, about one's lack of complacency... There is a certain seductive regress, seeming to offer one moral clearance by virtue of one's anxiety. I am not complacent, or even complacent about my non-complacency, and so on. Yet in the end one still risks patting oneself on the back. The fact that I am recursively anxious about using my own anxiety as a justification still does not give me clearance. The danger lies in supposing that being a Hamlet excuses everything, which is one further twist of complacency – and so is saying this in turn, if it were meant to excuse anything." [Gellner 1987c: 5]

¹²) This claim is meant to mirror Gellner's often-repeated argument that "the positivists are right. For Hegelian reasons." [Gellner 1985a: 64, see also Gellner 1987b: 181] The following summary discussion of Gellner's philosophy of the social sciences to a very large extent derives from these two essays and also from other essays in *Relativism and the Social Sciences*.

better, though we should be embarrassed to say either that it was better simply because it was winning, or that it was winning simply because it was better.” [ibid.: 64]

It is important, then, to tell the truth (and, presumably, to encourage others to also do so) because societies which rely on a certain form of institutionalised truth-telling called science are both nicer and richer. Indeed, Gellner argues that these societies are nicer precisely because they are richer. As he writes,

”this kind of society alone can keep alive the large numbers to which humanity has grown, and therefore avoid a really ferocious struggle for survival among us; it alone can keep us at the standard to which we are becoming accustomed; it more than its predecessors, *probably* favours a liberal and tolerant social organisation (because affluence makes brutal exploitation and suppression unnecessary, and because it requires a wide diffusion of complex skills and occupational mobility which in turn engender a taste for both liberty and equality).” [Gellner 1987b: 183]

The sheer rhetorical force of such arguments in favour of cognitively open, science-based, industrial societies almost makes one want to become a scientist or else to set up a factory in order to do one’s bit for humanity’s survival.¹³ These arguments, of course, work in favour of any form of industrial society, whether capitalist or socialist. Gellner claims to prefer the former variety because it is ‘considerably more efficient’; however, he also makes it quite clear that his preference is based on rather more than merely this criterion of efficiency: it is also because capitalism “commits the society undergoing it to far less false consciousness concerning its own organisation, than does socialism.” [Gellner 1994f: 13] Those who live by the sword die by it: as Gellner liked to pointed out, just as the “Nazis had believed in war and were eliminated by a violent trial by combat; the Bolsheviks believed in the verdict of the economy and were eliminated by an economic contest.” [Gellner 1993] The enforced doctrinal monopoly of Marxist dogma strangled economic growth in the same way as any other ideocracy and for the same reason – because a society which seeks to close the minds of its members prevents the cognitive and technological growth upon which economic growth is predicated.¹⁴ Conversely, economic stagnation and technological failure eroded Marxism’s doctrinal monopoly: as Gellner writes, it “was Brezhnev not Stalin who destroyed Marxism: terror would be and was conceptually accommodated, permanent squalid inefficiency could not.”¹⁵ Furthermore, it was precisely the technological intelligentsia created by (and for) socialist poli-

¹³) Gellner was by no means quite as enthusiastic about industrial development as such rhetoric might suggest. In particular, he did recognise the damage done to the environment by industrialisation. (Thus pre-nationalist Ruritanian peasants “had no reveries about plans of industrial development which one day would bring a steel mill (quite useless, as it then turned out) to the very heart of the Ruritanian valleys, thus totally ruining quite a sizeable area of surrounding arable land and pasture.” [Gellner 1983:]) However, this is not a significant theme in his writings. Even so, Gellner did also come to recognise the global environmental threat posed by world-wide industrialisation, although he could only hope that some form of world government might be able to deal with such problems. As he wrote, the “ecological problem... may oblige mankind in the future to abandon this ‘insurance through political diversification’.” [see Gellner 1994e: 181]

¹⁴) It is important to point out here that Gellner did not have a high regard for the moral philosophy of neo-classical *laissez faire* economists. Nor did he believe in Progress [see Gellner 1985a: 49-50, and also Gellner 1987d: 120-121].

¹⁵) [Gellner 1994g: 112]. Or again, “perestroika merely allowed everyone to say out loud what they had privately come to suspect, namely, that the Emperor was naked.” [Gellner 1994e: 174]

cies of industrialisation-from-above who could no longer tolerate the technical backwardness and political squalor of real socialism.¹⁶ It is clearly not enough simply to build lots of large factories and to make peasants into scientists: the legitimation of an industrial society requires a sustained level of economic growth which is made possible by, and which gives rise to, 'a taste for both liberty and equality'.

The 'taste' for liberty and equality is in sharp contrast to another kind of 'taste' which Gellner finds less palatable. Trying to understand the Western fear of what is today broadly (and bizarrely) named 'fundamentalism' in the developing world, Gellner writes:

"We always knew that societies undergoing the acutely painful transformation to industrial organisation might need strong ideological meat to see them through; it was precisely our detachment from that need which had that somewhat offensively patronising air about it. This, however, does not save us from being somewhat surprised, pained, and frightened when we see them indulging this taste with such zest, and in a manner which does not suggest that, after a while, this enthusiasm will abate and become routinised. Perhaps it will: but just now it takes a lot of nerve and optimism to expect such an outcome with any confidence. Could it be that the psychic taste for, or the social need of, the moralistic state is there for keeps, rather than as a temporary palliative for the suffering of the transitional period? No one knows the answer, but it is hard not to feel uneasy." [Gellner 1987d: 116]

The most striking rhetorical feature of this remarkably revealing passage is the stark opposition Gellner posits between 'us' and 'them'. Just exactly who is the 'we' that 'always knew', the 'us' that is capable of 'detachment' from a certain 'psychic taste', a certain 'social need', but who is still 'surprised, pained, and frightened' by the sight of 'them' ravaging over their 'strong ideological meat'?

Superficially, the contrast is between societies that are 'undergoing the acutely painful transformation to industrial organisation' and those which have already undergone this transformation. This contrast between 'developing' and 'developed' countries is also related to a contrast on another level between those societies which need a 'moralistic state' to legitimate these painful economic and social changes and those who are content with a merely instrumental one. So far, so good: these typological distinctions between the developed and the developing, the First and the Third Worlds, were the conventional wisdom during the *belle époque*,¹⁷ and there is nothing so very peculiar about

¹⁶) As Gellner writes, the Russian middle class, the professional intelligentsia "not merely survived, but numerically expanded during the period of Soviet power... Its numbers were swelled by universal education, and by the number of jobs which could only be filled by educated people... The eventual succession of, first disclosures about Stalinism, then the sense of the squalor of Brezhnevism, and finally the full impact of economic-technological failure and backwardness, by their cumulative impact weaned this class from their loyalty to the regime... I had always expected that some measure of liberalisation would come in the Soviet Union from the slow increase and thrust of this class, slowly moving like an irresistible sand dune. What I did not foresee (nor I think did anyone else) was that through Gorbachev, quantity would be transmuted into quality: the insidious quiet collective drift of this intelligentsia would become a landslide, and cause a dramatic transformation of the entire moral climate of the Soviet Union." [Gellner 1994g: 112-113]

¹⁷) Of course, the very notions of 'developed' and 'developing' countries have been endlessly problematised by critics of modernisation theory, as has the division of the world into the categories of First, Second, Third, Fourth... [See, for instance Worsley 1990]. One wonders, incidentally, if the concept of First, Second, and Third Worlds became so popular because of vague mental associations with gold, silver, and bronze Olympic medals.

Gellner sharing some of the prejudices of his time. It is only when Gellner goes beyond these dry typological distinctions and begins to brandish *feelings* such as ‘need’, ‘detachment’, ‘surprise’, ‘pain’, ‘fear’, ‘indulgence’, ‘zest’, ‘enthusiasm’, ‘nerve’, ‘optimism’, ‘confidence’ and ‘unease’, this is when it becomes important to ask whether this is merely a case of overblown rhetoric or whether something more important is going on here.

The key lies in Gellner’s use of the phrase ‘psychic taste’. Although he quickly tags on the more acceptably sociological concept of ‘social need’, it is clear that Gellner is really talking about two radically different states of feeling, of ‘psychic tastes’. And not merely *psychic* tastes either: material tangible tastes as well – radically different styles of cooking,¹⁸ eating, and, for that matter, defecating. As Gellner wrote of the Ayatollah Khomeini, to “understand him, we need to see him as he is. In taking him as he is, we show him more respect than if we present his works in a way which makes them almost acceptable as family entertainment. The brutal moralism and the hair-splitting scholasticism, but almost tenderly careful handling of sodomy, sweat, and excrement are all part and parcel of the man’s mind.” [Gellner 1987e: 138] Khomeini then might stand for the pre-modern mentality in general; and Gellner’s use of the word ‘we’ begins to make more sense.

Or does it? Gellner’s own rhetorical strategy in prefacing his essay on Khomeini with more than a page of Khomeini’s more shocking (to Western sensibilities) sayings, might well be deemed analogous to Khomeini’s own ‘theo-porn’, if one considers that the position of William Wyse Professor of Social Anthropology at the University of Cambridge is about as close as one can get to theocratic authority in a secular society. (Ought one, perhaps, to call Gellner’s own frequent and very funny aphorisms about sex ‘philoporn’?) What makes the devout Muslim’s regard for the Ayatollah’s pronouncements so very different from the attitude an ordinary British layman takes towards the latest scientific discovery, findings that are incomprehensible to him or her, but which are legitimated by the intellectual authority of the distinguished Professor? Even if one accepts that there are significant epistemological differences between faith in the Ayatollah’s pronouncements and belief in the Professor’s findings, differences which are also reflected in social status and political influence, it still seems possible to posit a continuum between the Ayatollah and the Professor, and, more generally, between traditional agrarian society and industrial society. The idea of such a continuum is supported by the notion of industrialisation itself as a *process*, as an ongoing operation of technological change and economic growth, with its own dynamic of obsolescence and advancement. Furthermore, the notion of industrialisation as an ongoing process actually allows (in its use of only the variables of power, cultural difference, and economic/educational opportunity) for a more structurally Gellnerian explanation of the simultaneous persistence and diminution in intensity of ethnic conflict within industrial societies and also of the persistence of nationalism in the form of antipathy towards other nation-states, than Gellner’s

¹⁸) As Gellner writes, “gastronomy is not so much a code, whether universal or specific, as a reflection of the level of development of the forces of production and coercion... Back to pre-hermeneutic sociology. Societies are systems made up of concrete people and their activities, and the interdependence and preconditions of these activities require exploration...” [Gellner 1985b: 165]

own rather weaker historically-based arguments about the time zones of nationalism.¹⁹ Yet Gellner always firmly rejected the idea of a continuum between agrarian society and industrial society, nor was he much interested either in the idea of ‘post-industrial society’ or in the notion of industrialisation as an ongoing process [see, for instance Gellner 1983: 96]. What really interested Gellner were the *discontinuities* between the ideal-types of Agraria and Industria, between *Gemeinschaft* and *Gesellschaft*, since these discontinuities produced the radical difference between ‘us’ and ‘them’.

II. Applying for a visa into Rational History

The West is democratic, the West is strong, it is democratic because it is strong and strong because democratic, and because this is the way world history is going... I have had my primary education and two and a half years of secondary education in Prague schools, and I can only say that this message emanated, unambiguously and confidently, from the portraits of the President-Liberator which adorned every schoolroom.

Ernest Gellner [1994c: 122]

Why was Gellner so interested in the radical difference between ‘us’ and ‘them’? One clue can be found in one of his most extraordinary essays, a brilliant speculation on the inner logic and genesis of Malinowski’s functionalist anthropology and its influence on European thought [Gellner 1987f]. Discussing the possible political and intellectual options open to Malinowski as a Pole at a time when there was no Polish state, in an intellectual environment saturated by a Hegelian belief in Progress as represented by the State, Gellner writes, “in this realm of rational history, there clearly are second-class citizens, fellow travellers endowed at best with a kind of immigrant’s probationary visa or entry-permit into rationality and meaningfulness, eagerly and anxiously waiting to see whether full citizenship will be conferred on them.” [ibid.: 49] One obvious option available to such ‘second-class citizens of World History’ is to individually jettison the ethnic identity which makes them second-class and to assimilate into a dominant state-endowed nation. Another option is to struggle to form one’s own nation, to fight for its own state, and thus to compete with presently dominant nations. However, Gellner also identifies a third option, the option of internationalism, cosmopolitanism, and identification with humanity as a whole rather than with one nation or another. As Gellner writes:

“This path has also been trodden by many. It may perhaps appeal specially to individualists, culturally self-made men living in a complex and mobile environment, and therefore given to identifying such a situation with the human condition in general: men who feel either that this is what human life is like, or that this is what it ought to be. But this internationalist, individualist, ‘cosmopolitan’ option, the cult of the Open Society, is perhaps less likely to constitute the *whole* answer for a man who knows full well, professionally, that the human condition in general is *not* like that – who knows in virtue of his professional expertise and commitment, that a great part of mankind lives or lived in absorbing, relatively self-contained communities. In other words, can an anthropologist whole-heartedly adopt the ‘cosmopolitan’ model of man?” [ibid.: 50]

¹⁹) For Gellner’s notion of nationalist stages and time-zones see [Gellner 1993, and also Gellner 1994h].

Gellner moves from an analysis of the options open to 'second-class citizens of World History' to a description of why one particular option, the cosmopolitan one, has a special appeal for a certain kind of person, 'individualists, culturally self-made men'. He then proceeds to specify the sub-set still further to include only those men who possess a certain kind of 'professional expertise and commitment'. Not all cosmopolitans are anthropologists, nor are all anthropologists cosmopolitans, or, for that matter, 'second-class citizens of World History'. But Gellner goes still further in narrowing down the ideal-type personality he has created in a few dazzling sentences: "He may well be cosmopolitan himself, but can he conceivably see the human condition in general in such terms? And if indeed he cannot, is he therefore *condemned to embrace* [my italics] its best-known and most favoured alternative, and indulge in the 'organic' sense of historic communities and of continuity? (...) Must he choose between cosmopolitanism and Hegelianism?"

The tenor of the passage, indeed, the intense empathy which pervades the entire essay, suggests the very high degree to which Gellner identified with Malinowski and his predicament. This can be illustrated with a rather pretty parallel. Gellner quotes Malinowski: "I should like to lead you back some twenty years to an old Slavonic university town... I could then show you a student leaving the medieval college buildings, obviously in some distress of mind..." [ibid.: 50-51] This is Malinowski in Cracow in 1905, on the verge of discovering the joys of anthropology. A little more than forty years later, another student can also be imagined, leaving the not-so medieval buildings of Balliol College, Oxford, also in an 'uneasy state of mind':

"I had been trained in Oxford, largely in economics and philosophy... Economic theory was largely deductive, and its premises postulated individuals with clearly articulated, privately chosen ends, seeking to satisfy them in a world of limited means. I knew full well that such a condition, if it ever applied at all, certainly did not apply to all men at all times (...) the philosophy which was emerging at the time, and which was being hailed as a great and final revelation, made exactly the opposite mistake: it claimed that the correct way to proceed in philosophy was by observing and accepting the conceptual customs of one's community, because such customs alone, enshrined in the habits of speech, could authorise our intellectual procedures... I was not terribly impressed by the conventional wisdom which was then taught and rather eagerly embraced by my contemporaries, but I lacked the confidence to repudiate it and reject it with emphasis, at any rate at once." [Gellner 1994h: 20-21]

But repudiate it Gellner did, eventually and with emphasis: rejecting both parts of the conventional wisdom, criticising the modernist blinkers of an economic formalism which treats the pre-modern world as an 'ontological slum unworthy of attention', but also fiercely attacking the later philosophy of Wittgenstein for its claim that conceptual meaning derives from communal consensus.²⁰ Substitute 'economics' for 'cosmopolitan-

²⁰) As Gellner once drily noted, "I think I can say, without fear of immediate and virulent contestation, that I am not widely known as an uncritical and enthusiastic admirer of Ludwig Wittgenstein's later work." [Gellner 1985c: 70] Gellner believed that "Wittgenstein taught a whole generation of philosophers to ask the wrong questions (...) conceptual control cannot be reduced to social control. Social control cannot be reduced to conceptual compulsion. Wittgenstein taught the former error to philosophers and the latter to social scientists, some of whom have come to think that the world is the totality not of things but of meanings. *Hermeneutik über Alles*." [Gellner 1985d: 185]

ism', 'Oxford analytic philosophy' for 'Hegelianism', and one might well be able to substitute 'Gellner' for 'Malinowski'.

However, a further substitution is also required, and this is where the comparison becomes less facile and also more suggestive. Malinowski was a 'pre-war Pole', someone who grew up in that part of the Habsburg domains which had once been Poland. Yet, far from taking the nationalist option, Malinowski in fact "had an undisguised admiration and affection" for the Habsburg Empire.²¹ (In part this might have been because Malinowski did rather well for himself under the Habsburgs: as Gellner repeatedly points out, Malinowski's thesis on Ernst Mach was the only dissertation in Cracow in 1908 to be received *sub auspiciis Imperatoris* [Gellner 1987f: 55, 56, 58, 62]. Gellner, on the other hand, was a 'post-war Czechoslovak', someone who was born fairly soon after the establishment of the (first) Czechoslovak Republic, too soon for there to be any widespread nostalgia for the Habsburgs yet. Furthermore, Gellner himself was soon enough affected by the rise of a rather more brutal empire, the Third Reich, from which his family fled and against which he later fought as a very young soldier. And, as if this weren't enough, soon after he was demobilised, he had to flee from Prague once again, foreseeing the imposition of yet another period of imperial domination in the form of Soviet hegemony. Why did all this first-hand experience not turn Gellner into a Czechoslovak nationalist?

One might argue that Gellner did not become a nationalist because he in fact took the first option open to 'second-class citizens of World History': the route of assimilation. Leaving Prague and its tragic uncertainties behind (not just once, but twice!), young Ernest went off to Balliol, acquired the right Oxbridge accent, got his First and a good job in London, married a beautiful Englishwoman, settled down with his pipe and his books, and ended up the distinguished Professor with the right initials behind his name. In some ways, Gellner goes out of his way in his writings to support such an interpretation, with his references to 'Lady Montdore's Principle' (who on earth *was* Lady Montdore?, an uninitiated reader wonders) and other insider allusions. Sometimes, though, he really goes a bit too far in this sort of projection of himself as old-fogy-with-plummy-accent:

"West End clubs are one of the few places left where it is still possible to have one's status confirmed by having one's shoes polished by human labour. Elsewhere it has become impossible, as I realised when I left my shoes outside the door of a New York hotel in the 1960s, and the hotel staff, quite misinterpreting my intention, simply threw the shoes away." [Gellner 1987g: 99]

The mischievous note of self-parody is unmistakable. But even if assimilationists are allowed to make fun of themselves, the fact remains that this interpretation of Gellner as an assimilationist is simply too pat. The assimilationist hypothesis would indeed conveniently explain why Gellner was so 'grateful' (to Elie Kedourie, another assimilated outsider) for the 'illumination' that nationalism is not simply natural, for if nationalism is not natural then there is no reason why one should not choose to belong to another nation of one's choice: assimilation loses the bitter flavour of betrayal. The assimilationist interpretation would also explain why Gellner constructs a fastidious Western collective 'we' (in

²¹) [Gellner 1994i: 77]. Elsewhere Gellner quotes Malinowski as writing, "I should like to put it here on record that no honest and sincere Pole would ever have given anything but praise to the political regime of the old Dual Monarchy. Pre-war Austria in its federal constitution presented, in my opinion, a sound solution to all minority problems." From Malinowski's Preface to *The Casubian Civilisation*, quoted in [Gellner 1987f: 58].

which, by definition, he is included, and whose feelings he can then voice) that is 'surprised, pained, frightened' by the sight of 'their' bad taste as reflected in Khomeini-style fundamentalism. The best way to confirm one's own membership of a club is to blackball (or, at least, to bad-mouth) others. However, while convenient and, perhaps, partly true, this hypothesis is too superficial to be wholly satisfying. For one thing, a successful assimilationist does not conspicuously draw attention to the extent to which he has succeeded in assimilating, as Gellner himself notes in a diverting footnote on social climbing:

"the cult of restraint which is so characteristic of English culture (...) could be attributed to a valuation of rank and status, which frees its carrier from a vulgar need to insist loudly on his standing. He *is*, he doesn't need to *do*. This provides a useful and discouraging hurdle for the would-be climber, who is faced with a fork: if he conducts himself with restraint, he will remain unnoticed and outside, for as yet he *is* not, but if he makes a noise, he will display his vulgarity and damn himself. (In practice, many have, however, surmounted this fork.) [Gellner 1987f: footnote 96-97]

Was Gellner speaking from personal experience? Assimilation is generally regarded as the 'easy' option: only those who have undergone the finer details of identity-moulting know just how painful, even humiliating, the process can be. It is not coincidental that some of the fiercest nationalists have been those who tried to assimilate – and failed. Indeed, it is the humiliation felt by these failed 'wannabes' which is at the heart of Gellner's theory of nationalism.

The hypothesis that Gellner did not himself become a nationalist because he succeeded in assimilating into a relatively nice and rich culture probably does have some truth to it. However, the assimilationist interpretation does not cover some important aspects of Gellner's life and thought. It does not, for instance, explain his long-term fascination with North Africa and, more generally, the Islamic world. (In all fairness, the assimilationist hypothesis does not have to prove that *all* aspects of Gellner's life and thought were dictated by the requirements of assimilation. Just the most important aspects.) However, the limited scope of the assimilationist interpretation is most clear when one considers the continuity, complexity, and depth of Gellner's intellectual interest, political commitment, and personal ties to Central and Eastern Europe, in particular, to the Czech lands. The intertwined nature of these concerns is particularly evident when Gellner writes about the fate of those intellectuals who were not as foresighted, or simply as lucky, as he was himself, and who did not manage to escape:

"The Czech intelligentsia is the captive Hamlet of Europe: ironically, the sloppy, inefficient and ill-disciplined industrial economy of contemporary Czechoslovakia (for communism has managed to reduce one of the most work-addicted nations on earth to just such a condition), which has made its writers, teachers and thinkers into hewers of wood and drawers of water, is also so lax as to give them, evidently, a fair amount of time to think, and even to write." [Gellner 1987h: 124]

As previously noted, Gellner claimed to prefer capitalism to socialism because capitalism was relatively more efficient and also because it required less 'false consciousness' of those living under it. These themes recur here – the same cool disdain for the 'sloppy, inefficient, and ill-disciplined' character of real socialism is here also coupled with a real sympathy for the 'writers, teachers and thinkers' who have been coerced into the almost Biblical roles of "hewers of wood and drawers of water" instead of performing the complex semantic functions appropriate to an industrial-age clerisy, functions which they can now only perform in their free time and on the sly. Gellner's sympathy sounds strangely

utilitarian, almost as though the worst part of the situation faced by the Czech intelligentsia was the bad work conditions.²² He seems to feel a similar sort of sympathy for the populace as a whole: in a peculiar parenthesis, he sounds sorry that “one of the most work-addicted nations on earth” has been “reduced” to sloppy inefficiency. Addiction to work is clearly a virtue for Gellner, and his critique of Czechoslovak communism is two-fold: first, that it prevents these good workers from doing their jobs properly; and, secondly, that it is so ‘lax’ that it cannot even successfully prevent these good workers from doing their jobs properly in their free time, intellectuals from thinking and writing, and ordinary people from the careful cultivation of their gardens in their weekend cottages.

Yet, for all its sloppiness, inefficiency, and lack of discipline, Czechoslovakia was an *industrial* economy. Gellner’s strong insistence on this leads to certain conclusions. First, the real opposition between ‘us’ and ‘them’ is not between capitalism and socialism (especially when both tend towards the middle ground of the consumerist welfare-state), but rather between industrial and agrarian societies. Czechoslovakia and Britain are not so very different, after all.²³ Furthermore, the structural similarity between industrial societies means that *some* of their members can be transplanted fairly easily from one industrial society to another. As Gellner writes:

“two equally sophisticated well-trained members of the upper professional layers of developed industrial countries feel little strain and need to adjust when visiting each other’s lands, irrespective of how competent they are at speaking each other’s language, in the literal sense... They already ‘speak each other’s language’, even if they do not speak each other’s language... It is ironic that intellectuals, the driving force of initial nationalism, are now, in a world of nation-states, often the ones who move with the greatest ease between states, with the least prejudice, as once they did in the days of an international inter-state clerisy.” [Gellner 1983: 117-118]

As an inveterate conference-goer himself, Gellner was an active member of this new international clerisy composed of cosmopolitan intellectuals. Three observations result from this insight. First, assimilation and cosmopolitanism are not quite as divergent options as they might seem. In a sort of transverse social climbing, Gellner, for instance, assimilated into the trans-national class of cosmopolitan intellectuals. Indeed, one might argue that the reproduction of this particular class is especially dependent on this sort of

²²) Even Gellner’s personal sympathies, then, are closely related to his intellectual concerns. It is the refusal to allow feelings to dominate the intellect which generates a stance of irony which can sound misleadingly dispassionate. As he points out, he “accepted this suffering of others with a vicarious stoicism which may, no doubt rightly, seem complacent and comic. But then, what help would it have been to anyone if one had become hysterical? The state of perpetual moral outrage, occasioned indifferently by good causes and bad (and seldom with enough knowledge to know just *which* it is) and used simultaneously to titivate oneself, to justify a shriller complacency, a meddling and demanding interference with others and a suspension of rules of propriety, is a habitual stance of the Far Left, and one which is in the end self-defeating and repellent. Cheap moral indignation drives out good.” [Gellner 1987d: 112]

²³) “An outside observer may be tempted by some comparisons. Britain is a free mixed-economy society, half-haunted by the guilt of capitalism. Czechoslovakia is a Stalinoid society haunted by the sins of Stalinism. De-legitimated capitalism faces de-legitimated socialism... Britain was the first industrial society, and the Czech lands were the first industrial area in Central Europe. So there are many parallels. Both societies are ailing.” [Gellner 1987d: 132] As this essay has tried to point out, Gellner’s attempt to present himself as an “outside observer” is somewhat disingenuous.

adoption since relatively few people are born trans-national and of these even fewer are intellectuals. Secondly, cosmopolitanism does not necessarily preclude local, particular, attachments. For if you are already metaphorically 'speaking each other's language' even if you do not literally speak each other's language, then there is no need to literally speak each other's language (if you see what I mean). This leads to the third observation: that there are different levels of cosmopolitanism. Cosmopolitanism could, for instance, be attitudinally defined as the ability to find common ground with an interlocutor presumably from another cultural environment on some underlying but not necessarily absolute level, or, on the level of identity-formation, as the ability to acquire and inhabit a complex identity composed of culturally multiple roles and personalities. However, since the ability to find common ground with a culturally different interlocutor implies a refusal to accept the absolute boundaries of one's own culture, and since the multiple roles in some sense cancel themselves out, both of these definitions do logically lead to a limiting concept of the cosmopolitan as an individual with no collective loyalties except to humanity as a whole.

This limiting concept of the cosmopolitan is essentially rationalistic: it is the Kantian vision of 'man as a *noumenon*', as a rational being who is free from his appetitive and social constraints and who can therefore freely act in a moral manner for the good of the human species as whole [see e.g. Kant 1928, 1952: 95-99; 1970]. Gellner, to some extent, discards the moral component of this image of the cosmopolitan; furthermore, as he likes to point out, Kant (and Hume) "under the fond delusion that they were analysing the human mind as such, *an sich*, anywhere, any time, were in fact giving very profound accounts of the general logic of the new spirit whose emergence characterised their age." [Gellner 1983: 20, see also *Reason and Culture* for a similar argument.] Gellner sociologises an even more rationalistic limiting concept on similar grounds: the starkly atomistic picture of the world presented in Wittgenstein's early masterpiece, the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, was meant to depict "the very limits of the world... In fact, what [Wittgenstein] thought of as the limits of the world were but the shadows of one variant of the atomistic strategy in philosophy." [Gellner 1987b: 182-183] However, this resounding rhetorical relegation of even the early Wittgenstein to the obscure shadows of irrelevant intellectual history does not ring entirely true – as one realises from Gellner's own way of using of Wittgenstein's image of 'the limits of the world'. Wittgenstein in the *Tractatus* used the image to make two related points: that the self, like the eye, cannot see itself, and that the philosophical self is a metaphysical subject which "does not belong to the world: rather it is a limit of the world." [Wittgenstein 1961: proposition 5.632, p. 57] Gellner replaces the 'philosophical self' with 'culture': as a result, in passages that (are meant to) echo and also distort Wittgenstein's description of the solitary self locked in its solipsistic world, Gellner provides new *social* images of the limits of the world. Thus, in "most of the closed micro-communities of the agrarian age the limits of the culture were the limits of the world, and the culture often itself remained unperceived, invisible". [Gellner 1983: 111] However, in industrial society where cultural homogeneity is at a premium, the "limits of his culture are the limits of his employability, his world, and his moral citizenship. (The peasant's world had been narrower than his culture.) He is now often liable to bump against this limit, like a fly coming up against the window-pane, and he soon learns to be acutely conscious of it." [Gellner 1987i: 16] There is a double movement involved in Gellner's use of the concept of the limit of the world: on the one hand, he transforms an essentially philosophical, indeed, transcendental, notion into a sociological concept

with which to clarify the radically difference between the agrarian and industrial world-views; on the other hand, as an ideal-type image of the worldview generated by the conditions of industrial society, the ‘terminal atomism’ of Wittgenstein’s delimited world is precisely the social and cultural space which Gellner himself came to inhabit, the world of mobile rational individualistic cosmopolitans.

However, Gellner did not think that this sort of cosmopolitan condition was a historical reality or that it was likely to become a universal condition. He did not believe in the ‘convergence thesis’, the idea that the structural similarities and economic interdependence between developed industrial societies would ultimately render cultural difference irrelevant and thus produce an essentially homogeneous global culture.“ [ibid.: 116-121] Gellner, then, found himself in the situation which he ascribed to Malinowski, in the position of a cosmopolitan who “could not conceivably see the human condition in general in such terms”. And, like Malinowski before him, Gellner found a ‘subtler and more complex’ way to avoid falling back on the obvious alternatives which his Oxford training offered him, refusing to adopt either the sterile uncritically modernist worldview of economics or the equally unsatisfactory philosophy of his time with its reification of the customs and speech patterns of the ‘community’. Gellner’s ‘subtler and more complex’ solution to the dilemma was to translate the dilemma itself onto the material dimension of human history, to realise that the economists’ model describing a world composed of the rational interactions and transactions of atomic individuals was an ideal-type image of *Gesellschaft*, a certain kind of society which emerged at a certain historical juncture, just as community-centric philosophy was in fact a certain idealised nostalgic image of *Gemeinschaft*, of the stable and relatively closed communities found in agrarian societies. The conceptual dilemma, the ‘either/or’, disappears, to be replaced with the concept of a transition from one worldview to another. The notion of ‘transition’ creates a useful space of ambiguity, a little bubble of time in which the past and the present co-exist, a zone of conceptual overlap in which one worldview can make sense of another radically different worldview. In this fruitfully ambiguous space Zeno’s arrow both moves and is still, [Gellner 1987f: 64-67] the particle is also a wave, the observer is also a participant, and an anthropologist can understand (and even share) the inner life of another community without losing his own cosmopolitan identity.

A richer interpretation of Gellner’s life and thought emerges from this insight, an interpretation which does rather more justice to the complexity of Gellner’s intellectual interests and personal attachments than are allowed by more superficial understandings of Gellner as a functionalist with no respect for local conditions or as a rationalist with no regard for particular feelings. Ironically, the real reductionism lies in the image of Gellner as a reductionist, an irony he would have appreciated.

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