

THE INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS OF THE “TRANSITION”: ERNEST
GELLNER’S SOCIAL PHILOSOPHY AND POLITICAL SOCIOLOGYⁱ

SGIR Pan European Conference, Torino

12-15 September

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INTRODUCTION

Amongst scholars of International Relations, Ernest Gellner is probably best known as one of the key theorists of nationalism and as a leading figure of the ‘modernist’ school of nationalism studies. However Gellner’s interests and contribution to knowledge extends considerably beyond the study of nationalismⁱⁱ. A principal objective of this article is to set out Gellner’s extraordinarily ambitious and multidisciplinary vision of our modern condition which underpinned his lifetime’s work into a wide array of subjects.

Gellner was one of that group of political exiles from the turmoil of fascism and communism in East Central Europe who contributed disproportionately to British academic life. Like others from this cohort, he was dismayed by the complacency he encountered in the intellectual climate of post-war British universities and was unwilling to remain silent for the sake of academic advancement. Gellner was never afraid and, in many ways, relished the role as iconoclast. His first major work, *Words and Things* (1959) was an excoriating attack on the intellectual provincialism and trivialisation of knowledge which he found in the philosophy studied at Oxford University in the 1950s, which was then in the midst of the ‘linguistic revolution’ associated in particular with the legacy of Ludwig Wittgenstein. For someone who had still not obtained tenure, it was a brave and potentially fool-hardy act of defiance and might have brought his academic career to an untimely end if he had not obtained the support of Bertrand Russell, who approved of his critique, wrote to the *Times* in his favour against the Oxford philosophical establishment, and brought Gellner fame and the status of a young *enfant terrible* of British academia.

Gellner's response to this early exposure to intellectual provincialism was to dedicate his subsequent life to crossing academic disciplines and to addressing an impressively wide array of topics and subjects. He was probably unique amongst British scholars in that, during his life, he held chairs in philosophy (LSE), sociology (LSE) and social anthropology (Cambridge). He contributed original and path-breaking monographs and articles to all these academic disciplines. His works and range of interests included a detailed ethnographic study of the tribesmen of the High Atlas mountains in Morocco (1969); the sociology of Islam (1981); Soviet anthropology and social thought (1980; 1888); issues of social philosophy (1974), the philosophy of science and the philosophical problems of relativism (1985a), critiques of post-modernism (1992); the sociology of nationalism (1983; 1997a); politics of modern society and role of civil society (1994); an analysis of psychoanalysis (1985b); as well as a general grand theory of history (1964; 1991). He wrote over 25 books and his full bibliography runs into the hundreds.

Despite his diverse and prolific output, Gellner's essential message and the intellectual focus of his work was relatively simple, even stark. He sought in his many endeavours to bring out what he saw as the single most important development of human history: the 'transition' or, as he sometimes calls it, the crossing of the 'ditch' from *agrarian* society, characterised by Malthusian scarcity, a violent and coercive ruling class, and closed non-cumulative cognitive framework imposed by a self-perpetuating revelation-holding clerisy, to *industrial* society, characterised by affluence, dynamic and cumulative cognitive growth and the prospect, if not the guarantee, of liberty. Gellner's world vision is one of a 'world in which one style of knowledge, though born of one culture, is being adapted by all of them, with enormous speed and eagerness, and is disrupting many of them, and is totally

transforming the milieu in which men live' (1992: 78). Gellner treats this as the 'fact' of our present condition and sees it the central task of all the social sciences – philosophy, sociology, anthropology, and politics – to work out its implications. Gellner was unashamedly a modernist, a defender of Western empiricism and the positivist tradition, and a political liberal but someone also deeply beset by fears that this 'miraculous' discovery of an incredibly powerful cognitive style, and the technological economic advances it promotes, might result in the extinction rather than the consolidation of liberty. It is, at least in part, these tensions in his admirably unified and parsimonious model of historical development which makes his work so rewarding.

At the present time, Gellner's intellectual contribution is accorded a surprisingly marginal role in the various disciplines to which he belonged. Ever since his confrontation with Oxford philosophy, he has been ignored by mainstream analytical philosophy. A similar fate has befallen his work in social anthropology, despite holding the Cambridge Chair in Social Anthropology from 1982 onwards. In sociology, his work has a greater recognition but has become increasingly marginalised in the post-modernist shift in sociological conceptualizations of modernity and its meanings. Gellner's relative marginality to IR is perhaps more understandable since he had only a limited interest in the role of geopolitics, an omission which he did note was problematic.ⁱⁱⁱ

In this article, we argue that Gellner has much to offer those whose academic interests lie in IR, despite his disinterest into a number of the core concerns of IR. The argument has four parts. First, it is suggested that Gellner's political sociology, though relatively marginal in contemporary sociology, offers more to IR than other leading sociologists. Gellner's biography and sociology is contrasted with Zygmunt

Bauman and Ralf Dahrendorf, two fellow central Europeans who have contributed enormously to British sociology. Second, it is argued that the overarching social philosophy and theory of history behind Gellner's intellectual contribution provides a powerful tool for approaching some of the core contemporary concerns of IR. The third and fourth sections examine Gellner's original contributions to two specific areas of such concern – the dynamic of nationalism and the phenomenon of Islamic fundamentalism.

BIOGRAPHY AND SOCIOLOGY IN CONTEXT

A central concern for sociology, particularly historical sociology, is the delineation of what is distinctive about modernity. Its description necessarily affects our understanding of our contemporary world. This section seeks to place Gellner among his leading contemporaries within British sociology and their contrasting views of modernity, and in doing so it seeks to highlight the contours of Gellner's distinctive approach. It does so by contrasting his historical sociology with that of two other (east) central European-origin academics who made a significant impact on British sociology: Ralf Dahrendorf and Zygmunt Bauman. There is an immediate contrast that should be noted: in terms of academic popularity Gellner is perhaps the least celebrated. In the 1960s and 1970s, a period in which 'Marx-Weber sociology' was dominant, Dahrendorf's views on social stratification and conflict were widely discussed and cited, while Bauman's views on the social conditions of 'post-modernity' have become celebrated following the post-structuralist/cultural turn in British sociology through the 1990s. Gellner's sociology never quite captured the British sociological *zeitgeist*, and yet for all that, we maintain that it is *his* sociology

that remains the most prescient and the most relevant to contemporary international relations, offering as it does an ‘international political sociology’.

Gellner remained something of an ‘outsider’ in British academia (Hall, 1981: 197). His social background partly explains this. He was Czech in origin; his parents were German-speaking Jews who switched to using Czech under the ‘liberal nationalist’ regime of Jan Masaryk’s interwar Czechoslovakia. Gellner’s immediate family fled to Britain following the Nazi invasion of 1939; those that remained perished. In Britain he attended Oxford University before joining the Czech Brigade and taking part in the victory parade in Prague in 1945. Unable to re-settle in Prague he returned to Britain (Hall, 1998: 1-2).^{iv} These were formative experiences which influenced much of his theorising on modernity and its concomitant ideologies of nationalism and Marxism. Academically, Gellner was genuinely a polymath. As already noted, his work embraced philosophy, sociology and anthropology, and was notable for its willingness to take unpopular yet strongly held positions. Yet despite the range of his work, there was coherence to it.

An attachment to empiricism was a unifying theme. This, Gellner shares with Ralf Dahrendorf and together they share an admiration for Karl Popper, both his empiricism and his liberalism. Popper’s insistence on the verification of knowledge marked both thinkers as did his promotion of the ‘open society’ as the optimal outcome. Dahrendorf’s passion for liberty derives from his youth in Germany, marked by anti-Nazi activity for which he was sent to a concentration camp (Hall, 1981: 121). Yet while Dahrendorf’s admiration for Popper led to a rather crude ‘evolutionism’ in which the emergence of an ‘open society’ was itself viewed as the ‘end of history’ which had to be defended at all costs (Hall, 1981), Gellner’s liberalism was rather more hard-nosed. Liberalism was a desirable yet historically rare outcome,

continually vulnerable to competing ideologies. The conditions under which it prospered had to be understood. Lessnoff (2002: 59) offers this observation: ‘The difference between Popper and Gellner is that what Popper simply advocates as the most rational politics, Gellner claims to be the only possible democratic politics’. The difference is telling, for Popper ‘rational politics’ is justified philosophically for Gellner it is justified on sociological grounds, as the only social option available to foster democracy.

Both Gellner and Dahrendorf draw on Popper’s model of social change. For Dahrendorf (1972) conflict is part and parcel of human society, and is presented as a social good, a necessary instrument of social change. Dahrendorf is theorising Popper’s ‘warrior ethic’ that suggests that humans are naturally contentious. Conflict arises in response to the differential access to power. However there is a rather naïve optimism to the theory since there is a belief that it will inevitably result in a civilised society (Hall, 1981: 123-32). While Popper advocated only incremental change, Gellner suggests that a more fundamental revolution had to take place in order to allow for the very existence of reform-orientated societies. It was an analysis of this that Gellner devoted his intellectual life. It is the resulting sociology that has greatest significance for IR. Gellner presents a ‘trinitarian’ view of human history in which revolution has played a pivotal role: the Neolithic and industrial revolutions are identified as seismic ruptures in human history. The first heralded the transition from hunter/gatherer society (‘*forgia*’) to settled agrarian society (‘*agraria*’); the second marked the transition to modern industrial society (‘*industria*’). It is this latter transition which provides the central focus of Gellner’s *oeuvre*, and through which topics as diverse as nationalism, Islam, psychoanalysis and postmodernism are understood. These are ‘episodes’ in human history thereby conveying the contingency

of these events; they are not inevitable developments (Hall, 1981: 201-2). There is an abiding conviction running through Gellner's work that modernity is an achievement, the material benefits that it produces are real and continue to be experienced across the globe.

The contrast with Zygmunt Bauman could not be more stark. Bauman's continuing intellectual development is characterised by a growing disillusionment with modernity and the embrace of a series of 'emancipatory projects', notably Marxism, post-modernity and most recently his own formulation, 'liquid modernity' (Bauman, 2000), which seek to transcend our present social conditions. These projects, in Gellnerian terms are 're-enchantment' projects (a description Bauman himself adopts, see below), theories characterised by the replacement of analysis with hope; as a result they provide only 'false trails'. They fail to adopt the necessary empirical rigor. Bauman's sociology must in part be understood by examining his biography. He shares with Gellner a Jewish background, yet his family gravitated toward communism rather than liberalism. Jozef Pilsudski's Poland was more conservative and nationalist than Masaryk's Czechoslovakia, and Bauman's family experienced anti-Semitism directly. In this context the universalist and salvatory aspects of communism were particularly appealing to those, notably Jews, with 'liminal identities' (Riga, 2006; cf. Gellner, 1998). At the outbreak of war in 1939 Bauman's family fled to the Soviet Union, there Bauman joined the Polish army in Soviet Russia (mirroring Gellner's own military service) and was part of the Soviet push westwards in 1945. Bauman continued to serve as an officer in the military as an idealistic Communist Party member, while undertaking graduate studies. He grew only gradually disillusioned with 'state socialism', in part the result of anti-Semitic

purges: he was dismissed from the military in 1953 and from his academic post in 1968. He secured an academic post in Britain in 1971 (Smith, 1999: 38-41).

Bauman's chief concern has been to theorize ways in which the human cost of modernity can be overcome. According to Bauman modernity is characterised by the drive for order imposed by the modern state and its agents; human beings suffer since they are denied the freedom to realise their own identities (Smith, 1999: 142-3) As a Marxist he speculated that capitalist modernity could be circumvented altogether. Notably he argued that the communal values and organisation of Polish peasants were conducive to the economic organisation of Communist Poland (Smith, 1999: 70-4). Interestingly an earlier generation of sociologists had found these same characteristics entirely compatible with early 20th century capitalist Chicago (Thomas and Znaniecki, [1918-20] 1984). As a postmodernist Bauman suggests that the attempt to impose order has failed, and it is that failure which has ushered in a postmodern era in which individuals can rediscover their moral nature and bring about the '*re-enchantment of the world*' (Smith, 1999: 147-50). Gellner's response to this sort of theorising is stoic: drawing on Weber he insists that the disenchanting costs of modernity cannot be wished away, they need to be borne; they are the price to be paid for the very real benefits that modernity, in particular science provides. In other words 'science destroys but cannot create' (Hall, 1981: 212-5).

In our view Gellner's conceptualisation of the transition retains all its explanatory power, and has much to offer IR. Gellner's emphasis on the transition to modernity and its continuing repercussions acts as a necessary corrective to Western-centric theorising which ignores the fundamental fact that much of the world is still grappling with the transition to modernity and its immediate consequences. Moreover Gellner was particularly prescient in his view that the issue of liberalisation rather

than the traditional concern with revolution would occupy us as more societies became industrialized (Hall, 1981: 230). It is now necessary to flesh out its philosophical foundations.

THE PHILOSOPHICAL ROOTS OF GELLNER'S "TRANSITION"

As has been noted earlier, Gellner's theory of the transition from agrarian to industrial society, the escape from the 'rural idiocy' identified by Marx, was predicated on an unashamedly modernist, empiricist/positivist and liberal social philosophy. His driving intellectual concern was with the prospects for liberty, following in the classical liberal tradition and inspired in his own time by the two teachers he most revered – Karl Popper and Bertrand Russell. He never really questioned the liberal expectation that the affluence promised by modernity would ultimately be attained by all. As he noted in 1987, 'that development would take place at all, that industrial affluence would eventually be reached by all societies, seemed to me to be reasonably certain (with certain provisos), and I have not really changed my mind on that' (1987: 112). But where he dissented from a teleological liberal optimism was over the prospects for liberty. He believed that it was impossible to have a comparable confidence in the political as against the economic realm and that the battle to establish the conditions for liberty would be a much more serious existential struggle, where the forces opposing it – the pre-modern legacies of authoritarianism, the 'acute miseries' of the passage to affluence and the political need to be single-minded and ruthless in reaching this goal – all militated against the survival of the fragile inheritance of liberty. Gellner was, therefore, a liberal with a vocation seeking to contribute, as far as possible, to the intellectual struggle to help

liberty's 'fighting chance' (ibid: 113) of becoming as widespread and institutionalised as the future expectation of global affluence.

The heart of Gellner's intellectual project was, therefore, to provide a philosophical and analytical framework for understanding this critical disconnection, so vital for our present condition, between the trajectory of affluence and the trajectory of liberty. Part of Gellner's originality was to identify one of the root causes for this in the realm of ideas and in philosophy, in particular in the implications from what he called the 'cognitive revolution' underlying the 'transition' to modernity. His starting point was with those key Enlightenment thinkers that he studied at Oxford: Descartes, Hume and Kant. For Gellner, Descartes' main contribution was the breakthrough implicit in the famous 'cogito ergo sum' which established a new method or yardstick for determining truth and falsehood and one not based on received wisdom or some external source of revelation, but rather on 'clear and distinct ideas'. Descartes was, in this way, asserting that you needed to stand outside from the multiplicity of meanings and concepts derived by one's own and other cultures and adopt, in Gellner's felicitous term, the position of 'cosmic exile' to sort out the sheep from the goats.

This standing back and taking a voluntary form of cognitive exile from the world represented, for Gellner, the critical turning point towards a modern and away from a pre-modern cognitive framework. Pre-modern cognition was, for Gellner, a much more suffused and complex baggage of linguistic concepts where the referential functions (describing some physical reality) are combined with statements of social obligation (affirming a particular social order). Language use in pre-modern societies is, in Gellner's terms, 'multi-stranded', where the concepts used are both descriptive of the physical world and asserting loyalty to a given social order. Descartes' radical

innovation was to be the first to separate these two functions and to propose a single-stranded rationality, where referential accuracy was to be cognitive king. This single-stranded cognitive approach not only changed the way we understand the world but also our capacities for manipulating and mastering that world. Gellner nicely illustrates the contrast between these two approaches by comparing the single-stranded modern and rational purchaser buying 'the best commodity at the least price' with his multi-stranded pre-modern for whom:

Buying something from a village neighbour in a tribal community is dealing not only with a seller but also with a kinsman, collaborator, ally or rival, potential supplier of a bride for his son, fellow juryman, ritual participant, fellow defender of the village, fellow communal member (1991: 144).

Descartes, thus, initiates the sceptical tradition underpinning the cognitive revolution, where it is the individual's experiences, not the givens of tradition and revelation, which hold epistemological sway. But, Descartes' subsequent philosophy back-tracked from his initial radical starting point and it was up to David Hume and Immanuel Kant, the real heroes of the Enlightenment for Gellner, to articulate the radical implications of world shorn of its privileged social order and a sacred realm of facts. Hume went further than Descartes in stating that the only things we can be sure of in this world is information obtained through our sense perceptions. This austere universe is inherently iconoclastic. Hume famously recommended that if any book contains neither 'abstract reasoning concerning quantity or number' nor 'any experimental reasoning concerning matters of fact and existence' then 'commit it to the flames; for it can contain nothing but sophistry and illusion' (quoted in 1974: 37).

This severely restricted and disaggregated Humean vision of the world is, in Gellner's phrase, a 'granular' vision where all the facts are separate and in principle

separable. All facts are to be treated as equal, meaning that none should be granted any a priori privileges nor deemed to be necessarily connected with any other fact. For Hume, there is no necessary causation and even values must be separated from the facts to which they are attached (the fact-value distinction). In Hume's vision, the only things we can be sure of are analogous to a series of disconnected photographic images which we then, in formal terms, arbitrarily connect together into a collage. The radical implications of this threatened a complete epistemological scepticism, where even one's personal identity over time could no longer be assured. It was this potential epistemological shipwreck which famously awoke Kant from his 'dogmatic slumbers'. Kant's critical contribution, which made Gellner hail him as the greatest philosopher of them all (ibid: 184), was in arguing that while we are, as Hume articulated, a part of the world and thus liable to radical atomistic disaggregation, we are also outside of the world in that we are conceptually programmed, through our essential rationality (our Reason as against our Nature), to think as if there is a causal order, to a commitment to the validity of thought which seeks to explain and predict that order, and to the assumption of a continuing personal identity with a responsibility to freedom.

For Gellner, Kant's genius was not in reversing or undermining the fundamental revolution brilliantly captured by Hume, but in his success at a salvage operation in taking the 'absolute minimum to save our humanity, to make us more than mere things...He was like a refugee from a catastrophe who arrives, nobly carrying the two or three beings dearest to him' (ibid: 188). But, the reality still remains, despite Kant's best efforts, that the cognitive revolution, where language is single-stranded and focused on accurate description, explanation and prediction leaves a decidedly mixed legacy. On the one hand, it provides the techniques and

methods for assuring cumulative cognitive growth, particularly in the natural sciences, and which has provided the foundations for the ‘transition’ from Malthusian scarcity and a social order based on agricultural surplus to a modern socially mobile industrial order which brings hitherto un-dreamt of affluence. There is, for Gellner, no turning away from this without involving a return to mass starvation. But, on the other hand, this cognitive world, unlike the earlier pre-modern version, is very poor at providing social cohesion. It provides the tools for manipulating the world to mankind’s advantage but does not offer any vision of how that world should be constituted to satisfy man’s basic moral and psychological needs. In one of Gellner’s inimitable aphorisms, the core problem is that ‘truth cannot define a social system’ (1991: 86). The fact is that single-stranded and flattened world is ‘notoriously a cold, morally indifferent world. Its icy indifference to values, its failure to console and reassure, its total inability either to validate norms and values or to offer any guarantee of their eventual success’ is simply the ‘consequence of the overall basic and entrenched constitution of our thought’ (1991: 64-5).

It is this failure to match the advances in the natural sciences with similar advances in the social sciences – about the required social order for this new world – which is at the heart of Gellner’s intellectual anxiety. It is here that he particularly relies on Max Weber’s sociological insights, as the key thinker who provides the historical account of how the particular form of rationality linked to modernity becomes dominant, and the associated moral ‘disenchantment’ and social ‘iron cage’ that accompanies it. Gellner does not, in practice, show great interest in determining the precise causal mechanisms which led to the ‘transition’ first occurring in Europe and, in particular, in Britain. He does, though, constantly proclaim it as a ‘miraculous’ event, given the weight of the social forces in favour of maintaining the pre-modern

status quo with the monopoly of power it secured for the narrow stratum of ruling elites and their ideological legitimators. In *Plough, Sword and Book*, he sets out fourteen specific factors in Europe and Britain which could be considered, singularly or in combination (such as European feudalism, state/church division, free peasants, plural state system...etc), to have facilitated this unique transition but concludes that 'we shall probably never know with precision the precise path by which we have escaped the idiocy of rural life' (1991: 186).

Gellner is, though, more fully exercised by the need to find an explanation for why the first transition brought both affluence *and* liberty, which as noted before, he did not see as necessarily con-joined. Here, Gellner is interested in Weber's famous but controversial thesis of the role of the Protestant work ethic in the shift to modernity. Gellner accepts the basic Weberian contention that there is a critical affinity between puritanism and modernity, since the puritanical mindset rejects mediators between the divine and the human, giving primacy to the individual's conscience and his/her grasp of external reality. In addition, the jealous, inscrutable, inaccessible and anti-rational God of the puritanical imagination is not dependent on miracles for His validation but rather on the evidence of the orderly facts of His creation. Puritanism, in this sense, provides the intellectual foundations for an egalitarian and mobile society, and a non-interventionist miracle-free world, which is critical for encouraging the scientific method. But, what is particularly important for Gellner in explaining the securing of liberty in the first European 'transition' was the fact that the English puritans lost the civil war and were not then able to impose their theocratic and authoritarian vision of society. Instead, what emerged was a society of toleration, the first 'civil society', where elements of the earlier superstitious religious order were restored but with a toleration of the puritans in their midst so long as they

concentrated their energies on wealth-creation rather than theocratic restoration. For Gellner, the origins of civil society, and thus of the political condition of liberty, came with ‘a political stalemate between practitioners of superstition and the zealots of enthusiasm, such as in fact did occur in seventeenth century England, leading to compromise’ (1994: 48).

Gellner clearly finds much explanatory consolation in this first emergence of non-kinship based civil society and the reassurance that the increasing affluence of modern society could also be reconciled with a liberal and tolerant political order. But, Gellner was also convinced that this was a contingent conjunction. Toleration might, admittedly, have been necessary to permit that first breakthrough across the ‘ditch’ from agrarian to industrial society but there is no such necessary linkage for latter shifts in other societies. It is here that Gellner introduces the critical concept of *rattrapage*, meaning the determination of those societies seeking to ‘catch up’ and emulate the economic successes, and the political power that this brings, of the early modernisers. It is here that he sees the sociological roots of the division between Anglo-Saxon and continental philosophy. The essential reason for their diverging approaches and styles was that ‘in Edinburgh and Glasgow, thinkers tried to explain the changes which had already happened; in Paris, to call for changes which ought to happen’ (1991: 115). It was this fact that the *philosophes* were living under the conditions of the *ancien régime* which made their social and political prescriptions more radical and, at times, revolutionary. In France, the enlightenment was a counter-Church and counter-doctrine, which as a consequence ‘mirrored all too faithfully that which it would repudiate and replace’ (ibid: 116). With the French Revolution, you have the first attempt to translate the Enlightenment and the cognitive revolution into a unified social order, elevating Reason into a secular equivalent of the God which

had been overthrown in the old order. But, as with the later Russian Revolution, this belief in a secular theodicy, where progress and Hegel's cunning of reason are made king, resulted in reigns of terror where individual freedom and liberty were one of the first victims.

The essential problem for Gellner is that later emulative modernisation is necessarily pursued in conditions where individualistic liberty is either absent or a potential obstacle to reform. Gellner's concern was that compared to early industrialization, 'later industrialization is altogether different: its infrastructural requirements become enormous, conspicuous and contentious. Emulative industrialization is often imposed in conditions that are not favourable to economic activity, which themselves need to be imposed' (ibid: 187). It is in such conditions that the 'icy indifference' of the scientific method, its inability to condone any particular social order or to provide psychological comfort to those suffering the radical disruptions caused by the shift modernity, appears completely inadequate. It provides the context for various attempts to 're-enchant' the world and to offer a moral order which can legitimate and make worthwhile the sacrifices required for the passage to affluence. It is this pessimistic understanding of the rigours of late development which made him sensitive to the appeal of Marxism-Leninism. Although he was a stalwart anti-communist, and constantly decried 'really existing' communism's negation of individual liberty, Gellner did believe, at least for most of his life, that Marxism-Leninism provided a compelling model of the Weberian pre-condition of a 'Calvinism of collective and emulative industrialization' (1994: 32-2). He was, obviously, relieved when that model collapsed completely with the Velvet Revolutions of the late 1980s, but then his anxieties re-emerged with the

consequences of the complete pulverization of civil society evident in post-Soviet societies.

Much of Gellner's intellectual compulsion can be seen as driven by the need to explain and challenge those involved in the business of 're-enchantment' or those, more insidiously, who seek to deny that such re-enchantment was problematic. In this latter camp, his invective was particularly concentrated on various forms of philosophical relativism that deny 'the existence of transcultural and amoral knowledge' which constitute '*the* central fact about our shared social conditions' (1992: 75). Culprits included, most notoriously, the late Wittgenstein and his idea of incommensurate 'life forms' or 'language games', whose baleful influence he saw resurrected in the post-modernist turn in the social sciences. He also saw the United States, and other post-Enlightenment settler countries, as peculiarly unable to understand the radical disjunction between modern and pre-modern cognitive frameworks due to that fact that these countries were 'born modern' (Gellner, 1992: 52; see also Gellner, 1987: 84) and never knew or understood what pre-modern life was like. This was, for Gellner, the sociological explanation for the naïve liberal optimism in US social sciences, whose philosophical roots can be found in the one indigenous American philosophy, pragmatism, whose most famous modern exponent, Willard Van Orman Quine, Gellner (1974: 6) believed unthinkingly presupposed rather than problematised the 'self-evident truth' of the scientific method.

These academic targets of Gellner's withering critiques are, in one sense, the unwitting proponents of Western liberal complacency, who should know better but whose deleterious impact on real life is generally limited. In relation to the second category, those who Gellner saw as engaged directly in the re-enchantment business, the stakes were considerably higher and the impact on human development as much

more direct and potentially damaging. This is particularly the case to two categories of 're-enchanters', of central concern to the study of International Relations, which were to be the particular focus of Gellner's sustained intellectual concern: nationalists and the Islamic fundamentalists. It is these to which we now turn.

GELLNER AND NATIONALISM

Ernest Gellner can in many ways be credited with initiating the social scientific study of nationalism. Hitherto the study of nationalism had been the purview of historians, most notably Hans Kohn (1944). As is well known Gellner's first foray into the subject of nationalism was written in response to his LSE colleague, Elie Kedourie's (1960) claim that nationalism was simply an ideological perversion, with the implication that it was entirely avoidable. In contrast for Gellner it is an entirely necessary condition of modernity. The transition is key to understanding the theory, since it was only the particular social conditions of modernity that could give rise to this phenomenon. The result has been the presentation of the most celebrated modernist account of nationalism. 'Nation' in the modern sense of the term was according to Gellner impossible before modernity, for the very obvious reason that the mass of the population were rooted in the land and tied to their locality with little or no knowledge of or interest in the outside world. This was a world ordered by structure, far different from our modern world in which culture is the defining concern. The relationship between nation and nationalism is therefore counter-intuitive, in Gellner's words, 'nationalism is not the awakening of nations to self-consciousness: it invents nations where they do not exist' (Gellner, 1964: 168).

Nationalism spreads in response to the ‘uneven diffusion of industrialism’ (Gellner, 1964). However industrialisation impacts unevenly not just *across* territory but *within* territory, different ethnic groups are differentially affected since territories themselves contain a high degree of ethnic stratification. This latter point is less well understood (Hall, 1998). In order to bridge the resulting ‘developmental gap’ affected peoples faced a stark choice either to assimilate or separate. In this early work ‘blocked mobility’ was the key mechanism by which men became nationalists. Assimilation was often ruled out on grounds of religious, linguistic or skin pigmentation differences, making nationalism and the creation of an opposing nation-state the only viable option. This is a crucial contribution, and has very obvious implications for IR, since it suggests that not only the timing with which states embrace modernity is important, but also the timing with which different populations *within* states embrace modernity matters.

This early work was later superseded by *Nations and Nationalism* (1983). However as John A Hall (1993) perceptively notes there is a break between these two works, in other words the latter was not simply an elaboration of an earlier work. Rather *Thought and Change* theorised Gellner’s anthropological experience of Morocco, North Africa and the French overseas empire, whereas *Nations and Nationalism* theorizes Gellner’s own national background of the Czech lands within the Habsburg Empire, amusingly depicted in the fictional ‘Ruritania’ and ‘Megolamania’. It is a functional argument that is advanced here in which nationalism is understood as providing industrial society with a homogeneous culture, that culture is required by industry in order to produce a mobile workforce able to respond to the demands of industry. It is the modern state that produces this culture through mass schooling. However Michael Mann (1992) has questioned the historical accuracy of

this claim, pointing out that industrialisation and mass schooling arrived *too late* to explain the emergence of European nationalism. Gellner's theory does not quite capture nationalism's genesis, however it does capture its enduring appeal in the modern world. The first industrial revolution could only happen once. Its incidence in England can be attributed to a range of fortuitous elements (Hall, 1981). Thereafter its key elements could be packaged 'suitable for export', and it is this that his theory captures and was understood by political elites, as divergent as Atatürk and Kenyatta, as they sought to 'catch-up' with the West.

Crucially Gellner's theory identifies in nationalism a homogenizing drive, which is itself a key characteristic of modernity. This is an idea contained in his much-quoted definition of nationalism: 'a political principle which seeks to make the cultural and political unit congruent' (Gellner, 1983: 1). This stands against a range of thinkers such as Charles Taylor and James Tully, who emphasise a 'strange multiplicity' of identities found in modernity. Gellner disagrees. The history of modernity has been about the eradication of traditional communities and the imposition of a single high culture. Gellner (1997a) latterly developed a time zone view of nationalism to clarify this idea in the European context. In 'first time zone', the west European seaboard was characterised by enduring states which possessed a high culture with the result that nation-building was a relatively peaceful affair. In the second time zone a high culture was in place (German, Italian) but political authority was dispersed; unification nationalism managed the marriage of nation and state relatively peacefully. In times zones three and four in East Central Europe this was a bloody affair where ethnic populations were far more mixed and divided among four multiethnic empires (Hohenzollern, Habsburg, Romanov and Ottoman). This point is illustrated well by considering the changing ethnographic map of East Central Europe

during the 20th century. Here US statesmen have played a crucial role in determining its political boundaries through their advocacy of ‘self-determination’ (Paris 1919) and then determining their ethnographic composition, by sanctioning population transfers (Yalta 1945) (Riga and Kennedy, 2006; cf. Gellner, 1997a: Ch. 6). It was these strategies together with the Holocaust and Stalin’s population deportations which brought about the ‘unmixing of the peoples’ (Brubaker, 1996).

Methodological and terminological issues are often to the fore in discussion of these works. The term ‘industrialization’ confuses, since it implies simply the development of a particular form of economic organisation. It is better understood as ‘modernization’, comprising the range of features, not just economic, which characterise modernity (O’Leary, 1998). This is a point which Gellner appears to accept in his last published work on the subject (Gellner, 1997a). Methodologically Gellner’s use of a functionalist argumentation in *Nations and Nationalism* has engendered much criticism. The familiar criticism of functionalism, that needs are presented as causes producing a teleology, has been levelled at his theory (Anderson, 1992). However Gellner is unrepentant in his use of a structural functionalist argumentation, a method drawn from British anthropology, and denies that it is teleological (Gellner, 1997b). Nicos Mouzelis (1998) has sought to reformulate Gellner’s method by suggesting that it stands favourable comparison with Max Weber’s *Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*. That work too posed difficulty in proving causality, yet the ‘elective affinity’ between Protestantism and capitalism is compelling. Mouzelis suggests that Gellner’s thesis suggests an equally compelling ‘affinity’ between nationalism and industrialism.

Gellner’s rather abstract theorising of nationalism, and the rather instrumentalist characterization of nationalists has prompted another comparison with

Max Weber. Perry Anderson (1992) has argued that while Weber was so seduced by nationalism's spell that he failed to produce a theory, in contrast Gellner has produced a theory of nationalism that fails to grasp its spell. Gellner (1997b: 83) indignantly retorted:

I am deeply sensitive to the spell of nationalism. I can play about thirty Bohemian folk songs on my mouth organ ... I do not think I could have written the book on nationalism which I did write, were I not capable of crying with the help of a little alcohol, over folk songs which happen to be my favourite form of music.

This dialogue prompts the importance of distinguishing between Gellner's description and his prescription. It is sometimes erroneously suggested that Gellner advocated his deeply pessimistic thesis, that homogeneity is inevitable in the modern world. While he was aware that there are multinational states in existence, his descriptive analysis suggested that these outcomes would remain rare at least during the transition, this, despite his deep loathing for the costs to human lives.

The transition is key to understanding Gellner's theory of nationalism. This is a thesis that has continuing relevance for contemporary IR. To give an example, Gellner suggested that nationalism was at its most virulent during the transition thereafter nationalism would moderate once the transition had been accomplished and societies became affluent. Therefore in Gellnerian terms contemporary international relations have much less to fear from the potential secession of Scotland, as opposed to the application of the nationalist 'one nation, one state' formula in Sudan, and its devastating humanitarian consequences in Darfur. Gellner's work on nationalism prefigured its re-emergence both as a contemporary political issue and as a subject of

academic study; his examination of Islam similarly prefigured its contemporary significance. It is to that topic that we turn now.

GELLNER AND ISLAM

The initial seeds of Gellner's analysis of Islam were sown in his anthropological study undertaken in Morocco, *Saints of the Atlas* (1969), which was then systematized in *Muslim Society* (1981) and coincided with the Islamist resurgence unleashed by the Iranian revolution of 1979. Political Islam, which had earlier been considered a marginal phenomenon overtaken and subsumed by the secular Arab nationalist revolutions of the 1950s and 1960s, suddenly gained international prominence. Gellner was, thus, well placed to contribute to the ensuing debates over how to understand this unexpected new global phenomenon.

In practice, Gellner's assessment of modern Islamist revivalism never gained the canonical respect of his analogous analysis of nationalism. In part, this was because his particular model of Islam was probably too complex, and seemingly idiosyncratic, to fit easily into the contours of the ensuing debate. Gellner never had, nor wished to have, much connection with the interpretivist or post-modernist account of Islam, which saw multiple Islamisms rather a single model of Islam. But, his analysis also fell uneasily between the competing 'neo-orientalist' and 'developmentalist' approaches to political Islam. The neo-orientalist stance became most closely associated with Bernard Lewis, a leading historian of the Muslim world, who presented Islam as a trans-historical social and political ideology, whose perpetual opposition to the dominance of the West and its failure to separate religion from politics, was seen to explain its resurgence as well as the poor human rights and

democratic record of the Muslim world (Lewis, 1988; 2002). Certainly, for many academic commentators on the Middle East, Gellner fits most closely into this neo-orientalist camp given that he does identify Islam as a key variable in the illiberalism of the contemporary Muslim world (Sadowski, 1997). However, Gellner's analysis is also not inimical to the 'developmentalist' counter-critique, promoted by scholars such as Fred Halliday (1996: 2005), Sami Zubaida (1993) and Charles Tripp (1996), who view political Islam as an ideology promoted and manipulated by ruling elites rather than as having endogenous qualities of its own which constrain economic and political developments in the Muslim world. Gellner's credentials as the arch-modernist in relation to nationalism, as a universal phenomenon dictated by socio-economic transformation, is supportive of the essential developmentalist claim that ideas are ultimately at the service of coercive power and not the other way around.

Gellner's stance on Islamic fundamentalism is, therefore, perplexing and has, as a consequence, limited its influence in the ensuing academic debates. Part of the problem is that Gellner's model of Islam does appear implausibly idiosyncratic unless integrated within his broader social philosophy and theory of history. This provides the context for why Gellner, as compared to the 'neo-orientalist' he is normally associated with, appears unusually sympathetic to Islam. This in turn reflects the highly positive role that Gellner accords in his book, *Plough, Sword and Book* (1988), to the major monotheistic salvation religions in the development of a single-stranded cognitive framework. In what is possibly his most impressive intellectual contribution in this book, Gellner argued that 'a single exclusive, jealous and iconoclastic deity, averse to magic and graven images, was perhaps one of the most decisive formative influences in the education of the human race' (1988: 82). And, what struck Gellner in relation to his generally sympathetic account of Weber's thesis on Protestantism,

was just how Protestant and even Calvinist Islam is in its doctrinal essence. The puzzle for Gellner was, therefore, not why Islam is somehow backward in comparison to Christianity but why the 'transition' occurred in Europe, with its more mediated and superstitious religious doctrines, rather than in the Muslim Middle East. In one entertaining passage in *Muslim Society*, he imagines what might have happened if the Arabs had won at Poitiers:

No doubt we should all be admiring Ibn Weber's *The Kharejite Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* which would conclusively demonstrate how the modern rational spirit and its expression in business and bureaucratic organisation could only have arisen in consequence of neo-Kharejite puritanism in northern Europe. In particular, the work would demonstrate how [this] could never happen had Europe stayed Christian, given the inveterate proclivity of that faith to a baroque, manipulative, patronage-ridden, quasi-animistic and disorderly vision of the world (1981:7).

A considerable part of Gellner's intellectual endeavour is to explain why the potential for an Islamic breakthrough to modernity was never fulfilled. Part of the explanation comes from the fact, as noted above, that Gellner believed that the European exception was itself due to an almost 'miraculous' concatenation of factors. The fact that the Muslim world never had such a fortuitous convergence of such differing elements was, in this sense, relatively unexceptional. But, in terms of a more substantive account, Gellner found the most compelling model of traditional pre-modern Muslim society as being provided by Ibn Khaldun, whom he called the 'greatest sociologist of Islam' (1981:16). Ibn Khaldun's basic model was that of the perpetual tension in power between the law-abiding political centralised states based on cities, generally committed to a high Islamic scripturalist culture, and the lawless

and stateless tribes, generally committed to a folk version of Islam populated by priestly mediators (living saints), complex rituals and the religio-superstitious paraphernalia required to provide psychological relief from a life of poverty and constant violence. The problem was that, for Ibn Khaldun, it was only the tribes and not the towns which could generate social cohesion; and political change only occurred when the tribes temporarily ceased their constant internecine conflicts and, united around a fundamentalist Islam, turned their attention to overturning the corrupt ruling state elites based in the towns. However, once this occurred, the perennial social and religious divisions re-asserted themselves, with towns and tribes politically disengaged from each other, until the turn of a new Islamist revival unified the tribes to overturn the now fully corrupted formerly tribal ruling elites.

For Gellner what is particularly interesting is what happens when European colonialism, as in other parts of the world, radically subverts this traditional perpetually oscillating pre-modern system. The principal sociological impact is that the tribal areas become incorporated into the state for the first time and lose their quasi-independence. On the ideological level, the main result is in undermining the functions of those religious mediators, the living saints and other semi-magicians, who were the representatives of a heterodox folk Islam and who had played a vital role in providing for conflict resolution and social stability in an anarchic political context. But what for Gellner is decisively different and distinctive about Islam, as compared to all the other major salvation religions, is that Islam's core religious doctrines and practices do not thereby become discredited. You have, as a consequence, a major and very important exception to the secularization thesis, where religious faith and practice becomes limited to the private rather than the public realm in the modern area. Instead, what happens is that the fundamentalist high culture of

Islam, that egalitarian, scripturalist version which had been limited to the *ulema* based in the towns, fills the moral and spiritual vacuum created by the encroachment of modernity and the industrialising and centralising state. Thus, what Gellner sees happening in this period of transition in the Muslim world is not the loss of faith but a ‘massive transfer of loyalty away from saint cults towards a scripturalist “fundamentalist” version of Islam’ (1994: 22). The reason for this is the unique adaptability of the core of Islamic faith to meet the predicament of modern life. This, Gellner explains, is because:

[Islam] possesses features – scripturalism, puritanism, individualism, rule-orientation, a low-loading of magic – which may have marked elective affinities with the virtues required to surmount the arduousness and strains of the long march to a disciplined, modern industrial society (ibid: 23)

The two processes which in other parts of the world led inexorably to the privatisation of religion – the promotion of science and the advent of nationalism – have not had the same impact in the Muslim world. The main reason is that, for Gellner, Islam has successfully co-opted both these processes to its service. First, because the adopted fundamentalist High Culture of Islam is compatible with science and, second, because Islam has been able to fuse with nationalism and provide a national, or as some commentators call it, an Islamo-national identity (Roy, 1994; 2004) which meets the psychic needs normally provided by nationalist ideology. Gellner is not, therefore, as is often thought, providing a counter-thesis to his general conviction of the ubiquity of nationalism but rather that, in the Muslim world, there is a unique fusion where ‘the two processes, radicalization of religion, and nationalism, are intimately intertwined, to a degree that it is hard to say which one is “merely” the external form of the other (1981: 59).

It is based on this belief in Islam's unique adaptability to modern life that provides the ground for Gellner's pessimism about the prospects for liberty in the Muslim world. As noted earlier, he supports the analogies often made between Muslim fundamentalists and Europe's puritans who were so critical to the rise of capitalism in the West. He is thus relatively optimistic that this Islamicized political order can provide the conditions for economic growth, though he was admittedly puzzled by the developmental failure of the Middle East in this regard. What he is less sanguine about is whether this prevalence of political Islam will be a force preserving liberty and forging a civil society. The main contrast, for Gellner, between the Muslim and Christian religious zealots is that the former are winning while the latter lost their respective civil wars. What Gellner finds difficult to believe is that the conditions for civil society can be ensured when divine law becomes the basis of a social order. There is, for Gellner, a critical difference between 'popular sovereignty formed against a background of scepticism, and against the background of the assumption that the Truth has been revealed and is available (1981: 68). He also highlights the fact that divine law generally tends to be much more prescriptive about personal conduct than about the precise form of economic and political organisation. And, in the 'really existing' Middle East this is confirmed in the perpetuation of forms of clientelism and neo-patrimonialism, where power is distributed through 'networks, quasi tribes, alliances forged on the basis of kin, etc.' so that you end up with a strange mix of 'religious moralism and cynical clientelism' (Gellner, 1994: 27).

In the end, Gellner's argument about Islam, though based on a typically controversial model which many feel caricatures a more complex reality, does get to the heart of the debate over the prospects for democracy and civil society in a context where Islam plays a powerful political role. For IR, this is of critical concern for any

understanding of the roots of conflict in the Middle East. Gellner sides with those who are pessimistic that there can be ‘democracy without democrats’ (Salame, 1994) and who assert that a divinely sanctioned order, however internally pluralistic, cannot ultimately provide the conditions for a genuine liberal order. There are clearly others who are more optimistic, and the Turkish experiment in this regard is critical, but Gellner’s voice is always a welcome check on those who seek to translate their wishes into reality.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this paper has placed most emphasis on seeking to provide a general overview of Gellner’s theory of history and his political sociology, the social philosophy which underpins this, and how the resulting relatively parsimonious model illuminates the very diverse range of his intellectual concerns, with particular focus on his contributions to the study of nationalism and political Islam. This has meant that more concrete assessment of how his work can be applied to the theories, methodologies and research agendas of IR has been neglected. However, what we hope we have been able to illustrate is that, first, Gellner’s work, when surveyed in a holistic form which shows how all the different parts fit together into a coherent account of our modern condition, provides an intellectual rich, demanding and fruitful intellectual vision which deserves recognition and study for its own terms. Second, that Gellner illustrates how important and fruitful it is to borrow and work in multiple disciplines, including insights from philosophy, anthropology and sociology, and which is perhaps particularly relevant to IR as a discipline which seeks to understand the ‘international’ from multiple different and cross-disciplinary perspectives. Third,

that Gellner's defiant stance in favour of empiricism and positivism, brought to the service of liberty and the promotion of a civil society in all parts of the world, provides, at the very least, a comprehensive and compelling response to more post-modernist and relativist accounts which are currently popular in all the social sciences, including IR. Similarly, that the importance Gellner gives to viewing contemporary developments in terms of a longer historical perspective and with crisp and parsimonious models of historical progression provide challenging insights which are useful even for those who might be in fundamental disagreement with them.

Finally, it does seem to us that Gellner's work does engage directly with what is a core challenge for contemporary IR – how to assess and understand the dilemmas and difficulties of the developing world in making the 'transition' to affluence and the ways in which political freedom might be threatened and hopefully advanced. We have illustrated this in relation to the phenomenon of nationalism and of political Islam, both of which are high on the intellectual agenda of IR and how that, in both these areas, Gellner's contributions need to be taken seriously by IR scholars. Gellner is often wrongly seen to be someone who has an almost deterministic quasi-Marxist view of how economic shifts dictate politics and IR, which ignores the role of state and inter-state interaction. This is only a valid criticism as it relates to Gellner's strange disinterest in geopolitics, but we have also sought to show that Gellner also accords a vital role to ideas and ideologies, the role of the pen-pusher as well as the roles of the producer and crucially the coercer, which is particularly illuminating for contemporary IR scholarship, especially in the light of the 'constructivist turn' in IR.

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NOTES

ⁱ We gratefully acknowledge the constructive and helpful comments of the *IPS* anonymous reviewers.

ⁱⁱ David Gellner (1997: vii) notes his father's surprise that it was his work on nationalism that became the best selling and most translated of all his works rather than his philosophical exposition, *Legitimation of Belief* (1974) or his view of human history, *Plough, Sword and Book* (1988).

ⁱⁱⁱ There are only a couple works which deal directly with the realm of international relations: 'How to live in anarchy' (1958) and 'War and Violence' in *Anthropology and Politics* (1995). These essays adopt an anthropological perspective, and argue that in the state of nature states, as with individuals, form groups with rules of social cohesion rather than becoming solitary and isolated. In this, Gellner argues, Ibn Khaldun was a better judge of human nature than Thomas Hobbes. The later article also contains a macro claim; that in industrial society coercion becomes less attractive as production offers unlimited rewards, impossible in agrarian society. We are grateful to the anonymous reviewer for drawing these works to our attention.

^{iv} We await the publication of John A. Hall's intellectual portrait for a fuller understanding of these biographical aspects: *Ernest Gellner* (Verso).