

GELLNER, ERNEST ANDRÉ

1. b. 1925, d. 1995. Balliol College, Oxford, John Locke Prize in philosophy; University of London, Ph.D. in social anthropology. Mentors, Lord Lindsay, Sir Raymond Firth. Philosophical influences: Hume, Kant, Russell, Popper. Anthropological influences, Ibn Khaldun, Durkheim, Malinowski, Lévi-Strauss, Robert Montagne, Evans-Pritchard. Taught philosophy at University of Edinburgh and at the London School of Economics 1947-1984. Fellow of the British Academy 1974. William Wyse Professor of Social Anthropology and Professorial Fellow of King's College, University of Cambridge, 1984-1993. Founding Research Professor and Director of the Centre for the Study of Nationalism, Central European University, Prague 1990-1995. President, Royal Anthropological Institute, 1986-1988; co-founder (with Raymond Aron, Eric de Dampierre and Thomas Bottomore) of *Archives Européennes de Sociologie*.

2. Main contributions to social thought: theory of nationalism, sociology of Islam, sociology of intellectuals. *Words and Things* (1959) blended philosophical and sociological critique of the philosophy dominant at post-war Oxford, initiating a lifelong interest in the *sociology of the absurd*. "Concepts and Society" (1962) argued that excessive charity towards concepts blocked a sound

sociology of the absurd. Anthropologists acknowledge that individuals manipulate the social structure and culture, but they overlook concepts, which blinds them to social control that employs absurd, ambiguous, inconsistent or unintelligible doctrines. Gellner extended this line of thought Muslim saints and *baraka* in Morocco (*Saints of the Atlas* 1969, *Muslim Society* 1981), to Soviet social scientists and their Marxism-Leninism (*Soviet and Western Anthropology* 1980, *State and Society in Soviet Thought* 1988), to the career of the psychoanalytic movement in the West (*The Psychoanalytic Movement*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. 1993), and to postmodernists (*Postmodernism, Reason and Religion* 1992).

Gellner explained nationalism as a response to modern circumstances. Full citizenship, moral membership of industrial society, requires literacy. Only a nation-sized educational system has the resources to provide the institutions and teachers who can deliver basic literacy and technological competence. Education, rather than defence, economy, or ethnicity is the determining precondition of the minimal political unit. But clerkly skills are not horizontally mobile from one language-area to another. Hence the demand that educational units have political autonomy. (*Thought and Change* 1964). Expanded, qualified, defended in *Nations and Nationalism*

1983, *The Social Thought of Ernest Gellner* 1996, and *Nations* 1997.

Gellner's fieldwork was on charismatic Muslim saints. His theorizing focused on two enigmatic features of Islam. The 'Pendulum Swing' in the arid zone between the scripturalist, urban, sophisticated, puritanical, Islam of towns, and the charismatic, ecstatic, and folkisch Islam of the countryside. In the modern era the pendulum becomes unhinged. His other focus is the tendency in Muslim societies for religion to trump secularisation and nationalism: modernization does not relegate Islam to private belief. Gellner candidly admitted that it was not clear why the fifth time zone (Islam) differed so radically from the historical time zones to the West (*Nationalism* 1997).

Two social problems pervade his philosophical work: the differences, intellectual and social, between non-scientific and scientific thought; and the nature of the breakthrough from closed societies in their various forms to the liberties of free and open societies, including the struggle after 1989 to establish civil society in the former Soviet sphere (*Conditions of Liberty* 1994).

3. Criticism of Gellner's work centre on its anti-idealist, anti-relativist robustness. An unapologetic positivist, Gellner was out of step with irrationalist fashions in the

social sciences. Edward Said characterized his work on Morocco as characterized as orientalist.

4. Gellner's work on nationalism and on the relation of Islam to modernity have intense resonance today, the era of ethnic cleansing. Gellner's view opens up many areas of empirical research. As does his view that Islam refutes the secularization thesis and hence constitutes an ongoing intellectual and practical problem for the sociology of modernization and of religion.

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