

## OBITUARY

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### ERNEST GELLNER (1925-1995)

#### MEMORIAL ADDRESS<sup>1</sup>

SUPPOSE that in twenty years time or so your children or grandchildren say to you; 'You knew Ernest Gellner, didn't you? Why was he so important to social sciences and to anthropology?' What do you imagine yourself replying?

Maybe the first thing you will want to say is that he was an exile. He was obviously comfortable and at ease in England, in the countryside where he lived, in the chairs he held, in King's, in the two or three sections of the British Academy he belonged to, and in the lead pages of the *Times Literary Supplement*. But he also said that he used to dream of the Prague of his childhood; he knew and relived a history that was far more tormented and varied than is the usual lot of an English academic, and his horizons were broader than those of even the most privileged native. If you think in terms of rivers, he sat by the waters of the Thames and Chichester Harbour and the Cam, and thought and taught and joked; (not the Seine; especially, the Left Bank of the Seine was not his scene). He enjoyed what the English could offer him and gave generously in return; but he remained an exile, 'without community or faith', as he said, and dreaming of the Moldau and the Danube. For Englishmen this was a refreshing and invigorating breath of Central European air.

And then part of your answer will surely be that he was an organizer of intellectual activity by others. Not only in departments. For although his work in

1. Text of an address delivered at a Memorial Service for Ernest Gellner held at King's College, Cambridge on Saturday, 24 February 1996.

the philosophy of science at LSE and his heroic creation of the Centre for the Study of Nationalism in Prague brought significant people together in stable collaboration, many of you will remember his ability to get ten or twenty or fifty people together for a few days, not more than a week; to get them talking, and to send them home refreshed, inspired, full of ideas and hope. He did that by his generous mixture of friendship, respect, interest in people, argument and scholarship, which very few people ever exhibit in such a combination and such abundance.

You will also want to talk about his ideas and arguments, the things that he did to alter the way social scientists do their work, and the ideas that anthropologists owe directly to Ernest Gellner.

So perhaps the first aspect to which you would want to draw attention is his conception of history as a sequence of collective attempts to solve problems. A shepherd sits with his sheep—Gellner was a sheep man from the Central High Atlas, remember, and subsumed cows and camels and goats under sheep—a shepherd sits with his sheep and covets his neighbour's flock. He could double his capital by knocking him over the head and running away with his booty to the next valley. Unfortunately the very same idea is passing through his neighbour's mind, and he has to defend as well as attack. So he makes a conditional alliance, offensive and defensive, with his neighbour, and then they make a similar alliance with their neighbours against more distant ones. And so on. They create a weak and fragile pattern of deterrent alliances, which relies on occasional failures for its effectiveness. This is the essence of a segmentary system: it is the stateless answer to the question, 'How do I protect myself against neighbours as ruthless and greedy as myself?' Or consider Gellner's account of how people preserve their social rules from continual questioning and scrutiny. In the Central High Atlas they established saints as a kind of Standing Orders Committee, guardians of the rules. Gellner pointed out that a more secure solution was to have the rules themselves attributed to an eternal source. He called this Platonism Mark I, and he used it to refer to rules of divine origin. However, it had the defect that people could find new Gods, or attribute new rules to God, and this too threatened to destabilize the social order. So there is a Platonism Mark II, which is the closed revelation of Islam: God declares there will be no further revelation, no new rules. This was a further solution required by the problems arising from the first.

Gellner's problem-solving history can seem optimistic, as though the successive solutions in some way improved on what people had devised before. But his point was that each solution carried new problems; there is no stable solution. It can also seem intellectualist; but Gellner allowed that these were practical problems, Platonism II being a solution to the essentially political issue of how a caliph might protect the rules that secured his position against his rivals.

This history is important to anthropologists for two reasons. It reminds them to look for origins. Segmentary systems did not spring fully formed out of nothing; they have an origin and a history. Islam is among other things an ingenious solution to the problems of stability in a rapidly expanding empire.

And that is the second importance: we may not know the history, but it is always the product of thought and argument, or at any rate of intention—‘solutions’ are human creations rather than the emergent properties of social forces. His emphasis on intention and argument are of immense importance to humane anthropology.

Gellner came to anthropology in the 1950s from philosophy. Although this move from Mecca to Medina was in no sense a flight, he did say later that he felt he was pursued across disciplinary boundaries by the hermeneutic plague. In fact some anthropologists in the 'sixties had begun to read Wittgenstein, were enchanted, and had found some of those doctrines attractive. But Gellner was a trained philosopher, and did understand Wittgenstein, and could perceive the implications of following him. His knowledge and understanding were invaluable to anthropology: he provided an authoritative voice in support of those who resisted the claims that relativism was required by true modern philosophy.

He wrote a kind of intellectual history that placed men and women in the worlds they inhabited. It had a startling effect to read of the ways in which Wittgenstein and Malinowski, for example, worked out the ‘basic polarities’ of the Habsburg Empire, between a universalistic bourgeois sociology of knowledge and the Hegelian ‘communalistic spirit’ that justified the ethnic minorities. Instead of contrasting Malinowski with Radcliffe-Brown, as was then customary, even at LSE, he put him in Cracow (a ‘suburb of Vienna’), in imaginary conversation with Wittgenstein and Hayek and Popper and Heidegger. Of course, this ability to locate people, to place them on the banks of the Danube or the Isis, is what had infuriated English philosophers, just as his treatment of Freud threatened to reduce psychoanalysts’ incomes to reasonable levels. A third example of Gellner’s intellectual history is his account of Hannah Arendt and Heidegger and of their emblematic status as representatives of rationality and of communalism; it is a piece that encapsulated something of the dilemmas Gellner himself clearly felt and expressed in his University Sermon delivered here only four years ago.

In short, Gellner was able to place knowledge and ideas in times and places. This is important to anthropologists because it shows how to do a sociology of knowledge without lapsing into mere contingency and relativism. Marxists and hermeneuticists have argued that Malinowskian functionalism is a doctrine that was a product and support of empire. Gellner showed that, as he would put it, they were only partly right: wrong empire, wrong time, and otherwise probably banal! Anthropologists know that they are the product of a culture. What they do not always know is how to accommodate that self-awareness with their claim to want to speak true words. Gellner showed how, and immeasurably increased self-understanding by his historical sociology of anthropological knowledge.

A third aspect you may want to emphasize is that Gellner played with dilemmas, and converted them into polarities or paradoxes. So, in his re-working of Ibn Khaldun, Gellner presented civilization and nobility as exclusive alternatives: you could be noble and uncouth, or civilized and abject; that was the way the world was. Similarly, North African Muslims could be comforted by a

hierarchical, intermediary-ridden, saint-driven Islam; or they could live theologically correct austere lives, in direct and unremitting communion with God. They couldn't be both comfortable and pure: these were exclusive alternatives, and people were bound to oscillate between them. Many intellectuals struggle between the attractions of enchantment, of living in a cosy, rule-bound, truth-defining, local world, and the enlightened search for dispassionate and unlocated truth. They seek to be rational in part of their lives but cannot concede the whole field to questioning all at once, not immediately or consistently. The world presents itself to them as a series of dilemmas. That is why Gellner's account of the Enlightenment is so shocking: he captured minds and jolted them into self-aware scrutiny because he represented the alternatives as paradoxes. So, before the Great Transition, the world was enchanted; and afterwards it was enlightened. You could be enchanted and unenlightened, or enlightened and disenchanting. Those people who felt themselves to be a little bit enlightened, but who kept parts of their lives in the dark for secret binges of enchantment, found themselves caught in a paradox created by Gellner and by world history: you couldn't be both.

Another example of this play with dilemmas is his account of Soviet and Western anthropology. He deployed his philosophical training, his linguistic skill and his understanding of sociologizing Marxism, to expose mercilessly the incoherence and inconsistency in the Marxist account of human history. He did that with wit and humanity, as he did in all his analyses of closed systems. He also demonstrated the subtlety and quality of thought within Soviet anthropology and compared that with the relatively cruder French and British varieties of Marxism. Soviet anthropologists lived in the system, and some of them maintained their integrity, by stretching it, bending it, introducing new ideas to accommodate new knowledge and understanding. They contrasted sharply with the free intellectuals of the West, who often used Marxism as a touchstone, to know who was with them and who against. Gellner was unique among anthropologists in having been present in Moscow in 1989, at the time of *glasnost* and *perestroika*, and in keeping anthropological notes at a crucial moment in Russian history, indeed in the history of the twentieth century. His work there enabled him to describe reactions to events, and he was especially able to present with understanding and sympathy the dilemmas of both dissidents and conformists, and of people who had been a little bit of each.

The collapse of the USSR was a major event with consequences that will resonate for decades. It seems extraordinary that Gellner should have been there, a philosopher-anthropologist, uniquely equipped to describe and analyse: how could that coincidence of time and man have possibly happened? But then you think again: he went to Morocco in the 1950s partly because he thought that conflict between Jews and Muslims would dominate the decades after the creation of the state of Israel, and he therefore wanted to understand Islam. He went to Prague six years ago because he foresaw the tragic importance of ethnicity and nationalism in the voids left by the collapsed Soviet empire.

In each case Gellner brought his qualities as an anthropologist and philosopher: his vision of history as a process of finding solutions to successive problems; his ability to locate men and ideas in a sweep of history; his sharp presentation of dilemmas as polarities. And he did this, in all his major work, at the centre of geopolitical interest and concern. Those are perhaps among the things you will tell your children about—with gratitude and pride that you knew him and loved him.

JOHN DAVIS