Ernest Gellner – A Great European

In memoriam professor Ernest Gellner

On 5th November 1995, Ernest Gellner died suddenly here in Prague. He was Director of the Centre for the Study of Nationalism of the Central European University in Prague, and when he died he had just returned from a meeting of the CEU Senate in Budapest at which he was nominated Pro-Rector.

Ernest Gellner was born in Paris in 1925, but lived in Prague until 1939 when the entire family emigrated to England. He went to a Czech primary school in Dejvice and then to the Prague English high school. His father's family were German-speaking Jews from North Bohemia, while his mother came from a Czech-speaking Jewish family near Příbram. He was a distant relative of the poet František Gellner. In England he completed high school and then enlisted in the Czechoslovak Army, with which he returned to Prague in May 1945. He was still in uniform when he began his studies at the Philosophical Faculty of Charles University, where he attended lectures by Jan Patočka and other lecturers in philosophy. He felt a deep attachment to Prague and wished to make his home here.

Even before 1948, the developments in Czechoslovakia since the war and the fact that after the expulsion of the German inhabitants we became – in his words – directly dependent on the Soviet Union as our "protector" against possible German retaliation, convinced him to return to Britain. He saw only too clearly that a political upheaval was pending and that this would rob Czechoslovakia of what sovereignty it had regained after 1945. He was convinced that incorporation into the Soviet sphere would be long-lasting. He told me, "I thought that this new calvinism, i.e. communism, would settle down in Czechoslovakia for a long stay, in any case for longer than a single lifetime". He never thought that he would be able to come back. The liberalisation of the comunist regime in the 1960s and the events of 1968 raised his hopes to the possibility of a change of regime and reawakened his interest in what was happening here. He returned to Prague in 1965, after an absence of nearly twenty years, to lecture on British sociology. He began to travel here regularly, made contact with various dissidents and began to bring Western books to Prague. Eventually, at the end of the 1970s, the police banned him from reentering Czechoslovakia.

In 1990 he joined the founders of the Prague College of the Central European University and became the most distinguished member of the Department of Sociology there. Gellner's experience in Prague, his father's conversion to a Czech identity, his multicultural family environment, his Czech and English schooling and the rich cultural life in Prague in the 1930s were all formative influences on his intellectual development. These experiences strengthened his interest in nationalism, national culture and identity, as well as in the formation of the modern industrial society and in social change in general.

In England he read philosophy at Oxford and at the London School of Economics, where he also attended lectures in social anthropology. His teachers included Karl Popper and A. R. Radcliffe-Brown, who had been a student of Bronislaw Malinowski. Popper's critical rationalism and anthropological functionalism were the starting point for Gellner's own work, although this has its own very personal character which is not easily

classified and is perhaps best referred to as "Gellnerism". Gellner's work was an unconventional melange of philosophy, social anthropology and sociology, but for me he was first and foremost a philosopher of history. This is borne out by the subtitles of some of his books, such as "The Structure of Human History" in *Plough, Sword and Book*, or "The Historical Role of Rationality and Rationalism" in *Reason and Culture*.

He published 18 books (with two more currently in preparation) as well as innumerable articles. His work is proof of his search for ever more precise and comprehensive answers to the question of just what is this modern world in which we live and how it came about. Ernest Gellner was undoubtedly one of the greatest authors thinking and writing about modernity. However he was not just a fashionable author or a critic of modernity; rather he sought to understand and essentially to support the values that created the modern world.

This search took on various forms, the first of which was philosophical criticism. He produced a witty but crushing critique of the Oxford philosophical establishment, that is, the linguistic philosophy he had come to know intimately while at Balliol. The preface to his first book *Words and Things* (1959) was written by the great British philosopher Bertrand Russell, and already marked him out as a controversial figure. One important and constant theme in Gellner's writings already evident here was the setting of all ideas in a sociological context. "People do not think in a vacuum, and even if the content and direction of their thought is in part determined by rational considerations, by where the wind of argument and the force of reasons and evidence drive them, these factors never uniquely determine what people think." For Gellner, the way questions about basic human problems are asked, as well as how the answers are formulated, is essentially determined by the cultural and social scene of the times we live in. This laid him open to accusations of sociological and cultural relativism, but these were unfounded. Gellner was close to Karl Popper in this respect. Both of them considered that philosophy is not an isolated activity for a few specialists, and cannot be separated out from people's everyday lives and concerns. *Every* individual implicitly explores their place in nature and in society and questions the meaning of life and history. Philosophy merely moves in the same field in a more critical, more systematic and perhaps more professional way, but its activities must be based on general valid approaches which are rational and verifiable. Gellner was basically convinced that our most reliable instrument is science, as the product of Western civilisation. He was a calm, undogmatic, but convinced Westerner. For him, despite the many problems which beset Western societies and which Gellner was well aware of, such societies are more ethically acceptable than those based on traditional, dominating or utopian-moral principles. In his book *Relativism and the Social Sciences* published in 1985, he says "such societies have certain important features: they display greater cognitive, technological and economic growth than any other society in human history. They appear capable of maintaining social order with less violence and oppression, with less deprivation and inequality, than any other large and complex society in human history."

The fundamental basis of his work was what J. Agassi and I. C. Jarvie described as his "epistemological, sociological and moral commitment to empiricism". Ernest Gellner said that the world consists of discrete grains, and this lateral atomisation is complemented by the further qualitative atomisation of all features of the grains. For him, reality is not a single holistic whole in which everything is interrelated. On the contrary, there

are many things that have no mutual connection. He felt that this image of the world presented science with a path to boundless progress.

A second aspect of Ernest Gellner's work which is less well known here was his empirical field work among the Berber tribes in Morocco. Several years' work there produced the books *The Saints of Atlas* (1969) and the more famous *Muslim Society* (1981). His research into the Berber tribes set him on the path to a comparative view of society and brought him to a better understanding of Western society and the emergence of its modern form.

This brings us to the third and principle set of questions, i.e. the emergence of modern industrial society. He considered that its appearance in Europe was the most important historical process in the history of humankind. At the same time he saw its genesis as coming about almost by chance, when modern philosophy and particularly science caused a split between temporal and religious power, and the creation of market capitalism and the independent cities led to the appearance of puralist, free-thinking, rich, modern European society. His theory of the nation and nationalism, expressed in his book *Nations and Nationalism* (1983) is closely concerned with the emergence of modern Europe. Industrial society cannot function without a good knowledge of language and the possibility of clear communication between members of that society. Languages differ and it is their functional necessity in modern society that formed the basis for nationalism which then created nations, and not, as most people still believe, the opposite.

Ernest Gellner was a great European liberal who, with his ideas, his teaching and especially his writing, fought for the values of freedom, humanity, tolerance, pluralism and well-being. His untimely death is a great loss.

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