

Editorial – The Ernest Gellner Seminar in Prague

We know Ernest Gellner as a cosmopolitan with a deeply ingrained English intellectual culture. There are, however, motifs in his thinking which could not be understood without his experience in Prague and life in the Czech Lands. Ernest Gellner lived in Prague during three periods of his life. Gellner's family lived in Prague until he was 13, when his parents emigrated to England. The second very short period was during the year 1945, when he came to Prague in the uniform of the Czechoslovak units in Great Britain, before returning to England that same year. The third, very intensive period of his stay in the city was linked with the establishment of the Prague College of the Central European University 1991. Gellner remained in contact with Prague, however, even in the years between 1945 and 1989, though initially only on a small scale. This relationship gradually intensified, especially after his visit to Prague in 1967 and after the Prague Spring.

During his engagement at Prague CEU he was a member and later on the head of the Department of Sociology, and he established the well-known Centre for the Study of Nationalism.

Ernest Gellner died unexpectedly on November 5, 1995 after having returned to Prague from a Senate meeting of CEU in Budapest. His death was a heavy loss for the whole university, and especially for the Prague CEU College. Most of us – who worked closely with him – were aware that the Centre for the Study of Nationalism, which Gellner had founded, would after his premature death be transferred to Budapest, the main seat of CEU. This indeed happened, and this decision put an end to the four-year existence of the Prague College of the Central European University.

Soon after Ernest Gellner's death, a group of his Prague friends and colleagues decided to preserve in Prague at least some of the activities that had been linked with this outstanding personality. We therefore reached the conclusion that we would continue to organise the Gellner seminars once a month. These seminars always combined an intellectual programme with a friendly gathering of people who were interested in social anthropology, sociology, philosophy and historiography, and in issues that we called 'Gellnerian'. For this purpose the section of social anthropology within the Masaryk Czech Sociological Association was founded, and after obtaining certain financial support we started, at the beginning of 1998, the regular monthly seminars. In these seminars we try to preserve the tradition of his own seminars, which he had been organising since 1993 at the Prague CEU College.

Thus, since May 1998 a permanent Ernest Gellner Seminar has been meeting monthly (with the exception of July and August) in Prague. Not a single month has yet been left out; once the organisers even managed to hold two seminars within one month. The aim of the seminar is twofold: (1) to enhance Gellner's legacy in the city where he grew up during the 1920s and 1930s and where he worked during the last years of his life, and (2) to help anchor social anthropology within Prague academic circles. The model for the Prague Gellner seminar is derived from the seminar organised back in the 1930s at the London School of Economics by Bronislaw Malinowski, the founder of social anthropology. Gellner, when he taught in the first half of the 1990s at the Prague campus of the Central European University, brought the Malinowskian seminar model with him.

The Gellner Seminar sessions since 1998 have been made possible owing to the financial and logistical support of the Senate of the Czech Republic and the Central European University's Prague office. The seminar sessions were originally held in the building of the Faculty of Arts of Charles University in Prague and later in the Masaryk room of the Prague seat of New York University.

Gellnerian themes such as the philosophy of history, power, ethnicity, nation, nationalities, liberalism, democracy, civil society, state, segmentary theory, Islam, nomadism, modernity, rationalism, positivism, relativism and culture are examined afresh by the best available specialists, both Czech and foreign, in a critical but friendly fashion in which discussion is made easier by modest amounts of red wine (this custom also was first introduced by Gellner when he used to organise scholarly meetings at his Centre for the Study of Nationalism at CEU in Prague). The seminar discussions are extremely lively and are led in an informal way. They usually last for more than two hours, which not only provides ample time for an exchange of opinions, but is also evidence of their popularity and professional level. The regular members receive abstracts or full texts by mail, recently also by e-mail.

Both Gellner and social anthropology are not well known among Czech scholars and the public, and even now, in 2001, students at Charles University are still unable to enrol in the study of social anthropology (since autumn 2001 it has been possible at Pardubice University, 100 kilometres east of Prague) as it has yet to be accredited as a regular university subject. The discipline exists only informally, being taught in isolated courses in various departments of the university. Or, it is somewhat concealed behind headings such as 'ethnology', 'general anthropology' or 'cultural and social anthropology' which are taught at the Faculty of Arts of Charles University and the Faculties of Humanities at both Charles University and the University of Western Bohemia at Plzeň. Gellner and social anthropology certainly appeal to Prague and other Czech academics and students. These seminar sessions have been well attended not only by academics in the field of anthropology, sociology and political science, but also by many students from the Faculty of Arts and the Faculty of Social Sciences of Charles University. Since the beginning the Gellner Seminars have been convened by the sociologist Jiří Musil and the social anthropologist Petr Skalník, both long-time friends of Ernest A. Gellner. The Gellner Seminar is the pivotal activity of the Section of Social Anthropology of the Masaryk Czech Sociological Society.

Thus far 36 seminars have taken place:

1. Zdeněk Uherek (Prague): Gellner's Anthropology and Europe;
2. Petr Skalník (Prague): Gellner's Texts on the Uniqueness of Truth and on Rationalistic Fundamentalism;
3. Jiří Musil (Prague and Budapest): Gellner's Book *Conditions of Liberty. Civil Society and Its Rivals*;
4. Zdeněk Suda (Pittsburgh): The Czech Nation as a Historical Curiosity;
5. Martin Hampl and Petr Dostál (both Prague): The Globalisation or Polarisation of the World;
6. Miloš Havelka (Prague): Questions of Czech Mentality;
7. John Hall (Montreal): Nationalism and Civil Society;

33. Alfred Rieber (Budapest): Stalin – Man of the Borderland;
34. Martin Kanovský (Bratislava): Identity and Ethnicity: The Splendour and Poverty of Social Constructivism;
35. Jiří Musil (Prague): Ernest Gellner and Current Discussions on Social Theory;
36. Hana Novotná (Hradec Králové): Culture as a Social Science Problem.

A recent offer to publish a selection of papers from past seminar sessions in English in a special issue of the *Czech Sociological Review* will further disseminate knowledge about this stimulating academic enterprise. Revised papers by Hann, Musil, Ottenheimer, Perival, Salner, Skalník, Suda, Šubrt and Uherek are published in this refereed journal. We also intend to continue this impressive series of Gellner seminars in the future, and expect presentations by both local and foreign professionals, especially from among graduate students. We hope that the main aim of the Gellner Seminar will continue to spur the Prague intellectual community towards critical thinking in the genuine Gellnerian tradition.

Jiří Musil, Petr Skalník

