

The Philosopher of Anthropology: Ernest Gellner on Anthropological Method

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Ernest Gellner has a very particular place in the history of anthropology. His own anthropological fieldwork on the saintly lineages of the High Atlas Mountains of Morocco – *Saints of the Atlas* (1969) – firmly places him within the British tradition of social anthropology, that is, the approach created by Bronislaw Malinowski (1884–1942) and A.R. Radcliffe Brown (1881–1955) that stressed the importance of extended periods of fieldwork. But Gellner was a polymath, whose training had been in philosophy, and the peculiarity of his contribution to anthropology lies in this fact: he theorized at a deep philosophical level with remarkable acuity what was involved in the practice of the discipline. The arguments he made are highly distinctive because they suggest that mainstream anthropological self-understanding is not correct. He is a powerful, indeed almost scandalous figure. Differently put, he was not and is not an accepted insider within anthropology. The claim here is accordingly that he ought to have such a position because his argumentation is both powerful and correct. In any case, even those who do not accept his position will, for sure, benefit by having to confront it.

His background was complex. His youth was spent in Prague. He was born to parents with Jewish backgrounds, but the family was not actively religious. The Jewish community was deeply loyal to the social democratic republic led by Tomas Masaryk. He was educated first in a Czech primary school and then in the Prague English Grammar School – but he grew up speaking German as well, for the family had a German governess, linking them to an established high culture. The safety offered by the republic disappeared in its last years as competing nationalist movements confronted each other, leading to the quip that the only real Czechoslovaks were the Jews. The family left for England only after Hitler invaded in 1939. His childhood had allowed him to sense the nature of belonging, without ever completely allowing him to 'get in' anywhere: he was very much a Central European figure, essentially homeless.

Gellner then went to English schools, saw active service as a member of the Czech Brigade, and returned briefly to Prague at the end of the war before leaving for what he felt was a second exile. He was convinced that Russian influence would prevail, and so returned to England, where he completed his undergraduate studies in philosophy, politics and economics at Balliol College, Oxford. In 1949 he joined the London School of Economics. He trained as a social anthropologist at there under Raymond Firth (1901–2000) and was close to the intellectual world of the great liberal and distinguished philosopher of science Karl Popper (1902–1994). But Gellner was formally a member of the sociology department – eventually gaining title of professor of sociology with special reference to philosophy. His years at the London School of Economics were extraordinarily productive, and he gained separate reputations for his work on nationalism (Gellner 1983), the pattern of history

(Gellner 1988), and Islam (Gellner 1969, 1981) – to which must be added a formidable reputation as a public intellectual. He was a brilliant stylist, and was the cause of numerous intellectual fights as he enjoyed taking on sacred cows, perhaps most notably in his powerful attacks on linguistic philosophy, with special reference to the work of Ludwig Wittgenstein (Gellner 1959, 1974, 1998). In 1984 he left his position as professor of sociology with special reference to philosophy at the London School of Economics to become the William Wyse Professor of Social Anthropology at Cambridge University. But the last years saw him return to Prague, to the newly founded Central European University, seeking to do all in his powers to consolidate liberal ideas and practices in the country of his childhood. [1]

Continuing reflection on his work has made me realize that there is a core to the marvellous range of his interests. Not surprisingly, this is to be found in his earliest work. His reputation was made initially by his attack on linguistic philosophy, that is, the ideas derived from the later work of Ludwig Wittgenstein (1889–1951), polished by J.L. Austin (1911–1960), and then utterly dominant in the universities of Oxford and Cambridge. *Words and Things* (1959) refused to accept the view that philosophy's only role was to perfect the rules of a particular form of life, disliking the implicit relativism of that position, further insisting that improvement in linguistic usage was sometimes possible. Scandal resulted from his sociology of this movement: these philosophers were seen as the 'Narodniks of North Oxford', revering the customs of the upper class to which they belonged and thereby losing any critical purchase on the nature of modern society. From this followed his most long-lasting contribution to anthropology, namely his concern with method. He was a fierce critic of idealist explanations in social science, that is, explanations which too easily privileged cultural factors rather than considering social structural realities. It is necessary – to take the title of one of his books – to consider cause as well as meaning. Furthermore, idealist explanations tend to lead in the direction of relativism; Gellner disliked this quite as much, being a fierce rationalist; he was a hammer of relativism of all sorts.

Cause and Meaning in Social Science: Theory

The seventeenth-century French philosopher Blaise Pascal (1623–1662) had declared that 'truth is different on the other side of the Pyrenees'. This suggests of course that there are no universal standards, that each society lives by its own rules. This was the view of linguistic philosophy, with famous members of that group (most notably Peter Winch (1926–1997), the author of *The Idea of a Social Science and Its Relation to Philosophy* [1958]) claiming to find support for their view in the very nature and characteristic research methods of social anthropology – the discipline that more than any other has to take difference seriously. Gellner was very well placed to assess Winch's claim for more than philosophical reasons: his doctoral research in Morocco, published as *Saints of the Atlas* (1969), was an exemplar – and a distinguished one – of the methods of social anthropology at work. His claim is that philosophers like Winch do not for a moment understand how anthropologists actually work. The proper rules for social science that he sought to establish were accordingly put forward in four very powerful essays written in the late 1950s and 1960s (later collected in a single volume: Gellner, 1972). Three criticize false trails whilst the fourth lays down straightforward positive principles for social science inquiry. I do not take

the essays in the order in which they were published, as will be demonstrated, preferring instead an alternative presentation that allows the logic of his position to be highlighted most forcefully.

'Concepts and Society' (first published 1970) has at its heart a philosophically adept demonstration that our theories can dictate what we perceive in external reality. An initial reaction to some oddity in another culture is to see illogicality, even the workings of a 'primitive' mentality. But idealists of all sorts tend to be much more charitable, stressing ways in which the oddity makes sense – thereby imagining that 'meaning makes the world go round'. Gellner argued that such interpretative charity can be overdone. To believe that a set of concepts makes sense – and that they provide complete conceptual cages that constrain us – can lead an anthropologist to curtail fieldwork, thereby to fail to understand what is going on.

Excessive indulgence in contextual charity blinds us to what is best and what is worst in the life of societies. It blinds us to the possibility that social change may occur through the replacement of an inconsistent doctrine or ethic by a better one, or through a more consistent application of either. It equally blinds us to the possibility, of, for instance, social control through the employment of absurd, ambiguous, inconsistent or unintelligible doctrines. I should not accept for one moment the contention that neither of these things ever occurs; but even if they never occurred it would be wrong to employ a method which excludes their possibility a priori (1972, p. 44).

This general approach was taken much further in a paper on 'Ideal Language and Kinship Structures' (first published 1957) and in an ensuing exchange with both Rodney Needham (1923–2006) and John Barnes (1918–2010). [2] Gellner had claimed that an ideal language for dealing with kinship structures based on physical realities could at least be imagined. Needham objected to this, insisting that social science was concerned with social understandings rather than physical realities. Gellner disputed this on the grounds that the possibility, for example, of classifying offspring as adoptive, depends on the observer's knowledge of the disparity between the social and physical relationship – indeed it is this disparity which gives the term its meaning. Barnes joined the debate at this point, making two points. First, he sought to socialize the notion of physical kinship, to say that what is taken to be physical is itself socially constructed; this was to make Needham's point, albeit at a much deeper level. Second, he added an epistemological injunction, namely that we cannot ever know about such a private matter as reproductive practices. Gellner argued against both points. To begin with, social scientists are not without resources when it comes to examining putatively private life. They can observe, listen to gossip and check as best they may. There may be difficulties in saying much about such private acts as copulation or murder, but difficulties are not impossibilities. More important is the distinction that can be drawn between the socially-physical and the physical-physical father, that is, between the socially attributed genitor and the actual biological father. Gellner's point here remains the same as it had been when answering Needham, namely that one only knows someone is socially determined to be the father if one possesses secure and universal knowledge that this is not in fact the case biologically. It is important to see how Gellner supports his position. He insists that it would be a strange anthropologist who returns from fieldwork in a society that said that a child had more than one genitor – or indeed that all children were

sired by a single male – to report that this is indeed the case. Anthropologists refuse to accept local beliefs as veridical, however widely accepted, because of their possession of real scientific knowledge. Accordingly, satisfactory explanations will offer accounts of how beliefs are sustained, what social effects they have, and how they are squared with counter-examples. The same general point was made negatively:

The anthropologist's account, far from being committed to respect the truth, in its context, of the belief ... is in fact based on a recognition of its falsehood. Anthropologists do not generally give complex accounts of how a tribe manages to sustain the faith in fire burning, wood floating, etc.: indeed, it would require an anthropological account if the tribe managed to sustain a *denial* of these (1972, p. 70)

This quotation is taken from the last of Gellner's critical methodological papers under discussion here, namely 'The New Idealism' (first published 1968). This is directed at Winch's position in *The Idea of a Social Science and Its Relation to Philosophy* which claimed, with extreme rigour, that we live in a world of concepts, that every such world is different and none better than any other. Were Winch's injunctions followed, Gellner claimed, anthropology as hitherto practised would be impossible, and the knowledge gained through encounters with others would simply amount to an insistence that they do things differently elsewhere. As noted, Gellner insisted that rational scientific knowledge makes it possible to ask all sorts of questions, notably about belief and especially about the ways in which belief was sustained in the face of apparently disconfirming evidence. But his attack went much further. One set of arguments concerns the nature of belief systems, and more particularly the idealist insistence that social understanding can only give us an account of beliefs because we live within the terms that they set. Gellner argued that belief systems are not as coherent as Winch had suggested. Many belief systems contain within themselves histories of change. It makes little sense, for example, to write of Western history without paying attention to the Reformation and the Enlightenment – above all to the rise of modern science, eventually able to replace dogma with empirical inquiry. Moreover, the attempts at self-improvement were not, as Winch occasionally seemed to suggest, somehow mistaken, nor were they anything but central to the civilization itself. At this point, Gellner's argument about excessive contextual charity comes in. Interpretations that presume that concepts make sense are inherently misleading due to the presence of various options within belief systems. Winch and many other idealist philosophers of social science offer a 'seamless wonder' view of the role of concepts in society.

Gellner liked to cite George Orwell's *1984* to accentuate why this is wrong. In that novel, great efforts are made to purify the dictionary so that certain thoughts become unthinkable, making their enactment impossible. To control the commanding conceptual heights of society, the novel suggests, is everything. But Gellner claimed that ideologies are not at all like this. They tend rather to be loose and shapeless monsters, permitting escape clauses and alternative options. Christianity was interpreted quite differently by peasants and by the upper orders, that is, by those who either prayed or fought. Likewise, as soon as Marxism became an official ideology it made sense for opponents of the regime to justify their actions in terms of the humanist writings of the young Marx. These examples matter enormously. If ideologies are not elegant and tight but instead confused and slack, the social scientist must start to ask which group emphasizes which set of beliefs in order to advance its interests. To

enter into this line of questioning takes us away from the search for meaning and returns us to causal analysis, to the evaluation of interests, to groups and to the nature of social structure. And there is a corollary. As a practising social anthropologist Gellner sees humans as more than concept fodder for positive as well as negative reasons. It is not just that people's lives are not totally bound by a set of concepts, but also rather that they take their beliefs with a pinch of salt, conducting themselves with a measure of humour and irony.

Further arguments are directed against Winch's relativism, against the notion that 'rationality' can only be seen within the terms of a particular culture – a view making Western science merely one cognitive approach amongst others, that is, the ideology of our world no better than the ideologies of other social formations. This was held to be wrong on four counts. First, self-contradiction stands at the heart of relativism as a philosophical position. Why should we accept the view that truth is different, as Pascal had it, on the other side of the Pyrenees unless this statement has universal status? In Winch's case there is something decidedly odd in his insistence that cultures are so to speak, separate and equal. If one is genuinely caged by a single culture, the standard reaction to another is to see difference as error, and inferiority. The fact that Winch stressed that all cultures are equal suggests that he does have at least some universal values. Second, relativism seems attractive because it makes much of avoiding the imposition of one set of standards on other people. Gellner took care to highlight Winch's position by quoting a comment made by the latter to the effect that missionary activities were reprehensible. This line of argument – stressing the dominant qualities of Occidental reason – became much more prevalent from the 1980s. But relativist tolerance is potentially phoney. It allows ruling elites to dismiss, as a heretic, anyone who wishes to challenge local practice. Differently put, relativism can be repressive, can generate conformity. Third, Gellner admitted that Winch's picture of social life may have been largely veridical in some early stage of history, before the emergence of world religions keen to proselytize, and in the absence of much cultural contact. But our world is not like this. Relativism's injunction to 'do in Rome as the Romans do' has become vacuous:

What is 'Rome'? The upper class of the contemporary municipality of that name? Central Italy? The Common Market? Catholic Europe? Countless boundaries, geographic and social, vertical and horizontal, criss-cross each other in a rapidly changing world. Relativism is not so much a doctrine as an affectation (Gellner 1974).

Finally, Gellner argued that it is a mere conceit, sustainable only within the study, to imagine that magic is the cognitive equivalent of modern science. Relevant here is his earlier argument about social science's dependence upon the understanding of the natural world that was brought about by modern science. All of this is to say that the problem of relativism has in a way been solved asymmetrically. The power of scientific-industrial civilization is so obvious that any theory that cannot cope with this fact has to be rejected.

The final paper that concerns us here, 'Nature and Society in Social Anthropology' (first published in 1963), presents a positive view of social scientific method. One should not automatically presume that belief is all, that meaning makes the world go round – not least because most societies in history have faced severe material constraints. Accordingly, an emphasis on power accounting is likely to do most to advance social understanding:

This consists of showing how the persistence of a given political or economic, etc.,

system is the result of the interplay of given forces in the given environment ... without placing too much explanatory strain on the assumption of an automatic persistence of strange beliefs, etc. The assumption is that people are very roughly similar all over the place, and are not perfectly socialized, i.e., are not total slaves of either the overt or the tacit norms of their society. Men will go off any kind of social rails. A Power Balance-Sheet shows how the system maintains itself even on the assumption of a reasonable amount of disturbance (and, incidentally, a reasonable amount of external disturbance as well) (Gellner 1972, pp. 125-6).

This passage can be seen as Weberian. It acknowledges that there are several sources of power in society, with social structure resulting from the way in which they interact. It might seem as if Gellner is not Weberian given his anti-idealist ethic. That is not quite correct. His position is rather that one ought to examine material constraints first, because ideologies are likely to reflect the balance of power; certainly, one should not take a belief as a social order without investigating the way in which it is sustained by more structural forces. But this is not to say that ideology does not matter, nor that it can at times be a genuinely autonomous force in history. In this matter it is as well to note straight away that Gellner was both one of the first scholars to insist that Islam would remain a force in the modern world and a brilliant exponent of the social changes brought about by rationalization processes within the great world religions (Gellner 1981, 1988). A final important detail about Gellner as methodologist can usefully be mentioned at this point. In an interview Gellner admitted that he was addicted to the construction of models of various constituent elements of social life, notably those of Islam and of nationalism (Davis (1991). But this very Weberian desire to construct ideal types was much more than a personal quirk. Gellner clearly believed that clearly articulated models would encourage thought. Very much in Popperian guise, a clear conjecture was most likely to produce a refutation that would advance knowledge.

Even if it is a slight divergence from the main line of argument, attention should be paid to 'An Ethic of Cognition' as this illuminates the very nature of methodology in a particularly profound and original way. [3] A brilliant opening passage argues that a methodology is more than a mere technique. In an obvious way this is very worrying: if a methodology smuggles in some view of the world, it is scarcely neutral, scarcely a method in the fullest sense. This allows characterization of what has been said to this point. Gellner's method does have a view of social life at its base, namely the insistence that belief should not automatically be seen as so complete and perfect that it constrains and controls society, with all other power sources being its mere derivatives. This view is not in fact smuggled in Gellner's general social theory; rather it is argued for openly and with passion. The argument of 'An Ethic of Cognition' is slightly different, and it applies to the world of positivism/empiricism that lies at the background of modern epistemology. Gellner claims that empiricism/positivism does rule out certain social worlds - namely those, including psychoanalysis (Gellner 1985), that are circular, and so able to avoid critical assessment - and that it is right to do so. The key point about empiricism is in effect Weberian: the world of science is based on a presupposition of emptiness; this has diminished our moral certainties, thereby placing us in a situation of disenchantment. The argument is a piece of meta-methodology, and it allows a comment to be made about a particular aspect of his work, his analyses of many modern belief systems, above all by placing them in their social contexts, explaining why they appeal to particular groups of people. In this regard he was a critic of 'Western' Marxism, the

expressivism of Charles Taylor (b. 1931), pragmatism, modernist theology, the anarchism of Paul Feyerabend (1924–1994), and ethnomethodology (for details, see Hall 2010 chapter seven). The last of these intellectual approaches stressed the role of encounters in social life, suggesting that society can be created and maintained with ease. Gellner wittily captured the approach of ethnomethodology as an expression of the structureless society of California, contrasting it in consequence with the greater material constraints that affect most human beings.

Cause and Meaning in Social Science: Practice

There is another way of seeing Gellner's method at work, namely that of looking at his explanation of major elements of social life – that is, his philosophical anthropology of modernity (Gellner 1983). The claim made here was straightforward and brutal, namely that modern societies will be and ought to be taken as legitimate when they provide affluence and place people in societies in which rule is exercised by co-nationals. The latter concern was wholly original and deeply influential, and the contours of the claims made deserve some attention.

There are complexities to Gellner's theory of nationalism and it was subject to slight changes and developments over time; but some elements remain constant. First, there is the insistence that the structural condition of pre-industrial society was such as to rule out any sense of shared national identity. The elites were small, divided between military, ideological and occasionally commercial elements, and they sat on top of a vast mass of peasants, separated from each other by different languages and cultures. Hence it makes no sense to accept the idiom preferred by nationalists themselves, namely that the nation was always present and merely waiting, like Sleeping Beauty, for the kiss that would awaken it. Nationalism was accordingly seen as modern. But Gellner refused to accept that the novelty of nationalism resulted simply from the emergence of a new set of ideas – a view that had been proposed by Elie Kedourie (1926–1992), his colleague at the London School of Economics (Kedourie 1960). Many ideas are proposed, Gellner insisted, but few adopted. It is useful to recall at this point his account of psychoanalysis and its derivatives (Gellner 1985). An account of the ideas involved was followed by enormous amount of attention to the characteristics of modern social life – the need to interact more and more with people in anonymous settings, together with the strains that this brings – that explained the success of the movement. Gellner proceeds in a similar way when dealing with nationalism. Modern social circumstances allow for a shared identity for the first time thanks to states being strong enough to create systems of public education. Nationalism is thus the creation of nations – a process of nation-building – rather than the expression of any generalized, pre-existent set of sentiments. And such cultural uniformity, he went on to add, is required by the needs of industrial society. Nigeria once had over fifty distinct languages; for it to have a chance to move to the modern world, linguistic homogenization is required, not least so that goods can pass from one end of the country to the other without delay.

Conclusion

Gellner's work as a whole often received fierce criticism. [4] This is not surprising. His love of clear models irritated many experts in the fields in which he worked. His cyclical model of the workings of Islam – the entry into a city by a puritanical tribe followed by its slow corruption allowing a new puritanical tribe to then replace it (Gellner 1981) – was almost certainly exaggerated. [5] It imagined the workings of North Africa to be present throughout the classical heartland of Islam in the near and middle East. It is equally the case that his theory of nationalism does not cover the whole world, despite its partial origin in his work on North Africa. [6] And there is a more important point about his theory of nationalism that must be made. Gellner always liked to ask about the functions of an ideology within a social order. This is excellent advice, never to be ignored. But this approach can lead to error, to functionalism in a stronger sense. To say that the needs of industrial society cause the birth of nationalism is to take a consequence as a cause. This is simply wrong – after all I have many needs, most of which have not somehow been met. So Gellner's work falls down badly at this point (see several essays in Hall 1998). But this does not mean for a moment that the other part of Gellner's theory, the insistence on the modernity of nationalism, is incorrect. Malešević (2019) demonstrates with great brilliance that national sentiment requires the organized strength of modern states to take hold. More importantly, it is entirely possible to identify causal forces that create nationalism, thereby to replace the functionalism present in Gellner's account by specifying particular agents (above all reforming elites seeking to nationalize their territories so as to increase their powers) whilst retaining his insistence that nationalism, once invented, has beneficial consequences for the working of modern industrial society. Roughly speaking, this is the question on which most nationalism studies now concentrate. Brilliant work by Andreas Wimmer (2012) has demonstrated the link between war and nationalism – with war both causing national sentiment to arise and allowing nation-state formation as the result of the destruction of empires due to geopolitical defeat. Despite all this, his work on Islam and nationalism remains enormously useful, encouraging thought in the most striking ways to this day. A more serious negative criticism is that some of the pillars of his thought look now to be less secure (Hall 2019). The emphasis on affluence, on economic growth, faces the challenge of climate change, whilst the slightly Saint-Simonian emphasis on science faces the challenges of the information silos created by modern technology.

Still, by and large, his views on method have not been discussed, as is often true in social life: decisive interventions are all too often ignored rather than discussed and debated. But there is one exception: Talal Asad's 'The Concept of Cultural Translation in British Social Anthropology', a critique of Gellner's essay on 'The New Idealism'. Asad (b. 1932) suggests that the very notion of translating the terms of one culture into those of another smacks of the arrogance of Western imperialism. He goes so far as to say that anthropology itself may play some part in establishing unequal power relations throughout the world. If a good deal of scepticism should surely be directed at the latter claim, serious attention needs to be given to a different argument:

If [Walter] Benjamin is right in proposing that translation may require not a mechanical reproduction of the original but a harmonization with its *intentio*, it follows that there

is no reason why this should not be done only in the same mode. Indeed, it could be argued that “translating” an alien form of life, another culture, is not always best done through the representational discourse of ethnography – that under certain conditions a dramatic performance, the execution of a dance, or the playing of a piece of music might be more apt. These would all be *productions* of the original and not mere interpretations... (Asad 1990, p. 193)

The element of truth here resides in the indisputable fact that significant areas of social life are best seen in relativist terms. Who indeed is to say that one form of dance is better than another? Nonetheless, the claim made here is that there remains a great deal to be said for the continuing importance of Gellner’s arguments about method. For one thing, social-scientific method does and should draw on modern science when addressing matters that go beyond symbol and expression. It is the falsity of certain beliefs, as Gellner stressed, that makes possible an investigation into the ways in which they are sustained. For another, there is great value in a method that does not automatically presume that belief is all, that meaning makes the world go round. Behind these two points stands the desire to explain behaviour, to produce a social science. In this matter, we move quickly into philosophical areas – not surprisingly given Gellner’s unique intellectual gifts. Bluntly, any explanation of human behaviour is morally insulting, as it turns the unique into a publicly specified mechanism. One can be unique without intellectual power, or cognitively advanced at the cost of losing moral certainties to which we were once used: there is no escaping this fork.

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[1] Hall 2010 provides full treatment both of his life and of his larger social theory.

[2] Full details of the debate can found in Hall, 2010, chapter four.

[3] The essay is included in Gellner 1979; see also Gellner 1974.

[4] See several essays in Hall and Jarvie, 1996.

[5] See again several essays in Hall and Jarvie 1996.

[6] See several essays in Hall 1998.