

Encyclopaedia of Nationalism

Athena S. Leoussi
editor

Anthony D. Smith consultant advisor



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Gellner, Ernest (1925-1995)

Gellner's first systematic attempt to deal with nationalism came with *Thought and Change* (1964). Nationalism arises with the passage from agricultural religious society to industrial scientific society. It is a self-generated response to the modern need for a mobile labor force, which requires a common education in a common language. The role of mass education is related to the industrial need for a semi-skilled labor force that must be easily replaceable. By losing their traditional roles in pre-industrial societies, men (and later women) become available in the labor market as a uniform mass, rather than as individuals. The "standardization of expression and comprehension" leads to the capacity for context-free communication. With industrialism, peoples moved from a vertical status-centred social structure to a horizontal culture-centred social system, governed by individualistic and egalitarian principles.

Gellner's major target was ideological diffusionism, the vision that ideas have a power of their own, that they can indeed lead the world, and that nationalism is determined by the diffusion of ideas. In polemics with this position, personified by his colleague at the London School of Economics, ELIE KEDOURIE, Gellner wrote *Nations and Nationalism* (1983), a path-breaking critique of approaches to nationalism centred on the history of ideas. This, in itself, is certainly a major achievement on the part of a scholar trained in, and teaching, philosophy. One of Gellner's arguments against the role of ideas, is his claim that no major political philosopher has vindicated nationalism. For Gellner this was symptomatic of the intellectual inferiority of nationalist theories—and hence, a proof that ideas count for little. But, above all other considerations, *Nations and Nationalism* is a devastating attack on Western Marxism, with its still suffocating presence in British academia. To widespread Marxist clichés

about structure and superstructure, Gellner responded with his own brand of labor-related and culture-tied determinism.

In the 1990s, his anti-ideological bent brought him into bitter polemics with the literary critic Edward Said in the pages of the *Times Literary Supplement* (Gellner 1994: 159-169). Nevertheless, the history of ideas was not totally alien to his views: for instance, in *Plough, Sword and Book* (1991), he concluded that the sixteenth-century *ex cathedra* acceptance of empirical evidence as the only yardstick for distinguishing veracity from deception—above the authority of Kings and Priests, represented the key breakthrough for the advent of industrial technology, and hence the beginning of modernity. The book's title implies a focus on production, coercion and cognition, which he sees as the crucible of all social transformations.

Gellner's interpretation of nationalism owes much to Émile Durkheim (1858-1917), and is influenced by both functionalism and modernization theories. Nationalism arises as a response to uprooting modernization which undermines traditional systems of ascriptive relations. Nationalism's historical mission is to dispense new forms of loyalty and identification with the nation-state. Hence, nationalism is a political response to a functional imperative: territorial and social mobility make necessary the construction of a collective identity which can operate for the uprooted individual as an anchor and steering compass. Gellner shared with modernization theorists the belief that there is a radical discontinuity between industrial and pre-industrial societies (1998b). This contrast is indeed at the centre of all his explanations of nationalism.

Following MAX WEBER (1864-1920), Gellner also focused on the bureaucratization of culture: "The state has not merely the monopoly of legitimate violence, but also of the accreditation of educational qualification. So the marriage

of state and culture takes place, and we find ourselves in the Age of Nationalism" (1994: 107). However, state-enforced homogenization, metaphorically identified as the Empire of "Megalomania" (probably a reference to the Habsburg empire), provokes the reactions of those who have been either excluded, or have chosen to opt out in order to protect their own culture. These latter are bound to form their own national movements, in which a low culture is promoted and transformed into a high culture. Their political project is redefined as "Ruritania," the prototypical nationalist homeland (possibly, an allusion to his native Czechoslovakia).

In the homogenizing world of nation-states, human societies find themselves at a radical crossroads: they must either organize themselves on the basis of the nation-state model or perish. A nation is here defined as common membership in a shared high culture. According to Gellner, the high culture of the age of nations is the vehicle of industrialism. This is a mass, rational, and scientific-technological culture which is communicated by a standardized script in the "national" language.

In turn, nationalism is defined as "primarily a principle which holds that the political and national unit should be congruent" (Gellner 1983: 1). Weber's influence on Gellner is well illustrated by Nicholas Stargardt: "Quite simply, nationalism replaces Weber's 'Protestant spirit' as the ideology which legitimates the construction of the modern industrialized world. And the disenchantment is the same. The irony of history for Weber was that a world successfully built on the Protestant ethic was ultimately secular, materialist and irreligious... So for Gellner, the ultimate triumph of nationalism is also the signal for its dissolution... By fulfilling the nationalist goal of industrialising and creating a successful consumer society, public and collective values are inevitably replaced by private and individual ones" (Stargardt 1996: 186).

With a wealth of inventiveness, a taste for the paradoxical, and a never-failing trenchant humor, Gellner produced outstanding and entertaining metaphorical sketches of dramatic historical events, such as the famous contrast between Kokoschka's and Modigliani's pictorial styles,

which he used to illustrate the shift from agricultural to modern society. The former was characterized by the coexistence and overlap of multiple color dots, the latter by sharply demarcated color fields which never intermingle (1983: 139-40). This penchant for analogy spiced with dry wittiness served to illustrate with captivating acumen some very simple models of social change. Nationalism, a bogey that had troubled so many scholars for nearly a century, was explained in relatively ingenuous terms, providing perhaps the best synthesis, still unequalled by other accounts.

Gellner believed that "Nationalism ... invents nations where they do not exist" (1964: 168) perhaps overstating the doctrine's arbitrary character—but without underestimating its creative potential. To the nationalists themselves, nationalism looks immemorial and ever-lasting. It is this doubly reassuring temporal projection towards the past and the future which explains nationalism's unfathomable force—but it also accounts for its simultaneous weakness. Indeed, there are far more potential nations in the world than there are actual ones. Nationalism is a powerful legitimizing force. However, its main legitimacy is grounded on the previous existence of a pluralist system of states. The multi-state system which emerged in northwestern Europe created the necessary preconditions for the advent of modernity. This is so, because a plural system supplies "a social variant of natural selection." In economic terms, this means that "production in a plural state system provides a better path to wealth than domination" (1994a: 74).

Gellner's only fieldwork—and subsequent anthropology Ph.D. degree of 1954—on the Berbers of the Central High Atlas (Morocco), provided the springboard for subsequent works and edited books on Islam, including *Arabs and Berbers* (Gellner and Micaud 1973), *Patrons and Clients in Mediterranean Societies* (Gellner and Waterbury 1977), and, most notably, his master achievement, *Muslim Society* (Gellner 1981). Here, he applied to Islam the same framework that he was applying to the study of nationalism. As he remarked elsewhere, "the mechanisms which underlie Muslim fundamentalism ... are similar to those which underlie modern nationalism: men

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leaving, or deprived of places in a local social structure are attracted by identification with a community defined by a shared High Culture" (1994b: 179). His distinction between low Islam and high Islam reflects the distinction between low culture and high culture. "High" Islam (the creed of the *ulema*, the intellectuals) is characterized by puritanism, simplicity, scripturalism, lack of hierarchy, and other "Protestant ethic" features which, according to Gellner, are the basic requirements of modernity. In contrast, "Low" Islam is made up of the pluralistic folk practices of local communities. In the past, these two movements co-existed as two separate spheres, and such opposition often resulted in their mutual reinforcement. However, with industrialization and urbanization, uprooted peasant communities turned into a mass urban proletariat and lost their attachment to the old customs and practices. As a consequence, they became available to the new ideology of "social cohesion" supplied by the *ulema* (who, in that context, fulfilled the function of the nationalist intelligentsia of the Western world). For instance, the Islamic revolution in Iran displays all the hallmarks of a modernist revolution directed by the *ulema* and supported by disaffected, uprooted, anomic, recently urbanized youth in search of a new creed. In general, "new-style puritanism, with its elective affinity for social radicalism, prevails where colonialism had destroyed old elites and where a new one had come up from below, rather than from the outer wilderness" (Gellner 1981: 66). Or, as in the case of Iran, where ruthless Westernization plus elites' alienation from the masses challenged the rulers' legitimacy.

The fact that political Islam has emerged with particular strength in industrialized, urbanized, and Westernized societies, testifies to Islam's radical modernity. This is contrasted with the peaceful and balanced coexistence of high and folk religion in pre-industrial settings. Gellner's doctoral dissertation, published as *Saints of the Atlas* (1969), shows the crucial role of local Holy Men (intermediaries between high and low Islam, but only conceivable within the framework of folk practices) in maintaining harmony between the seasonally migrating shepherds and the sedentary, as well as among the nomadic communities

themselves. Twice a year over a million sheep and a hundred thousand people travel across the mounts into the hills and plains and vice versa, generating a gargantuan movement of mass displacement. In these circumstances, the mediating role of the Saints is essential—considering also the shepherds' proud independent spirit and their anti-state sentiment.

Although Gellner's theory of nationalism is complete in itself, it is necessary to situate it within his critique of mainstream sociological, philosophical and literary approaches in order to grasp the author's message to the full. Among the philosophers, Gellner felt particularly close to David Hume (1711-1776) whom he had masterly compared to that "very great North African sociologist," Ibn Khaldun (1332-1406) (Gellner 1981). Immanuel Kant (1724-1804) was "the most heroic of philosophers" for his attempt to blend "enchantment" with external validation. His "unconstrained cognitive exploration" set the intellectual standard to be followed by subsequent generations (Gellner 1979: 8; 1995: 41).

His attacks on the orthodoxies of his time made him a unique, if not isolated, figure. He was a sworn adversary of fashionable dogmas swaying Western academia, chiefly relativism, feminism, post-modernism, psychoanalysis, "textism," neo-Marxism, and in general all "closed systems." He regarded psychoanalysis as another closed system—only matched in its closedness by Marxism—which "excludes critical assessment of itself by the implicit rules which succour-seekers must obey if the amelioration of their condition is to be attained" (Gellner 1993: 223). Psychoanalysis and nationalism share a common *Zeitgeist*: "The provision of human warmth and solace, much in demand in our society, is uncertain and precarious. In this situation, the vacuum principle operates: something must fill the crying need. It is psychologically impossible to tell the sufferer that no help is available, even if it is true" (ibid: 223). Consequently, psychoanalysis plays the same "filling" function as nationalism.

His relationship with religion was that of a fully-fledged secularist, but nevertheless one of empathy (Gellner 1974). Thus, he could understand the allure of Islam in the Islamic revival, while also recognising that the "secular *umma*"

of communism could provide a similar sense of security to common people. Since Marxism offered a "moral order," its demise meant the collapse of that order, a void rather easily filled by nationalism (Gellner 1994b). Totalitarian socialism offered "total salvation" in a "naturalistic and sociological idiom," precisely as previous empires, founded on dynasty and religion, had offered salvation in a "transcendental" idiom. Behind a veneer of methodological Eurocentrism, his works evince esteem and even admiration for exotic cultures (Gellner 1975: 56-68).

Gellner remained close to social anthropology, especially to Bronislaw Malinowski (1884-1942) and, to a much lesser extent, to Sir James Frazer (1854-1941). Their influence is particularly felt in his writings on kinship systems (Gellner 1987). Of all the anthropologists, it was Malinowski who solicited his most devoted admiration. For the students of nationalism, Gellner "rediscovered" Malinowski's late work, *Freedom and Civilization* (1944) which contained a number of important and very simple suggestions for policymakers in areas plagued by ethnic conflict. By rejecting both nationalism and cosmopolitanism, Malinowski continued the Central European heritage of "cultural autonomy" as a (never implemented) attempt to recognize and protect cultural differences within the existing political order. Gellner wrote some fine pages on Malinowski's own thought and his *Mitteleuropa* roots (Gellner 1994b: 74-80; 1998a). As for the general state of British social science, Gellner criticized what he recognized to be an ever-present concern, the "colonial sense of guilt." This sense of guilt misted all internal scrutiny like a malignant fog, hampering all possibilities of rational discussion.

Gellner's deeply-felt polemics against Marxism often expanded into a wider critique of the doctrinaire Left, but remained fair to those, innovative voices such as Tom Nairn, who attempted to rescue the ideology from its own fetters (Gellner 1978: 103-111, Nairn 1977). Paradoxically and provocatively, he preferred Soviet "Marxist" anthropology (with their cryptic and refined contributions) to the academic populism of British Marxists (Gellner 1988).

Gellner was much influenced by Karl Popper's (1902-1994) vision of an open society (Conversi

1999). But he also thought that it was necessary to protect citizens from the excesses of the market. For instance, he was aware that a relentless spread of the market model of universal competition would bring a social and ecological cataclysm: "Any unrestricted use of [technology] ... quite possibly will lead to a total disruption of the environment and the social order" (Gellner 1994a: 89). His exceptional interdisciplinary embrace meant that he brought insights from anthropology into philosophy, from historical learning into the social sciences and again into anthropology. This perhaps rendered him an isolated figure in the "compartmentalized community" of British anthropologists—reinforced by the fact that he did not engage in fieldwork after his doctoral research. By contextualizing, relativizing, and historicizing the discipline, he showed that anthropological problems could be solved with tools from other disciplines which experienced similar crises.

In 1993, and following the undoing of the Marxist "secular ideocracy" in Eastern Europe, Gellner moved to the newly established Central European University in Prague to direct, until his untimely death in 1995, the Centre for the Study of Nationalism.

Among possible critiques of Gellner's grand theory of nationalism, one is that it is too abstract to be applied to concrete examples of contemporary nationalism, particularly among stateless groups. The temptation, to which he tended to succumb, to pigeonhole ideas, movements and concepts has also been noticed (Tambini 1996, O'Leary 1997, Smith 1996). Roman Szporluk has rightly observed that Gellner's "own system, his grand vision of global scientific and industrial transformation, did not allow for the possibility of Auschwitz, or for the Gulag, and did not claim to have an ex-post explanation of that occurrence" (Szporluk 1999). Indeed, if the drive for total cultural homogeneity (hence for ethnic and racial purification) is assumed as a basic feature of modernity, then the alleged "ocean" separating 1789 (or 1848) from *Kristallnacht* may be no more than a rivulet. Once human beings become available for a homogeneous standardized high culture as interchangeable uniform mass, it is a short step from

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transforming them into cheap flesh and blood for the new European conscript armies—a possibility first experienced in the French Revolution and its *levée en masse* of August 1793. The Nazi reintroduction of conscription in March 1935 is inconceivable without the homogenising idea of the unity of blood, language and destiny of the German *Volk*. The rise of uniform, assimilated, and uprooted “subjects” paved directly the way to all the major man-made tragedies in this century.

A related problem lies in Gellner’s unorthodox method. The lack of an adequate bibliography and of an appropriate apparatus of footnotes which characterize his writings make his scholarship quite unique and entirely dependent on his syncretic genius. Moreover, most of his models, including his basic models of agrarian and industrial society, are ideal-types or reified categories rather than really existing social realities or historical events. Also, his approach is particularly competent in East European and Islamic matters but less so in West European matters. This may explain the fact that Gellner is one of the most popular theorists of nationalism in the ex-Communist world. However, when discussing Western Europe, he unconvincingly referred to the “lessening of the political salience of ethnicity.”

Given Gellner’s anthropological upbringing, one is struck by the glaring absence from his writings of the distinction between “ethnic boundaries” and “contents.” The first scholar to formulate this distinction, FREDERICK BARTH, is mentioned only in relation to his Pathan fieldwork. Hence, cultural content seems to Gellner to be more important than the oppositional boundary that delimits one culture from another. This brings him dangerously close to the “Convergence Thesis.” This is the view that, as advanced industrial societies come to resemble one another, conflicts diminish. However, in reality, the fact that “differences between languages become phonetic rather than semantic” (cultural convergence), has not been accompanied by the expected reduction in global conflict (political convergence). Even less realistic is the expectation that “generalized affluence diminishes intensity of hatreds” (economic

convergence). As we know, economic welfare and development can, by themselves, bring peace and accommodation only in the short term.

Steeped in East European intellectual tradition and deeply rooted in its historical speculation, Gellner has failed to notice that a new chasm has arisen between high and low culture. This time, however, the low culture is simply the vast anonymous consumerist produce of the U.S.-led global village, while the “masses” no longer seem to yearn for an identification with a nationally defined high culture. This also accounts for the decline of the role of intellectuals, and their replacement by media pundits and rock stars. These use body-language direct semantics which replace lexical or morphological finesse and precision, and thereby fulfil basic needs through “neo-tribal” identification. Yet, globalization was not Gellner’s concern. Refusing to conform to the post-modernist fad, Gellner seemed rarely concerned with contemporary developments. His past-oriented far-sightedness is not matched by a penchant for prognosis—nor did he probably wish it.

More generally, a form of “fatalism” underpins Gellner’s approach to nationalism (Tambini 1996). His approach seems to suggest that things happen just because they have to. For instance, the idea that cultural homogeneity is a necessary concomitant of modernity has exposed him to charges of determinism, and can be easily counter-balanced by the opposite persuasion that multiculturalism is indeed a contemporary necessity dictated by the *force majeure* of globalization. This can be argued as follows: as states are inhabited by minorities, they can no longer impose a homogeneous culture with democratic means. In order to achieve a minimal degree of legitimacy, states have to stress pluralism and grass-roots participation, rather than a monolithic uniform culture.

Besides this modest criticism, Gellner’s vision of nationalism (and of modernity in general) remains unsurpassed. No other scholar of nationalism has achieved such clear delineation of such a highly intricate phenomenon, sketching with masterly touches an extremely complex and changing world, while conveying the travail of an entire era with powerfully simple images.

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Daniele Conversi

Gellner's Theory of Nationalism: A Critical Assessment

Whereas most theorists of nationalism base their observations on the words and actions of nationalists themselves, Gellner viewed nationalism through a vision of the entire history of humanity. As a historical sociologist, Gellner narrated mankind as a progressive adventure in which hunter gatherers evolved into agrarian societies, and then discovered modernity. He regarded modernity as a kind of miracle: mankind stumbled across the discovery that it could elicit the secrets of nature by scientific enquiry, and by exploiting this knowledge, could create a prosperous life for itself. Once the secret was out, it became irresistible to all the peoples of the world. Modernity is nothing else but the consequence of this achievement slowly spreading throughout the world. However much the religious may rail at materialism or conservatives yearn for the security of tra-