Book Reviews/Comptes rendu

Siniša Malešević and **Mark Haugaard**, eds., *Ernest Gellner and Contemporary Social Thought*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007, 280 pp. $US 32.99 paper (978-0-521-70941-5), $US 85.00 hardcover (978-0-521-88291-0)

Ernest Gellner (1925–95) was one of the great social theorists of the 20th century, the equal of more celebrated theorists such as Foucault and Bourdieu. His greatness lay not in offering a theoretical "paradigm shift" but in offering a coherent and trenchant defence of Enlightenment philosophy, and making a powerful case for its continued relevance to understanding and explaining the modern world.

This edited volume provides an admirable appraisal of the breadth of Gellner's work, and in doing so makes two essential contributions. First, it provides a correction to the widespread perception that Gellner was simply a theorist of nationalism. While nationalism is the focus of the middle section of this book, other concerns are elevated, allowing a fuller appreciation of his social thought. Second, it establishes just how coherent Gellner's "worldview" was; Gellner's ability to engage with a range of diverse phenomena in a consistent and lucid fashion was unrivalled. The contributors to this volume are drawn from the many intellectual worlds with which Gellner engaged, notably philosophy, anthropology, and sociology; Gellner knew many of the contributors personally, and despite their differences they acknowledge his influence on their work. The tone of the volume is best captured by the editors, who quote a contemporary's view that "even when you remain unconvinced by Gellner's solutions you are always struck by the degree of originality and the relevance of the question he asks" (p. 7).

The editors, Siniša Malešević and Mark Haugaard, begin by providing a biographical sketch of Gellner as something of an intellectual outsider ("Rebel with a Cause" is the apt title). The volume is then divided into three parts. The first, "Civil society, coercion and liberty," is organized around Gellner's philosophical commitment to liberalism, and his assessment of its fragile sociological moorings. Alan Macfarlane traces the historical emergence of civil society, viewing it as something that emerged gradually with both *Gesellschaft* and *Gemeinschaft* characteristics. This gradual emergence is at odds with Gellner's more abrupt account. Macfarlane argues that it is intermediary organizations, which

display both traditional and modern attributes, that are sufficiently robust to protect liberty whilst withstanding the strain of the historical transition or the contemporary "war on terror." Michael Mann questions Gellner's claim that liberalism emerges as production trumps coercion in modernity. He argues that while this may have been true of states domestically, externally they often behave illiberally, with coercion prioritized over production. This has historically been the case with imperial states such as Britain and the United States. Haugaard suggests that it is not simply the replacement of coercive power by economic power which marks modern societies, rather it is also the introduction of a qualitatively different, manipulative power through which societal consensus is achieved. Finally, Peter Skalník examines Gellner's critical engagement with Marxism and its practice in the Soviet Union. Skalník argues that as a Popperian, Gellner was intellectually curious about "closed societies," which stood in contrast to the "open societies" of liberal democracy.

The second section, "Ideology, nationalism and modernity," revolves around Gellner's theory of nationalism, a theory that much to Gellner's surprise has come to define his social theory. A familiar criticism of this theory is that it suffers from a teleological functionalism, in which nationalism is viewed as serving the needs of industry. Nicos Mouzelis seeks to reformulate Gellner's theory to save it from this criticism. He does so by substituting "modernization" for "industrialization," thus allowing other mechanisms, most notably state formation, to be included in the explanation for nationalism's emergence. Mouzelis thereby provides a necessary corrective to Gellner's largely apolitical theory. Malesevic suggests that Gellner was overly optimistic in his appraisal of industrialization, to which he gave undue prominence to production at the expense of ideology and coercion. Malesevic argues that nationalism continues to ideologically dominate established industrial states, in the form of banal nationalism, and those states continue to be marked by violence, despite Gellner's insistence that nationalism would diminish once industrialization had been achieved. However it is worth noting that the violence to which Malesevic refers is externally directed. Therefore the intensity of internally directed nationalist violence does indeed appear to decrease once the transition, and its accompanying demand for homogenization, has been accomplished. Finally Thomas Hylland Eriksen asks whether Gellner's model can accommodate the emergence of contemporary transnationalism. He suggests that it cannot, given that Gellner failed to adequately distinguish between "culture" and "identity" and thereby fails to allow the possibility that a person may possess one culture yet identify with another: this, argues Eriksen, is distinct from diaspora, and characterizes transnationalism.

The final section assesses Gellner's engagement with the contemporary ideologies of Islam and postmodernism, as well as his general philosophical position. Gellner famously distinguished between fundamentalist Islam which claims a monopoly on "unique truth" and "postmodernism" which denies the very existence of "unique truth," and sought to establish a middle course: a liberalism which seeks truth, but does not seek to own it. Michael Lessnoff convincingly questions Gellner's claim that the contemporary displacement of mystical "low Islam" by fundamentalist "high Islam" is functional for the emergence of industrialization in the Islamic world, and mirrors the role played by Protestantism in the emergence of capitalism. Lessnoff points out that it was the dominance of mystical "low Islam" that allowed for advances in science in the Islamic world, especially astronomy in the 13th century, and not the more scriptural form. Gellner did not directly engage with postmodern theory per se, rather he identified it with relativism, which he believed posed a danger to the search for the truth. Kevin Ryan's contribution critically discusses Gellner's *Postmodernism, Reason and Religion*, arguing that while Gellner offered up a "triad," his argument really collapsed into "Reason" versus "non-Reason" (postmodernism and religion). Moreover, Ryan contends, Gellner's failure to really engage with the complexity of postmodernist theorizing, and in particular his preoccupation with its epistemological groundings, meant that he not only missed postmodernism's great strength — understanding the contingency of meaning — but his failure to properly engage did not live up to his own advocacy of the kind of rational dialogue he valued in "Reason."

The volume ends appropriately with John A. Hall's essay, which seeks to capture "Gellner's metaphysic," highlighting the way in which, despite the impressive empirical range of Gellner's work, it was nevertheless animated by an organizing "metaphysic," revealing as much about his character as about his philosophical approach. (Further insights are promised in Hall's forthcoming intellectual biography of Gellner.) To those familiar with Gellner's *oeuvre* this volume provides both a reminder of its scope and its continuing importance; for those new to Gellner the volume provides an essential introduction, with the hope that it will prompt further investigation. *Ernest Gellner and Contemporary Social Thought* comes highly recommended.

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of the 'Transition': Ernest Gellner's social philosophy and political sociology" (with R. Dannreuther), *International Political Sociology* (2007) 1(4):339–55.
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