

Ernest Gellner

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Ernest Gellner, who died on 5 November 1995, was one of the great polymaths of the century. Many of his twenty books were concerned with philosophy, sociology and anthropology. Yet at the core of his work was an historical question.

His own life, poised between thought systems and cultures, had put him in an unique position to appreciate the 'great transformation' of modernity. This he described in an interview in 1990 as follows. (Interview with John Davis, May 1990, published in *Current Anthropology*, vol.32, no.1, Feb. 1991.) 'The difference between the agrarian religious world and the industrial scientific one has always been for me absolutely central to understanding the world.' 'The emergence of an open system in north-western Europe...is a central fact about the world, about the human condition. There have been transitions from societies based on a stable technology, a stable faith, hierarchical organization, cultural stratification, and all the rest of it to societies based upon economic growth, a kind of universal bribery fund with a commitment to secure material improvement. That involves an unstable occupational structure, which in turn involves a measure of egalitarianism, a homogeneous culture, because people have to communicate with each other, which involves nationalism.' This he thought was 'the enormous transition which I think is the central fact about our world' and was 'my central preoccupation'.

Gellner had made a number of attempts to understand this 'great transformation'. The most extended of these was in his book *Sword, Plough and Book* (1989). There, in a section headed 'Conditions of the Exit' he gives a check-list of 'factors' which might have enabled the west to 'escape'. There are fifteen of them, from 'Feudalism as the matrix of capitalism' through 'the restrained state' and 'the direct Protestant ethic thesis' to 'a national rather than civic bourgeoisie'. Most are thought-provoking, and some, such as 'the availability of an expanding bribery fund', are original. But none is determining and Gellner is too auto-critical to be really convinced by any of them. The best that he can draw from this analysis is a list of possible ingredients. The precise weightings are not specified nor the ways the elements should be combined. We are left, as Gellner is himself, unsatisfied. It is still a miracle, the way through the gate is still obscure. This obscurity has now been partially cleared away by the essays and book reviewed here.

During the period of the collapse of the Soviet Union Gellner wrote essays on the 'Origins of Society', 'Culture, Constraint and Community', 'The Highway to Growth' and 'War and Violence', subsequently published as part of *Anthropology and Politics*. He later wrote *The Conditions of Liberty* which synthesized and extended the thought of a lifetime. There are, of course, weaknesses in his work. Many of the assertions are undocumented, some are exaggerated. He largely ignores eastern Asia and America. He imposes too neat and tidy a three-stage model on the past. Yet it is a privilege to watch this brilliant mind, who had deeply engaged with the history and structure of three civilizations, Islamic, Communist and Western Capitalist, reflect on how the last of these emerged.

One area in which he expanded his analysis was in relation to the religious system. Like Weber, Gellner does not suggest that Protestantism intentionally or directly **caused** capitalism. Firstly the famous ascetic virtues of hard-work, honesty, saving were an accidental by-product of the Reformation. Thus 'one may also accept the Weberian argument that virtues which could only initially emerge as the by-product of bizarre religious conviction, because their beneficent effects were not known and were anticipated by no one, nevertheless become habit-forming and are perpetuated, once their place in a modern economy is properly and widely understood.' (Gellner, *Liberty*, 202)

Part of what Protestantism did was to push to one extreme a general tendency in much of western Christianity towards an attack on a magical and ritual embeddedness. Part of the explanation for the growth of an unusual thought style in the west from early on lies in Christianity, that is to say 'the impact of a rationalistic, centralizing, monotheistic and exclusive religion. It is important that it was hostile to manipulative magic and insisted on salvation through compliance with rules, rather than loyalty to a spiritual patronage network and payment of dues.' (Gellner, *Grove*, 36) As can be seen, this ascetic streak tended to become overlain in Catholicism with a world of miracles and magic and Protestantism was the extreme attempt to restore it to its original anti-magical cleanliness. Compare the excesses of ritual Roman Catholicism with 'a monotheistic, iconoclastic, puritanical, nomocratic world: a distant, hidden, rule-bound and rule-imposing, awe-inspiring God has proscribed magic, ritual, ecstasy, sacred objects, and enjoins a rule-bound morality on his creatures, and similarly, imposes law-abiding regularity on all nature. He concentrates all sacredness in Himself; piety is henceforth to be manifested in sober orderly conduct, in an

undiscriminating observance of rules.(Gellner, Grove, 39) This is moving towards a 'disenchanted' world which is an ideal background for orderly science and orderly capitalism.

Gellner has a second line of argument which does not focus on the nature of religion, but on its power in relation to the State. Puzzling on how mankind escaped from the joint domination of priests and kings, Gellner began to develop the idea that it was because the two fell out. The 'normal' situation in agrarian civilizations was described by Durkheim, who 'sketched out what is really the generic social structure of agro-literate societies, namely government by warriors and clerics, by coercers and by scribes. In his version, the two ruling strata happen to be conflated, and top clerics were meritocratically selected from the authorized thug class.' (Gellner, Grove, 37) Yet instead of this usual Caesaro-Papist concordat, the tension between Church and State is a peculiar western characteristic - as compared, for instance, to India or China. Gellner quotes David Hume's explanation for the toleration in England or Holland; 'if, among Christians, the English and the Dutch have embraced principles of toleration, this singularity has proceeded from the steady resolution of the civil magistrate, in opposition to the continued efforts of priests and bigots.' This points in the right direction, but why were the civil magistrates, unusually, opposed to religious extremism?

The key, Gellner suggests, may have been in the stale-mate between a powerful Church and a powerful State, both seeking a monopoly yet neither able to obtain it. 'The separation of, and rivalry between, these two categories of dominators may well constitute one of the important clues to the question of how we managed to escape from the agrarian order. Priests helped us to restrain thugs, and then abolished themselves in an excess of zeal, by universalizing priest-hood. First Canossa, then the Reformation.'(Gellner, Grove, 58)

The Calvinists were far from tolerant. Yet in their battle with their co-religionists of the national Churches, and with the State, they finally preferred a compromise. Seeking for tolerance for themselves, they had to give it to others. There was an 'ideological stalemate'. 'For virtue to be privatized, what may be essential is that the practitioners and preachers of uncompromising, absolute and enforced virtue, and the practitioners of the old rival, socially rooted and socially adaptive ritualistic religion should terminate their conflict in stalemate, and so in mutual toleration, as happened in England.'(Gellner, Liberty, 78)

This is a subtler formulation than the crude interpretation sometimes drawn from Weber, that 'Calvinism caused capitalism'. If Calvinism was too successful, as in Scotland or Geneva, it could destroy the liberty needed for capitalist development just as effectively as the Counter-Reformation. It was only where it made some progress, but then was checked and fused with alternative traditions that, like a moderate dose of disinfection, it cleaned out the system. In England (and Holland) there were the checks to prevent its total victory. The English continued that tradition, represented by Becket, of a Church prepared to stand up against the State but not prepared to enter into an agreement to dominate. The separation of religion and politics is one of the central constituents of modernity and it was achieved by accident and through a dynamic tension and balance of forces of an unusual kind and over a long period.

The second part of Gellner's explanation lies in the relation between the political and the economic. His first premise is that as societies develop into what we call 'civilizations', predation (politics) will dominate production (economy) and constantly restrict its development. It is a kind of Malthusian law of power. If through some accident or discovery, wealth is increased, it will lead to a rise in predation which will reduce mankind back to that world of violence from which momentarily it seemed to be lifting itself. Indeed, the two kinds of Malthusianism are linked, for, as Gellner sees it 'Agrarian society was inescapably Malthusian, with population constantly pressing on resources; the distribution of those resources could not but be invidious, and hence required a good deal of coercive enforcement, often very brutal.' (Gellner, Grove, 59) Thus the growth of population, as Malthus suggested, led to violence (war). But the war also led to the growth of population. 'The need for production and defence also impels agrarian society to value offspring, which means that, for familiar Malthusian reasons, their populations frequently come close to the danger point.' (Gellner, Grove, 34) It was indeed a vicious, and apparently inescapable, circle.

What has happened is neatly summed up thus. 'As an initial, stark hypothesis, I would propose a new law of

three stages: at first, violence was contingent and optional. In a second stage violence became pervasive, mandatory and normative. Military skills became central to the dominant ethos. In the third stage, which we are at present entering, violence becomes once again optional, counter-productive and probably fatal.' (Gellner, Grove, 160) The violence took various forms. There was the Machiavellian dynamic: the need to get in your defence first, 'the simple principle of pre-emptive violence, which asserts that you should be the first to do unto them that which they will do unto you if they get the chance, inescapably turns people into rivals.' (Gellner, Grove, 34) There was that preference for the exciting short-cut to wealth through seizing other people's productive surplus, once shown in war and now in the stock market. There was the jealousy of the powerful who are threatened by alternative sources of power, the 'vicious circle which in the past obliged power-holders to suppress successful accumulators of wealth, as an imminent political menace.' (Gellner, Liberty, 78)

Of course, from time to time, the relations of production and predation are reversed, and there is a period of economic and cognitive growth, as in Greece or the Italian city states. 'Under favourable circumstances, power had very occasionally moved from thugs to traders even in earlier periods: but as long as there was a kind of ceiling on economic development, the shift did not proceed too far, and either reached a limit beyond which it could not go or was eventually reversed.' (Gellner, Grove, 168) In general, looking over the long history of mankind up to the middle of the eighteenth century, it seemed true that 'political considerations trumped economic ones and the economic side of life simply could not be granted full autonomy - in other words, a market society was impossible - because the economy was so pathetically feeble.' (Gellner, Liberty, 169) The normal tendency was for wealth-producing oases to be over-run by the surrounding military powers, as happened in Italy, southern Germany or the Hanseatic League. 'Commercial city states are a fragile rather than a hardy plant. Why should the free merchants of north-west Europe fare any better than their predecessors who lie buried in the historic past?' (Gellner, Liberty, 73)

Gellner makes a cunning attempt to explain what is ultimately an improbable miracle. One of the main lines of his argument concerns the role of technology and science. There were two distinct phases. As the change began, the important thing was that there was technological power and growth, but that it was not too obvious and not too great. 'So early development may well have depended on the relative feebleness rather than the power of innovation. In fact, by the time the new world emerged in full strength, and its implications were properly understood, it was too late to stop it. It had been camouflaged by its gradualness, and that was made possible by the relatively non-disruptive nature of its techniques.' (Gellner, Grove, 131)

This is why Gellner always stresses an expanding but **feeble** technology as one of his essential pre-conditions. Among the conditions of the escape were 'above all, a fairly feeble technology, one just about capable of improving significantly on traditional methods of production, and making sustained innovation appear attractive, but not capable of very much more. A feeble technology of such a kind can be given its head and it will not disrupt either the social order or the environment, or at any rate not too much.' (Gellner, Liberty, 89)

The miracle, however, only occurred by chance because, just as this phase of wealth growth reached its limits, as in Holland in the eighteenth century, there was a change of gear, so to speak. Suddenly, without anyone being able to anticipate it, two 'revolutions' occurred, which finally coalesced and confirmed the switch from predation to production. These were the enormous surge in knowledge and productive power created by the scientific and industrial revolutions.

Adam Smith and Adam Ferguson had been right to be pessimistic in the light of all that had happened in the past, yet their forecasts 'came to be invalidated by the same factor, by the tremendous expansion of productive power consequent on the impact of scientific technology.' (Gellner, Liberty, 79) In the eighteenth century, a phenomenon whereby 'commerce and production for a time take over from predation and domination' for the first time in history perpetuated itself because it was 'accompanied by two other processes - the incipient Industrial Revolution, leading to an entirely new method of production, and the Scientific Revolution, due to ensure an unending supply of innovation and an apparently unending exponential increase in productive powers.' (Gellner, Liberty, 73) Thus the 'entire shift from valuation of

coercion to valuation of production was only possible because, rather surprisingly, indefinite, sustained, continuous technological and economic improvement **had** become possible.'

It has often been observed that through history the balance between offensive and defensive weapons has changed the nature of war and peace. What Gellner is basically arguing is that for the first time in history an even deeper technological shift occurred, whereby the weapons or tools of production became more powerful than the tools of predation. A rich country with a small navy and mercenary army could face down a larger, more warlike, but poorer country. More power and wealth could be made from producing things than by predating on others. This is not necessarily a permanent shift, yet it is indeed a momentous one and it rests largely on the uneven developments of the technologies of production and destruction.

What happened was that a country which was pursuing the path of production for the first time in history devised a method of becoming so rich by productive increase, that it was also able to become the politically dominant power. Technological expansion became a virtue, rather than a threat. The 'fittest' were not those who pursued the straight path of predation, but those who put much of their energies into production. 'Astonishingly, the regime in which oppression and dogmatism prevailed was not merely wicked, but actually weaker than societies which were freer and more tolerant! This was the essence of the Enlightenment.' Thus 'it was only **sustained and unlimited** expansion and innovation which finally turned the terms of the balance of power away from coercers and in favour of producers. In the inter-polity conflict, no units managed to survive and to continue to compete if their internal organization was harsh on producers and inhibited their activities or impelled them to emigrate.' (Gellner, Grove, 169) The great reversal in history was 'only aided by the strange and unusual mechanism which favoured producers over power-seekers, by eliminating entire collectivities which produced less or grew less than their rivals.' (Gellner, Grove, 172) Thus the 'fittest' were now those who espoused that mix of openness and technological progress whose model was England. 'The economic and even military superiority of a growing society then eventually obliged the others to follow suit. Natural selection secured what rational foresight or restraint had failed to bring about.' 'So all the states in the relevant part of the world were in the end obliged to emulate the liberal path to economic prosperity, or at least some aspects of it, in the hope of augmenting their power and relative international position.' (Gellner, Grove, 168)

All this was made possible because of the fact that Europe was split into a number of medium sized states. You can repress most of the people most of the time, but not all of them all of the time - unless you live in a vast absolutist world as in China or the Communist Soviet Union. This is expressed in Gellner's inimitable throw-away style as follows. Usually an improvement in technological power will strengthen domination, 'But in Europe the process was taking place within a multi-state system, and the thugs were unable to use growth to strengthen themselves everywhere at the same time and to the same extent. The various thug states were also engaged, as was their habit and joy, in conflict with each other. Those which had tolerated or were for one reason or another obliged to tolerate, prosperous and non-violent producers in their own midst, suddenly found themselves **more** powerful - because endowed with a bigger economic base - than their rivals.' (Gellner, Grove, 167) In huge absolutist Empires, predation will eliminate production. 'But in a plural state system, in which other states prosper dramatically and visibly, the throttling and throttled systems are in the end eliminated by a social variant of natural selection. In a multi-state system, it was possible to throttle Civil Society in some places, but not in all of them.' (Gellner, Liberty, 74)

Hints and rather crude lists and suggestions in **Sword, Plough and Book** have now been developed into a much more coherent argument which maintains the **contingency** of what happened, and through another structural analysis of the **balance** between technology, polity and economy, gives a scintillating insight into what happened. It places the scientific and industrial revolutions at the heart of the escape, but recognises their contingency as well. As Perry Anderson observed, 'of all the sociological thinkers of the subsequent epoch, Gellner has remained closest to Weber's central intellectual problems ... none has addressed themselves with such cogency to the core cluster of his substantive concerns.' (Perry Anderson, *A Zone of Engagement*, Verso, London 1992, p198) Another way of putting this is to say that Gellner was asking the same question as Weber, namely how did the unique, modern, western world emerge. This is the heart of their shared problem and only Gellner has had the combination of philosophic, sociological and comparative

knowledge to take up Weber's challenge successfully.

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