

ERNEST GELLNER 1925-1995

EDITORIAL NOTE

The great philosopher and sociologist Ernest Gellner died in Prague on 5 November 1995. In recognition of the contribution which he made to the study of nationalism, we reprint here two articles which illustrate his insights, and which cast light on the Scottish debate about nationalism, civil society, and the state. The first is an appreciation which was written by Tom Nairn for The University of Edinburgh **Bulletin**, 6 December 1995. Nairn himself was a long-standing associate and friend of Gellner, and they influenced each other over many years and in relation to debates about many countries. The appreciation provides an introduction to an interview with Gellner which is published here for the first time in English. It originally appeared in the Italian journal **L'Indice dei libri** in 1990, and contains an analysis of the role of civil society which is pertinent not only to the states which were then emerging from the former communist regimes of central and eastern Europe, but also to western-European nations such as Scotland where the debate about autonomy is intense. The interview was conducted by Guido Franzinetti, who worked with Gellner in the early 1990s at the time of the setting up of the Centre for the Study of Nationalism at the Central European University in Prague. A brief listing of Ernest Gellner's key writings appears at the end.

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APPRECIATION OF ERNEST GELLNER

Tom Nairn

Few of Gellner's obituarists mentioned his links with Scotland and the University of Edinburgh. So it may be in order to recall here how significant a part these played in his earlier development. Gellner's Czech-Jewish family came from the Sudeten or German-speaking region of Bohemia. They chose Czechoslovakia after the fall of the Hapsburg Empire and (as he recalled ironically in the interview which follows) 'I was somehow instructed to consider myself Czech'. Bilingual from his earliest years, he went to an English-language school in Prague. In 1939 the family emigrated to England, and during 1944-5 Ernest fought in the Czechoslovak Armoured Brigade in France. After the war he took a BA degree in philosophy at Oxford. In 1947 he came to Edinburgh to begin his academic career as an 'Assistant and Demonstrator' in Professor John Macmurray's department of Moral Philosophy. Lord Murray (the Scottish law-lord who has recently retired as a member of the University Court) remembers him at that time as a 'tense and earnest' young scholar still suffering mild culture-shock from his first encounter with Scotland. He stayed in the University two years before moving to the London School of Economics (where he achieved great distinction as a social anthropologist).

During these years Idealist speculative philosophy still reigned at Edinburgh. John Macmurray was a hugely popular figure who attracted overflow audiences to his First Ordinary lectures. In the other philosophical department, Logic and Metaphysics, the Kantian A.D. Ritchie also maintained what had been the mainstream tradition of grand philosophical theory. Though finding it insufficiently rigorous (especially Macmurray), Gellner was undoubtedly influenced by that tradition. Ten years later he was to publish **Words and Things**, a scathing denunciation of the Wittgensteinian and common-language orthodoxy which replaced grand theory in the 1950s. Though it made him extremely unpopular with the new Oxbridge establishment, he never repented, and towards the end of his life would still speak of Macmurray, Ritchie and their associates with great affection and respect.

In 1987 Gellner wrote that 'the experience of living on the edge of so many nationalisms without properly belonging to any ... impelled me to think about nationalism'. From the 1960s onwards Gellner became the prime theorist of this subject. The culture shock of 1947-9 may have played some part in his evolution. He had come to the edge, Scotland, and discovered both a distinct nation and a centre of civilisation. It is certainly the case that the repercussions of this experience stayed with him, and his love of Edinburgh never dimmed.

Ernest Gellner 1925-1995

Upon retiring from Cambridge University in 1992, Gellner went home to Prague and founded the Centre for the Study of Nationalism at the Central European University. In 1994 the Sociology Department at the University of Edinburgh invited him back for a two-day conference on the political break-up of Czechoslovakia (an event of which he had come to think favourably). Other participants included former Premiers of Slovakia and the Czech Republic, and the proceedings have been published in **Scottish Affairs**, no. 8 (Summer 1994). He enjoyed the event hugely, gave a Public Lecture at Old College and then led many of the participants on a climb up Arthur's Seat. This turned out to be more gruelling than most had expected. Although by now walking with the aid of a stick, Professor Gellner never missed an opportunity to remind one of how vigorous his earlier membership of the University's Mountaineering Club had been. His last Prague work was **Conditions of Liberty**, a rehabilitation of the concept of civil society which originated in the thought of the Scottish Enlightenment.

In retrospect Gellner's thought will undoubtedly appear as one of the greatest by-products of the Central European borderlands in this century: a unique fusion of anthropology, sociology and philosophy. And his short yet formative time in Scotland may have played an important part in bringing that exalting fusion about.

INTERVIEW: ERNEST GELLNER

INTERVIEWER: You were born in 1925 of Czech-Jewish parents. You went to the Prague English Grammar School; your family came to Britain in 1939. You served in the Czechoslovak Armoured Brigade in Northern France, and then graduated at Balliol College, Oxford. At that stage, you had various options open to you: Czechoslovakia, the United States or Israel. Why did you choose Britain?

GELLNER: Well, Czechoslovakia was excluded after '45 because I was there in '45 and I saw the Stalinist future very clearly. The coming of the Stalinist regime in '43 was absolutely obvious in '45 as a consequence of the then situation. The expulsion of 3 million Germans in fairly brutal conditions (which I saw) meant that the Czechs were terrified of the Germans, whose resurgence they foresaw: they remembered Munich very clearly and the conjunction of the two meant they were totally dependent on Russia, and they