

Ernest Gellner: Language and Solitude: Wittgenstein, Malinowski, and the Habsburg Dilemma

Cambridge, Cambridge University Press 1998,
xix + 209 p.

Language and Solitude: Wittgenstein, Malinowski, and the Habsburg Dilemma is the very last book written by Ernest Gellner. It can be seen as a summary of the lifelong academic efforts by this arguably most original thinker of the 20th century. Here Gellner makes his final and unequivocal, albeit not always explicit, statement about anthropology as the most efficient way of grasping our visible and invisible social world. Although one cannot find it explicitly in his writing, Gellner defines humans as primarily knowledge-seeking beings (we might coin a Latin neologism of *homo gnosticus*). For Gellner, knowledge and cognition is the highest manifestation of being human. Already in his initial work in academia, i.e. the late 1940s and the early 1950s, he began to distinguish between "two fundamental theories of knowledge" which are "profoundly opposed" and which at the same time do not concern knowledge only but "human life" as such and "theories of society, of man, of everything" (p. 3). The one, represented by Wittgenstein's linguistic philosophy, with which Gellner acquainted himself when he was a student at Oxford, seemed wrong to him already then but he could not prove it easily.

Only when he discovered social anthropology, a new discipline created by Malinowski (and continued by his disciples Firth and Schapera at the London School of Economics) by way of transcending ethnology as it was practised there earlier by Malinowski's teachers Westermarck and Seligman, did Gellner identify a tool which enabled him to show effectively why the 'individualistic/atomistic' conception of knowledge represented by Wittgenstein was wrong. Even Wittgenstein's very linguistic theory was wrong according to Gellner. Anthropology enabled Gellner to identify the opposite theory, an 'organic' vision of the world in which knowledge is a 'team game', and concepts are the property of 'entire cultural/linguistic community', not of isolated individuals. As he put it "[C]ultures freeze

associations, and endow them with a feel of necessity. They turn mere worlds into homes, where men can feel comfortable, where they belong rather than explore, where things have their allocated places and form a system" (p. 5). Gellner expresses this credo unequivocally:

– No single individual is capable of excogitating the system of ideas required to make a world: only the unconscious cunning of a culture and a language is capable of such an achievement. Man cannot act on his own, but only when sustained by and interacting with other participants in this collective game. The ideas of a culture, of a historic tradition, of an ongoing community, work through him (p. 6).

At end of the book he was perhaps more careful but still clear about the fundamental difference between the two worldviews:

– The real intellectual problems that modern society faces consist, in very large part, of the relationship between the two styles, between universalism-atomism, which helps explain the success of the new science and thereby itself acquires a certain authority, further reinforced by the superiority of the market form of production over centralised and socially oriented ways of running the economy, and, on the other hand, by the yearning for 'meaning', social coherence, the fusion of value and fact, the absorption of the individual in a supportive and loving community, which in turn blends into the natural background. These are the terms of reference for our problems. Anyone who simply proposes one of them and ignores or dismisses the other, has little to tell us. That might have been possible once, but it is so no longer (p. 190).

Throughout his stormy career, Gellner never agreed with the artificiality of the thinking of linguistic philosophers, and with their knowledge for the sake of knowledge. He disagreed with overstretched fundamentalism, exaggerated cultural relativism, with hermeneutics, postmodernism and culturalism. He wanted to appreciate also the other side of the coin. For him neither Lévi-Strauss nor anthropological Marxists unseated Malinowski from the virtual priesthood of anthropology. Social anthropology to him was the empirical knowledge of

relations between real people who associate in communities and societies. In social anthropology, with its theory and practice of fieldwork, he found the means of how to argue simultaneously in favour of the uniqueness of truth and for the invincibility of scientific knowledge, which is aimed at life and practice. In this sense he was a materialist.

Social anthropology proved to be an organic combination of the two approaches to the realities of modernity. After all Gellner's main contribution is his very original understanding of modernity by way of analysis of nationalism. Nationalism, as he put it so succinctly in a paper he gave in Piran in September 1995, less than two months before he died, was defined by the relation of polity and culture: "The state is legitimised by its role in protecting a culture and a culture is completed by having its own state. This is the basic doctrine of nationalism (...) boundary of the political unit and the cultural unit converge. (...) The marriage of state and culture is the basic principle of nationalism." Indeed, as if telepathically with Malinowski who in his time never managed to complete his 'scientific theory of culture', Gellner had to make an enormous step forward and recognised the crucial role which anthropologically conceived culture plays in understanding society, especially the modern society equipped with the nation-state polity.

At this stage the reader should be reminded that during his life Gellner had not one but four fieldwork experiences: the first was the post-Munich Britain where he arrived in April 1939 as a boy of a little over thirteen years and again as a 20-year-old demobilised student when he returned from Prague early in 1946 (Once in Britain he continued his high school – in Prague he studied at an English high school – education at St. Albans County Grammar School with excellent results and then went on to study at Oxford's Balliol College for a year before enlisting for active service in the war against Germany, fighting at Dunkirk and liberating Plzeň/Pilsen as a member of the Czechoslovak Brigade which fought alongside the U.S. and British armies. After demobilisation, Gellner studied for few months at Charles University and then decided to return to Oxford.). The second fieldwork of

Ernest Gellner was the proper anthropological one, in the Moroccan Atlas, the results of which were published as *Saints of the Atlas* (1969). The third piece of fieldwork of Ernest Gellner took place in Moscow, U.S.S.R., in the late 1980s when he spent his sabbatical at the Institute of Ethnography of the USSR Academy of Sciences. Finally, Gellner's fourth field experience was carried out in post-communist Prague where he moved after his retirement from Cambridge and spent the last three years of his life. As a matter of fact he died in Prague, in his flat on Prokopská 9 on 5 November 1995. In effect, Gellner was a refugee and a migrant all his life, obviously with the exception of the first 13 and half years. Throughout his life he cherished the impressions and fictions of Prague and Czechoslovakia, which he acquired before his escape to freedom. Ironically, in Britain he was always viewed as a refugee intellectual, obsessed with a weird continental way of thinking and remembering things that the British did not (want to) know (I am grateful to Professor Brian McGuiness for explaining to me Gellner's position in British society and academia.). In Prague at the end of his career and life, for a change, the Czech people saw in him as a British philosopher with something of a Czech-Jewish background which was not widely known.

Whereas British philosophers point out Wittgenstein's quest for the ultimate confines of knowledge, Gellner stressed the extreme individualism and non-practicality in Wittgenstein's theory of knowledge. Gellner believed that what he calls the Habsburg dilemma consisted in an unresolved tension between these two gnoseological poles. "It was with the rise of nationalism", Gellner writes, "that the deep confrontation (...) really came into its own within the Danubian empire. The opposition between individualism and communalism, between the appeal of *Gesellschaft* ('Society') and of *Gemeinschaft* ('Community'), a tension which pervades and torments most societies disrupted by modernisation, became closely linked to the hurly burly of daily political life and pervaded the sensibility of everyone" (p. 12). It appeared that the most eager partisans of the Austro-Hungarian Empire turned out to be the liberals of Jewish descent, "standing out-

side the faith with which the state was once so deeply identified" (ibid.) and whose cosmopolitan culture was quite opposed to the ethnic demands of the awakeners. Romantic-populist ethnographers, in opposition to the 'bloodless cosmopolitanism', glorified peasant folk culture. Rationalistic individualism and romantic communalism stood in seemingly irreconcilable, dilemmatic, opposition.

Malinowski, whom Gellner compares with William the Conqueror, and his titanic thrust towards the establishment of social anthropology nearly *ex nihilo* served Gellner for the sketching of the other alternative, which was seemingly also an absolute one. It was the romantic communalism of co-existence of cultures without their being hijacked for political goals. Malinowski experienced its functioning during the last few decades of 'Kakania' (The famous Austrian writer Robert Musil coined Kakania a bit derogatively echoing the k.u.k. – *königliche und kaiserliche* – monarchy better known as the Austro-Hungarian Empire.). Ruled fairly benignly by Franz Josef I of the Habsburg dynasty, Kakania eventually succumbed in the wake of World War One to its own conservatism and the external forces of modernity. Malinowski was a holist, who saw "life as participation in a collectivity, which alone gives life its meaning" (p. 181) and did not believe in politicisation of ethnicity. Rather he welcomed cultural diversity and advised that political sovereignty of nation-states should be curbed.

Possibly the most exciting part of Gellner's last book, where he comes out of the closet so to say, is the section on Malinowski's politics. By employing experience with native nationalistic ethnography of the Carpathians Malinowski revolutionised it, Gellner argues, by putting it in the Trobriands to the service of his scientific empiricist quest. Malinowski transformed ethnography into anthropology, thereby changing it, in Gellner's words, "from time-machine into a history-exterminator" (p. 140). Anthropology was a strictly empirical science, mostly concerned with the non-European, in his time colonial, peoples. By the 1930s, however, Malinowski understood that anthropology can be also a practical science and he put it, at least at the London School of

Economics, to the service of understanding social and cultural change, mainly in Africa. Later, when he faced the practical and theoretical anthropological task of understanding the problem of war (World War Two started in Poland, his native country, when Malinowski was on sabbatical in the U.S.A. and he never returned to England because of it), he combined his cosmopolitan liberalism with the political necessity of curbing the sovereignty of nation-states which, if equipped with exclusivist and supremacist, highly politicised, nationalism, caused wars. The solution to the seeming dilemma he saw, according to Gellner, both in the practice of cultural autonomy (as he knew it from Galicia under Austrian rule) and in the British colonial policy of indirect rule. As Gellner puts it, what attracted Malinowski to indirect rule was the fact that "it limits the political power of local rulers" while continuing to "encourage, foster, and sustain the cultural expression of the indigenous society, including its political hierarchy" but its "power is markedly restrained" (pp. 142-143). Gellner in a way complements Malinowski by saying that the answer to the moral repellence of colonialism is not its abolishment but rather the demand that everybody should be colonised.

"[U]niversalisation of colonialism is just as good as its abolition", writes Gellner, and hastens to explain that colonisation of everybody means to "deprive their political units of sovereignty – whilst allowing them absolute cultural freedom of expression, thereby incidentally depriving boundaries of some of their importance and symbolic potency" (ibid.). Gellner laments that Malinowski's precepts were not adhered to, post-World War II and post-1989 nationalism unleashed wars. Gellner (ibid.) believes that culture is not necessarily territorial and its enhancement could be, so he hopes, combined with the defusing of nationalist frenzy. It is possible to reduce political institutions to "mere administrative conveniences (...) emptied of their emotive potency". This legacy of Ernest Gellner, inspired so decisively by Malinowski's anthropology, is the 'only hope' for humanity.

Anthropology, through its meticulous collection of synchronic field data, is simultaneously a search for meaning, social coherence,

amalgamation of values and facts, it is the absorption of the individual into a supporting and loving community, which further combines with the natural environment. By accepting the non-Witgensteinian alternative, represented by the Malinowski's social anthropology, Gellner does not at all commit the error of absolutisation. He was indeed a maverick, combining unusual qualities into a unique synthesis, very much like his intellectual 'grandfather' Malinowski: "empiricist organicist, a positivist romantic, and a synchronic holist" (p. 135). As Steven Lukes explains in his foreword, Malinowski "recombined elements of both - romantic and positivist, organic and liberal - thereby prefiguring and expressing a version of Gellner's own position" (p. xiv). It is thanks to Malinowski's anthropology that Gellner managed to understand and explain the Habsburg dilemma, unresolved *à l'époque* because of the false necessity of the choice between the two absolutes. Gellner's legacy consists in his assertion of the need to submit to the logic of technological modernity, which originated in the West before its further global distribution.

On the other hand however he stresses its transcendence by the anthropological approach to the realities of human life. Thus Gellner does not reject the solitude of individualism for its methodological failure but rather because the knowledge thus gained does not offer any exit useful for the practice of humanity. Social anthropology, starting with Malinowski, through its empirical study of human society and culture in all their manifestations, shows the path towards the fulfilment of and transcendence of simple biological needs by values inculcated by culture. Gellner put it very succinctly at the end of his last book (p. 190):

- A satisfactory life is one which is provided with the means of playing out a part in a culture/play, a part agreeable to the actor. This fact is obscured in our society by the egalitarian levelling out of roles that has allowed people to pursue recognition mainly through the acquisition of goods. This creates an illusion that those goods are, in themselves, desired and satisfying.

Petr Skalník

