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# Ernest Gellner and Debates on Nomadic Feudalism

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## ABSTRACT

*This article discusses the contribution of the Ernest Gellner to the Soviet Marxist debates on the political evolution of pastoral nomadic societies. Gellner touches on two aspects of the problem considered in the chapter: a theoretical one concerning the heuristic possibilities of the Marxist method and a properly historiographical one providing assessment of either authors or of their works. Gellner has valued positively those Soviet anthropologists who have disclaimed nomadic feudalism. At the same time, the specific traits of pastoral nomadic societies cannot be explained on the basis of mere logic of the internal development. The specificity of nomadic society cannot be correctly understood without an appeal to the cultural ecology and relations of nomadic pastoralists with their sedentary agrarian neighbours.*

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In 1988, Ernest Gellner published the book *State and Society in Soviet Thought*. It is clear even from the title that the book was devoted to an analysis of the thoughts of Soviet (Russian) anthropologists regarding various theoretical problems. However no review of this book has ever appeared in Soviet anthropological journals. It is believed that in this way Soviet anthropologists ignored any criticism. This is not the case. A review of this book was to have been written. Those who have intended to write it were

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then young Soviet anthropologists on whom the western ideas including books by Gellner had an efficient influence. It had been planned that each of those willing to participate in the review would present an analysis of those chapters for which s/he had competence. However, as is often the case when many people take part in a project, some did not write their parts and the work was not done.

The following is an expanded version of my portion of the review concerning nomadic societies (my other fragment was devoted to the Asiatic mode of production). Initially a Russian variant of this text was published in the mid-1990s (Kradin 1996). Later, in the course of discussion concerning the importance of Gellner for development of anthropology, an idea was formulated to prepare the paper for a wider group of researchers. Without additional comments however many fine points would be incomprehensible to Anglophone scholars. Therefore, I had to re-orient the Russian version into this present English form<sup>1</sup>.

Only in 1934 did the question of nomadic feudalism emerge in Soviet anthropology. From the 1920s to the early 1930s, there existed a pluralism of approaches to the stage classification of nomadism: some researchers spoke in favour of the primitive-tribal nature of nomadic societies while others dwelled on their state-like characteristics. There have been also intermediate points of view. Since the mid-1930s, with Stalin's dictatorship firmly established when mass repression and genocide against the Soviet people was underway, the theory of nomadic feudalism became the prevailing perspective in historical literature. However, there were also revisionists within the camp of the orthodox monists who made their analyses of nomadic feudalism. And if, according to the official point of view, the basis of nomadic feudalism was the ownership of land, then in the opinion of the revisionists such functions were attributed to cattle ownership. These disagreements led to several heated discussions. The most lively of them took place between 1953 and 1955. After the 20th congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (1956), when only a small step was made towards democratic transformations in the country, the ideological pressure of communist despotism toward the social sciences was relaxed a bit. However, this relaxation was sufficient enough to encourage

many researchers to seek new approaches and propose non-traditional solutions of scientific problems. At the same time, the points-of-view appeared which insisted on a non-feudal nature of nomadic societies: concepts about pre-feudal and early-class nature of nomadic societies, and a perspective about the existence of the Asiatic Mode of Production (AMP) among the nomads and also a specific nomadic form of evolution (for details on the discussion see Kogan 1980; Halil 1983; Khazanov 1975, 1984; Markov 1976; Kradin 1992; Masanov 1995).

During the ten post-Soviet years, this discussion has largely continued in the literature in the Russian language. In this discussion, all the above viewpoints have figured to some extent or another. However, attempts to substantiate a specific mode of developing the societies of pastoral nomads have attracted the greatest attention. The subject of discussion has been concentrated on the question of what is the base for nomadism's specificity, (1) the internal nature of the stock-breeding being the base of the so-called nomadic mode of production or, (2) the peculiarities of the external modes of adaptation of nomads to the agricultural world-empires. Simultaneously, under the conditions of overcoming of the formational monism, attempts have been undertaken to consider nomadism from the perspective of an evolutionary civilisation approach, which would substantiate the existence of a specific nomadic civilisation in history (cf. Kradin 2002).

Gellner has turned his attention to the problem of nomadic feudalism twice: first in the foreword to the book, *Nomads and the Outside World*, by Anatoly Khazanov and then, more fully in this collection of essays with the title, *State and Society in Soviet Thought*, where he devoted a special chapter to the discussion of the social-economic relations among the nomads (Gellner 1984: ix-xxv, 1988: 92–114).

Gellner does justice to Soviet nomadology. As Russian history has been always related to the steppe world, – he writes, – the Russian and Soviet scientists should be successful in research of nomads. Therefore, to a degree the problem development has been dictated by its urgency for the Soviets. Gellner touches on two aspects of the problem considered in the chapter: a theoretical one concerning the heuristic possibilities of the Marxist method and a

properly historiographical one providing assessment of either authors or of their works.

As to the theoretical aspect, Gellner notes that nomadism is for Marxism the same fundamental problem as is the AMP. Neither nomads nor the East (the Orient) fit into the common evolution of humanity from the primitive stage to Communism. The problem arises from the impossibility of interpreting the superficially motionless and cyclically evolving nomads within the framework of progressivist (and I would add, Eurocentrist) theories of the human history which also include Marxism.

Another serious problem is in that it is difficult to represent the socio-political organisation of nomads in terms of the Marxist conceptual system. How can we explain from the Marxist point of view such a paradoxical fact that among the nomads private property in means of production (i.e. livestock) has appeared practically in parallel with the formation of nomadism as an economic-cultural type far in advance of private property in land among the agriculturists whereas, as their socio-economic level is concerned, the nomads are less developed than sedentary people? How accurate is it to assign the nomadic pastoralists to the primitive formation when there has existed private ownership of livestock and of persons allowing to accumulate it in large quantities? Conversely, how can one consider nomads to be primitive even if they had no state bureaucratic apparatus?

Finally, how should nomadism be interpreted within the framework of one of the basic methodological principles of the historical materialism – the law of correspondence between base and superstructure? According to Marxist theory, changes in the base lead inevitably to the respective transformation in the superstructure (in the form of revolutions). The economic basis of nomadism – pastoral cattle-breeding – has remained actually unchanged over the course of many centuries. Ancient, mediaeval and even more recent nomads have had a similar herd composition strictly determined by the ecological conditions of habitat, primitive and easily transportable tin ware and analogous household technology. However, pastoral ‘superstructure’ did not demonstrate the permanency of base. The nomads sometimes created tribal alliances of separate conglomerates of tribes and kindred clans, but also formed the

gigantic nomadic empires under the dominion of mighty leaders and then have again disbanded into separate khanates, tribes and even smaller groups.

Because nomadism has dropped out the Marxist dialectics of history, – summarises Ernest Gellner, – Soviet theorists have created a specific theory of nomadic feudalism. Gellner rightly assigns the credit of the founders of the theory of nomadic feudalism to Boris Vladimirtsov (1934) and Sergey Tolstov (1934). The book *On the Question of the Turkish-Mongolian Feudalism* by professor Nikolay Kozmin, who was killed by firing squad in Irkutsk in 1939, remained unknown to Gellner (Kozmin 1934). Gellner writes with respect of Vladimirtsov as a great orientalist and does not count him among the sycophants of the orthodox Marxism.

Gellner rightly notes that most of data interpreted by Vladimirtsov as feudal concern the period of the empire and brings about the quite natural question: how right is it to use the feudal paradigm with respect to the non-imperial nomadic societies? The fact is that Vladimirtsov, as opposed to his imitators, does not practically cite the classics of Marxism, and has not escaped Gellner's attention. True, Gellner is here somewhat inconsistent. By intuition, Gellner treats Vladimirtsov sympathetically. Still he assigns him among the founders of the theory of nomadic feudalism. In fact, Vladimirtsov's direct contribution to the creation of a really Marxist theory of nomadic feudalism was grossly overestimated. Vladimirtsov was a great orientalist of the linguistic orientation. It is not likely that he could know Marxism thoroughly.

To do this it was necessary not to perfection knowledge of many dialects of the Mongolian language but to study Marx's *Das Kapital* and *Der Ursprung* by Engels. All that is Marxist in the *Social System of the Mongols* is the inclusion of Engels' book in the reference section and an attempt of Vladimirtsov to justify, using the actual data, the presence of a number of feudal institutions in the Mongolian society during the period of the empire. In this case, it is interesting that Vladimirtsov perceives feudalism as a juridical system. In a number of important positions, he cites Pavlov-Silvansky, the well-known Russian historian of the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. But nowhere does Vladimirtsov writes of feudalism as a specific mode of production that comes after a slave-

owning mode.

Why exactly has Vladimirtsov and no one else been considered to be the founder of the theory of nomadic feudalism? I think that the answer to this question can be found by tracing some parallels in the Soviet assessment of the work of the archaeologist Childe and the orientalist Vladimirtsov. Leo Klejn showed in his book *The Phenomenon of Soviet Archaeology* (1993) that, in Childe's lifetime, attitudes towards him were quite watchful, whereas posthumously, his contribution to the development of Marxist archaeology was canonised.

It was a common practice in the Soviet Union with respect to the foreign leftist intellectuals. As long as he lives be on the guard: goodness knows what trick was played by him and your warm attestation can very seriously harm you (in the Soviet Union political accusations had always retrospective effect and contagiousity). And a dead Marxist is a good Marxist: his views will always remain Marxist forever (Klejn 1993: 116).

It is possible that similarly this happened with *Le régime social des Mongols*. The author was a scholar of authority who died suddenly three years before the book appeared. After this, it could be quite painless to attribute any ideas to him. For some scientists, he became an icon and his contribution to the Mongolian mediaeval studies was canonised for a half of century. For others, Vladimirtsov proved to be a convenient target for criticism. Most of critical arrows of the main opponents of the theory of nomadic feudalism – Tolybekov and Markov – were shot not in the direction of Zlatkin and Potapov. They have pointed towards *Le régime social des Mongols* although they have criticised Stalin's understanding of feudalism and not Vladimirtsov's. The attempt by Fedorov-Davydov (1976) to show that there is little in common between Vladimirtsov's understanding of feudal property and that of most Soviet specialists on feudalism has not met with success.

Unlike Vladimirtsov, Tolstov does not evoke any sympathy in Gellner. Tolstov is well-known as a violent introducer of Stalin's straightforward theses. Gellner notes a predominance in Tolstov's works of canon citations from the works of the classics of Marxism over particular historical data. However, this is not the reason for his antipathy. The basis of Gellner's negative opinion was the result

of the pressing attempts of Tolstov to justify the relationship of the Marxist theory of class struggle with a necessity to apply it in action. By giving proof of the class, feudal character of nomadic societies, Tolstov provides supportive data to the proposition of a presence in contemporary pastoral societies of the class of kulaks-bloodsuckers, the intensification of class struggle (according to Stalin's thesis) and, therefore, the necessity of the scientific substantiation of an unleashing of the class genocide against nomads of Central Asia, Siberia and Kazakhstan.

Furthermore, E. Gellner quite adequately interprets the course of further discussion on nomadic feudalism. He shows how a thesis of the feudal nature of nomadic societies has gradually penetrated throughout the Soviet historical science and believes, completely correctly, that a new splash of discussion has been stimulated by the famous Tashkent session in 1954. Gellner identifies Zimanov, Potapov and Tolybekov as the key figures in the discussion. Gellner's sympathies in his analysis of the discussion are evident (unfortunately, one more supporter of Tolybekov, the Kazakh ethnologist Shakhmatov, was dropped from Gellner's field of vision). Shakhmatov was clearly on Tolybekov's side and explained with sympathy his position when Tolybekov was subjected to severe criticism by dogmatists. In Gellner's opinion, Tolybekov's criticism of the semi-official theory of nomadic feudalism is of importance. To the contrary, the viewpoint of Potapov and his supporters (all except Shakhmatov) defending the official scheme is unsympathetic to Gellner. He demonstrates the tentativeness and contradictory character of Potapov's constructions. 'His use of argument from survivals is strange', states the British anthropologist in summarising his analysis.

Gellner properly exposes the weak aspects of Tolybekov's position which, on the one hand, criticises the theory of nomadic feudalism but, on the other hand, remains within the framework of feudalism-oriented (patriarchal-feudal) interpretation of the history of the pastoral nomads. Alas, there were objective reasons for this. After a defeat of the first Soviet discussion on the Asiatic mode, the concept of the historical process in the national historical science could only develop within the framework of a unilineal formation paradigm. It is possible that many researchers being edu-

cated in the Soviet Union at the time (for example, Tolybekov was born in 1907) did not suspect that multidimensional interpretations of world history could occur. Within the framework of the Soviet Marxism, during Stalin's era, the engine of world history could move only along one line: if not forward then 'one step forward, one step back'.

Nomads have not fitted into the dialectics of world history. On their historical rails, the red signal has been invariably found. That is the reason why – as Gellner believes – in order to introduce nomads into the course of the historical process, Tolybekov defended the progressiveness of inclusion of the Kazakhs into Tsarist Russia (Gellner 1988: 114). Here, Gellner unites Tolybekov's viewpoint with the position of Sartre who bravely deleted all so-called 'pre-historical' peoples from world history, assigning for them merely an exotic position in the historical past within the framework of more developed, 'historical', societies. Sartre's position has been sharply and justly criticised by Lévi-Strauss. Gellner was on Lévi-Strauss' side. However, it should be said in defense of Tolybekov that he has not remained a pure 'unilinealist'. Tolybekov attempts to lay a parallel track alongside the main one of world history. He provides a strong political-economic background to his viewpoint trying to prove that land is only a subject of labour whereas means of production is the animals pastured by them. In this regard, Tolybekov can be considered as one of those researchers in the USSR who attempted to restore within Soviet Marxism the multi-lineal interpretations of the historical process.

After Tolybekov, Markov raised the banner of struggle against nomadic feudalism. His concept of the specific 'nomadic mode of production' formulated in 1967 in his Doctor of Science thesis was quite multilineal and dangerous for the dogmatic five-member scheme. Unfortunately, Gellner apparently was not familiar with this hypothesis. He only cites the published book by Markov, *Nomads of Asia*, based on the thesis but in which the courageous idea of the nomadic mode of production was already replaced by the concept of pre-class character of nomadic societies.

Also the polemic of Markov with Zlatkin, Lashuk and Fedorov-Davydov has escaped Gellner's attention. For some reason, the British anthropologist does not include the works of these Soviet

scholars; not even those which were published in the central Moscow scientific journals.

Nevertheless, despite these gaps, Gellner correctly relates the subsequent progress of Soviet nomadology to the writings of Markov and Khazanov. Gellner notes that, unlike the works by Tolybekov which operate only with data on history of the Kazakhs, Markov and Khazanov argue their positions using representative historical information. Gellner assesses the contributions of both authors largely in the light of their consistent criticism of the theory of nomadic feudalism; in this connection, he writes that both Markov and Khazanov came independently to the same conclusions (Gellner 1988: 109–112).

In many respects, one can agree with the conclusions of Gellner. Markov himself has emphasised the anti-feudal orientation of his investigations (1976, 1998). Nearly all chapters in Markov's book are a critical review of well-known (and interpreted as feudal) facts from principally different angles of vision. 'The priority of the well-reasoned dethronement of this theory is due to just him', believes Kalinovskaia (1996: 154). Khazanov (1981: 173, note 3) emphasises, though not so directly, his negative attitude vis-à-vis the feudal interpretation of nomadic societies. One can also trace a certain similarity in the characterisation by both authors of nomadic economy, social structure and political organisation. It is also true that, eventually, both authors to a degree reach Ibn-Khaldun's concept of the cyclical evolution of pastoral societies (Gellner 1988: 113). But at the same time, as far as their conclusions are concerned, Markov and Khazanov disagree with each other. If, from Markov's viewpoint, the nomads could not get over the barrier of class formation (at different times, he called them by different terms – pre-feudal, pre-class or nomadic mode of production, all involved in the primary formation) then for Khazanov, the nomads, during the course of independent evolution, could reach a level of the early state. And this, one should agree, is a principal difference.

Completing his review of Soviet nomadology, Gellner turns to the second volume of *History of Primitive Society*. Not a Marxist himself, Gellner nevertheless sympathetically cites Shnirelman's conclusions that nomadic pastoralism, though being one of the

forms of productive economy, ‘does not allow society to rise above the level of pre-class or, in rare cases, early class relations’ (Shnirelman in Bromley 1986: 244) and even he finds similar thoughts in the works of Childe. The fact that this idea was presented in an official academic volume edited by Academician Bromley and issued by the central scientific publishing house (with a large number of copies printed) serves, in the opinion of the British anthropologist, as an index of change in Soviet nomadology. Gellner makes a slightly optimistic conclusion with respect to the future of Soviet anthropology: ‘The continuing steady stream of “feudal” interpretations... seems to be swinging in favour of the rival view’ (Gellner 1988: 113).

Alas, if this indeed was the case! Gellner overlooks that the fundamental work on primitive societies cited by him did not reflect views of the majority of researchers. The volume has been prepared by one of the most striking research teams of the 1970–1980s, working in the department of history of primitive society (headed by Avram Pershits) of the then Institute of Ethnography of the USSR Academy of Sciences. I think that if Ernest Gellner would have acquainted himself with the works of a wider circle of nomadologists he would not have been so optimistic. Unfortunately, for many historians and ethnologists in the post-Soviet countries Marxism retains its influence. For about 10 years, I have taught different courses at universities and could see that it was not necessary to cite Marx in order to be a Marxist. The references to works of Marx, Engels and Lenin disappeared. However the same people have remained as chairs and heads of research committees.

Another large group of researchers has simply replaced the term ‘formation’ with the term ‘civilisation’. If earlier they attempted to prove their right for a place in world history by proof of the existence of feudalism among their ancestors, then now they do it through declaring themselves partisans of civilisation. In this case, many people perceive civilisation as a stage in world history (Morgan, Engels) rather than as a specific original cultural system (in the sense of Spengler or Toynbee).

Gellner has valued positively those Soviet anthropologists who have disclaimed nomadic feudalism. At the same time, the specific traits of pastoral nomadic societies cannot be explained on the ba-

sis of mere logic of the internal development of nomads. These ideas go back to the famous book *Inner Asian Frontiers of China* by Owen Lattimore (1940) in which he showed that the specificity of nomadic society cannot be correctly understood without an appeal to the cultural ecology and relations of nomadic pastoralists with their sedentary agrarian neighbours. In more recent times, at first Anatoly Khazanov (1984) and then Thomas Barfield (1981, 1992, 2000) have focused attention on this problem. Khazanov has conclusively shown that the great nomadic societies (he assigns them to the early state stage) were established because of asymmetry of relations between the nomads and their outer (settled) environment. Barfield, rejecting the diffusive interpretations of borrowing of the state by nomads from farmers, has shown that the degree of the centralisation of the steppe society was directly related to the level of political integration of the sedentary agrarian society. Subsequently, Peter Golden (1992, 2001), using data on sedentary mediaeval nomads of the East European steppe, developed the ideas of the mediacy of the steppe politogenesis with the agrarian world.

For Marxism such ideas were unacceptable because, according to the theory of formations, the state could emerge only due to internal factors such as growth of productive forces and class struggle. From this viewpoint even early ideas of Khazanov advanced in his book on the evolution of the Scythian society (1975) looked quite revisionist. A tradition of referring to the specifics of nomadic societies on the basis of only, or largely, internal development survives in the Russian research on nomadism until today (Kalinovskaia 1996; Kychanov 1997; Markov 1998). Nevertheless, there are also followers of the Lattimore-Khazanov-Barfield line in the Russian literature (Masanov 1991; Kradin 1992, 2002; Furson 1995; Skrynnikova 1997; Vasiutin 1998; Kradin, Korotaev *et al.* 2000; Barfield, Bondarenko, Kradin 2002; Barfield, Bondarenko, Kradin 2003, etc.).

The question remains as to whether Ernest Gellner exerted any influence on Russian nomadology. There was no direct impact, of course. However, I do not doubt that his influence on Russian anthropologists would be stronger if his 1988 book had been translated and published in Russia as it was the case with *Nations and*

*Nationalism*. Gellner's book and the work of Valeriy Tishkov, the main constructivist in Russia, have helped greatly to dethrone Bromley's primordialist-Marxist theory of ethnos. Nevertheless, one should not forget that Gellner did much to facilitate the publication of Khazanov's *Nomads and the Outside World*. For a long time Khazanov's name has been influential in the West and the USSR. His ideas were internalised by the nomadologists of my generation. From this perspective Ernest Gellner played an important role in world studies of nomads and also in the emergence of a multilineal tradition in Russian anthropology of nomadic societies.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> The textual meanings were adjusted by Peter Skalnik and Dawn Hammond corrected the English.

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