
The Social Condition of Knowledge: Gellner and the 'Postmodernist Menace'

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ABSTRACT

*Gellner is known as a defender of rationalism and strong critic of relativism. In his last two books on these issues, **Reason and Culture** and **Postmodernism, Reason and Religion** (both published in 1992) he again attacked modes of reasoning undermining the role of reason in scientific practice. Epistemological debate is simultaneously a statement on the condition of modern society a distinctive feature of which is, among others, the institution of critical scientific inquiry. Without judging his Rationalist Fundamentalism as false or true, I reconsider its relation to postmodern wave in the social sciences and humanities, particularly anthropology. I opt for a kind of 'rationalism relativised' to social context that, according to lessons drawn from philosophy and anthropology in the last decades of the 20th century, saves the idea of critical thinking without evoking metaphysical notions of objective knowledge.*

INTRODUCTION

Ernest Gellner does not need a long introduction. Philosopher, anthropologist, sociologist, one of the most renowned *savants* of our times, he was a kind of contemporary Renaissance man¹. For several decades he has both inspired and stirred academic circles with his unconventional ideas. In anthropology Gellner is mostly recognized for his works on nationalism, emergence of modern mind and state formation, relations of intellectuals and political

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power, Islam and history of ideas. A part of the latter is his voice on the issues of rationality that has been recently neglected in anthropological circles. I think that particularly in this field Gellner contributed to the history of human thought very significantly. In this essay I focus on this issue by making some comments of his last two books addressing the controversy of rationality and relativism, namely: *Reason and Culture: The Historic Role of Rationality and Rationalism* (hereafter *RC*), and *Postmodernism, Reason and Religion* (hereafter *PRR*). Each in a different way, the books are concerned with the debate between rationalism and relativism, the story of rationalism in modern European society, and the transformation from religious to scientific modes of thought and world views.

All these issues are old hat in Gellner's studies, but the question of postmodernism is novel. On the one hand, Gellner comments on the trend of postmodernism as it relates to the social sciences and humanities, particularly in anthropology. On the other hand, however, he treats it merely as a contemporary mutation of relativism. For all who are acquainted with Gellner's writings it can look as if there is *nihil novi sub sole* in both books discussed. In a sense, this is a correct impression. This kind of *déjà vu* is caused partly by recurring themes in Gellner's lifelong work. But the main reason for this impression lies, I think, in the fact that Gellner has been extremely consistent in his philosophical stand throughout his academic career. His opponents will probably claim that he is simply rigid, but his admirers will praise this coherency. For me, at least, reading both texts was a wonderful intellectual journey on a winding and sometimes turbulent river of Reason in modern European culture. In Gellner's books we can trace the sources of the rationalist current, its many tributaries, and various pollutions. *RC* and *PRR* can be seen, as in a structuralist interpretation of mythical stories, as the succeeding metaphorical versions of the metonymic message previously delivered to us by Gellner in his numerous books on these topics. It is now up to the reader to grasp the complexity of Gellner's thought, in which divergent strands of intellectual history are pulled together in a unique form of unconventional association. Like a good storyteller, Gellner entertains us with his specific, suggestive, allusive, and often salty language of narration.

So much for the well-deserved homage. Now, let us see, in broad strokes, what both books are about.

RATIONALISM ACCORDING TO GELLNER

Traces of rational thinking can be found in ancient philosophy and in the theological thought of the Middle Ages. In a sense, 'rationalism looks as if it might be the offspring of monotheism: a single and exclusive deity led us to the notion of a unique and homogenous fount of truth' (*RC*: 57). Nevertheless, the real history of rationalism starts with René Descartes. He anticipated the spirit of the modern European, scientific vision of the world. The driving engine for Descartes' intellectual endeavor was the freeing of reason from 'custom and example'; in other words, the freeing of our concepts from our culture. Tradition constraints thought and obliterates the critical view. In this sense, 'Culture and Reason are anti-theoretical' (*RC*: 2). For Descartes, reasoning would liberate the individual: 'Culture [would] be transcended by the cognitive Robinson Crusoe' (*RC*: 14).

This pure rationalism was criticized by David Hume. However, conventional opinion to the contrary, his empiricism does not have to be seen as an inherent rival of rationalism. For Hume, the universal features of the human mind organize our sensory experience. In this way, he 'fell back on the custom' (*RC*: 21), this time the custom of mind. But the Humean universe is still an orderly one; the question is how we happened to construct it. It was up to Kant to vindicate the active role of man in cognition. The capabilities of our mind form the cornerstone of a rationally cognizable world. Laws exist not in things, but in us.

Descartes, Hume, and Kant provided us with a philosophical blueprint for the modern world. Some of their findings have proven to be still valid. None, however, was able to explain why, despite generic properties universal to the human mind, there are different systems of belief. Their ethnocentric concern was their own European culture. To solve this problem sociology stretched out a helpful hand. Emile Durkheim advised that conceptual compulsion does not reside in the individual mind but is instilled in us by society, largely through ritual. If this were not the case, Hume's asso-

ciationism would lead to cognitive entropy. Confusion is avoided thanks to rituals which impose upon our minds categories present in collective representations. 'Associations are born free, but are everywhere in chains' (*RC*: 34). Ritual forces upon us mental and moral discipline. Thus, 'religion... made us human' (*RC*: 37). In this way European thought has made a full circle: from Descartes who wanted to liberate us from culture to Durkheim who claimed that it is thanks to culture that we think as we do.

Durkheim was unable, however, to account for the fact that some systems of belief are more rational than others. It was Max Weber who provided us with the best available account of the process of rationalization. His analysis of Protestantism and the birth of capitalism describes by what contingencies of history the scientific ethos was born in modern Europe. Durkheimian sacred compulsion has been substituted with Weberian desacralized compulsion, in which the general principles of systematic reasoning prevail. The attitude of respect to selected ideas entrenched by religion is no longer dominant. Instead, only ideas honoring formal qualities, evenhandedly applied to all phenomena are recognized. The roots of this ethos are, paradoxically, in religious pietism, and in this meaning 'there was nothing rational about rationality. ...Reason was born from Unreason' (*RC*: 47). The rational world we live in now 'does not commit us to any... specific set of concepts; it commits us to a sober and symmetrical... treatment of whatever notions we handle' (*RC*: 52).

Reason defined as such has many 'natural' antagonists on Earth. Tradition was already mentioned as one. Any form of authoritarianism cannot sustain rational criticism and the rationalist always acts as social critic. Empiricism runs against Reason only as a contender for the position of ultimate judge of our cognitive statements. Pragmatism, with its piecemeal procedure of trial and error, does not accord with the rationalistic desire for general principles of cognition. Transcendental rationality has had many foes in philosophical tradition: Hegel, Marx, Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, and Freud. All of them found constraints other than Reason to be the primary driving forces of the human condition: History, Will, and the Unconsciousness. Reason also has many maladies. It is, for example, assumed to be a product of Providential Coincidence,

which means that we should be content with what we have at hand because it is harmonious with nature (pragmatists) or most accessible at a given time (Hegel). Rational thinking itself also produced a view that undermines the position of transcendent Reason. Reason cannot justify its unique position. In this way, paradoxically, Reason commits suicide. More mundane forces like Will, Instinct, and so forth, replace Reason. For some thinkers, Reason also seems impotent insofar as its own validation is concerned; it cannot rationalize its own procedures.

In recent times, Reason has been undermined by relativists. The ideas of Kuhn and Wittgenstein decidedly contributed to this *coup d'état*. The notion that we can apprehend reality exclusively via paradigms excludes comparison of different theories on the ground of this reality. The concept of 'language games' leads to the stand that: 'cultural idiosyncrasy becomes King' (*RC*: 119). Reality cannot be explained but only described. Local community is vindicated and again raised to the prominence of being supreme judge for all things. Thus: '*custom and example* are sovereign after all' (*RC*: 123). In this sense, the Wittgensteinian conception 'is one of the most bizarre and extreme forms of irrationalism of our time' (*RC*: 121). Even Chomsky's linguistic theory, commonly regarded as Cartesian in spirit, has irrationalist taints. When one accepts that rules which govern our thought and language are implicit and unintelligible to us, then one is breaking Descartes' principle that we should be able to check our ideas (formal principles of logic included) and decide whether they are sound.

Kuhn and Wittgenstein paved the way for extreme relativism, *ergo* irrationalism. In anthropology, as in many other disciplines, contemporary proponents of relativism christened themselves as 'postmodernists' and became fashionable. The direct intellectual roots of anthropological postmodernism may be sought not only in Geertz's interpretivism, as Gellner asserts, but also, I think, in symbolic interpretations of the so-called Oxford School. However, postmodernism pulled the pendulum to the edge of irrationalism. What main characteristics of these orientations, if any, can be grasped in this murky trend? Briefly, no methodology, no epistemology, no objectivity, no verifiability, and no clarity. Postmodernists are mostly interested in meanings, cross-cultural under-

standing, and the translation of meanings into our own categories. The hunt for meaning, in turn, leads most of them to a conceptual impasse. Because postmodernists are so preoccupied with the distortion of meanings encountered in other cultures, they achieve little more than 'subjectivity and navel-gazing' (*PRR*: 41). Postmodernists 'agonize so much about their inability to know themselves and the Other, at any level of regress, that they no longer need to trouble too much about the Other' (*PRR*: 45). All this leads not merely to cognitive relativism, but to cognitive paralysis.

Now, we can outline the scene. There are three main actors on the stage. First, there is Religious Fundamentalism, of which modern Islam is a conspicuous example. The absolute authority of a god fortifies certain absolute presuppositions, which cannot be put on trial. Second, there is Relativism, which holds that there is no knowledge beyond culture and morality, custom and example. The authority of a particular tradition serves as final judge of the truth of a given claim. Third, there is an Enlightenment Rationalist Fundamentalism, of which Gellner is an advocate. Let us examine the main characteristics of this latter stance.

According to Gellner, Descartes' aspiration that we can totally free ourselves from culture is absurd. Nevertheless, in cognition this is an aspiration which should direct our activity, and which, at least in some sense, is attained. Knowledge acquired in science is independent of the particular cultures in which scientific inquiry takes place. The results of these investigations are checked against reality and measured by the practical effects of their application. In this sense scientific knowledge becomes universal and, willy-nilly, conquers societies which entertain different styles of life. 'Experience, or rather, controlled experimentation, constitutes an effective, socially independent court of appeal for all cognitive claims' (*RC*: 167). The experiments and data acquired are systematized, thanks to the ordered, disciplined, patterned and exact practice, which is called 'rational attitude'. The rationalist procedure entails empiricism; Descartes and Hume are matched. The method itself can be boiled down to the atomization of experience and its reassembly in theories about the world. The routine of atomization applies to every idea, to every theory or statement. In this way culture, also, as Descartes recommended long ago, is put on trial.

Gellnerian rationalism shares with Religious Fundamentalism the 'belief in the existence of a unique truth' (*PRR*: 84). Unlike religious dogmatic ideology, however, it does not make exceptions for any concept. Rationalist empirical method is symmetrically applied to every issue, and the content of each belief should be rationally assessed. The only absolute value is the formal principle of the scrutinization of everything. Rationalist Fundamentalism does not accept the relativistic idea that there can be as many truths and standards of rationality as can be determined by different 'life forms'. However, paradoxically, along with relativism, it does not permit the accessibility of ultimate knowledge. Nevertheless, relativism, and postmodernism as its ephemeral mutation, is a real peril for rational cognition. We should not allow it to prevail because too much is at stake. Postmodernist discernments can be valuable in art and entertainment but not in substantial aspects of our life. 'Serious knowledge is not subject to relativism, but the trappings of our life are' (*PRR*: 95).

This, in brief, is the main thesis of Gellner's works. The synoptic character of my account cannot render the richness of thoughts offered. There are several ideas, which are innovative. One is the exegesis of postmodernist parallels with romanticism on the one hand, and the intellectual threads leading to Marxism and the Frankfurt School of Herbert Marcuse and Theodore Adorno, on the other (*PRR*: 31–36). Another is the interpretation of Wittgenstein as expressed in his earlier and later works: two opposite visions of society existing in Habsburg Austria – respectively, universalistic *Gesellschaft* and parochial *Gemeinschaft* (*CR*: 116–124). Altogether, both books present a brilliant tale for everyone interested in intellectual history, the rationality versus relativism debate, postmodernism, philosophy and anthropology. The above description has been meant to outline some major aspects of Gellner's ideas.

It is now time to voice some polemical glosses. I do it in the name of Gellner's own rationalist recommendation that every belief should be evenly criticized.

DISENCHANTMENT OF THE SCIENTIFIC WORLDVIEW

It is obvious that Ernest Gellner, with his Fundamentalist Rationalism, is one of the scholars who, in Richard Rorty's words,

have remained faithful to the Enlightenment and have continued to identify themselves with the cause of science. They see the old struggle between science and religion, reason and unreason, as still going on, having now taken the form of a struggle between reason and all those forces within cultures which think of truth as made rather than found (1989: 3).

The moment one accepts the view that science is just our next construction of the world, the whole Gellnerian argument about scientific objectivity falls down. The problem is not, however, that simple, and I think not only the question of relativism is involved.

It would definitely be an oversimplification to say that Gellner does perceive a difficulty or, to be more precise, impossibility, in freeing ourselves from culture. As indicated above, he stresses it many times. 'Perhaps there can be no culture-free cognition' (*CR*: 19). 'We cannot step outside our skins, or outside our social world' (*CR*: 52). In Quine's words, Cosmic Exile is really impossible. Cognitively, we are not like Robinson Crusoe.

But according to Gellner, all this does not mean that we are condemned to relativism. Mysterious contingencies of events have engendered a kind of cognition that is specific and not locally bound. 'Custom was not transcended: *but a new kind of custom altogether was initiated*' (*CR*: 160). And this is 'excellent custom', different from all previous customs. The idea of the Big Ditch (cf. Gellner 1974), of essential discontinuity or qualitative differences, between modern European and other cultures, reverberates again. Rational custom demands symmetrical application of its rational method and criteria to every phenomena and theory. The universal, not provincially bound procedure, guarantees that 'there *is* external, objective, culture transcending knowledge: there *is* indeed "knowledge beyond culture"'. Although any system is articulated in some idiom, 'there are idioms capable of formulating questions in a way such that answers are no longer dictated by the internal characteristic of the idiom carrying it but, on the contrary, by an independent reality' (*PRR*: 75).

In short, Gellner believes that the objective world can be objectively revealed. This revelation is not given once and forever, as in religion, and the investigation will never be completed, but it is an

ongoing, systematic process in which the objective methods of science pursue objective nature. Advocates of a more modest view of science would disagree. Those first aspects of Gellnerian rationalism that can be questioned are encapsulated in the notions of transcendentalism, objectivism and foundationalism.

Let us start with a citation from Rorty: 'The world is out there, but descriptions of the world are not' (1989: 5). In other words, there is nothing wrong with the view that the world exists independently of us and our descriptions of it. But 'truth cannot be out there – cannot exist independently of the human mind...' (*ibid.*). Our statements about the world belong to a different order from the world itself. There is no reason, not to mention no proof, for believing that there exists an isomorphism between our conceptualizations and the 'real state of affairs'; that there is a naturally justified correspondence between our language and the world 'out there'. The idea of a unique method, which approximates truth is not necessary for scientific practice. We can continue scientific practice without metaphysical convictions that our findings and concepts replicate nature. It is enough to assume that science serves some of our purposes in the best way we presently have at hand. In this sense, it is not necessary to speculate whether our premises grasp the essence of reality or not. Note that nothing that would undermine the scientific practice or method itself, whether understood in the Gellnerian way or not, can be found in this argument.

Maybe the recognition of extrinsic truth, and necessary or intrinsic truth, will also help to elucidate the point. On the one hand, the extrinsic truth refers to some empirically defined ubiquitous phenomena. There is no sense in undermining such facts as procreation, political relations, the social and physical world around us, although it is worth keeping in mind that a specific perception of them is always culturally defined. On the other hand, the concept of intrinsic truth says that phenomena, not only material reality, have some characteristics inherent in their nature. Gellner claims that in science we are on the track where extrinsic truth coincides with intrinsic, or necessary truth. I doubt that this is rationally verifiable.

I have to admit that a pragmatic standpoint looks to me more, if I may use the word, reasonable. There are several (again the word) reasons for this. The argument of isomorphism of our concepts and the external world is truly metaphysical. How can one testify that a given theory approximates reality in the best way? Despite Gellner's tremendous and lucid efforts, I remain skeptical. Gellner writes of scientific cognition that the 'merit of this unique style is pragmatically vindicated by the dramatic, and literally often devastating, superiority of technology based on it' (*CR*: 148). From our perceptions of the world around us this appears to be so. But shall we, as I wrote elsewhere (Buchowski 1993: 94), use this sociological or anthropological argument in giving answers to epistemological or even ontological questions? I don't think so. The fact that most societies accept, under the threat of extinction, certain prescriptions resulting from a particular worldview proves nothing in the sphere of ontology. Is it not enough to say that science serves our practical needs best? Do we, as well, have to jump to the conclusion that it is the only objective way? I believe we do not.

I take it that Gellner has in mind the technological efficacy of a practical application of science, which supposedly makes science most objective. But, for example, in the Middle Ages most Europeans had to submit to Christianity under similar threat, or be exterminated with fire and the sword. Does this mean that Christianity rendered the world in a more objective way than either Islam or any pagan belief system? I do not believe that the differences in armament were sufficient to give a decisive advantage to any particular worldview. Of course, Gellner's answer would be that it was not only a matter of the power of technology used to 'convince' a given society of a new religion, a technology somehow extracted from a web of social relations, but also such issues as economic system, social structure, political situation, and so forth, that contributed to the conversion. This actually is the point in question. There is no direct relation between the widespread acceptance of a given view and its objective character as understood by rationalists. The fact that most people think and behave in a particular way does not mean that this way is in better accord with the universal truth and objective reality.

In sum, I see a kind of contradiction in holding the views that, on the one hand, it is external reality which is the ultimate judge of rationalists' scientific statements, and, on the other hand, the commonality of the acceptance of certain views serves as proof of their accord with reality. It follows, after all, that it is societies (communities) that finally judge a presumed objectivity.

Gellner's point that there is some type of cognition beyond culture appears to be, at least partly, internally inconsistent. On the one hand, he admits that this Cartesian dream is unattainable. I totally agree. On the other hand, he tells us that this type of cognition transcends the limits of culture so that it is transcultural. I believe I comprehend the point: Science is no longer bound to any local beliefs; it is supposedly independent of any particular society and its rituals. Of this meaning, I can nod approvingly, although with some hesitation. The crucial issue here is probably the definition of culture. If one understands it in a traditional, ethnographic sense that it is somehow territorially localized, then, following Gellner, one can say that scientific practice does not comprise a culture in this classical denotation of the word. But, as Gellner allows, scientific cognition is a code of conduct, the fruits of which are 'recorded in an idiom which was tidy and symmetrical.., in a shared, standardized, and precise currency' (*RC*: 169). My question is: Do not these codes and idioms, accepted habits of scientific method and theory testing, form a kind of culture? Of course this culture is not local, but rock-and-roll is also widespread. Gellner would agree with the statement about music, but not about science. The understanding and appreciation of music depends on our taste and cultural situation. The customs and beliefs of science, however, are not only universal extrinsically, but also objective, that is, universal intrinsically; they force researchers to check their beliefs against reality and not local community beliefs. But still, are not these methods, ways of thinking, and procedures of accepting certain views culturally established and accepted? After all, it was contingent upon this cultural acceptance that the particular rationalistic and empiricist culture was born. Do not scholars worldwide form an 'interpretive community', as Stanley Fish aptly phrases it, respecting the norms and directives of their own scientific culture? The authority of reality is summoned as independent of local cul-

tures. However, this view of reality is socially constructed too. Again, what kind of warranty do we have that this is an objective view, and does not refer to some metaphysical notions or dubious sociological validation?

Part of the notion of a unique truth is a conviction that it can be discovered with a unique method. 'Only a *procedure*, but not substantive ideas, is absolutized' (*PRR*: 84). Scientific inquiry is assumed to yield a 'genuine knowledge' (*CR*: 54). Let us start from the point that this argument is built in a classical formula, according to which there are no exceptions, except... In this case, everything can be objectionable but the method. So, after all, there *is* an unquestionable belief not submitted to rational criticism; not the only one, by the way, in Gellner's system. The belief in a 'unique truth' has a similar status. As Kolakowski (1989) demonstrates, some kind of mythical, unquestioned *Grundlage* is present in every system. Michael Polanyi puts forward a similar idea when he states that ascribing truth to any methodology is a normative, non-rational act. 'The attribution of truth to any particular stable alternative is a fiduciary act which cannot be analysed in non-committal terms' (Polanyi 1962: 294). Of course, I cannot anticipate the future, but who knows? Maybe the procedure itself will also be undermined. The exclusion of such a possibility contradicts in a sense Gellner's historicism, and, decidedly criticized by anthropologists, his progressivism. I doubt if something that was born more or less coincidentally in seventeenth-century Europe, as Gellner shows us, could be assumed as an eternal, unquestionable truth. The concept of procedure itself may be treated as substantive as well. Moreover, and probably above all, do we really need to believe that what we gain by means of the scientific method is 'genuine knowledge'? Again, I think we can live without this 'religious' faith.

In sum, then, I am not saying that there is anything wrong with the Gellnerian vision of modern science itself and the place of rationalism in it. The picture we are given, one among many of this kind, is very vivid and lucid. My reservations are concerned with the explicit and unnecessary ontologization of science and its conclusions. I can easily admit that rationalistic aspiration has comprised a very important driving force in modern European society and 'the non-relativistic snake had entered the Garden of Eden,

never to leave it again' (*PRR*: 57). Maybe, in a foreseeable future 'rationalism is our destiny' (*CR*: 159), at least in its stronghold, the domain of cognition. I am ready to say that science is truthful, but hasten to add, according to the norms of cognition accepted by us. This means that I do not share Gellner's religious, pious attitude toward entrenched science itself. I think that we do not need to justify our conduct by grounding scientific statements in, and relating them to, such metaphysical notions as universal objectivity, unique method, and transcendental truth. In this way, I would say, we can *disenchant science* without doing any harm to scientific practice. Thus, we may be witnessing a 'third disenchantment' of the world. From magical unitarism, through religious, and then scientific monotheism, we have arrived at the point in which 'scientific rituals', which satisfy our practical needs, can be performed without a sacral belief that they are somehow solemnly objective and close to the truth. It is enough to hold that science is a useful method serving our desires in some respects, as other practices serve us in the domain of social relations, without metaphysical justification.

POSTMODERNISM, RELATIVISM AND AMERICAN CULTURE

Gellner's severe criticism of postmodernist anthropology is one of the most enjoyable pieces I have read on this topic. In his ebullient style, Gellner offers some insights into the intellectual ancestry of this movement, the logical snares into which it falls, and the 'metatwaddled' rhetorical tricks exercised. He shows us how postmodernists commit cognitive suicide resulting from their 'egocentric predicament' and their focus on the epistemological barriers we face in our interpretations of meaning in other cultures. As Gellner puts it, postmodernists are so 'inebriated with the difficulty of explaining the Other that in the end they don't even try to reach it... The Inaccessibility of the Other becomes a science and mystery on its own' (*PRR*: 56).

I agree with Gellner's judgment that the postmodernists' exaggerated focus on subjectivity and the cognitive limits of anthropological interpretive encounters merely diagnose the malady but

cannot cure it. The topic of the adequacy of the interpretive capacity in anthropology recurs in this discipline quite often. I think that the discussed aspect of postmodernists' writings may be treated as a next wave of these cognitive anxieties in the social sciences. I do not consider simply lamenting on the impasse to be a commendable attitude. I am also skeptical about the viability of hermeneutic methods, because of their dubious verifiability and excessive subjectivity. This facet of postmodernism in anthropology has been already criticized (cf. Sangren 1988; Roth 1989; de Sardan 1992). So far, so good, but I think, Gellner's rendition of postmodernism is not fully accurate.

Two points can be made in connection with the last statement. On the one hand, one may object that Gellner bases his opinion about the whole intellectual movement on, in fact, one book, a collection of articles edited by James Clifford and George Marcus (1986). Some additional references to Geertz, who, after all, does not consider himself postmodernist, are made, but Gellner rightly treats him as an anthropological protagonist of the approach discussed. On the other hand, as Robert Pool (1991) tries to convince us, if one actually applies the usually accepted criteria of postmodernist writings in ethnography, then there are hardly any postmodernist texts. Stephen Tyler puts it blatantly that '*Writing Culture* is not post-modern' (1987: 50). Nevertheless, let us assume that Gellner has a right to consider this attempted manifesto as a representative of postmodernism, though only in anthropology. Postmodernism is difficult to define, so Gellner tries to pinpoint it simply. The cost of simplicity, however, is that the conclusions drawn cannot cover the whole spectrum of ideas². Postmodernism is not only about subjectivism and cognitive paralysis.

First, one should distinguish between the postmodern condition and postmodern epistemology. Gellner fastens his attention on the latter feature. His general philosophical view of the advantages of rationalism, brilliant in itself and supported by arguments accumulated for more than three centuries, is contrasted with the selected writings of a few anthropologists, who represent only one particular point of the entire postmodernist methodology. I think that if the comparison was meant to be fair, then not only Rabinow (several times) and Marcus (once) should have been cited. What about

Foucault, Derrida, Lyotard, Baudrillard, and many others? What may exculpate Gellner in this case is that *PRR*, the book I am now discussing, has been written not as a comprehensible critique of postmodernism itself, but with a quite different aim in mind. Nevertheless, his severe appraisal of the postmodernist malady comprises a vital aspect of his volume.

Postmodernism is treated by Gellner as ‘an ephemeral cultural fashion... and contemporary specimen of relativism’ (*PRR*: 24). The real danger of cognitive relativism is that ‘nihilism does follow from’ it (*PRR*: 55). I am not sure about either of these points. Let us start with the second statement. If one treats relativism as a view in which there are several objective truths (as understood by a rationalist), then of course relativism is doomed to be wrong. But if one accepts that ‘truth’ about the world ‘out there’ is constructed, then I can see nothing nihilistic in it. The awareness that there is no immediate link between human language (concepts) and the world releases us from this metaphysical question. It is enough to hold that our views and solutions are best for us; we work on them within our conceptual system. Rational critique, where choice-making is justified by the norms of our society and secured by institutional frameworks, prevents the modern West from facile nihilism, both in cognition and in social life.

I will give an example. Gellner tells us a parable of Sartre, who, as a leftist French intellectual, denied the existence of *gulags* (Soviet labor camps). Their existence, according to Sartre, was a function of the historically conditioned political interests of the believers. Gellner says that ‘this is simply rubbish. Gulags do or do not exist. The reality is ascertainable independently of the political opinions of the investigator’ (*CR*: 168). The Sartrean view – which was, especially in the European political context, curious – can now be put aside. I am, perhaps, one of the last persons who would deny the existence of *gulags*. The fact that the Soviet regime sent people to labor camps and exploited them to death is beyond doubt. No reasonable person denies the existence of some observable occurrences such as this. More important for us, however, the way in which we define this phenomenon of people working under compulsion in such conditions is conceptually/culturally/socially defined.

My argument runs as follows: of course, people work and die everywhere. The way in which this is done is perceived differently in various cultures. Ancient Egyptian pharaohs, ancient Roman senators, or even eighteenth-century American slave owners did not see anything wrong with this type of treatment and the resulting deaths; the forced labor built the monuments or fortunes of the enforcers. The meanings of slavery, political prisoners, labor camps, human rights, and so on, have been established by their social construction. If Cheops or Ramses had seen gulags, they would not have found anything wrong with them (except, perhaps, the cold climate where most were located). Caesar would not have objected. Jefferson, even though he wrote the Bill of Rights, would probably have been confused that White people were held there. To put this in yet another way, the fact of *gulag* is not denied. However, a great deal of time passed before we began to describe labor camps in terms of condemnation and as a peril to our values. Our perceptions are outgrowths of our historical development and we attach meanings to such phenomena. In contemporary societies this consensus runs so deeply that even Stalin and Pol Pot tried to hide the facts of their brutality. The values and norms constructed by our societies – in this case Western democracies – led to the denunciation of such practices. Nevertheless, this does not signify that our description of the *gulag* renders this phenomenon in an ultimate and an objective way. In short, *gulags* are real but the descriptions of them are contingent upon our concepts. To say that there are some facts ascertained with the help of our categories, even prevailingly and empirically universal, is not equivalent to saying that things are in their nature exactly as we see them.

Furthermore, we do not have to accept other concepts and values as valid for us. It is impossible to emphatically embrace the views of other societies. We cannot, as Gellner states it elsewhere, jump ‘in and out of our socio-historical skin’ (1984: 64). Pirandellism is a dream of hermeneutics. However, we can study and integrate the ideas positively evaluated of other societies into our own system (cf. Rorty 1991: 29-31). We also have the right to denounce practices that we consider inhuman. In this sense, I agree that we are condemned to ethnocentrism, but it does not follow that we are destined to fall into arms of fundamental rationalism as well.

The first point stressed earlier was that postmodernism is a transient fashion. In the sense described by Gellner, it may easily be, although I think subjectivism will continue as one of the trends of contemporary European tradition. However, the so-called postmodern condition of the contemporary Western world is not a fad, but a phenomenon which postmodern philosophy and social science try to conceptualize. Pluralism, the mixture of styles and conventions, self-appreciation of the constructive nature of human thought, all this has led to the search for new modes of description. I would not impeach postmodernists by allowing that only the cheap motivation of '*Sturm und Drang und Tenure*' (PRR: 27) concern them. They may be as fond of their views as others are of their own. The turn to subjectivity expressed in the anthropological volume criticized by Gellner is just an example of these large-scale social events and intellectual movements.

The last issue leads us to Gellner's vision of why relativism is so attractive in America. His argument is that the American spirit, somewhat embodied in the notion of a Middle American worldview, is, in fact, monolithic and was born modern (PRR: 51–3). The average American worldview is not sufficiently permeated with awareness of cultural plurality. This lack of sensibility contrasts with other parts of the world where, as in Levantine ports, 'every street peddler is at home in a number of languages, and is familiar with the idiosyncrasies of a number of cultures' (PRR: 53). Discovery of other cultures is considered a revelation in America. It may be paradoxical that I, a continental European, should defend America, but I wish to voice some possible objections, since the thesis itself does not seem to me to be justified or documented.

Thus, let us voice some counterpoints. Despite many homogenizing attempts one should keep in mind that American society is, after all, built from various nationalities, and the influx of people from all quarters of the world continues. This would be enough to imply that the population at large has been aware of cultural differences. Multiculturalism was not concocted by anthropologists but is studied by them as an actual social phenomenon. The accusation that American society is not fully aware of the multiplicity of cultures is questionable, and this accusation will remain strange to me so long as Gellner does not define the intuitive notion of Middle

American mentality. One could claim that Americans, at least when compared to Europeans, do fairly well in their interethnic and intercultural relations. Part of this success may be because they have been reading Margaret Mead, Melville Herskovits, and Gregory Bateson for years. In this sense, relativism is by no means a novelty for American public, which supposedly breathes it with excitement.

CONCLUSION

Now we can close the circle. It is this multicultural situation – participation in, or witnessing of, a multiplicity of cultures and a unique mixture of meanings, realization of their conventionality and flexibility, perception of the constructive nature of every conceptual scheme, in short a postmodern condition – which can be observed in America in its fullest form, that conditions ‘relativistic’ tendencies. When combined with philosophical theories, these tendencies could lead to views about the nature of scientific cognition contradictory to Rationalist Fundamentalism (or rather, foundationalism). This does not mean, however, that ‘relativism’ has to assume that extreme form described by Gellner. As I have just implied, we do not have to succumb to the absolutism of other cultures, but appreciatively sustain in our own ‘rationalistic’ culture, some features of which Gellner so nicely depicts. But I think that the denial of absolutism should be symmetrically applied. For reasons already given, there is no justification for assuming that our vision is correct. We can hold our views without the metaphysics of scientific objectivism. Other societies may also wish to accept our vision. It is a pity that conversion has occurred too frequently by forceful means.

Philosophical doctrines on the epistemology of one particular domain of modern European culture, namely science, cannot be resolved by cultural studies. Furthermore, neither epistemological nor cultural norms (criteria, standards) can tell us whether, with their help, we make statements that are ontologically accurate. This is why, I believe, it is more rational not to assume such identity and correspondence; there is no real reason for such metaphysical belief. At this point, my notion of rationality partly coincides with Gellner's: Rational views are those which we have accepted after

critical considerations. In other words, those beliefs are rational which we can justify to ourselves, but which we do not have to sanction by referring to any metaphysical entity, be it God or Objective Knowledge.

Gellner's books are fascinating and, as usual, provoke in the reader many considerations. In my polemics I voiced some points occasioned by a more contextual and pragmatic vision of human beliefs. I think that modern European culture and science, so superbly characterized by Gellner, can perpetuate itself without a belief in the uniqueness of our statements on nature. Of course, I cannot be so convinced, as Gellner is for himself, who is right. I have simply attempted to provide some arguments in favor of my view, which for Fundamentalist Rationalists probably poses jeopardy to Reason and Genuine Knowledge.

What I can claim from my desacralized and non-metaphysically anchored standpoint is that Gellner might be either an enchanted scientist or one of the last sober men among us. It seems that either interpretation places him in a felicitous position. The idea of science as a truth-pursuing activity can be treated as an important, positive motive for people who engage in it, even if the idea itself may be illusive and constituting a kind of sacred charter. In this perspective, Gellner acts as a legitimizer of an important part of life of many contemporary people. If it will somehow turn out that Gellner is one of the last of the sober philosophers among us, then the eternal glory of being correct will be his.

NOTES

¹ For a comprehensive tribute to the range and fertility of Gellner's ideas see the book edited by Hall and Jarvie (1992) and entitled *Transition to Modernity: Essays on Power, Wealth and Belief*.

² The postmodernist literature and literature on postmodernism mushroomed in the 1980 and 1990. For general overview on the relation of postmodernism and social sciences see Rosenau 1992. I choose this particular book because of the similarity of its title with Gellner's book on relativism, rationalism and social sciences.

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