
‘A Blobologist in Vodkobuzia’: Ernest Gellner Crossing the Iron Curtain¹

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ABSTRACT

Ernest Gellner was originally a refugee in Britain when in 1946 the Iron Curtain was erected between the East and the West. Thus, he had no illusions about the nature of totalitarian regimes in the Soviet Union and the ‘people’s democracies’. But as an anthropologist and philosopher, he was intrigued by the changes behind the Iron Curtain, especially in the social sciences, which were officially under the spell of the dogmas of Marxism-Leninism. We do not know whether he wanted to find openings in the ‘granite unity’ of scholarship in the Eastern Bloc or just to wonder what kind of brains worked in the institutes and departments there. The article will look at Gellner’s reading of knowledge products of Soviet and Eastern European social science as well as Gellner’s overall views about them.

Keywords: Ernest Gellner, social anthropology, Marxism.

INTRODUCTION

Social anthropology originally evolved from a combination of modern curiosity and the quest for hegemonic perfection in colonial, less developed parts of the world. Ernest Gellner, who became an anthropologist after first being a philosopher and sociologist, chose to study the opponents of Western Judeo-Christian civilisation: Muslims and Communists. The former he studied among the Berbers of the High Atlas (Gellner 1969). He also generalised (Gellner 1980). The object for ‘fieldwork’ in the communist case was the Soviet-type social system and its theoretical underpinning, *i.e.* Marxism. The Soviet Union and its satellite states were, during the most productive phase in the life of

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Gellner, the less known side of the 'Great Contest', often known by its most conspicuous feature, the Iron Curtain. Russia, as a cultural phenomenon, was among the most admired countries which Gellner championed.

Gellner was well aware of the nature of Stalinism. In an allegorical gloss originally written in 1979, he wrote: '...the brutal coup, and subsequently the ideological straitjacket, imposed on that country over a quarter of a century ago by Colonel Shishkebab was not merely a tragedy for the natives of the country, but also sadness for those outside it who love it and its culture' (Gellner 1987: 1). Here, Gellner openly confessed that he loved Russia and its culture. But he clearly declared that if he were invited to visit during the Stalinist 'Trauma': 'No decent man would go.' More than a quarter of a century later, the totalitarian regime softened. 'The old hack appointed by Shishkebab has long since retired, and the Institute is in the hands of his successors, who are not hacks... [I]nside the subject there is a complex and confused struggle between those who would liberalise it and heed scholarly criteria (whatever they may be) and those who drag their feet, or even wish to march in the opposite direction' (Gellner 1987: 2–3). Gellner now considers a new moral problem. The current Director of the Institute of Blobology [=Bromley], a former Shishkebabite, who 'now struggles for liberalisation... invited me over to lecture on some recent developments in Blobology, and to help develop contacts between his Institute and blobologists the world over. Would I go? Of course, I would go. I like going. I fancy myself as rather suitable for this kind of mission' (Gellner 1987: 4). Gellner then imagines his inconspicuous image in Moscow, his 'appaling' language, 'my kind of squashed-dago looks' and especially 'the poor quality of my clothing' (*Ibid.*). The gloss ends with a moral discussion so typical of Gellner. So he went, and crossed the Iron Curtain not once.

It is noteworthy that Gellner happened to cross the Iron Curtain exactly when the Soviet society entered a phase which allowed people to think more freely. In academic circles the historical materialism became the target of discussion. Namely the renewed discussion about the Asiatic mode of production as a special, somewhat aside standing phase in the sequence of the socio-economic formations contributed to relaxation of Marxist dogmatism. In ethnography the debate between the community adherents and the lineage/clan theorists marked relaxation of dogmatism (*cf.* Skalník 1981). The volume *Problems of the*

History of Pre-capitalist Societies (Danilova 1968) was a watershed. Even if only one of the several planned volumes appeared, the one which did appear was liberating and Gellner noticed it at once.

WHO WAS GELLNER?

Ernest (Ernst, Arnošt) Gellner (1925–1995) grew up in Prague, where he also died. In between was the life of a brilliant intellectual; arguably he was the most influential social scientist of the second half of the twentieth century. He first became an 'enfant terrible' by his critique of linguistic philosophy, but throughout his career he also showed his talent by the examination of psychoanalysis, populism, kinship and Islam. His fieldwork among the Moroccan Berbers (Gellner 1969) made him a social anthropologist. His methodical reviews in *The Times Literary Supplement* were often witty reading for intellectuals outside the field of anthropology. Gellner's critical view of Marxism and Soviet-type communism led him to develop a systematic interest in Soviet and Eastern European affairs, primarily anthropological. His compassionate writing produced a long series of books, monographs, and collections, which will remain a key to his great mind and a reference for generations of his successors. Perhaps unwittingly, his most impressive works pertained to nationalism. His most read book was *Nations and Nationalism* (1983), translated into dozens of languages. Even though he spent most of his active time employed by the London School of Economics and Political Science, Gellner's career reached its apogee as William Wyse Professor of Social Anthropology at the University of Cambridge. Finally, upon his retirement, he accepted the directorship of the Centre for the Study of Nationalism at the Central European University's Prague branch. Recently, a representative collection of essays entitled *Ernest Gellner's Legacy and Social Theory Today* (Skalník 2022) evaluated Gellner's comprehensive contribution to knowledge. His younger Cambridge colleague Chris Hann continues to stress Gellner's continuing importance (Hann 2025a, 2025b).

HIS FIRST TRIP TO THE USSR

Gellner was not only a blobologist (social anthropologist). He was a philosopher and sociologist who never forgot his native country. Starting in 1958, he published on Czechoslovakia and increasingly also on the Soviet Union and its 'ethnography'. He attended the 7th International Congress of Anthropological and Ethnological Sciences, held in

Moscow and Leningrad in the summer of 1964. There is correspondence between him and Dr G. F. Debetz of the Institute of Ethnography of the USSR Academy of Sciences, who served as the Secretary General of the congress. Gellner first wrote to Professor Melvil asking him to provide information about the congress. There, he expressed his quest to 'satisfy my long-standing desire to visit the Soviet Union' (Gellner to Melvil, January 2, 1964). Debetz sent the registration forms to Gellner, who returned them completed on 28 January. On February 27, Debetz confirms the receipt of the abstract of Gellner's presentation at the congress. He informs Gellner that the abstract will be reproduced in the book of abstracts that will be distributed prior to the congress. In March, Gellner wrote to Debetz inquiring about excursions to 'ethnographically interesting parts of the Soviet Union', and mentions the publication of the Russian translation of his book *Words and Things* (Slova i veshchi, Moscow 1962). 'Will it be possible (and if so, how) for me to collect the author's fees, in order to use them for further travel in the Soviet Union?' (Gellner to Debetz, 10 March 1964). No reply from Debetz to this inquiry was found in the correspondence.²

Although Gellner apparently was in Moscow and presented his paper 'Political and Religious Organisation of the Berbers of the Central High Atlas', we do not know whether he collected his royalties for *Words and Things* and could visit other places in the Soviet Union (Gellner 1964). Most likely not.

After the ICAES in Moscow, Gellner continued correspondence with the Institute of Ethnography. On 5th November 1965, Gellner wrote identical letters to both S. P. Tolstov (still the Stalinist director of the Institute of Ethnography) and D. A. Olderogge, inviting them to participate in a special working group on sociology and social anthropology to gather under his baton during the next congress of the International Sociology Association in Evian, France, in 1966 (Gellner 1967). No replies to these letters were found, and there were no Soviet delegates participating in Gellner's panel on sociology and social anthropology. There were, however, Soviet delegates in Evian who represented Marxist philosophy rather than sociology. Gellner nevertheless continued to mediate between Western and Eastern anthropology. Namely, it should be noted that Gellner was instrumental in initiating the Wenner-Gren-sponsored conference 'Soviet and Western Anthropology', which was held at Burg Wartenstein, Austria, in 1976 (Gellner

1980). This conference was attended by the new director of the Soviet institute, Yulian Bromley, accompanied by eight Soviet colleagues.

HIS WINTER IN MOSCOW AND 'THE SOVIET AND THE SAVAGE'

In the meantime, Gellner followed with interest and sympathy the tragic outcome of the Prague Spring (Gellner 1971a, 1971b, 1972). But somewhat paradoxically, the Soviet military invasion and occupation of Czechoslovakia was followed by a *détente* between the East and the West, and his interest in Soviet *etnografiia* could continue with increasing intensity. In winter 1972, he was able to spend time in Moscow thanks to the 'scheme operated by the British Academy and the Soviet Academy of Sciences'. The first 'fieldwork' was difficult. 'The six weeks I spent in the Soviet Union, when I began to work on this topic systematically, must have been some of the loneliest of my life' (Gellner 1988: viii–ix). The result was his pathbreaking essay 'The Soviet and the Savage'. It first appeared in the *Times Literary Supplement* in 1974 and subsequently was reprinted in *Current Anthropology* with CA comments (Gellner 1975, 1988a). Rereading this text fifty years later, I cannot help admiring Gellner's wit and penetrating power of analysis. After mere six weeks in Moscow, he grasped the essence of the tension between the scholars who, like their western counterparts, developed theory from field data, and those researchers who continued to fit the same data into the Procrustean bed of Marxist dogmatism. He referred to L. V. Danilova, a historian of the Middle Ages, whose introduction to the compendium *Problems of the History of Pre-Capitalist Societies* (also known as PIDO) signaled rethinking of Marxist historical materialism. Gellner sensed here 'brilliant form the state of play in Soviet social anthropology' (Gellner 1988a: 1). Indeed, the more than 600 pages volume contained a number of long essays by authors such as Nikolay Butinov, Yuri Semenov, Vladimir Kabo, Vladimir M. Bakhta, Yuri Maretin, Mikhail Vitkin, Leonid Vasiliev, Leonid Sedov, L. L. Viktorova, and A. I. Neusykhin. A half were 'ethnographers' arguing about the primacy of kinship or community in different parts of the world (*cf.* Skalník 1981, 1992); the other half were historians or theorists interested in the transition from primitive to higher stages of society, including the emergence of the state. What united Danilova's introduction with the following essays was a new presentation of data, while maintaining the discipline of quoting Marx and

Engels. Gellner was fascinated by the tension between the two. He also regretted that the following second volume in the series, *Law of History and Concrete Forms of World-historical Process*, which had already been prepared for publication, was never published. (Actually, at least another two volumes were envisaged, but were due to opposition by champions of the five-stage scheme of history, suspended and the methodological sector disbanded).

Danilova was not among those Soviet commentators on Gellner's article. But according to the very recent study by Sergei Alymov, she prepared a comment rejecting Gellner's claim that she doubted the primacy of economics and the mode of production (Alymov 2024). She corresponded with the journal's editor, but her comment was not published in *Current Anthropology*. Alymov found it in her archive. Other Soviet commentators were quite hostile to Gellner's article. For example, Olga Akhmanova was wondering how 'a piece of journalism' could be submitted to a treatment by a scientific journal, and what the 'meaninglessly intriguing' text was really about. She asked, 'Where is Lenin?' who wanted Marxism to serve as a guide to action and rejected it as a dogma (Gellner 1975: 601–602). Bromley, in his comment, commended Gellner for defining Soviet ethnography not as the study of primitive society but still of the 'precapitalist social structures' which contradicts to the study of contemporary processes by Soviet ethnographers. That leads Bromley to the propagation of his own idea of 'ethnoses, or peoples' and of ethnic processes as the primary objects of research for Soviet ethnography.

Pershitz, another Soviet ethnographic theorist of the time, believes that 'Gellner... on the whole, takes a favourable view of the segmentation of history into socioeconomic structures or stages' but considers primitive society a 'weak point' of this segmentation. Pershitz concludes that he disagrees with Gellner's view that 'the principles of historicism and recognition of the general and the specific in the development of mankind do not apply to primitive society as fully as to the societies which followed it' (*Idem*: 609). Petrova-Averkieva, who in her early years had a chance to study with Boas, contends that Gellner's article 'may be considered an earnest attempt on the part of a Western scholar to evaluate the state of historical-philosophical problems in Soviet ethnography objectively.' She concluded her comment by saying that 'Gellner's reflections in this article are characteristic of him as a scientist who deeply feels the theoretical crisis in the present-

day social anthropology of the West and unintentionally recognises the advantage of Marxist theory of the study of the history of human society' (*Idem*: 610–611).

Sadomskaya, writing at Amherst, MA, says in her comment that 'Gellner means well and has tried to be objective in his paper, but he has passed off as reality what is in fact wishful thinking.' However, a comparison between the British and Soviet situations is not possible. She believes that, to Soviet scholars, Marxism was like a language and a climate. Malinowski is highly regarded by them as an excellent ethnographer, but 'incapable of understanding many things because of his disregard for Marxism.' Evolutionist methodology differs substantially from the 'Marxist-Leninist theory of progress through leaps and revolution. Evolutionism is heresy.' Also, Gellner is wrong in supposing that Soviet ethnographers are primarily engaged in the study of primitive societies. Instead, contemporary ethnography, both in the USSR and the world, is their main interest. '[T]he author's contention that there is a connection between Soviet anthropology's historical method and primary attention to primitive societies has no basis in fact.' Finally, Sadomskaya notes that the Danilova volume was sold out within days and served as an event heralding 'more freedom in the interpretation of historical problems.' But she notes that the following volumes in the series did not appear and that the methodology sector was abolished (*Idem*: 611–612). Semenov, another major Soviet ethnographic theorist, dwells on Gellner's point that Morgan's teaching was incorporated into Marxism by accident. Semenov maintains that '[N]o specific doctrine of primitive society has ever been or will be a part of Marxism', while a Marxist theory of primitive society, based on the Marxist principles of historical materialism, is 'all the more urgent.' Morgan is appreciated by Soviet ethnographers, but 'there is not a single Soviet scholar who would insist that all of Morgan's and Engels's concepts are right.' Semenov reminds the reader that 'the existence in the same historical epoch of societies at different stages of development does not contradict the materialistic understanding of history or the true Marxist theory of social-economic formations, as Gellner believes, but they do contradict the simplified evolutionist interpretations of Marxist theory' (*Idem*: 613–614).

Gellner, in his reply to these and other comments, accepts substantial criticism. However, he does not consider his superficial treat-

ment of Morgan and the incomplete coverage of Soviet work as insurmountable. He maintains that he 'did succeed in sketching out the main conceptual framework of Soviet scholars in this field, highlighting both its internal strains and the points in which it is of importance for Western anthropologists' (*Idem*: 616). That is why the reprint of 'The Soviet and the Savage' took the first place in the collection *State and Society in Soviet Thought* (Gellner 1988a). In the years 1973–1992, Gellner wrote a number of reviews, essays and translations concerning Soviet ethnography. They testify about his unabating interest in Marxism in its Soviet manifestations, as well as the theory of primitive society and ethnicity. I have paid attention to this production in two major papers (Skalník 2003, 2007) and refer the reader to them. Let us now dwell on the circumstances of Gellner's crossings of the Iron Curtain.

FURTHER ANALYSES OF SOVIET MARXIST THOUGHT

As I mentioned above, Gellner crossed the Iron Curtain in 1964 and 1972. The first visit was occasional because he attended a world congress of anthropologists and ethnologists. He may have met some Soviet ethnographers then, but did not have the opportunity to travel around. The second stay heralded his scholarly involvement with Soviet ethnography and its theoretical equipment. Subsequent visits were further instalments in this quest to understand the mystery of Soviet scholarship and its specific theoretical concerns. Unfortunately, I have not seen Gellner's project, which he possibly presented to the British Academy, his main sponsor. What is, however, quite probable is that he wanted to come to grips with the Soviet version of Marxism. It is also probable that he considered Soviet ethnography a viable parallel to Western anthropology, namely, social anthropology as it was practised in Britain. Repeatedly, he contended that Soviet ethnography was like social anthropology. But still '[S]omeone trained in the British tradition of social anthropology who enters the world of Soviet anthropology undergoes a drastic, and no doubt salutary, culture shock... [B]riefly and crudely, it is the contrast between the evolutionist-historical and functionalist-static visions of man and society' (Gellner 1988a: 2). Gellner was mainly interested in understanding the emergence of modern (western) society and was therefore fascinated by the alternative Soviet modernity propelled by Marxism. Similarly, he studied

Islam and its kind of modernity (Gellner 1994). During his visits he befriended the leading Soviet specialist on nomadism, namely Anatoly Khazanov, whose two chapters were included in the volume *The Early State* (Khazanov 1978). He helped him to settle academically after Khazanov's emigration to Israel. Gellner facilitated the publication in English of Khazanov's opus magnum *Nomads and the Outside World* (Khazanov 1984). Khazanov later became Ernest Gellner Professor of Anthropology at the University of Wisconsin-Madison.

I first met Gellner soon after I crossed the Iron Curtain in the opposite direction. I visited London twice in the autumn of 1976 and, on 24th November, gave a talk on Soviet ethnography, arranged by Gellner, at the London School of Economics. Present were several protagonists, including Meyer Fortes and Tamara Dragadze. I targeted Bromley's ethnos 'theory', and a good deal of discussion followed. I kept lively correspondence with Ernest for nearly twenty years. In the first letter, I commented in detail on the manuscript of Gellner's article, 'State before Class, the Soviet treatment of African feudalism.' It was a review article of Lev Kubbel's *Songaiskaia derzhava* (1974). The point was that Kubbel discovered that the Songhay state emerged earlier than social classes, which was of course against the Marxist orthodoxy. I pointed out to Ernest exactly this (Skalnik to Gellner, October 24, 1976). Indeed, Gellner mentioned in his paper that 'Kubbel clearly is no palaeo-Marxist and his book provides interesting evidence of the partial withering away of such rigid adherence to a fixed progression in the Soviet Union' (Gellner 1988c: 71). The concept of the early state which Claessen and I have coined (Claessen and Skalnik 1978), has expressed that we disagreed with the Soviet dogmatic concept of ranneklassovoe gosudarstvo (early class state). But Gellner was not excited by Kubbel's insistence on the feudal character of Songhai. What Gellner noticed is that Kubbel 'seems, perhaps unwittingly, to be echoing the liberal rather than the Marxist definition of the state – as the agent of elimination of hindrances of the good life. Only when domination becomes an independent function of power, may we speak of government in the full sense of that word' (Gellner 1988a: 81). And he further argues: 'I find Kubbel's effort to save the Songhai for feudalism interesting, but not as fascinating as his attempt to save the ancient Ghanaians from having a state' (*Idem*: 89). Gellner stresses the importance of the means of coercion for understanding the character of the state in various 'socio-economic categories'.

NIKIFOROV'S MARXISM IN GELLNER'S ANALYSIS

Gellner's crossings of the Iron Curtain brought about a number of other fruits. He found very important Soviet assessments of Asian historical developments. Namely, Nikiforov's book *The Orient and World History* attracted his sharp mind. There, the author exposed himself as what Gellner calls a 'Pyatchik' or passionate advocate of the historical sequence of five socio-economic formations from primitive via slave-owning, feudal, capitalist to socialist/communist stages. Gellner reveals himself as a 'Trinitarian', *i.e.* champion of the sequence of Foragia, Agraria and Industria (Gellner 1988b), to which I have added Cyberia (Skalnik 2022: xxix). When discussing Nikiforov, Gellner reminds the reader of 'a spectre' that haunts Marxism, namely the Asiatic Mode of Production (AMP). 'The idea of the AMP... breaks up the unity of mankind and of human history'. AMP is 'absent from the West and one that is particularly tyrannical and inimical to human dignity, liberty, and progress, and that is especially prone to indefinite self-perpetuation and stagnation' (Gellner 1988a: 41). Gellner brings in Wittfogel's *Oriental Despotism* (1957) and accepts that Nikiforov hates him because he suggests that despotism is possible in the socialist mode of production as well. Nevertheless, Gellner grasped that Nikiforov and Wittfogel agree on that 'the idea of AMP is incompatible with Marxism'... 'This leaves Wittfogel and Nikiforov firmly united against those who say that Marx and Engels never held the AMP idea at all, or that they always persisted in holding it, and that it is an integral part of Marxism' (Gellner 1988a: 45). But they disagree on the question whether the AMP existed in the real world. Gellner rightly approves Nikiforov's idea that the AMP rests on the formula 'primitive community plus government'. The point of course is that the state emerged before class. 'So the state, however despotic, is also functional: without it, most of its oppressed subjects would not survive at all. Better red than dead. Better alive under a hydraulic bureaucracy than dead from famine. So the state can afford to be despotic, knowing itself to be indispensable' (*Idem*: 50). Gellnerian logic is admirable. And Nikiforov does not find 'man's calvary' in the AMP but already in the primitive community where there was 'no property, no classes, no antagonism, no state.'

It was Henry Lewis Morgan, an anthropologist, who saved Marxism. So says Nikiforov. Gellner calls this 'a semicircular pattern of

history' which is more naturalistic than historicist. History begins with 'undifferentiated primordial community; ...it takes a bitter detour through three modes of alienation, and finally returns to an undifferentiated, classless, and stateless condition.' Hegelian historical logic, in contrast, 'begins in the despotic East and culminates in the free West' (*Idem*: 53). Nikiforov's argument, rather, is that '[G]overnment could not occur in primitive society, hence the Asiatic Mode is impossible, for government in it would have to create itself, there being no classes within society that could engender it' (*Idem*: 54). Let us remember what Gellner wrote in the paper on Kubbel's book: the state could emerge before class. Gellner's wit is captivating. Before Morgan, the AMP was needed as a starter of history (of class struggle). But now 'it was no longer needed' ...as... 'Eve (of primitive community) herself was seen as capable of arousing passion and action. And the AMP was no longer needed to explain the absence of private property in land in the East' (*Idem*: 62). Gellner posits that the central point of Nikiforov's argument is the elimination of the AMP and the elevation of 'the historic role of the primordial community. The AMP had been a kind of theoretical cloud... obscuring the crucial and dynamic role of the rural community' (*Idem*: 63). Otherwise, the 'harmony' of Marxist theory would be impossible.

Gellner says that Nikiforov's Marxism displays 'admirable coherence'. Exactly that attracts Gellner to the best pieces of Soviet Marxism. He likes to play a game of intellectual brilliance with his opponents. He may admire the coherence of the argument without agreeing with the contents. If Nikiforov believes that there were no exploitation and domination in the primordial community, Gellner argues against it, domination and coercion were the original movers. Violence is present in all societies (*cf.* Skalník 2019).

GELLNER VERSUS SEMYONOV

Gellner's duel with Soviet anthropology reaches its apogee in his discussions with Yuri Semyonov. Gellner translated several key texts by Semyonov into English to show the quality of this Marxist theorist's argument, but also because he thus created an opponent with whom he could debate on a certain level. In a paper published in 1992, I wrote that 'the evolutionist myth that has signified the development of Marxism since Engels has helped to disqualify the scientific methodology of Marx. Conversely, as long as evolutionism of the nineteenth-

century kind is not rejected, the creative application of Marxian methodology in Soviet *etnografia* will remain impossible' (Skalnik 1992: 391–392). This quote summarises my own reading of Semyonov and other conservative Soviet authors. Meyer Fortes, in his introduction to Gellner 1980 commented on an exchange between Semyonov and Godelier. He concluded that 'the evidence is incontrovertible that kinship, ritual, and political institutions constitute relatively autonomous domains of social structure and can by no means be reduced to emanations of the "relations of production" *sensu stricto*' (Gellner 1980: xxii). Gellner took to test Semyonov's special kind of unilinealism in his 'theory of socio-economic formations and world history.' Gellner classifies Semyonov as a philosophical realist who 'holds realism to be an essential prerequisite for the correct interpretation of Marxism' (Gellner 1988a: 139). The result is what Gellner calls 'torch relay theory of history,' which means, according to Semyonov, that due to diffusion, not every society has to pass through all five or six stages. Moreover, the torch moves to the periphery (Gellner calls this 'the doctrine of the essential periphery'). Gellner noticed that 'torch is passed sideways' would explain not only transitions in the past history, but also the transition from capitalism to socialism/communism. As it appears, functionalism's stability is also conflict-ridden, although it is also the 'primitive-communal' societies that did not possess 'classes.' Another problem is the modern slavery in the Americas, which emerged at the threshold of capitalism. Another is stagnation because so many 'primitive communal' societies were best described by functionalism. Would they pull themselves up into world systems? We might never know, but we do know that they were pulled out of their peripheral position by at least an Asiatic-type society. The latter, however, 'stubbornly remained stagnant, and it took the brutal prince of capitalism to rouse that sleeping beauty from her slumber' (Gellner 1988a: 151). Gellner opposes the Hegelian-Marxist 'acorn-oaktree' model to the Weberian 'gatekeeper' model of human progress. The non-Western acorns failed to become Western oak trees. But Gellner claims that Semyonov's logic supports the third step aside in history: the Russian revolution in backward Russia.

BROMLEY'S ETHNOS AND THE CONCLUSION

Gellner is well known as a theorist of nations and nationalism. Therefore, it is not surprising that, years before the publication of his most

popular book (1983), he, so to speak, crossed the Iron Curtain again when he submitted to his incisive analysis Bromley's concept of ethnos. Gellner called his theory of ethnicity a 'minor revolution'. While British social anthropology is aimed at structure, ethnos-oriented Soviet 'ethnography' is aimed at culture. To wit with Gellner '[J]ust as the rich have souls to be saved as much as the poor, so modern societies have structures and cultures to be explored, as much as the most backward and isolated tribes' (Gellner 1988a: 119). In a way, Gellner suggests, what in the West fulfilled 'the vogue of applied anthropology' was taken in the Soviet Union by 'a specialised study of ethnic phenomena.' Gellner correctly notes that the study of ethnos is 'conspicuously important', is legitimate, practical and 'comparatively unperilous' from a Marxist point of view. Thus, Bromley seems 'to lead the ethnographers towards the promised land of the ethnos' (*Idem*: 121). Leaving aside the question of the originality of ethnos research (see Skalnik 1986, 1988), Bromley managed to harness the research energy of Soviet ethnographers away from primitive clans and communities towards ethnos. He redefined ethnography as the study of primarily ethnos and the ethnic aspects of social life, past and present. His tour de force is reflected in the redirection of ethnography in the countries of the Communist bloc. Gellner rightly remarked that the study of ethnicity does not involve any revision of borders or boundaries within the socialist sphere. And this avoidance made Soviet ethnographers helpless vis-à-vis conflicts such as that of Nagorno Karabakh (Artsakh). Today, the study of ethnicity in Russia is out of fashion (Tishkov 2003).

Elsewhere, I quoted Gellner saying that he 'always knew that those beliefs were rubbish' but respected them as a religion of others (Gellner 1993: 141; cf. Skalnik 2007: 103). That may be valid generally about Marxism, but it does not need to apply to Soviet ethnography, especially to the views of some of its representatives. That is why Gellner spent so much time, energy, and brainpower to understand and explain what was ultimately an attempt to square the circle. But Gellner was an intellectual maverick, and he liked to play with intellectual opponents. Because he was also a philosopher, he appreciated the logic of others, especially if they were dead serious. At the same time, he considered brave those who managed to spot dogmatic weaknesses and tried to correct them or, in some cases, outright reject the falsity in favour of scientific truth. Crossing the Iron Curtain was, for Gellner, an intellectual adventure but also a repetitive excursion into a world that was to disappear. In an interview he gave in 1990 to a jour-

nal that no longer exists, I mean *Contention*, Gellner discussed a long list of questions about the Soviet Union, but he did not propose the idea of the collapse of that country or that system (Gellner 1992). Then I remember him saying in 1992 that the end of the USSR was regrettable because there was no longer a counterbalance to the West. Ironically, the present-day Russian ethnography produces lots of that is able to compete with social anthropology. Even more ironically, though, after thirty years of free exchange of ideas, a new Iron Curtain challenges the universality of anthropology.

NOTES

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² I am grateful to Sergei Alymov for copying and sending me the set of correspondence between Gellner and the Moscow Institute of Ethnography.

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