Conservatives or Radicals?

Ernest Gellner, ***Anthropology and Politics: Revolutions in the Sacred Grove,*** *Blackwell, Oxford, 1995*

Reviewed by ***Roger Sandall***

THE natural politics of anthropology are conservative. Conservatives believe that our inherited social arrangements embody the accumulated wisdom of the past, that they express the unique spirit of different nations and peoples, and that the modernising impulse should be strictly curbed. Since this is exactly what anthropologists say about primitive cultures, it surely follows that anthropology promotes a conservative world view. Yet anyone who has met anthropologists in the flesh will soon have noticed that their political temper is usually radical. At home, within the cramping limits of an academic jurisdiction, they seek to undermine the legitimacy of the culture that gives them bed and board; abroad, they often ally themselves with revolutionary causes. These essays by the late Ernest Gellner, who held chairs in both philosophy and anthropology in the UK, help to explain this paradox.

In his paper 'Culture, Constraint, and Community', Gellner gives us a glimpse of the conservative nexus. First written for a long view of humanity over the last few million years, it emphasises how 'volatile' we are behaviorally, how genetically underdetermined and underprogrammed and unpredictable — at least by comparison with the rest of the animal kingdom where genes do the work of direction and control. Men and women are rather too imaginative for their own good. Bewitched by unending possibilities, they must be firmly told what to do; and that is the role of culture. Common sense must be taught. Moral rules most be imposed. And Gellner's important and original point is that systems of moral rules must therefore have been there from our very beginnings. The 'under-programmed' nature of human nature means that, right from the start, when we first stopped having orangutans home to dinner, 'genetic underprogramming must have been linked to the presence of a compensating system of cultural/linguistic restriction. . .' (p. 61). Optimistic liberals are inclined to regard genetic underprogramming as mankind's greatest glory, our biological charter of liberation. But there's a downside too. Precisely because of the absence of 'built-in' controls, the addition of 'built-on' systems of discipline and coercion is imperative. Genetic looseness and tight cultural controls are the two equally necessary sides of being human. Without the one, no progress. Without the other, chaos.

'De Maistre observed that the executioner is the foundation of social order' (p. 58), writes Gellner, noting that while this is part of the political story it is only a part. But with the lessons of De Maistre's executioner and Hobbes's fear of chaos seeming to grow so naturally out of anthropological soil, how is it that on their home ground most anthropologists are inveterate pull-downers, dismemberers, upheavers of all that is secure? And, more amazingly, how can such a radical cast of

mind simultaneously admire the primitive and the ancient, where harsh coercion enforcing every sort of cognitive absurdity has widely prevailed? Does it reflect merely the Romantic triumph of hope over experience, or could there be more to it than that?

In the essays 'Past and Present' and 'Anthropology and Europe', Gellner locates the immensely influential Polish anthropologist Bronislaw Malinowski within the decline of Habsburg rule and 'an age of irredentist nationalisms [where] the limits of a culture were soon to become the limits of the territorial claims of the state which found its *raison d'être* in protecting that culture' (p. 95). In this setting, Romantic idealisations of 'culture' certainly made themselves felt, and Malinowski's anthropology, which defined cultures as institutionally interrelated organic wholes, can be seen as a natural enough intellectual reflection of this environment. This conception of the internal unity of cultural systems descends in an unbroken line from the 18th-century pioneers of romantic nationalism, Herder and Hamann.

So far, perhaps, so Romantic. Yet there was nothing Romantic about Malinowski's interest in the positivism of Ernst Mach, or the thesis he wrote on that topic which was honoured by the Emperor Franz Josef himself. Nor did he feel driven to romanticise cultures, however whole and organic, where the ordinary life of the native might not have been 'solitary', in Hobbes's phrase, but was all too often 'poor, nasty, brutal and short'. British anthropologists in the Malinowskian mode by and large called a spear a spear, took a clear-eyed empirical look at even the most curious beliefs and practices, and never found the increasing moral and cognitive relativism of their American colleagues entirely convincing.

So where does today's nonsense come from: the view that all cultures are equal — cognitively, morally, aesthetically, and all the rest? Gellner's attempt to fix the blame on American naiveté and ethnocentrism is funny and not wholly implausible. According to him, three centuries of life as independent farmers and small businessmen had given Americans the impression that the way they lived was the way everyone lived: that the 'truths' announced in the Declaration of Independence were indeed 'self-evident'. Then in the 20th century 'the idea of culture' came along and knocked them head over heels. Gellner claims that the effect of such a discovery on unprepared minds will be 'wildly exciting, intoxicating and utterly vertiginous. It will be addictive and constitute a revelation' (pp. 19, 20). It will lead to the liberating conviction that nothing whatever is self-evident and that anything goes, and to the relativism now so pervasive in academic circles.

It's a nice try. Certainly Gellner is on to something. What he is describing is perhaps best exemplified by the missionary conversion phenomenon: the frequency with which, after the culture shock of sitting down with savages, Christian priests and missionaries became persuaded that the moral world of the primitive was superior to their own. But whatever may be true of America, the influence of large numbers of quasi-religious members of the anthropological fraternity will take us only so far in explaining the general appeal of radicalism within the profession. Much more important has been the painful discovery on the Left that the industrial working class would never effect the change to socialism, the need for someone else on

whom to fasten one's millenarian hopes, and the resulting idealisation of pre-industrial cultures and ways of life. In England, intellectuals with classy accents and a taste for Marx long ago discovered how much more comfortable they felt sitting down with African chiefs than with Manchester mill workers. They never were happy with ordinary workmen. Eventually, as disenchantment with the working class became general, the adoration of Third World cultures replaced the worship of the proletariat in virtually all progressive minds. This became modern anthropology's radical nexus.

Gellner has interesting things to say about modernisation, about Freud's treatment of the origins of conscience and society, about Sir James Frazer's influence on T. S. Eliot, about the future of warfare — and much, much else. The two pages where he explains why he believes it unnecessary to impose a formal Prohibition of Hermeneutics are funnier than anything I have read from an anthropologist in a long time, and the range of his commentary is a saddening reminder that with his recent death the last great cosmopolitan intellect in anthropology has passed away. But the essays of most interest to the educated general reader are likely to be the first and the last: 'The Uniqueness of Truth' and 'The Coming *Fin de Millénaire*'. Here he directly confronts the epistemological folly so popular today, which has seen one-time Departments of Anthropology turned overnight into Departments for the Defence of the Absurd. Scientific knowledge, which Hermann Eutic and his mates have perversely tried to relativise out of existence, is now a universal feature of modernity and 'the most important single fact about our world. To deny it, under the delusion that this furthers the cause of human equality, is at best an absurd self-indulgence' (p. 4). As for Professor Geertz's claim that 'anti-relativists' are men afraid of their own shadows, Gellner has this to say:

> The truth is quite different. It is only a failure to understand the issues which permits such debonair nonchalance. Cognitive relativism is nonsense, moral relativism is tragic. You cannot understand the human condition if you ignore or deny its total transformation by the success of the scientific revolution [which] in no way involves unequal treatment of people — quite the reverse...

To grasp the nature of the modern world one must start 'from the indisputable fact that genuine knowledge of nature is possible and has occurred, totally transforming the terms of reference in which human societies operate'. To pretend otherwise is an irresponsible affectation. 'The *fin de millénaire* should have its fireworks', he concludes, 'but let it not deprive us of our sense of reality' (p. 252).

After teaching in the Department of Anthropology at the University of Sydney for 20 years, Roger Sandall retired in 1994.