

anthology. The ingredients are good but the cook, alas, diffident and unimaginative.

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GELLNER, ERNEST. *Relativism and the social sciences*. x, 200 pp. Cambridge: Univ. Press, 1985. £22.50

Two of this collection of seven essays are original publications. The five other essays, some camouflaged through publication in eclipsed sources, will now enjoy the visibility they deserve.

In the main essay, 'Positivism against Hegelianism', Gellner establishes that Karl Popper really is a positivist, and argues that Popper and we and our advanced modern culture ought to be proud of that.

In 'Relativism and universals' Gellner argues that the real world is one not many and that our advanced modern culture has come closer than any other to penetrating its mysteries.

In 'The gaffe-avoiding animal . . .' Gellner claims that some things are just too important to be left to rational calculation.

In 'What is structuralism?' Gellner treats structural explanations as a form of emanationism, which he contrasts with the empiricist's covering law account of causation.

In 'Concepts and community', a review of Kripke's book on Wittgenstein, Gellner argues that 'the single most important fact about the intellectual history of mankind' is that the social theory of concepts is false.

In 'No haute cuisine in Africa', a review of Goody on *Cooking, cuisine and class*, Gellner argues that 'neither food nor society is primarily a code' and that you do not eat your dinner the way you read a telegram. 'Back to pre-hermeneutic sociology'.

In 'The scientific status of the social sciences' Gellner argues that something like empiricism is the proper meta-paradigm for all science and he considers the plight of the 'doubt-ridden Faustian social scientist'. How come 'no Mephistopheles seems eager to buy his soul'?

The entertainment value of the book is very high, and so is its intellectual value. Gellner is so witty, amiable and insightful that even readers maddened by his positivism or his thesis of the intellectual superiority of modern Western culture are likely to forgive him his conclusions.

Frederick Nietzsche once described Asia as a 'dreamy place' where they still do 'not know how to distinguish between truth and poetry'. Gellner's essays develop a similar thesis. The world woke up in the West and became good for the first time about three hundred years ago. A spirit of science descended to earth in Europe. She brought with her a long list of intellectual and epistemological vices and virtues: idealism

bad/empiricism good, holism bad/atomism good, conflating bad/drawing distinctions and isolating functions good, communalism bad/individualism good, consensus bad/external criteria good, religion and ritual bad/science and calculation good, essentially contestable ideas bad/falsifiable ideas good, social science bad/natural science good, Wittgenstein bad/Wittgenstein no good.

Three hundred years later the proof of the virtuous path can, according to Gellner, be seen in its rewards: the evolution in the West of a scientific-industrial culture with a firmer grip on reality (no more conflating of truth and poetry), a richer and more fulfilling way of life with less violence and oppression, control over the environment, technological and economic and military superiority, and an institutional complex through which productivity is linked to the continual growth of knowledge, in a world where everyone else looks to us for technology, toys and consumer goods.

As for the path of vice. It led to social science and continental philosophy, as well as to all those self-certifying, totalistic, totalitarian imposed dogmatisms of the pre-scientific agrarian world. That, in brief, is Gellner's general thesis. Despite appearances to the contrary, my summary is not hyperbolic.

Gellner loves high intensity provocation and he is good at it. And he has a provocative thesis. But he loves even more the corrosion of dogma. Gellner is probably the best deconstructionist that anthropology has got, which means that a proper appreciation of his writings requires attention to his style as much as to his thesis. His style is playful and foot-loose and assumption-questioning; but most notably it is thoroughly ironical.

There is Gellner the avowed positivist ('separate anything that can be separated from anything else'; sticks and stones can break my bones but mere words can never harm me) who lives and loves and scores by conflating the functions of language, and who can't keep off rhetoric, metaphor and theological discourse ('cognitive perdition', 'cognitive emergency measures', ideas that 'perish without justice' or are doomed to a 'life of eternal return').

There is Gellner the avowed Popperian ('definitive eliminations' in a 'fact-terminating world') who spends most of his time discussing metaphysical issues (who can blame him? reality-testing is a metaphysical act) and relatively little time advancing falsifiable claims or 'operationalising' his thesis or systematically testing it against relevant comparative evidence. His heart of hearts is reserved for elegant discourse and gorgeous lines not for grubby granules of data.

There is Gellner the avowed monist (a defender of the idea of a fixed view of things

pinned down by a unitary world of hard, argument ending facts) who gives and gets pleasure by being on the move between several worlds. First he is inside the covering law view of structuralism's emanations and then he is out of it and into the emanationist's view of covering laws. First he is inside Popper's view of Hegel and then he is out of it and into Adorno's view of Popper, all the while exemplifying the deconstructionist maxim that all that is mental (and Gellner is very 'mental') is a never-ending process of overcoming partial views. Nelson Goodman once recommended for hard scientists a cognitive policy of 'judicious vacillation' ('One might say there is only one world but this holds for each of the many worlds'), which Gellner puts into practice, regardless of his thesis and announcements.

Perhaps it is because of all those ironies, manifest and latent, that when it comes to reading Gellner, getting there is all the fun, and it hardly matters at all where he ends up. He saws off all the philosophical branches that everyone else sits on, and then settling himself in comfortably on the branch of positivism he hands the reader his sharpened blade.

The fun begins with pallid abstract concepts vividly redescribed: from holism to 'package-deals', from solipsism to 'cosmic exile'. The fun continues with the quips, the sallies and the one-liners. Against the anti-positivists: They leave you with 'the impression that a "positivist" is anyone who subjects a favoured theory to the indignity of testing by mere fact'; 'idealism is alive and well and operates under the name of hermeneutics'. Against the structuralists: 'popular explanations of it fluctuate between the unintelligible and the obvious . . .'. Against Wittgenstein, the person: 'confused, somnambulist, ahistorical'. Against Wittgenstein, the philosophy: 'The soft porn of irrationalism'; 'My form of life, right or wrong'; 'It is communal consensus which makes addition'.

As you read this collection you are bound to have one of the more dazzling times of your intellectual life as Gellner takes you by the hand and introduces you to a list of all possible philosophies of science, to a list of all possible ways of arguing for or against the view that the social sciences cannot be scientific, and to all possible ways of devising objections to Gellner's general thesis.

The deconstruction of Gellner will presumably develop the lines of criticism that he himself anticipates, since he anticipates everything. Gellner admires the cognitive virtues of the positivists, but he is too objective and on the move to embrace them without doubt. He acknowledges the many criticisms of positivism: that facts are not self-describing or unambiguous, that science cannot limit itself to observables, that reality testing is a metaphysical act,

that convergence of ideas may not be the *sine qua non* of advancing knowledge even in the natural sciences, that science does not advance through crucial experiments, that all representations of reality (whether social reality or non-social reality) are intellectual package deals in which it is not possible to isolate the physics from the metaphysics, the seen from the unseen, the science from the religion, etc. He doesn't deal with any of these criticisms at any length. Instead with an occasional nod or barb in their direction he seems to say 'I didn't say they weren't true. I said I don't believe them'. He comes to rest on that favoured branch of empiricism-positivism and terminal facts and waits for others to saw it off. If his branch does go I do not think you will hear the crash; for if all knowledge is without fixed foundation there may be no ground to hit, and Gellner is a certifiable master of the eternal free fall.

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GODELIER, MAURICE. *The making of great men: male domination and power among the New Guinea Baruya* (Camb. Stud. social Anthrop. 56). xvi, 255 pp., illus., map, bibliogr. Cambridge: Univ. Press, 1986. £30.00 (cloth), £10.95 (paper)

The Baruya are a tribe of some 2,000 people spread among seventeen scattered villages and hamlets in the Kratke Range in the Eastern Highlands Province of Papua New Guinea (PNG). They belong to a collection of tribes now known as the Eng. (They used to be known by the pejorative term *kukakuka*, meaning 'thieves', during the Australian colonial period.) The Anga region was the last colonial frontier of PNG: the first government patrol post was set up in 1960; in 1965 the area was declared 'pacified' and opened up to the free movement of whites.

Godelier was among the first of many anthropologists who have worked in the area since 'pacification'. He arrived in 1967 and revisited the area many times over the next thirteen years. This book is the beginning of what promises to be a spate of writings on the social, economic and religious life of the Baruya by Godelier and his students.

The central theme of *The making of great men* is inequality: between men and women on the one hand, and among men themselves on the other. The book is divided into three parts. The first two deal with inequalities in the precolonial (i.e. pre-1960) order and the third part describes the transformations brought about by colonisation up to 1979, the date of his last visit.

Part 1 is a reconstruction of the social hierarchies in Baruya and examines women's subordinate position and the institution and