

# CULTURAL HUBRIS

Reviewer: Javid Iqbal Amiri

***POST-MODERNISM, REASON AND RELIGION* BY ERNEST GELLNER, PP IX + 108, ROUTLEDGE, LONDON AND NEW YORK, 1992, PRICE NOT GIVEN**

Here are some commonplaces about Descartes. That he is the father of modern philosophy; that his methodological doubt provides the only firm foundation on which to build a 'secure' philosophy; that nonetheless, the methodological doubt culminates, paradoxically for a philosophy, in solipsism. This last commonplace must bear further dwelling on for it is important to our present discussion. That his self doubt ends up giving the average Cartesian merely self-certainty and no more is old hat. The crucial question that arises in this context is, if his methodology leads him and others of his ilk--namely the western thinkers--- to such 'a purblind conclusion as solipsism, how has the west managed to survive to this day and more than that how has it been able to put the semblance of ideational unity-in-multinamity that we espy so often, either openly or implicitly in western writings? The answer is, the Cartesian methodology is merely a prop for the western proclivity for narrow-mindedness and bigotry. With smooth cynicism the western mind slips into its solipsistic shell when it suits it and with equal alacrity joins its other equally bigoted variants to put up that smarter-than thou, more successful-than-thou and holier-than-thou attitude; this last despite the exile of the sacred from western episteme, which fools so many orientals so frequently.

Ernest Gellner's present work falls into this category. Let no one be fooled that Professor Gellner is undertaking an honest and disinterested comparison of three modes of thought. It must be granted him that he makes no bones about belonging to a particular school of thought, calling himself as he does 'a card-carrying member' of Enlightenment Rationalist fundamentalism. But that is where all this honesty ends. In fact, this piece of honesty is there only in the third part of the book where he talks about his own cherished ideology, the one referred to above. He begins, as a matter of fact, on a note of mock surprise at finding religion (read Islam) as an

ideology worth recko ‘ The typical solipsist that he is, he thinks religion had been banish from the world altogether. After all for later bigots--- or earlier with reference to Gellner--- like Auguste Comte and Hegel religion was merely passing phase in the life of humanity to be left behind, outgrown and outstripped for rationality, that shifting and truncated ideal of most egocentric western thinkers to rule the roost. Even this ideal as we have alluded to in our last sentence is a shifting one. The Platonic, the Aristotelian, the Cartesian and the Hegelian versions of rationality are radically different from one another. Gellner himself prefers the Cartesian version and so smug is he about it that he prefers to call himself a fundamentalist of that variety. For once one finds the term fundamentalism getting some respect. Yet throughout the essays he uses the pragmatic high ground to criticize both Religion and post- modernism. For one thing this reveals an inadequacy in his chosen ideology to fend for itself. For another it is also a telling testimony to the fact that the west which poses as being rationalistic most of the time, is not really founded upon any version of rationalism but has at its base a perverse power-brandishing and power--grabbing ideology, Consider the following:

1) Although he admits that there are no privileged facts (pp. 75.76) or truths, he does argue for Reason on the basis of consequences. The entire tenor of his argument is inclined to, or asserting the superior truth value of his own system predicated though not on its intrinsic worth but on consequentialism “Nothing succeeds like success”.

He sets about further on (p. 81 onwards) to demolish the notion of privileged facts and of the sacred without admitting that he wishes to do away with all other notions of privileged knowing than his own, that of Power and Lucre. Whatever his pretensions might be, Gellner will not succeed in befooling us that he acts as the unofficial mouthpiece of the very vested interests\_privileged, did I hear someone say?\_ that keep his university and those like it across the ocean, the Ivy League ones, going.

Taking him up on this very assertion one would like to know how it follows logically from him vehement and repeated denials of the existence of privileged notions, how his own comes to have the privileged place that he is arguing for it. In his unguarded moments he would concede, we’re sure, that it is Nietzscheanism pure and simple, Thus although perspectival, his notion

is privileged because it is the one enjoying mundane power and authority, ergo success, at present. No morality, no logic and much less no truth value there at all. Just naked power asserting itself. Nietzschean spite vituperating agents the Last Man, if you will.

2) Interestingly he berates the post--modernists for taking their perspectival — relativist cue from Nietzsche (p 48). One and the same Master inspiring two different interpretations. To be fair to the mentor of most modern Westerners, let us grant that Gellner himself is more true to Nietzsche than the post--modernists what with their having ignored the power factor completely. A case of faulty hermeneutics perhaps!

3) Gellner rightly upbraids the post--modernists for ignoring the political aspect of reality but conveniently does the same when shedding false tears for fellow pen-pusher Salman Rushdie who was no doubt politically motivated to spew forth his Satanic Verses at the same time as the west was proscribing a play being staged in London's East End Showing the Zionist connexions of the Nazis<sup>104</sup> and while classics like *The Merchant of Venice* were being proscribed from high school syllabi in Canada. He also finds it convenient to forget the legislation passed in 1989<sup>105</sup> by the U.S. Congress prescribing capital punishment for persons desecrating the U.S. flag. The 'sacred' does creep in, however much one might try, though in this case it creeps in, in a blasphemous way.<sup>106</sup>

4) Belonging as he does to an elite grove of academia (Cambridge), it is regrettable that he resorts to slurs against followers of a certain religion (pp. 76-79). If certain Muslims, without scriptural or doctrinal support, did put certain others to the sword are we then to take it that Radovan Karadzic is carrying out his extermination programme against the Muslims of Bosnia with the imprimatur of the Vatican, indeed of Jesus himself? One may then just as well think that apartheid in South Africa was and still is endorsed by

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<sup>104</sup> This happened sometime in 1986. See inquiry vol. 4 No. 3, March 1987, p. 76 Published by Tropvale Ltd, London.

<sup>105</sup> For a full report on this see, Crescent International, April 16-30, 1989, p. 10. Published by, The Open Press, London & Markham, Ontario.

<sup>106</sup> This, of course, is a totally misplaced and corrupted sense of the sacred. For the right perspective see S.H. Nasr, *Knowledge and the Sacred* (The Gifford Lectures, Edinburgh University Press, 1981).

Christ himself? And were we to credit (sic) Jesus himself with inspiring the Inquisition and the burnings at the stakes that followed we should only be following the practice of Gellner's co-idologues.

5) In a way this is yet another work by a so-called western scholar to celebrate the passions. The student of philosophy that he is---albiet the truncated and eclectic western type of philosophy- he knows that sensations literally lead nowhere. The line that he draws, therefore, having debunked nihilism, is at the level of Reason, the Enlightenment version of Reason. While on the one hand this Reason reads into Nature its own version of order<sup>107</sup> and prescribes its own egocentric teleology for the weaker and the downtrodden to follow, it takes great care riot to let higher, universal ideals and religious truth creep into the picture. The picture is ostensibly one of egalitarianism. But fie be on him who dares to delve deep into the picture, for if his search objective and sincere enough he will find that this is the veneer foisted on a world that is in truth controlled by self serving capitalists crafty politicians who employ by the hundreds of thousands, scientists, writers, politicians, intellectuals and artists to celebrate the universality of bestial passions and to keep humankind pegged at that level for long as possible, To this picture, post--modernism poses little or no threat. It is the vision of the transcendent that religion offers that is repulsive to Gellner and his masters.

This is one reason why he tries to fudge the issue of why people turn to post modernism by blaming it on the post modernists intellectual laziness. His Darwinian skull will not countenance any argument that shows up this search as a form of the perennial human quest for eternal values which in the case of post modernism is regrettably misplaced. In being misplaced the post--modernists an helped in no small measure by pseudo religious people who prevent any true understanding or exemplification of religion and thereby repulse the so called educated lot. Gellner is deceptive enough to make the pseudo-religious stand for religion and thereby discredit religion itself, which in reality is distinct from these personalities. In any case, Gellner

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<sup>107</sup> That an ecological crisis of cataclysmic proportions has precisely because of this is very well brought out by S.H. Nasr in his *Man & Nature- The Spiritual Crisis of Modern Man*, London: Allen & Unwin, 1968

never mentions those personalities that religion itself sets up as beacons of light and paragons of exemplary conduct to follow. Should this be pointed out to him, we are sure he would start experiencing Cartesian doubts as to the veracity of these historical figures. A situation here of heads I win tails you lose.

6) Those listed above are not his greatest or his major errors. That belongs to the class of 'category mistake'. Gellner is not new to this

concept; he is, in fact, guilty of it. He takes Islam as the example of religion. He then makes this transcendent doctrine having immanent implications and ramifications squat with other profane and immanentist doctrines and thereby distorts the entire axis on which religion claims to operate. Not only that he historicizes it too thus making it convenient for himself to further distort and thus ridicule its message. Gellner seems to deliberately ignore the glaring fact that although not purely historical in origin, the message of Islam is potentially history's only salvation carrying as it does the possibility of transforming history and orienting it towards Divine ideals. In fact, for Islam, history is one of the media in addition to the human self and nature that offer abundant signs of the Lord for contemplation and for action in the light of Divine injunctions.

Yet in Gellner's bigoted scheme Islam must now conform to the logic of immanentism and yield results or be exposed as mere fancy. Gellner ecstatically thinks he does just that but he is gravely mistaken there for if he has really convinced himself of that he is merely exposing himself as a Darwinian ape devoid of all the finer elements that Man can pride himself on. Homo faber Gellner might turn out to be vicariously, homo sapiens he certainly is not and will not be unless he decides to take, by his own logic, the Darwinian one, certain devolutionary steps. Perchance, he might regain some wholesome sensibility.

In fact, throughout his impugned essay Gellner is speaking as a pompous Homo faber totally enslaved to the technological imperative. Since

Jacques Ellul has admirably gone over this ground we shall not redo it here.<sup>108</sup>

True, Gellner's ideal technologised man has devised for himself an entire new world from which he has banished what he considers to be the old superstitions of religion and morality. The pockets of resistance that have sprung up on the part of, or in the name of, religion are a cause of great concern to Mephistopheles in his hour of triumph over the soul of Dr. Faustus. Why else would he want us to remember the misdeeds of a certain godless people in the name of religion but have us forget the cataclysms wrought by his darlings science and technology in Hiroshima, Nagasaki, Three Mile Island, Bhopal, Chernobyl and of course recently in the Persian Gulf? Try as he might, Dr. Faustus now of the band of Mephistopheles will not have us live down the specter of Big Brother.

Whatever the demerits of his work it does call attention to some of the glaring deficiencies and faults of the believers which are not the result of the belief system itself. For one thing the predominant predilection for a deracinated mode of thought is totally unbecoming of followers of a faith that is a harmonious blend of rationality and intellectual intuition. Only by reviving a thought system based on these two cardinal elements will we be able to rebuild it according to contemporary needs.

The other important rather essential feature is power with the difference that this power has to be based in and used exclusively in accordance with, Islam's value system. In too many places, but especially in Palestine, Kashmir and Bosnia an solution to the Muslim community's problem is lacking precisely because of the absence of a backup of power. It bears repetition here that simultaneously with generating and building Ummah-wide institutions of power must go a camping for self reform and self purification.

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<sup>108</sup> In his masterly work, *The Technological Society* New York, 1964 (tr. By John Wilkinson), Ellul brings out very well the pitfalls and disasters inherent in 'la technique. This led S. Pervez Manzoor to call him, 'the metaphysician of technology'.

Without this latter campaign the institutions will turn us into those very despicable creatures that our faith looks down upon.<sup>109</sup>

## NOTES

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<sup>109</sup> On this see S.H. Nasr (Chapter-III, "Revelation, Intellect and Reason in the Quran") Sufi Essays, Albany, N.Y, SUNY,1973.