

ERNEST GELLNER'S FUNCTIONALIST APPROACH TO NATIONALISM: A CRITICISM

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El debate académico sobre el origen, desarrollo y futuro del nacionalismo tiene en la figura de Ernest GELLNER unos de sus representantes clásicos más relevantes. Este estudio examina el problema de la teoría del nacionalismo de GELLNER para adaptarse a la sociedad post-industrial. La sección I estudia los rasgos generales de la teoría del nacionalismo de GELLNER. En particular se atenderán el desarrollo de la relación cultura-poder y la entropía resultante del nacionalismo gellneriano. El papel de la división de trabajo, la burocracia o institucionalización, la educación unida a la Cultura superior alfabetizada o el asentamiento de los Estados-Nación son los rasgos fundamentales que GELLNER subraya. La sección II presenta, desde una perspectiva más concreta, las hipótesis de GELLNER referidas a la evolución del nacionalismo según su teoría, destacando el industrialismo homogéneo y la alternativa de la desterritorialización. La sección III presenta los elementos más relevantes de la sociedad postindustrial: individualización, institucionalización de la individualidad y colapso de los estados-nación. La sección IV fija los elementos actuales que el planteamiento de GELLNER no es capaz de abordar. El presente trabajo tratará de identificar cuáles son esos elementos a la par que contestará a las siguientes cuestiones: ¿es el planteamiento de GELLNER capaz de explicar los movimientos nacionalistas en la actualidad? ¿Se corresponde el trinomio Industrialización-Modernidad-Nacionalismo planteado por GELLNER con la realidad del nuevo paradigma? El trabajo concluye que la explicación de GELLNER sobre el origen del nacionalismo puede ser acertada, pero no lo es tanto su aproximación al desarrollo del mismo.

Palabras claves: Nación, Cultura, Funcionalismo, Modernidad, Sociedad Postindustrial

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This study examines Ernest Gellner's nationalism theory and the problems that arise when applying it to the socio-political contemporary reality.

Section I examines the general aspects of Gellner's functionalist approach to nationalism, focusing particularly on the development of the relationship between culture and power, and the resulting entropy. I examine the main features stressed by Gellner: division of labour's role, the bureaucracy or institutionalization, education related to the State's culture, and the settlement of the nation-state. Section II presents the most relevant elements of post-industrial society: individualization, institutionalization of individuality and the collapse of nation states. Section III points out the current issues Gellner's approach fails to address. This paper's aim is to identify these issues, and to answer two questions: Is Gellner's approach able to explain current nationalist movements? Is the Industrialization-Modernism-Nationalism triangle still applicable in our times?

The paper concludes that Gellner's explanation of the origin of nationalism might be successful, but he fails to explain its role in the socio-political contemporary scene.

Key words: Nation, Culture, Functionalism, Modernity, Post-Industrial Society

SECTION I

“La manera adecuada de hacerlo (*abordar la cuestión de las naciones y el nacionalismo*) consiste en debilitar discretamente las asociaciones habituales, asentando a la vez las nuevas en principios que sean evidentes por el contexto, hasta establecer por fin uno en que se pueda formular una afirmación que resulte natural, y no una mera repetición de lo que se sabe hace tiempo”[1].

Nations and Nationalism, GELLNER, E., 1983

Throughout his career, GELLNER developed a theory of nationalism based on the relationship between language, thought, and action, an approach that he originally introduced on *Thought and Change* (1964). The first relevant concept in that approach is that of “Nationalism”. In this ethno-cist approach[2], ‘nationalism’ is a claim from a group of individuals calling for a state for their cultural development. Cultural affinity is the basic social link[3]; it is both sufficient and necessary for the social link. His view assumes the existence of politically organized systems in general, and of

1 Cursiva Propia

2 Gellner (1983) p. 23.

3 Gellner (1996) p. 19

states in particular. The second key concept is that of a Weberian "State": a clearly identified agent or set of agents, strongly centralized and disciplined, for whom the use of force is legitimate. He takes this a step further to hold that this use of force is rather a monopoly of power based on the monopoly of the "legitimate education"[4].

The third relevant concept is that of "Nation". GELLNER denies[5] the deeply-rooted conception of inherent nationalities. His aim is to defend that nations are a "political shadow"[6], a product of Modernity's imposition of higher cultures and resulting homogeneity.

Traditionally, two approaches were offered: the cultural one (same nation, same culture), and the willed one (belong to a nation, belonging recognition). GELLNER offers an alternative in which he describes culture's structure and in which nationalism is explained by sociological circumstances. This approach is known as functionalism, as it explains the rising of particular socio-political changes based on the function they played.

GELLNER focuses on structure or organization[7] understood as a system of roles or positions into which society is divided. His approach looks at culture understood as a set of signals and signs. He does not deny that the latter has an individual component, although in the final development of his theory he adds that it is variable because it is subject to collective decision[8]. GELLNER assumes that in modernity each one is presented as a reflection of the other, but stresses that it has not always been so. He extrapolates this sociological division between structure and culture to the conceptual base already outlined: he believes that modernity translates structure and culture to the vocabulary of State and Nation (these are not universal[9] nor necessary[10], although neither are they contingent nor accidental).

In the industrial era, it is education that generates the connection between culture and the will of belonging to a particular nation, and the consequent need for channelling it politically. In such a way that the identification between culture and politics in the nation-state is the result of a social process and not something that is given. In his final analysis, GELL-

4 Gellner (1983) p. 109

5 Ibid, p. 74

6 Gellner (1996), p. 126

7 Ibid, p.18

8 Ibid, p.17

9 Ibid, p.21

10 Ibid, p.30

NER suggests that nations are the result of nationalism, and not the other way round[11]. He does not deny that, through this process, individuals develop a sense of belonging, and a will to belong. That nationalism generates a legitimate and sincere feeling of membership does not prevent it from being the result of a particular social development[12]. To support these assertions, GELLNER looks at two cases: the agrarian society (pre-industrial) and the industrial society.

In his functional explanation of the agrarian society, GELLNER assumes that the attribution of the category of “cultural”, as understood in modernity, is post hoc. In the agrarian society, culture and power do not go hand in hand. There is no horizontal homogenization of culture nor “cultural imperialism”[13]. Here he introduces a central element regarding the role of the State: there was no political expression of culture in pre-industrial societies (and, if there was, it was secondary and not in the same sense as in the industrial society).

This proliferation and overlapping of cultures assumed that the opposition between the segments was an advantage, because it strengthens one’s own rites and doctrines[14]. There was a doctrinal (clerical), fiscal/military (noble), but not cultural, homogeneity. Cultural specialization was a tool for the effective difference between states. Understood as lack of mobility in *Nations and Nationalism*, this acquires a new magnitude in GELLNER’S later work.

In *Nationalism*, GELLNER establishes that, in the agrarian period, when the state and cultural differentiation existed, the foundations for the appearance of nationalism were laid (there where there was education[15]), but this was secondary. The state was considered to be rather a warehouse, a police authority, etc. not a cultural custodian (that, by the way, did not exist). As a rule, in the agrarian society, the difference between sectors in a hierarchy generates an unequal society[16]. This is precisely what makes nationalism fail: the union between culture and power is incompatible with the use of culture to tell apart establishment groups. This does not mean that nations, or classes (criticism of Marxism), were asleep. They simply did not exist. This changed with the arrival of the industrial era.

11 Gellner (1983), p. 137

12 Gellner (1996), p. 33

13 Gellner (1982), p. 86

14 Gellner (1983), p. 25

15 Gellner (1996), p. 39

16 Ibid, p.45

The first thing to note is that GELLNER's approximation is not Marxist[17]. GELLNER's theory departs from an analysis of the rationality principle (and the consequent Modernity), which was about. This generates a morally inert and unitary world where the ideas regroup in culturally continuous and internally fluid communities (following the Humean account of causality, as GELLNER observes). What, then, encouraged this new function of States that GELLNER presented? The constant and increasing division of labour.

The industrial society is one in constant growth. It generates the need of an absolute mobility: constant growth comes with a constant movement that requires equality. Necessarily inherited roles disappear: men have to be equal to one another, to have access to any social function. We find the paradigm of this equality in language: all members of a nation must be able to understand each other. This obligation establishes The Cultures, which are visible and accessible. Definitively, this leads to the direct worship of The Culture (there are no intermediaries any more[18]). Cultural plurality disappears as only alphabetized cultures persist (collective amnesia). Let us see how the already mentioned division of labour leads to this.

GELLNER supports the idea of Collective Societies outlined by Renan, but he understands these only as the Industrial Societies that generated nationalism[19]. Therefore the scheme of an industrial age would be: a State – a Culture. Behind this standardization there is a need to face what Émile Durkheim called Division of Labour. This division is based on the idea that specialization supposes a higher moral dignity, and that to achieve this all need to potentially have access to any spheres of society. For Durkheim, this is characteristic of Complex Societies where a community is generated. GELLNER's approach is slightly different. Even when he assumes the existence of closed communities, he does not consider them to be the result of a division of labour, but of the need for industrialization. Equality of access is not the result of a moral conception, but of a social functional need[20]. Organic solidarity, inherent to the social organization, is not inherent to the division of work. A State that organizes it is necessary (for GELLNER, thinking otherwise would be naive[21]). He assumes the need for equality and points out that, even if inequality exists, it is not sharp, or it is protected

17 Gellner (1986), p. 92

18 Gellner (1983), p. 28

19 Ibid, p.29.

20 Ibid, p.98

21 Ibid, p.72

by an illusion of equality[22] (that in the agrarian society was neither given nor intended).

Specialization comes after the non-specialized and standardized. It is reached by means of a general, generic and standardized education that allows a determined way of reproduction[23]. Unlike in the agrarian society (where very few were educated and education was very specialized), in the industrial society everyone is educated and this education is general. This means that the whole of society is turned into clergy, into what GELLNER calls eunuchs. The higher, alphabetized culture expands to the whole of society and its distribution is taken to be a moral duty of the State. GELLNER presents two motivations for this: economical and occupational, the need for economic growth and for the workforce that makes it effective. This asks for a pyramidal national literacy (the State assumes the role of the family or the micro-communities characteristic of pre-industrial societies), where the State dictates what education ought to be. Culture, in this scenario, stops being an adornment and becomes the basis for a certain social order (industrialized, modern, etc.). As said above, this is central idea from the Weberian scheme used by GELLNER: monopoly of the education. This is supported by GELLNER all throughout his theoretical development. Education allows the desacralization of differences, yes, but this is because of a need of mobility that is inherent to the industrial production system. GELLNER adds a new category in his later work, typical of Marxism, which, although will not be treated here, is cardinal: the domain[24]. To finish with GELLNER's approximation to the emergence of nationalism, it is necessary to pay attention to the category that GELLNER introduces to describe these societies: entropy.

One of GELLNER's main elements is the tension[25] between the entropy generated by nationalism and entropy-resistant groups. In his exposition, culture does not lead to structural differences any more. His approach assumes the existence of a unique structure (the nation-state) created to dominate citizens with their consent[26]. He talks about societies that tend towards entropy, that is to say, towards internal randomness and a fluid totality. There are groups that resist entropy, and these are problematic for industrial societies. These groups will be those that, due to genetic aspects – such as race, a deeply-rooted cultural background, etc. – do not manage

22 Ibid, p.98

23 Ibid, p.103

24 Gellner (1996), p.61

25 Gellner (1979), p.106

26 Gellner (1983), p.146

to adapt to the structure fixed by the State. In this respect, culture can be an anti-entropic feature, but in this case it will be comparable to a physical feature. But why are nationalist movements not resistant to entropy? They are, but not as much as other groups, since they are the unique result of a communication problem (so there is a solution), whereas real resistance to entropy is not solvable. Nationality (in his example, the Ruritan) can be assimilated or it can triumph, whereas race (in his example, blueness) cannot be assimilated and can hardly succeed. In any case, those who because of being unable to establish their nation (especially, the lack of a definite territory), or because of being exposed to discrimination having been assimilated to an already established nation, these groups of individuals will be the open resisters to entropy. This is the major problem that, according to GELLNER, generates the nationalism generated within industrial societies.

SECTION II

GELLNER's proposal relies upon a particular vision of history in which mankind's progress is based on the accumulation of science and technology[27]. However, GELLNER criticized Marxism for trying to explain society from its analysis of capital. Could we not criticize his functional explanation of superior, literate industry-culture in the same way? To answer this, we need to look first at his characterization of post-industrial society.

If we accept the diagnosis of Reflexive Modernity Theory, GELLNER's functional explanation is obsolete. The core of this new approach is the emergence of the Welfare State and the individualization encouraged by society[28]. The level of security reached makes the individual abandon the broad categories of classes and the traditional models of family (social micro-environment). Traditionally attached to the bourgeoisie, it expands to the whole of the population. Accessing the job market frees us, leaving the collective experience of the job market (no longer collective) as anti-liberating. Individuals themselves are the ones that implement society[29]. This is a consequence of the institutionalisation and standardization set by the job market. However, this does not only depend on education, but also on consumption, regulations and social supplies, goods, traffic plans, etc. A control of individual situations is introduced, but it is not set by the State

27 Gellner (1983), p.115

28 Beck (1986), p. 122

29 Ibid, p. 125

(or at least not only by the State). The two factors affecting this are, as in GELLNER's theory, mobility and education.

BECK holds that true mobility takes place in post-war years, with the emergence and strengthening of the service sector. This mobility is the one which generates individualization not only from family or job spheres, but also from particular territories[30]. Instead of collective destiny, a personal destination arises as the central element of individualisation.

In relation to education, GELLNER sets the same temporal factor, the post-war period[31]. Education (and, in particular, the power to choose) has become a minimum for each individual to write their biography[32]. A language of self-realisation arises from the identification and requires again mobility (not by the division of labour). Thus, mobility and education generate a two-way relationship, in which each one requires the other, and none is motivated by the division of labour generated by industrialisation (or first modernity), but by individuals' need for self-realisation.

How, then, are social links generated? On the one hand, institutions are trying to preserve already expired realities[33]. On the other, mobility is no longer between establishment groups, but between social risks (emotional pathologies, for instance). As a result of this new immediacy, social coalitions are diverse in origin and constantly changing. This is a quirky pluralisation[34], where the same individual can vote for a nationalistic party, be right-wing, and belong to a charity for animal rights. The trends, fixed by the mass media, mark individuals; not so much the State. There are still entropy-resisting groups (although BECK does not consider the concept of entropy), but these do not face a native-culture, but mass society, a set of isolated individuals. Let us see how he combines individualisation, institutionalisation, and standardisation.

The central thesis on individualisation holds that conceiving the relationship between individuals and society as a change of awareness or situation is no longer valid[35]. The new relation arises after the liberation of the individual (from the scheme of class, nation, etc.), a loss of stability, and his return into the mass. Regarding post-industrial individuality, we no longer speak about cultural identities, but about biographical models. Although

30 Ibid, p. 132

31 Ibid, p. 133

32 Ibid, p. 134

33 Ibid, p. 162

34 Ibid, p. 163

35 Beck (1986), p. 209

these are standardised, they are not controlled by political institutions any more, and even less by the political institutions of the nation-state. Status and culture are replaced by “institutional life models”. These institutions are not fixed into the nation-state, although they have a political shape. The individual's existence is lonelier than ever but, in turn; more disturbed than ever (we are, in situ, here and in any other part of the world). A new element related to the identity of the individual arises: transformation (or even dissolution) of the public and private spheres of life, so clearly defined at the beginning of Modernity. Institutions work with standardised biographies, but these move away from reality. The State persists in its attempts to establish Culture, but it is not effective any more. Institutionalisation grows, but within society, what proliferates is a series of self-built biographies. While States keep working at a local level, individuals are already in a global one[36]. Therefore the issue is to determine the role of the nation-state in a post-industrial era, with special attention to the role individual identities play.

The central element of post-industrial society is a consciousness of the risks to which it is exposed (reflexive communities). A derived circumstance is the collapse of the nation-states that lose great part of their regulatory power within the global risk society[37]. Online society changes the dynamics of industrial society, segmented into labour and technological development groups, dissolving the territorialised paradigm[38]. The nation-states have regulatory power, but no creative capacity: politicians in the nation-state preserve and protect established democratic and economic procedures. Alternative groups of action arise in the nation-state (action is not necessarily governmental). The putative economic and technological control of the modern nation-state weakens, not only because of global risks but also because of the general uncertainty of politics[39].

The arrival of global risks eliminates the concept of “otherness” from external affairs politics. It is assumed that the relevant matters affect us all equally and inevitably. Awareness of the ecological crisis is the beginning of the end of the paradigm of the nation-state in industrial modernity. But, what happens with identities? In the new paradigm, Anthony Giddens and Ulrich Beck talk about “reflexive biographies”, where diverse social identities, even contradictory identities, are overlapped. This does not lead to the disappearance of national identities, but it eliminates their exclusivity.

36 Ibid, p. 223

37 Beck (1999), p. 180

38 Ibid, p. 180

39 Ibid, p.220

Individuals still support national identities, between many other local or global identities. Post-industrial societies (or the reflexive modernity) generate mobile identities.

SECTION III

As we have already mentioned, this characterization of Post-industrial Society is one of many in the literature. This reasserts one of the critical points of GELLNER's work: GELLNER's excessive functionalism prevents him from fostering a theory that is not limited to historical facts and past social circumstances. From existing models that better explain the current social, political, cultural, economical, etc. reality; we can assert that, although the debate remains open, the change of paradigm is indisputable. Identifying this change with "Risk Society", "Post-industrial Society", "Society of Ignorance", etc. may be problematic, but the change itself is clear. Regarding the GELLNERIAN account of nationalism, the controversial notions are: mobility, standardization, and entropy.

The notion of mobility that GELLNER attributes to the division of labour does not correspond with facts. The class system that generated industrialization included a mirage of mobility (properly described by GELLNER), but it did not generate the equality that he attributes to it, not even formally. Mobility generating equality came later, with the change of paradigm. After the barbarism of both World Wars, individuals become passive, productive subjects comparable to mechanical capital. The auto-accomplishment to which BECK refers is generated inside the welfare state, but it is not imposed by it. Individuals are ready to cede part of their freedom to be able to access the results of collective synergies that require the mobility of the individuals within the community, as between communities. Mobility changes the known/stranger paradigm, in such a way that the stranger is *socially there*[40]. The connection between the different spheres that compose society is what prevents homogeneity. The world is not any more composed by compact and homogeneous pieces[41]. The increasing globalization (increasing of mobility) is generating more distinctions. What is the role of the nation-states, active, if lapsed, is an issue to follow.

The notion of cultural standardisation by means of education is the most lasting element between those presented by GELLNER. The problem is that

40 Innerarity (2006), p.135

41 Ibid, p.145

the society in which education has taken place has changed. Education is still an exit ramp to equality of opportunities and it keeps high the demand for training within particular cultures. But education is being used as an instrument for multicultural learning increasingly frequently. The State preserves its aim for homogeneity, but the overlapping of cultural spheres within the State has led it to assume a new role. Culture has ceased being a closed compartment dictated by the state, which sees now that imposed normality is not acceptable any more. It is true, as said above, that affiliations to big groups (at least to the historical establishment groups) ceased, but the social character of individuals lasted. What GELLNER attributes to the industrialism and, therefore, to its resulting nationalism, has been diluted: *we* have been overcome by contingencies[42]. This has translated into politics as deep discrepancies between representatives about what constitutes the authentic nation. The constant review of history has led to the awareness that societies and their cultures are contingent. But does this mean the disappearance of group consciousness and the abandonment of the claim for Culture and Power – indicated by GELLNER–?

GELLNER claims that the communion between culture and power instilled by nationalism generates homogeneous entropy. GELLNER develops his vision of the nation-state from the idea that nations are intrinsically exclusive and that they support internal homogeneity, based on the imposition of a Culture. These are becoming what he metaphorically calls aquariums[43]. GELLNER considers nationalism as a generator of hermetic societies where there is no place for unruly differences. That is why the main issue he focuses on is *the entropy-resistant groups* conflict.

For the aims of the present work, we will assume that it is possible that the initial momentum of industrialization and his nationalistic germ encouraged education implementation within the so-called higher cultures – we will not discuss up to which point we can attribute this to industrialization exclusively – even assuming that, we would still need to explain why, after paradigm change, his approach became insufficient, if not invalid. In his later works he explains this. The moral scene that makes possible nationalism's maximal expression is generated in what GELLNER calls "the third morality stage". This is a shift from reason and universality (Kantian approach) to feeling and cultural specificity (romantic approach, such as Schiller's). The problem is that feelings are linked to communities that turn and reflect upon themselves under the nation-state's protection. This gener-

42 Innerarity (2006), p. 137

43 Gellner (1983), p.130

ates *exclusive clubs*[44]. Ultimately, it generates the same cultural exclusivism of GELLNER's nation-state theory.

Now, if one heeds the current political scene – without reckoning the different levels of nationalism in each region-, we observe that, with a few exceptions, homogeneous countries or communities do not exist. What does this mean? GELLNER's claim about the nationalism generated by industrialisation is false. The identification between culture and power has weakened. Nevertheless, the semantics of a world divided into nation-states is persistent. In this sense, the nationalist claim supports elements already present in GELLNER's analysis: territoriality, national sovereignty, linguistic normalisation, etc. Nevertheless, the actor moving these categories is radically different: cultural homogeneity within the same community is impossible[45], history has assumed its contingency and artificiality[46] (opposite to the component of revival that GELLNER attributes to the nationalism) and, ultimately, individual roots have been dispersed. We have become interested in flows rather than in limitations. Education does not put forward any more a *we* in opposition to the rest of the world, but a positive integrative *us* inside a poly-contextual society[47], both national and supranational. Likewise, the levels of territoriality have increased (appearance of political international organisms), although the emotional component has been kept. In this sense, we have not abandoned individual identities – even less after the process of self-reflective individualization mentioned before-, but we have become open, democratised[48]. The collective consciousness– both emotional and rational, opposite to the erroneous distinction of subjective/objective provided by GELLNER – has overcome limitations on several matters, enriching identities by means of *opening*, ceding political spaces without giving up on their main vindication.

CONCLUSION

As said in the introduction, GELLNER's theory is effective, or at least innovative, when it comes to explaining the pattern of initial development of nationalism. His criticism of nationalism's mysticism – by contrast with its

44 Gellner (1996), p.124

45 Innerarity (2002), p.107

46 Ibid, p.108

47 Innerarity (2006), p.131

48 Innerarity (2002), p. 113

origins – has been presented as valid, in as far as recent socio-political reality has proven it. In spite of this, vindication of polycontextual communities to keep a certain identity between culture and power is still legitimate. The exclusive element that GELLNER credits these communities with is valid only if we assume the entropic homogeneity that GELLNER ascribes to them, and that the state-nation paradigm is valid and in use. Present times hold a vindication of identity, but its translation into politics does not reflect this. Politics has lost its land-linked element, individuals have assumed their several identities, and the sum of these factors has allowed a nationalism that has to be necessarily inclusive. The modern paradigm and the Aquarium-communities referred by GELLNER have been substituted by superposed, mutually enriching, cultural spheres. Many exclusive elements perform in a state-nation model, but these do not correspond with the global society and they lose validity or become merely an option between many. This circumstance is empirically useful while no semantic changes are introduced into academia, allowing an inclusive nationalism's definite stabilisation and the rejection of the modern paradigm as an explanatory one.

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