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Ernest Gellner's Legacy and Social Theory Today

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INTRODUCTION: GELLNER'S LEGACY CONTINUES TO INSPIRE

Petr Skalník

THE LEGACY OF ERNEST GELLNER

Ernest Gellner was active in the social sciences and philosophy during most of the second half of the twentieth century. He was born in Paris in 1925, where his father was pursuing his studies, accompanied by Ernest's mother. The Gellner family lived in Prague until the spring of 1939, when they emigrated to the United Kingdom. While he harboured emotional memories about his childhood in Prague, his higher secondary education and graduate and postgraduate studies took place in England. He joined the Czech Army unit in Britain and participated in the liberation of Czechoslovakia from the Nazi occupation. After the war he briefly studied philosophy at Charles University, but soon became persuaded of the non-democratic prospects of Czechoslovakia and returned to England to continue in his post-graduate studies at Oxford.

His studies were successful, and after a stint in Scotland, Gellner joined for several decades the London School of Economics, where he became Professor of Philosophy with special emphasis on the social sciences, especially sociology. He was attracted to anthropology, though, and carried out a field study in southern Morocco, where he studied alternatives to Islam orthodoxy. He completed his PhD from Oxford and his field monograph was published a few years later (Gellner 1969). But before that, another book appeared from his pen and that caused an uproar. It was *Words and things*, an attack on linguistic philosophy, which was then very popular in Oxford, where the target was Wittgenstein's anti-empiricism (Gellner 1959). His second theoretical book, *Thought and change* (Gellner

1965), first broached the question of nationalism, and that theme kept Gellner busy until his sudden death in 1995 (Gellner 1997). But the controversy with Wittgenstein remained an active red thread of interest for him (see his posthumously published *Language and solitude: Wittgenstein, Malinowski and the Habsburg dilemma*, Gellner 1998; cf. Skalník 2001, 2003b).

Gellner was politically a left liberal, and that attracted him to a critical approach to Marxism and especially Soviet Marxism (Gellner 1980, 1988a; cf. Skalník 2003a, 2007). Somewhat paradoxically, his most well-known book is *Nations and nationalism* (Gellner 1983). Gellner was strongly interested in Islam and he compared it with actually existing socialism and communism (Gellner 1994). His journal articles were widely read and he was able to publish a plethora of them in numerous collections. Last but not least, Ernest Gellner was well read not only in anthropology but also in history, which culminated in his synthetic treatise *Plough, sword and book* (Gellner 1988b).

Gellner was a subject of critical volumes. The first was the result of a conference in Prague that met shortly after his death, although the volume still carried Gellner's prepared response to his critics (Hall and Jarvie 1996). John A. Hall, Gellner's biographer (Hall 2011) published a collection on nations and nationalism (Hall 1998). Other collections of essays were published in Budapest (Periwal 1995), Cambridge (Czegledy 1996/1997), Prague (Musil and Skalník 2001) and Russia (Skalník 2003). Michael Lessnoff published a monograph on *Gellner and modernity* (Lessnoff (2002), and thus far the last evaluative collection was published by the Cambridge University Press (Malešević and Haugaard 2007). Most of these publications have concentrated on Gellner's personality and academic assessments of his work.

The present volume has a different aim and scope. While it refers to Gellner's great contribution to philosophy, social history, sociology, and anthropology, its main accent is on the present and hopefully future impact of Gellner's legacy. In geopolitical perspective, Gellner survived long enough to observe the interethnic war in Bosnia. It is essential to realize how much happened during the almost thirty years since Gellner's death. At the very outset of the twenty-first century, the United States was attacked by an organized group of foreign terrorists. The ominous airborne attack led to punitive action culminating in the longest war waged by the United States, this time in Afghanistan. In 2003, Iraq was falsely accused of possessing weapons of mass destruction and was occupied by

NATO armed forces. The target gradually became the Islamic State, which formed in the power vacuum in the area between eastern Syria and western Iraq. In its place there emerged a Kurdish military democracy (Rojava). The worldwide upswing in various kinds of neo-nationalism has not contributed to political stability. Meanwhile, the People's Republic of China has emerged as a world power that challenges the hegemony of the United States. This political instability in the Middle East and elsewhere in the world has been accompanied by the spectre of global warming. Climatic vulnerability has lately become a dominant topic of international politics and the main concern of a growing movement of environmental activists. A theory of the *Anthropocene*, a geological epoch of human hegemony on planet Earth, has been proposed. Added to these global troubles is the prospect of repeated or permanent pandemics.

The world population has now been connected by mobile phones, and personal computers have become almost universally used. The online system of transmission and preservation of electronic data has heralded a new phase in human history, which I would call *Cyberia*, following Gellner's periodization sequence of Agraria and Industria. The latest phase of robotization is artificial intelligence (dubbed almost affectionately as AI). Gellner saw the human being as a knowledge-seeking creature, a sort of *Homo scire quaerens*, and would probably have found scientific development during the first quarter of the twenty-first century quite fascinating. We can only speculate what his reactions would be to these novelties. But we may be certain that, as a sociologist and anthropologist, he would ask questions about the social consequences of these global changes.

The authors of the chapters and comments presented in this volume address many of the queries mentioned above. I have divided them into clusters of common interest. What follows is a discussion of the meaning of these clusters through the lens of the scholarly legacy of Ernest Gellner.

HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVES

It is quite clear that the Habsburg past fascinated Gellner. He was not the only one. The problem is, however, that Gellner was born seven years after the demise of the Austro-Hungarian Empire and all he knew of it was either what the older generation told him or what he read subsequently. Whereas he idealized his Prague childhood and boyhood memories, the pre-Czechoslovak epoch could be only a myth for him. The Czechoslovak democracy of the First Republic was in many ways built on Austrian

foundations, but it also evinced an open rejection of Austrian symbols (e.g. statues were removed to a 'lapidarium'). Gellner was in fact attracted by mostly Viennese intellectual figures such as Freud, Hayek, Husserl, Popper, and especially Wittgenstein. In what follows, **Johann Arnason** examines Wittgenstein's authority on each distinctive culture as this was juxtaposed to Malinowski's empiricism in Gellner's posthumous book *Language and solitude* (Gellner 1998). Arnason's sociologizing approach is somewhat critical of Gellner, but does not sufficiently appreciate Malinowski's impact on him. In his comment on Arnason, **Chris Hann** seems to praise Arnason above Gellner. According to Hann, Gellner's work simplifies while Arnason's is more complex and broader in scope. Of course, Arnason has the advantage of being born later, which has given him the opportunity to evaluate the whole of Eurasian civilization, including the last quarter-century. Gellner's interest was in Europe.

Another historical perspective is offered by **Thomas Hylland Eriksen**, who discusses postcolonialism as it was and could be found in the writings of Gellner and Said. The latter was a radical writer, and his book *Culture and imperialism* was reviewed very critically by Gellner in *The Times literary supplement*. The two never met, and **Grażyna Kubica**, in her comment, ventures into drafting a fictitious conversation between Gellner and Said after a meal in King's College at Cambridge. Whereas Kubica pictures their mutual positions as irreconcilable, Eriksen seeks points of accord, suggesting a less opposed stance. Said's stress on the imperialist nature of colonialism, which Gellner tries to soften, is today more in vogue within the intellectual critique coming from the Global South. Said wrote that 'the formerly subject peoples are entitled to the same kind of nationalism as, say, the more developed, hence more deserving, Germans or Italians' (Said 1993: 261), while Gellner, as if in a retort, writes that 'universalisation of colonialism is just as good as its abolition' (Gellner 1998: 142). Are Said and Gellner opposed or converging?

Gellner's attack on individualism is actually historical, because it was conceived during Gellner's study of philosophy at Oxford during the late 1940s. However, his posthumous *Language and solitude* proves that he never abandoned this concern. **Ian Jarvie** is arguably one of the most erudite specialists on Gellner (see his comprehensive 'Bibliography of Ernest Gellner', Jarvie 1996: 687–718). Originally trained in philosophy at the London School of Economics (LSE), he later worked substantially in social anthropology as well. He very skilfully discusses the vicissitudes of individualism versus communalism in Gellner's work. Gellner, according

to Jarvie, won both his arguments. He proved that linguistic philosophy was erroneously conceived, while society, following Durkheim, was more than an aggregate of individuals. At the same time, Gellner attacked psychologism in the social sciences. Society included institutions that enabled action. Both Gellner's foes continue to exist, and that is the reason why Gellner's philosophy of society is alive today. **David Gellner's** broadly conceived comment reveals that Ernest Gellner hoped to avoid 'hermeneutic plague' by transferring to anthropology, but found out that it had entered anthropology as well. When commenting on the methodological individualism debate, Gellner's son admits that there is disagreement between his father and sociologists such as Bourdieu or Giddens. Unlike Gellner, they believed that individual tribesmen and their conduct explained the functioning of their social systems.

THEORETICAL ISSUES

Ernest Gellner was a major theorist of social sciences. Most authors of chapters in this part are anthropologists. An exception is the chapter written by **Ralph Schroeder**. This author, specializing in computational social sciences, argues that 'a machine can learn and teach itself how to improve upon theories—or data-driven hypotheses—about the social world'. This approach he applies to Gellner's theory of history, and works also with Weber's enchantment/disenchantment nexus. Schroeder is an innovator who shows that Gellner's structure of history may not be liked by many, but actually can even accommodate such novelties as climate change. In effect, Schroeder is a powerful supporter of the applicability of Gellner's theories to understanding Cyberia. **Siniša Malešević's** comment is very pertinent here, as it points out the political volatility of computation in social sciences, and also the possible one-sidedness of AI because of its use of positivist data.

Gellner's scientific rationality, expressed through Weber's disenchantment, is the subject of **Alan Macfarlane's** chapter. Macfarlane's reputation was established by an analysis of English individualism; he then went to the East and studied the Gurungs of Nepal, Japanese society, and finally Chinese society. Gellner remained a student of Western modernity, be it Islam or communist societies, but never crossed the line dividing the Western 'axial' civilizations from the Eastern societies. Gellner remained faithful to the tradition of thinking along the lines of David Hume and Max Weber, for whom enchantment was deposed by disenchantment.

Macfarlane believes that the secret of the East is that modernity there combines with enchantment. One can of course ask just how enchanting the Chinese (Korean, Vietnamese, Mongolian, Laotian) adaptation of Marxism-Leninism is. Macfarlane also speculates about Gellner's supposed immortality. **Adam Horálek**, in his comment, transports the enchantment-disenchantment debate to the question of nationalism, and there he apparently finds Gellner inspirational.

Chris Hann, in his chapter, brings a critique of Gellner's neo-liberalism. The author, a left-wing economic anthropologist, points out Gellner's insufficient analysis of economy and seems not to recognize his search for a socially responsible society. Hann's critique concentrates on one of Gellner's last synthetic works, namely *Conditions of liberty: Civil society and its rivals*, and his treatment of the concept of Civil Society. Economy is reduced to production while ignoring exchange and affluence. Political economy is missing in Gellner. The twentieth century is better understood by Gellner, but it is a liberal or later neoliberal understanding, not a social one. Socialism was to him an ideocracy. On the other hand, Gellner cared for social relations, which today's post-Gellnerian societies do not treat well. Hann mentions that Gellner could not stomach novelties like illiberal democracy. Hann's text called forth two comments. In his comment, **Johann Arnason** argues that socialism/communism cannot be characterized as ideocracy. This label should rather be used for Islamic societies. The Soviet model was much more materialistic. Eventually, Arnason asks how Gellner might have read Xi's China. **Anatoly Khazanov's** volunteered comment is a militant piece. His vigorous diatribe against Hann's critique of Gellner is quite eloquent and will possibly lead to a polemic. Comments in this volume are left without response and it is hoped that the book's appeal will not be dimmed by this comment's publication.

Daniele Conversi connects Gellner's approach to nationalism with the question of the *Anthropocene*, the new epoch determined predominantly by humans. That epoch, started by Western modernity, may be the shortest geological period, as it might end human and indeed all life on earth. What would be Gellner's response to the transition from Industria with its nation-states to the *Anthropocene* without any prospects? The anthropogenic origins of climate change are now fully established and the question seems to be when and how it will lead to a catastrophic outcome. Conversi believes that industrialization in the Gellnerian sense did not only engender nationalism but initiated climate change as well. The connection between nationalism and climate change should be seriously studied. The

possibility of 'omnicide' was perceived by Gellner, even though he had more in mind nuclear self-destruction. 'Unsustainable mass consumption', initiated in the United States, is a kind of permanent potlatch, that is, destruction, and Gellner warned against it. Conversi's term 'nationalism mode of production' also means that the atomism of political nations prevents a concerted effort to mitigate climate change. The comment by **Thomas Hylland Eriksen** basically endorses Conversi's findings, but also develops several alternative future developments. Will nationalism become the last line of defence or disappear along with the advancing *Anthropocene*?

David Gellner devotes his chapter to populism in the work of his father. Ernest Gellner's co-edited book on populism was not so much meant to debunk political populism but to show that populism is a characteristic of intellectuals. This has to do with Gellner's critique of linguistic philosophy, which remained in the background of his work throughout his creative life. Populism is closely linked with nationalism; indeed, it is a kind of nationalism. Populism is also a method derived from the belief in the importance of folk. Unfortunately, Gellner did not write a book on the Czech nationalism that, based on the idealization of folk culture, eventually led to the quest for political independence. **Mihály Sárkány**'s comment shows that, while he does not always agree with David Gellner, 'populism is the consequence of too great a gap between the upper and lower strata of society, which is changing towards democracy'. Populism is evidently a major actor in the contemporary world, and Gellner's views on it help us understanding its novel manifestations.

GELLNER ON HISTORY

Guido Franzinetti, in his chapter, evaluates Gellner's theory of nationalism from the perspective of historians. Most historians appear to be not in agreement with the theory. At the same time, historians may have missed the point: Gellner's theory is highly abstract and does not pretend to compete with historiography. Nevertheless, it seems to me that Gellner's structure of history is complementary to what historians do, especially those who periodize history. The transition between two major epochs that Gellner calls *Agraria* and *Industria* begets, among other things, nationalism. Without nationalism there would be no nation-states. There is also a question of the different logic of (social) science versus the humanities. Many historians consider their discipline to be part of the humanities, whereas social anthropologists and sociologists occupy themselves with

science. The details of Franzinetti's analysis, including his use of innumerable references, brings the reader towards a new approach to Gellner. **David Shankland**'s comment seems to appreciate this complexity. That is why he concludes with the idea of rapprochement between the positions of historians and anthropologists.

Another chapter that aims at history and its theory is **Siniša Malešević**'s discussion of particular aspects, namely group solidarity, in the work of the medieval sociologist Ibn Khaldun and in Gellner's work. Ibn Khaldun stresses war, which calls forth the group solidarity of each estate, whereas Gellner finds that economic forces in the industrial era create nationalism as a special form of group solidarity that straddles social stratification. Gellner, of course, had an advantage over Ibn Khaldun because he could analyse both *Agraria* and *Industria*. Nevertheless, he seems to have underestimated the importance of war and violence in both epochs. The Sword matters mostly in *Agraria*, not so much in *Foragia* or *Industria*. One can ask what role the Sword (in whichever form) would play in *Cyberia*. As **Guido Franzinetti** shows in his succinct comment, that theory of war, especially as pertains to *Industria*, is missing in Gellner. That of course makes Gellner's theory of nationalism vulnerable. His thesis that production replaces predation appears to be wishful thinking. Rather, I would argue that predation is propelled by production; ascent to the status of an economic power reflects itself in the rapid growth of armaments and aggression. Group solidarity resulting from war mongering may in some cases embrace hundreds of millions.

Andre Gingrich discusses intersections between anthropology and history. What fascinated Gellner was the functionalist scepticism vis-à-vis history. On the other hand, he wanted to incorporate indigenous historiography. Thus, his analysis of Maghreb and the Near East is, in a way, an attempt at historicization of anthropology and, vice versa, an anthropologization of history. This is the meaning of the combination of Malinowski and Ibn Khaldun. Gellner also exchanged views with Jack Goody, who also attempted to combine anthropology with history in trying to explain multiple modernities of his day. The book *Plough, sword and book* (1988) is evidence of Gellner's thought about the structure of history. **Daniele Conversi**, in his comment, concludes that Lenin's concept of self-determination was closer to Woodrow Wilson than to Marx. Anthropology has much to do if allied to history.

Further evidence about the role of history in Gellner's thought is provided by **Nikolay N. Kradin**'s discussion of periodization. In fact, he

concentrates on Agraria, Gellner's second stage of history. Kradin is interested in the elites, but he specifically analyses nomadic and mountain societies as examples of more self-managing egalitarian chiefdoms. Comparison explains the so-called Greek Miracle. Kradin, aware of Gellner's writings on the subject, pays attention to Soviet Marxism and its treatment of the East. Finally, he describes the study of nomadism in the Soviet Union. His chapter helps us to understand better the Soviet-Russian world of scholarship as it strives to participate in global research. **Anatoly Khazanov**, in his comment, adds a number of Gellner's viewpoints that help in the understanding of Kradin's picture of Soviet and post-Soviet developments.

Lahouari Addi, in his chapter, dissects Gellner's views about the difference between scriptural Islam and the oral faith of the saints as it is exposed in *Saints of the Atlas*. Addi's analysis is critical of the somewhat rigid dichotomy in Gellner's early rendition. Not only did Gellner further develop his conception in his later writing; as **Andre Gingrich** asserts in his comment, Addi's critique is not always valid. However, his discussion of the possible parallels between Islam and Christianity, especially Protestantism and urban Islam on the one hand and rural maraboutic religion of the saints and Catholicism on the other, is fascinating. Evidently there is a connection between the metaphysical dynamics and the emergence of nationalism. Whereas the saints tend towards egalitarian social balance, the *ulema*, similarly to Protestantism, supports the state and nation. But this parallel is not straightforward, and Gellner would have most likely brought new insights had he had a chance to follow the recent Arab revolutions. Gingrich's rich comment recapitulates Addi's disagreements with Gellner, although he agrees only partly. The question has been whether urban scriptural Islam is in strict opposition to rural mystic Islam, but perhaps it is rather that society stands in the opposition to community (see Gellner 1994: 51). Gingrich believes that Gellner's enthusiasm for the potential of modernist reform in Islam was not fully substantiated. How would he have reacted to the Arab revolutions that started fifteen years after his death?

GELLNER AND ANTHROPOLOGY

This part starts with the chapter by **John A. Hall**, who undertakes to show that Ernest Gellner's famous attack on linguistic philosophy, dominant during the 1950s in most influential British universities, was in fact essential for the future of social anthropology. The reason was because linguistic philosophy, claiming that 'each society lives by its own rules',

tried to hijack social anthropology for its own idealist purpose. Gellner, a philosopher who carried out substantial anthropological fieldwork, was best equipped to prove that linguistic philosophers had nothing to do with social anthropology. Hall stresses that four of Gellner's early methodological papers have decisive importance for explanation in social anthropology. His functionalism means that his later theory of nationalism must be corrected. Nationalism is an aspect of modernity but not an effect of *Industria*. **Ian Jarvie**, in his succinct comment, directly asserts that Gellner was a 'robust materialist'. He is not terribly excited by Hall's idea that explanation of human behaviour is morally insulting. Instead, he believes that 'explanatory interest in the other is a form of honouring'.

Adam Kuper, in his dense contribution, intimates that Gellner's cosmopolitanism was a prerequisite of his anthropology. His keen interest in Islam parallels the achievement of Israeli statehood in the midst of the Arab world. His philosophy led him to empiricism and the scientific method, which alone led to reliable knowledge. His heroes, if any, were Popper and Malinowski. Gellner, according to Kuper, concluded that science made possible modernity with its industrialism and secularism, but also nationalism. Kuper underlines the importance of Gellner's theory of history. (The question is what follows *Industria*, which Gellner could not foresee, nor test as empirical reality.) But eventually he stresses that, in Gellner, philosophy and anthropology find a synthesis. In his comment, **Petr Skalník** throws doubt on Kuper's accent on the influence of the Austro-Hungarian Empire on Gellner. His theory of nationalism is complex and possibly most lively in his legacy.

One of Gellner's most recent disciples, **David Shankland**, contributed a chapter that deserves keen attention. The first part recapitulates Gellner's life and theories. Shankland's interest in the history of social thought brought him to the early post-war time, when the young Gellner wrote a long letter to his teacher Karl Popper. Gellner is critical of Popper, and so is Shankland critical of Gellner. What is remarkable was Gellner's passion to encourage criticism of his theories. With all the requisite reservations, Gellner was an admirer of Popper's philosophy. But he turned to social anthropology early in his career perhaps to understand more deeply the difference between Open and Closed societies. Empirical ethnography led Gellner to the understanding of closeness, and the same method helped him to describe 'the exit' into openness. Shankland proceeds to explain his own work in Turkey through the lens of Gellner's writing on Islam. Both Alevis and Sunni Muslims adjusted to the republican order in Turkey; Gellner was

well aware of the specificity of Turkey, but he did not live up to the Turkey of today, when the country is evidently displaying more Islamic features and distancing itself from Europe more than during Gellner's lifetime. **Lale Yalçın-Heckmann** comments that Gellner saw in Turkey a disproof of Ibn Khaldun and that even today's events, such as the 2016 coup attempt, should be assessed from a deeper research perspective.

Lale Yalçın-Heckmann's chapter first returns to Gellner's deliberations about Turkey. One of the few countries in the non-European world that kept its independence while facing foreign colonial expansion, the Ottoman Empire, and namely republican Kemalist Turkey, decided on its own to take a path towards Westernization and eventually democracy. That in itself fascinated Gellner, who repeatedly reflected on the liberal and democratic prospects for a country in which the army has been a corrector of the chosen path, where a series of coups was followed by democratic restorations. Yalçın-Heckmann then recalls her fieldwork in her native Turkey, which took place among the Kurds under Gellner's supervision. Eastern Turkey has been marked by the interplay of tribes and rulers within the framework of Islam. This somewhat mirrors Gellner's fieldwork situation in Atlas Morocco. Eventually, she discusses the meaning of the unsuccessful army coup in 2016. Was it more a variant of the previous dynamism than a contribution to the petrification of Islam-seasoned authoritarianism? **David Shankland**, in his comment, draws attention to the importance of religion in the recent development of the Turkish state under AKP party sway. He agrees that here Gellner's work and Mardin's work intertwine. Van Bruinessen's treatment of tribal Turkey is appreciated as well. Gellner remains an important key to the understanding of modern Turkey.

GELLNER AND NATIONALISM

This part begins with the chapter by **Anatoly Khazanov**, who seeks to understand today's nationalism and nation-states. He argues very colourfully that both nationalisms and nation-states are globally distributed. Notwithstanding that some powerful states strive to suppress nationalism in their ethnically distinct provinces, their efforts are not very successful. Using force has no prospect. Globalization does not contribute to less nationalism; on the contrary, nationalism thrives in globalization and nation-states do not disappear. Gellner had problems with the aftermath of the fall of the Soviet Union, as he feared the growth of nationalism, which was often based on mythology. Khazanov shows that Gellner's

theory of nationalism remains inspirational even in the post-communist era. New unification processes (such as the European Union or the African Union) lead to a strengthening of nationalist feelings and movements rather than to supranational political formations. As Khazanov states, to write an obituary of nationalism is premature. Cantonization as an alternative to nation-states is also rather unrealistic. Gellner remains inspirational, even though he could not foresee all that is happening in the twenty-first-century world. **John A. Hall**, in his comment, corroborates Khazanov's standpoint. He points out that developments around Russia and China, as authoritarian powers, are leading to the rise of illiberal nationalism.

The chapter by **Adam Horálek** strives to apply Gellner's thoughts on nationalism and nation-building to his field data from Taiwan. This island country formed as an ethnic hierarchy (Austronesian aborigines, old Chinese immigrants, post-1949 Kuomintang refugees from mainland China). Horálek analyses the complex identity relations on the move within the framework of the One China ideology. He shows that Taiwanese identity is stronger with the younger generations of those who were born on the island. Although Gellner's theory of nationalism is Eurocentric, it can also be used when trying to understand non-European societies such as China and Taiwan. **Alan Macfarlane**, in his comment, wonders how the Eurocentrism of Gellner's theory can be applied to Asia. He argues against the existence of a nation-state in China that is an imperial civilization, but he does not disagree with Horálek's thesis about the dynamics of nationalism in Taiwan. We evidently need more research and thinking about the applicability of Gellner's theory of nationalism to non-European areas.

The chapter written by **Grażyna Kubica** applies Gellner's theory of nationalism to her native Silesia. Silesianess, as the identity of people living in the southwestern part of Poland and northeastern Czechia, has been contested for centuries. Neither country recognizes Silesians as an ethnic minority, but those Silesians who declared themselves to be Germans or Poles have enjoyed the status of official minority. Kubica discusses the various facets of Silesianess, and wonders why some Silesians do not feel enough belonging to it. In Silesia, Gellner's nationalism is turning into identity politics. This is because Silesians do not strive for their own state, but would be content with a kind of cultural recognition as a minority. Cieszyn Silesia, where Kubica did her long-term research, has been almost fully assimilated into the Polish nation while still nurturing a separate culture of resistance at the same time. **Marcin Brocki**, in his comment, introduces his research in another part of Silesia, namely Opole Silesia, showing

the opportunism of declaring ethnic identity. He is critical of Kubica's approach because, according to him, she follows Gellner's 'fairy-tale theory' too closely.

Vytis Čiubrinskas addresses in his chapter the question of the cultural conditioning of ethnicization in the post-communist nation-state of Lithuania, where the Polish minority occupies the area in and around the capital city of Vilnius. Although the Polish minority in Lithuania is relatively small, it is quite active in the cultural field. There has been a rich dynamics of 'occupation' as well. Gellner's usage of the term 'cultural engineering' helps Čiubrinskas to better understand the majoritarian arguments. The late Christian Giordano's concept of *ethnocracy* stresses the importance of ethnicization, which allows states to divide and rule in complex ethnic situations such as that of the late Soviet Union. 'Nationality' in the ethnic sense was even inscribed in personal documents as a complement to citizenship. Paradoxically, in the post-Soviet context, Lithuania people who were classified as Poles refer to their old Soviet status in order to enhance their otherness vis-à-vis ethnic Lithuanians. Ethnicization seems to be one of the topics where Gellner's theory could serve as inspiration for further research. **Zdeněk Uherek**'s comment refers to the findings of Rogers Brubaker who, unlike Gellner, has specialized in minorities in the post-communist world. And he points out that Gellner anticipated the complexities of ethnicization, using the example of the late Habsburg Empire.

The last chapter in this part on Gellner and nationalism was written by **Zdeněk Uherek**. His approach is epistemological, as it discusses the dimensions of two 'words', namely nation and nationalism, with special emphasis on the latter. In Gellner's theory, nationalism is, however, presented as a kind of originator of modern nations, leaving the much older notion of nation aside. Gellner gradually moves from nation to nationalism as the titles of his books indicate. Further, Uherek refers to a plethora of recent authors on different kind of nationalism, such as transnationalism, masochistic nationalism, medical nationalism or digital nationalism, which seem to depart from Gellner. Whereas in Gellner's understanding nationalism unites, these new kinds of nationalism, or one would say neo-nationalism, tend to divide and cause conflict. **Vytis Čiubrinskas**' comment approvingly points out three dimensions of nationalism, to wit, epistemological, ideological, and 'as a reality'. He also turns attention to the term ethnicity as broached by Brubaker; it has also been commonly used in Soviet and post-Marxist Russian ethnology.

Finally, general comments by **Aleksandar Bošković**, **Nikola Balaš** and **Petr Skalník** evoke the atmosphere of the Prague conference, as they

followed particular groups of presentations. These comments have documentary value, because they were not further revised in the light of later revisions of the chapters.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The chapters and comments included in the present volume have touched most of the legacy of Ernest Gellner as a philosopher, sociologist, and anthropologist. One is again surprised by how broad and deep Gellner's thought was. Now of course, so much effort was not made just to come out with another admiration gala. The point here is to distil that which has more than historical value, namely, the ideas with which Gellner's oeuvre helps us to understand, examine, and possibly even resolve the conundrums of the twenty-first century and the concurrent debates.

Gellner's academic career developed during the Cold War era. Only the last six years of his life can be counted as part of the initial post-communist period. Although some might look at Gellner as a non-political inhabitant of an ivory tower, it is obvious to an attentive observer that his scholarship reflected events in the political field. His liberal standpoint never wavered. He left Czechoslovakia for Britain because of national socialist tyranny and anti-Semitism. He fought the Nazi tyranny from the first moment he could be a soldier, but when he saw after the war that the pre-war liberal and democratic Czechoslovak ideal was gone and a communist variant of tyranny was taking its place, he returned to Britain. There he pursued his university studies, followed by a splendid academic career at the London School of Economics and subsequently at the University of Cambridge. While he was at Cambridge, the Berlin Wall fell and Czechoslovakia, together with other 'socialist' countries of Eastern Europe, shook off the yoke of communist regimes. The Soviet Union fell apart two years later. Gellner was to retire from Cambridge at the same time. His philanthropic friend George Soros decided to enhance the chances for open societies in the ex-communist parts of Europe by establishing the Central European University, and Gellner was appointed to its faculty in Prague. While working there, he died on 5 November 1995. At that time, the end of the Bosnian war had been negotiated at Dayton, Ohio. If he had lived, would he have undertaken an analysis of this first post-communist ethnic war?

During those decades spent in Britain, Ernest Gellner followed avidly the news from Central and Eastern Europe and indefatigably commented on them in British liberal and social science presses. He developed a special

interest in Soviet Marxism as applied to history and anthropology. In particular, he looked for openings and creative loopholes in social science thought. Whereas his writing on Central and Eastern Europe still awaits publication as a collection, many if not most of his articles on Soviet anthropology, history, and sociology were published as books. This part of Gellner's thinking and writing is not reflected in this collection of chapters and comments. The reader is referred to these publications and subsequent evaluations. But Gellner was quite concerned with the potential of a new wave of nationalism emerging from the ruins of the Soviet empire. His legacy therefore consists in showing that, the more humankind dons a straightjacket of global uniformity, the more vigorous are the reactions of culturally (religions included) defined groups, be they nations, regions, ecologically oppressed people, and so on. The interplay of the state and civil society would and should help to prevent that these reactions from becoming tragic and lethal.

These trends, however, are connected with the philosophical and sociological debates that informed the early career of Ernest Gellner. Empirical research and empiricism as a *démarche* put Gellner among those who want to know the truth both in particular and in general, rejecting the tenet of the closed circuit of facts for facts. Only if we accept that Gellner's trajectory has its red thread of logic may we start to admit that there is a kind of thought and research inertia leading through Gellner from the past into the future. The chapters and comments which follow this introduction testify in a plural but also directional way about Gellner's legacy as a mostly lively multitude of ideas, methodological points, and instructions that have helped us to grasp the world as it rushes deeper and deeper into the unknowns of the present century. It is to my mind futile, nay unnecessary, to decide about the immortality of Gellner as philosopher, sociologist, and anthropologist. The future development of social theory will determine the viability of one's particular import.

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PART II

Theoretical Issues



CHAPTER 7

Gellner in the Anthropocene: Modernity, Nationalism and Climate Change

Daniele Conversi

INTRODUCTION

When Ernest Gellner began writing on nationalism, anthropogenic climate change had not yet been fully identified as a major global crisis and a threat to human survival. But by 1983, when his most famous and highly cited book *Nations and Nationalism* appeared in print, the prospect of climate change was already being considered across a variety of scientific disciplines (Rich 2019).

This chapter begins with an observation: while Gellner emphasized industrialization and industrialism as the matrix of nationalism, he also fully identified the former with the beginning of the modern age—the industrial society that slowly replaced agricultural society as the inaugurator and hallmark of modernity. In Gellner’s theory industrialization and industrialism had led to the expansion of nationalism. Yet, industrialization eventually brought about something more drastically life changing than industrialism itself: an increasing reliance on fossil fuel consumption

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for economic growth, inaugurating ‘fossil capitalism’ (Malm 2014). While for Gellner the rise of industrial society propelled the entrance into modernity, it simultaneously paved the way for a precipitous exit from it—even though we are only just beginning to be aware of the trend today after decades of interdisciplinary scientific research (Latour 2018a). The notion of the *Anthropocene* signals this radical historical shift, a highly traumatic transition that may be incomprehensible within the classical modernist *Weltanschauung*.

This chapter seeks to answer two core existential questions. First, if the effects of the passage from agricultural to industrial society were so all-pervasive, which consequences can be envisaged in a forced exit from modernity due to its own short-circuit? Second, if industrial expansion has led to both nationalism and climate change, and their pairing has become particularly pernicious (Conversi 2020c), how could a Gellnerian perspective enlighten us as we are being pushed arbitrarily towards a new time-frame, which might well turn out to be the shortest historical age ever. We have now entered an era of extreme uncertainty in which revolutionary, rather than radical, solutions are required.

This chapter speculates on how Gellner might have responded to such an existential question, as we begin envisaging the utmost fringes of a self-destructive modernity devoid of all eschatological meanings. I will focus on two aspects of Gellner’s thought: the role of industrialism (and industrialization) and the critique of postmodernism. Of the two, the first is the most consequential in terms of creating a possible new theoretical approach for the upcoming times.

TIMING AND THE WISDOM OF INSIGHT

Ernest Gellner wrote about 200 years after the beginning of the Industrial Revolution, when its human consequences were already clearly visible. The resulting landscape was indeed so clear that Gellner could make his famous diagnosis about what I succinctly identify as the *nationalist mode of production*, that is, the way the new social organization spawned by industrialism engendered modern nations (thus shaping the ‘ideology’ of nationalism, although ideology didn’t figure much in Gellner’s analysis). Gellner (1983) famously identified the rise of nationalism with the expansion of industrialism and its requirement of a highly mobile, culturally uniform labour force.

Yet, when the Industrial Revolution began with the advent of the steam engine in the late eighteenth century, no corpus of scientific research or scholarly projections were available to anticipate that in the foreseeable future the normal, indeed dominant, institutional makeup of modernity would be the *nation-state*. Even less likely was any anticipation that an institution entirely underpinned and sustained by the ideology of *nationalism* would dominate world politics.

This lack of insight is in sharp contrast with the much more traumatic scenario emerging before our eyes: it is now science that is conveying the message of how the future may be, or rather, may *not* be. Indeed, thanks to gargantuan scientific advances, we can be pretty certain that a ‘world without nations’ is a likely outcome of the drastic changes brought about by the current political economic model and its meltdown—if no dramatic counteraction is rapidly undertaken at a global level.

Are nations going to be once and forever eclipsed? Or may they survive? How? The answer to these questions of course depends on a lot of factors, which largely impinge on the way both political elites and civil society may react and mobilize to counter the looming threat. Just to clarify: this is not the usual refrain about the imminent death of nations pronounced so many times before by Marxists, anarchists, neoliberals, free market fundamentalists and many others, that nations will fade away thanks to the proletariat revolution or the advent of neoliberal globalization.

The ‘end of it all’ is approaching in a much more prosaic and less ideological way insofar as a rapidly expanding body of scientific research is churning out a quantity of data that, put together and merged, can easily lead us to predict a ‘world without nations’ in the sense of a world with no human communities endowed with the capacity to survive, except in liminal, suboptimal conditions.

The twentieth century has often been defined as ‘the century of genocide’. The twenty-first century is well on its way to becoming the century of *omnicide*—a term originally coined during the Cold War, when the possibility of a nuclear holocaust was clearly visible (Gralnick 1988). The term *omnicide* as the ultimate terminator has very recently been recovered to encapsulate the reality of a series of catastrophic environmental crises, largely centred on, but limited to, climate change (Levene and Conversi 2014).

This brings us to a new chronology. If Gellner was largely concerned with the passage *from agricultural to industrial society*, the shift we are

going through in these decades is much more abrupt, immediate, shattering and permanent in its impact on society and the very lives of millions of people.¹ Indeed such an impact transcends human societies, encompasses the whole variety of living forms and impinges on the very surface of the Earth. We have indeed entered a new timeframe, the Anthropocene.

The Anthropocene (Crutzen and Stoermer 2000; Steffen et al. 2011, 2015; Zalasiewicz et al. 2021) represents an entirely *new geological epoch distinct from the Holocene*. The Holocene Epoch has terminated as a consequence of human activities (Zalasiewicz et al. 2021). Hence the Anthropocene can hardly contain a pre-geological age like modernity that is exclusively centred on human history: the new chronology of the Anthropocene reveals the limits of modernity, particularly its standardizing, homogenizing connotations. The *Anthropocene Working Group* (f. 2009) has been set up to address the inclusion of the new epoch in the *Geological Time Scale* through a robust and all-comprehensive chronostratigraphic and geo-chronological understanding of available data with the aim of reaching a globally synchronous base and inception time (Zalasiewicz et al. 2017, 2021).

From a humanities and social sciences perspective, Anthropocene means that, to a large extent, we are already *exiting history*: humans are being *expelled from history* and propelled into geological times. Again, this is not part of the *end of history* hubris pontificated by neoliberal ideologues. Quite the contrary. Yet it may well be the end of history as we know it—a largely as a consequence of (recent) human action and inaction, the end of the self-destructive Pandora's box released by late capitalism. In *exiting history* and entering geological time, we are transforming ourselves into human fossils and, in the process, we're fossilizing everything around us: transforming all other living beings into fossils, too.

How meaningful can the notion of *modernity* be once one is aware of the possibility of abandoning history? Modernity can only make sense within human history. In the Anthropocene, the notion of modernity itself, so central to the study of nationalism, is being torn apart and forced down under the pulling force of multiple strains and stressors.

In other words, everything previously associated with modernity is being *turned upside down*. This has nothing to do with the superficial and cryptic notion of 'post-modernity', first developed within an architecture where the hegemony of modernism had been all the rage for over a century. There is nothing 'post-' or relativistic about the ongoing mutations,

as they are slowly leading to a paradigm shift in all human, social and life science disciplines.

As history, however fictitious or invented it might be, remains at the core of nationhood, we should question whether the continuity of nations might be at all possible. Overwhelming cross-disciplinary scientific research is clear that, unless drastic changes are introduced into our daily lives by radically altering our consumerist lifestyles, human continuity cannot be granted even in the short term (McCoy et al. 2014). Whereas one or two decades ago some of us worried about our grandchildren, today we are (or should be) genuinely concerned about our children. While many pin their hopes on the *deus ex machina* of technolatry led by the double-edged sword of AI, no *technofix* will ever be able to address, let alone resolve, the multiple challenges and feedback loops which the self-destructive neoliberal order has created (Antal 2018; Huesemann and Huesemann 2011).

The human consequences of the entrance into the Anthropocene will likely be so pronounced that the passage from agricultural to industrial society, at the core of most of Gellner's explanation, may well be seen as minor in comparison.

FUTURES: THE CERTAINTY OF CLIMATE CHANGE, THE UNCERTAINTY OF HUMAN SURVIVAL

Once it used to be said that we have only two certainties about the future: death and the taxman. In the last decade, millions of pages of scientific research indicate that a third candidate should be added to future certainties: climate change. It is no longer a question of if, but of when and how.

According to one well-known study, by 2013 the overwhelming majority, over 97%, of scientists across all disciplines were in general agreement about the anthropogenic origins of climate change (Cook et al. 2013). This may, however, be mostly irrelevant, as science is a process of trial and error and much scientific evidence can later prove to be not absolutely certain. The very notion of scientific 'proof' is incorrect and uncertain, as the best possible status achievable for a scientific theory is merely 'not-yet-disproven'. If one applies Popperian principles, largely that of falsifiability (Popper 1959), one may find more validation than falsification. If 'all swans are white', no black swan about climate change has yet emerged to

falsify the consensus hypothesis. That means that we are pretty much doomed if we continue with ‘business as usual’.

If climate change is a *certainty*, how long it will take before it affects the lives of every single living being? How and to what degree will they be affected? How will societies and political institutions cope and react? Will the political order and state system collapse, as has already been hypothesized about a decade ago (Parenti 2012, 2014)? Which institutions will take their place? Are alternative social communities and political institutions more likely to offer opportunities for human survival? How many will survive? Under what conditions? How much time do we have to change in order to avert a complete (life-erasing) catastrophe?

All these questions will hover around us for a long time as we enter into the realm of utter uncertainty. But, before a road map can be devised, we still have to understand when and where all this originated, to identify the aetiology of this ultimate environmental ailment, the causative sequence leading to the nadir point we are beginning to cross. Ultimately, it all boils down to when the origins of the Anthropocene can be dated. Among a variety of chronology proposals, the one I believe to be the most realistic is the identification of such origins in very recent times, since the exponential increase in greenhouse gas emissions coincided with the expansion of mass consumerism and the unprecedented accumulation of human waste, which has immensely accelerated between the 1960s and 2020s (Syvitski et al. 2020).

In the social sciences, the lack of consensus on the Anthropocene is more pronounced, and can be related to subjectivities and ‘perceptions of epochal transformation’ (Hann 2017). And it is here, at this momentous stage, that rereading Gellner can reveal some surprising connections. Industrialism is really about uniformity, cultural homogenization and the replaceability of human beings, not just as human tools for the expansion of industrial elites, but as cannon fodder (soldiers) in times of war (Conversi 2007, 2008; Mandelbaum 2013). Nationalism itself has been used as a tool for standardization and regimentation. These conditions of uniformity and replaceability also characterize the social formation of the Anthropocene as a new era of supreme homogenization. In fact, some biologists have used the more appropriate term *homogenocene* to indicate that the human impact on the global environment is characterized by the erosion of all forms of diversity, including biodiversity (Curnutt 2000).

The usual, if not most widely accepted, *chronology* for the beginning of anthropogenic climate change (at the core of the Anthropocene)

considers the Industrial Revolution as the main catalyst. Such a timeframe is the one officially adopted by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) and is also the most consistent with Gellnerian theory for the self-destructive path taken up by humankind—or rather, its elites.

Most relevant, the IPCC dates the warming of the Earth to a watershed event around c. 1760–1780 as steam power began to be used in Britain. When the signatories of the 2015 Paris UN Climate Change Conference (COP 21 or CMP 11) agreed the ambitious goal of not exceeding the upper threshold of a 1.5°C temperature rise, they referred to the rise in global temperatures since the Industrial Age. So, the beginning of the Industrial Revolution is set as a symbolic starting point for the onset of climate change. Successive rises in the Earth’s temperature are thus measured on the basis of that threshold date.

However, it is worth noting that, while the Industrial Revolution began in the 1780s, *its impact was not fully experienced in most sections of industrializing societies until the 1840s* (Hobsbawm 1990: 27). Indeed, per capita GDP remained relatively stable before the Industrial Revolution and, as industrialization led to capital accumulation, per capita economic growth also grew despite increasing pauperization and proletarianization. It was not really the Industrial Revolution that created the problem, but its ultimate consequences in terms of the expansion of the capitalist mode of production with its homogenizing impacts and widening class divide.

CLIMATE CHANGE AND NATIONALISM

In Gellnerian terms, we should thus note that what gave rise to nationalism also gave rise to climate change: industrialization and industrialism led to both. It is therefore curious, if not awkward, to note that until 2019 no nationalism scholar had been able to connect the dots (Conversi 2020c)—with one or two exceptions.

One possible exception was Eric Hobsbawm, partly left aside after the Cold War because his persistent commitment to Marxist analysis precluded his capacity to foresee the endurance of nationalism (Hobsbawm 1990). But Hobsbawm remains one of the most prominent historians of the last century. While he may not have addressed the relationship between nationalism and climate change directly, he was clearly aware of how the former could have a huge impact on environmental destruction. Several other historians have previously considered climate as a driving factor in history (Sörlin and Lane 2018).

Rather surprisingly, no research, investigation or study had connected climate change and nationalism—at least until 2020, when a book (Lieven 2020a) and a few initial essays appeared (Conversi 2020a, 2020b, 2020c; Lieven 2020a). To synthesize a developing field, three approaches have emerged to address the relationship between climate change and nationalism. A first position relates to Ulrich Beck’s idea of *risk society* utterly discarding nationalism as a walkable route, while refocusing on the European Union as a multilevel governance paradigm that can simultaneously deal with the parallel threats of nationalism and climate change (Beck 2016). A second *realist* position considers the nation-state as a critical institution that cannot be transcended in international climate negotiations and agreements (Lieven 2020a, 2020b). Anatol Lieven’s ‘environmental realism’ addresses the ‘failures of liberal internationalism’ by connecting climate change to political legitimacy as a security threat, which remains a more state-centred concept. Finally, a third *near cosmopolitan* position tries to find a middle ground between nationalism and multilateralism/cosmopolitanism by looking at emerging forms of international synergy (Conversi 2020a, 2020b, 2020c). The underlying question about whether to incorporate or discard nationalism in climate change policies remains unanswered, but the need to include the study of nationalism in climate change scholarship is emphasized. In general, all three positions point to a striking problem concerning knowledge transfer between the hard and social sciences, specifically at the interface between climate science and social sciences.

FROM AGRICULTURE TO INDUSTRIALISM; FROM GLOBALIZATION TO THE ANTHROPOCENE

As far as I am aware, Gellner did not make the connection between climate change and nationalism—at least, not in writing. As one of the sharpest minds of his time and in his field, one could speculate that he may eventually have found a few fascinating connections, if he had lived a bit longer.

According to Gellner, the shift from agricultural to industrial society was the most relevant change since the advent of agricultural society (Gellner 1988). No other change has been as relevant since then. Gellner, however, wrote this between the 1960s and the 1980s when another more substantial change was taking place. But neither Gellner nor the overwhelming majority of his contemporaries saw the writing on the wall (or

were able or willing to see it coming). To be fair, Gellner only mentioned the perils of a technological society or the industrial model of production run amok *en passant*: ‘Compare this with the technology available at present: any unrestricted use of it would—and quite possibly will—lead to a total disruption of the environment and the social order. The indirect consequences of modern technology are terrifying’ (Gellner 1994: 89). And: ‘The technology was just about powerful enough for that, and yet blessedly feeble enough not to destroy society or its environment, or give anyone power to dominate society militarily. All that has changed, and will never happen again’ (Gellner 1994: 169). Or: ‘The self-destruction of humanity, through nuclear or other war or ecological disaster, is perfectly possible and perhaps probable in the post-scientific age, whereas previously mankind did not possess the power to destroy itself, and, owing to its dispersal, was virtually certain not to face destruction by any outside force’ (Gellner 1985: 92). The possibility of omnicide was thus clearly present in Gellnerian thought, but not the causal set of effects leading to the Anthropocene (the term itself was unknown before the turn of the millennium).

Gellner possibly did not predict that this would occur so soon in the form of climate change. That is because no social or historical research had been conducted hitherto to explore the entrance into a new age beyond modernity and contemporaneity. No social scientist has had the means and skills to do this, because the challenge could initially be tackled only from within the hard sciences.

CLIMATE DENIAL, POSTMODERNISM AND RELATIVISM: IS IT ALL ABOUT THE NARRATIVE?

A second way of possibly reconsidering the relevance of Gellnerian thought to current developments is through its attack on relativism, denial and pseudoscience (Gellner 1985), as well as postmodernism (Gellner 1992).

At various stages, Gellner launched vigorous attacks against the Austrian philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein (1889–1951) as fleshed out in his ‘second treaty’, *Philosophical investigations* (1953) (Wittgenstein 2009). It wasn’t perhaps Ludwig the person who was at the centre of Gellner’s attacks, but rather the edifice of deception and denial being constructed around the utterances and principles of the Viennese philosopher. As a pupil of Karl Popper, Gellner was concerned about the analytical poverty,

lack of accountability and unreliability of the so-called linguistic turn spearheaded by Wittgenstein (Gellner 1998). As with Marx and Marxism, the target of his criticism wasn't so much Wittgenstein as Wittgensteinism—which, by this time, was already taking shape as a self-standing discipline, *cultural studies*.

To the credit of cultural studies, it must be said that around 1956 its founder, Richard Hoggart (1957), probably did not foresee either the feeble discipline that would emerge from his writings (Hoggart 1957) or the relativism, emptiness and deception that would come to prevail among its rank and file in subsequent decades. Gellner sometimes used the rather colonial notion of *mumbo-jumbo* to refer to postmodernist cultural studies jargon (Gellner 1979: 33 and 108). The discipline developed autonomously from the deep insights of its founder but later turned out to be strongly anti-scientific, a sort of obfuscation of knowledge, which imploded on itself after the famous 'Sokal hoax'. In 1996 the physicist Alan Sokal successfully submitted a bizarre article mimicking cultural studies jargon to the 'postmodernist' journal *Social Text*. The article proposed the nonsensical idea that quantum gravity is a social and linguistic construct. Sokal allegedly succeeded in publishing this parody after submitting it to the journal's unsuspecting editors and using the appropriate self-referential, jargon-filled style of mainstream cultural studies.

Gellner had long fought against what would later become the field of 'grievance studies' governed by 'fashionable nonsense' via the self-referential 'vanity presses' (McLeod et al. 2018). In the subsequent age of fake news, the phenomenon grew and grew online through eco-chambers and 'link farms' as the relativistic, postmodernist, anti-scientific, anti-rationalistic drift was easily taken up by the far right and extreme nationalists (Byrne 2020). Eventually the entire field of postmodernist cultural studies became pressured by a host of attacks, including AI: for example, via a click of the mouse, the online Postmodernism Generator is able to generate a flow of nonsensical articles replete with the typical buzzwords prevailing in cultural studies, postmodernist studies and so on.²

One could argue that such an 'anti-scientific turn' contained within the linguistic turn had something in common with climate change denial. But, before the linguistic turn had become a self-perpetuating engine on a treadmill propelled by the semi-seditious mechanics of academic niche solidarity, one should recognize that the Viennese philosopher had expressed a deeply humble human trajectory opposite to the modernist

hubris still pervading in the interpretive apparatus of the social sciences. Besides his subtle irony, such hubris is also visible in Ernest Gellner's more deterministic statements as *prise de position*. In his defence of Enlightenment, he considered himself a 'rationalist fundamentalist', a positivist materialist and an 'adamant ontological individualist' disdainful of hegemonic fashions and systems of thought (Malešević and Haugaard 2007).

But to conflate denial of science with postmodernism and cultural studies would mean to deflect attention away from causality and hence responsibility. As has been investigated in detail, climate change denial first emanated from a group of industries and reckless politicians (Dunlap and McCright 2010, 2011). Most often denial served to deflect attention from necessary political action while trying to escape the inevitable blame for sharing responsibility in the origins of the crisis and incapacity to conceive alternative scenarios (Rich 2019). Climate change deniers used the same tactics learned from the tobacco industry and adapted them to the interests of the fossil fuels industry (Oreskes and Conway 2010). They relied on powerful networks of dominant media (Dunlap and McCright 2011) and, later on, contributed substantially to the birth, development and online dissemination of fake news and 'post-truth' politics (McIntyre 2018).

Moreover, these economic and political elites were unwilling to face the prospect of massive legal action and endless litigation to pay compensation to the rising numbers of victims of climate change (Ewing and Kysar 2011). Also, they did not heed the red lights while intent on accumulating money and mindlessly expanding their businesses, even when it was beyond any reasonable doubt that they were causing unprecedented pain and destruction (Griffin 2015). They thus invested vast amounts of money in order to challenge scientific consensus, and funded organizations, institutions and media completely dedicated to obfuscating scientific evidence (Cook 2016; Dunlap and McCright 2010, 2011; Lewandowsky et al. 2015).

In short, while Gellner's attack on postmodernism only bears some resemblance to the current struggle against fake news and the distortion of truth, such connections are worth exploring further.

A CHRONOLOGY OF THE CONSTANT POTLATCH

Despite some semi-official agreement about dating the beginning of the Anthropocene at the onset of the fossil fuel industry, there is still disagreement regarding the latter's actual impact on the global environment. More recent research seems to point towards a different timeframe: it was not industrial society per se which risked reducing the Earth's surface to a wasteland, but the mass consumerism spearheaded by the USA in the 1920s which expanded globally in the 1950s and 1960s.

According to very recent cross-disciplinary scientific research, the Anthropocene began in the 1950s, or soon thereafter (Syvitski et al. 2020). It was accompanied by the spread of a highly destructive model based on the imaginary cornucopia of capitalist expansion. This was based on the diffusion of mass consumption, which, in turn, led to the release of increasing megatons of industrial waste into the atmosphere and onto the Earth's surface. Its dominant ideology, with its accompanying set of behaviours, has long been identified as consumerism (Bauman 2005; Sklair 2012; Stearns 2001; Taylor and Segal 2015).

Therefore, a relatively precise date, or chronological inflection point, indicates the beginning of the Anthropocene in the post-war expansion of American-style mass consumerism and its spread, from the 1950s onward, across the globe in successive waves and decades (Syvitski et al. 2020). This periodization is crucial, because it allows us to obtain a more complete picture of the current crisis and explore in a more nuanced way the relationship between industry, nationalism and climate change. It can also be useful for social scientists, who may not necessarily agree with other scientists about the precise dating.

A final and ultimate threshold date is 2020. This has been further confirmed by a huge amount of data published in *Nature* corroborating that by 2020 the 'global human-made mass exceeds all living biomass'. It further confirms that 'humanity has become a dominant force in shaping the face of Earth by quantifying the human-made mass ("anthropogenic mass")' in comparison to ALL the living biomass on Earth. This finding is so explosive that it is now beyond any doubt that the Earth is *at the cross-over point* that far transcends climate change in its gravity and reach (Elhacham et al. 2020). The even more astonishing discovery is that the anthropogenic mass has recently been doubling every twenty years in perfect parallel with the expansion of the American-Western mode of mass consumption and, therefore, the 'Westernization of the world' (Latouche

1996). This means that ‘for each person on the globe, anthropogenic mass equal to more than his or her bodyweight is produced every week’ (Elhacham et al. 2020). A 2020 date would suggest that the Earth’s natural defence in the form of even more deadly viruses is a way to save life on Earth itself.

It is neither the *anthropos* in the Anthropocene nor industrialization as such which is at stake or needs to be reversed, but the very notion of Western *modernity*—of which globalization is nothing but an Appendix.

MODERNITY’S ASYMMETRIES

The nationalism–modernity nexus points to one of the foundational debates in nationalism studies. The modern nation-state has been shaped by the ideology and practice of nationalism. But what is modernity and how can it be conceived in relationship to both nationalism and climate change? One possible avenue is to conceive it as the nexus and hub around which a series of asymmetrical notions and concepts gravitate.

As we know, modernity was a consequence of widespread changes in various areas of life, including the economic, religious, cultural and political. The French Revolution is usually identified as the political watershed, while the Industrial Revolution provided the socio-economic watershed, the most catalytic transformative socio-economic event since the Agricultural Revolution (Gellner 1988). The advent of industry was indeed the most important development in the history of humankind since the domestication of animals and plants.

This grand approach is partly shared by Karl Polanyi, who also centred on ‘modernity’ as radiating from the North Atlantic after the sixteenth century (Polanyi 1944, 2001). Eric Wolf also focuses on European overseas colonial expansion as a prelude or precondition to modernity (Wolf 2010). From an anthropological perspective, these approaches can be seen as ‘partial and Eurocentric’ (Hann 2017), an accusation shared by Gellner, yet they reflect historically testable trends and patterns.

Most importantly, these competing events (the French Revolution, industry and colonialism) all ushered in the age of modernity that, in all its aspects, still persists today as the overarching ontological and epistemological framework. Once well established and enshrined in the political realm, modernity and associated concepts began to assume more binary and divisive characteristics, becoming increasingly founded on all-pervasive asymmetries: on the one hand, the ‘modern’, the insider; on the other

hand, its antagonists, the ‘anti-modern’, the outsider. In the *esprit du temps*, modernity was largely defined in opposition to, and firmly pitted against, ‘anti-modernity’. The modernist discursive process was inescapably accompanied by a set of antithetical and derogative terms, such as ‘reaction’, ‘obscurantism’, ‘backwardness’ or, more figuratively, the ‘Dark Ages’ (as opposed to *l’âge des Lumières*). From a discursive point of view, asymmetrical concepts and self-concepts played a crucial role in the development and concentration of modern power. For the German historian Reinhart Koselleck (1923–2006), the concept of modernity was accompanied by a host of asymmetric counter-concepts (Koselleck 2013).

Nowadays, modernity remains the pivot around which a series of more or less accepted antonyms, binary couples and oppositional pairs move and interact: ‘civilized’ vs. ‘barbaric’, ‘progressive’ vs. ‘reactionary’, ‘patriotic’ vs. ‘anti-patriotic’, ‘advanced’ vs. ‘backward’, ‘developed’ vs. ‘under-developed’, ‘people’ vs. ‘plebs’, ‘majorities’ vs. ‘minorities’, ‘North’ vs. ‘South’, ‘superior’ vs. ‘inferior’, *Übermensch* vs. *Untermensch* and, of course, modern vs. anti-modern. These asymmetric incompatibilities are not characteristic, not even a prerequisite, perhaps, of modernity itself, and they in fact largely draw upon previously established oppositions between Hellenes and Barbarians or, subsequently, Christians and Heathens (Junge and Postoutenko 2011: 157).

For modernists, modernity is largely defined in opposition to anti-modernity (reaction, obscurantism, etc.), rather than in its own right. Prevailing notions of modernity are largely based on a (Western-centred) common-sense understanding of what is qualitatively and quantitatively modern. This is in turn based on a (Western-centred) common-sense understanding of what is *not* modern. Modernist notions like ‘progress’, ‘growth’, ‘advancement’ and ‘development’ were all-pervasive in the years leading up to World War I and totalitarianism. They were a central component of the predominant mindset unleashed by the diffusion of Westernizing modernity (La Branche 1993, 2005).

The very notion of modernity had been repeatedly challenged, particularly in relation to the Holocaust (Bauman) and other genocides, so that the entire twentieth century has been redefined as the century of genocide (Carmichael 2005; Levene 2000; Totten and Parsons 2004; Weitz 2003).

With global warming, climate change and biodiversity loss, the crisis of modernity and modernism may have reached a point of no return. Yet, the very term ‘modern’ is still used and abused as a validating adjective: even children customarily use it to charge new things with a positive spin, such

as justifying buying new toys or devices ('this phone is more modern', hence it is better). In the process, non-Western ideologies and world visions have been discarded and often eliminated as 'anti-modern'.

Modernist discourses are founded on dualistic self-concepts: such oppositions constitute the hub around which all modernist norms coalesce and expand in multiple directions.³ Asymmetric concepts are central to building the homogenizing nation-state with its competition-centred developmental ambitions. Because nation-building was conflated, and confused, with state-making, the formation of common institutions was imbued with nationalist ideology. But the founding ideology of the modern nation-state remains nationalism. By virtue of its unique capacity to articulate oppositional concepts into irrational incompatibilities, nationalism is, moreover, inherently homogenizing. The process of nationalizing spaces requires the 'othering' of those who resist its homogenizing impact (Conversi 2007, 2008). At the same time, the process can lead to the extreme of constructing state ideologies, focusing on one or more target groups as 'anti-nation'—sometimes to the point of annihilation (Murray 2015).

In short, modernism, like nationalism, is founded on the reiteration of asymmetrical concepts and is thus an intrinsically exclusionary ideology. 'Development' itself became an ideology, a 'global faith' (Rist 2002), with its belief in a linear, steady, indefinite rise of Western-centred living standards as the inevitable destiny of humankind. 'Progress' was another notion that thrived under these asymmetric conditions. For Christopher Lasch (1991), progress became transformed into a faith, assuming the eschatological trappings of established religions. And, according to Bruno Latour (Latour 2015, 2018a, 2018b), the dichotomy between humankind and nature, as if one was not part of the other, was another feature of the pervasiveness of modernist asymmetries. But, if we know with a reasonable amount of certainty when nationalism began, could we identify an inception point for our current global crisis?

WHEN DID THE ANTHROPOCENE BEGIN?

Anthropocene is a broad concept in which climate change plays a pivotal role as its primary vector. Whereas the IPCC has traditionally identified the beginning of global warming and climate change with the onset of the Industrial Revolution, the more complex notion of the Anthropocene

merits a more nuanced and, at the same time, precise set of considerations.

Moreover, pollution of air, water and soil expanded as soon as industrialization expanded. Victorian England was then the world's largest coal-consuming hotspot—Londoners consumed almost 3.5 tons of coal per year (Jackson 2014). Recycling remained for a time an essential part of daily life: dustmen cleaned up ash, cinders and debris, and then they recycled coarser dust for brick-making while the finer dust was sold as fertilizer, even though 'these tried-and-tested recycling arrangements ... were not suited to the expanding 19th century metropolis' (Jackson 2014: 2–3).

However, all these problems remained limited to a few cities in England and other regions where industry emerged.

RELATIVISM IS BACK: ALTERNATIVE DATING

In the social sciences and humanities, flexible interpretations, so often criticized by Gellner, risk prevailing in complete disregard of scientific records, particularly in a geological (chrono-stratigraphic) definition extending further back in time (Zalasiewicz et al. 2021).

A variety of alternative datings have been proposed with contradictory and sometimes unsubstantiated interpretations, none of which has been even vaguely agreed upon. Competing definitions of these huge geo-social changes span decades, centuries and even millennia.

For instance, a few archaeologists have been extreme in singling out the agricultural revolution as a possible starting point. Such a self-serving stretch recalls the falsification of history with which we are all too familiar while studying the relationship between archaeology and nationalism (Brown 2011; Clark 2015; Diaz-Andreu 1996; Hamilakis 1999; Kotsakis 1998). It was not agricultural practices that created a permanent impact on the Earth's surface, but rather their industrialization and, even more so, the homogenizing impact of mass food production. This led to various consequences, among which is soil depletion, now considered as one of the greatest threats to the capacity to feed future generations.⁴ It also led to the global adoption of (industrially produced) fertilizers and pesticides, with ramifications in all possible areas of human continuity and survival (Chakrabarty 2015; Davis 2017a, 2017b; Williams and Crutzen 2013).

More realistic candidates include capitalism's birth pangs and thus the appropriate coining of *Capitalocene* (Moore 2017), in line with Immanuel Wallerstein's world systems theory. Ultimately, if the rise of modern

capitalism can be identified as the key originating factor or variable, then the Anthropocene's inception date should be shifted even further back before the Industrial Revolution to about the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

HARD SCIENCES AND HARD DATA: 1945

Perhaps the most realistic chronology is that developed by historians J. R. McNeill and Peter Engelke via the iconic catchall title 'The Great Acceleration' to signify the enormous impact that began with the Americanization of the world after 1945 (McNeill and Engelke 2016; Steffen et al. 2015).

Following indications by nuclear physicists, the beginning of the Anthropocene has been symbolically set on a precise date: 16 July 1945, at 5:29 a.m., when the US Army detonated the first nuclear device (code-named 'Trinity') in New Mexico—part of the Manhattan Project (Waters et al. 2015). Interestingly, this is also the date usually selected for the beginning of mass Americanization in Western Europe and the corresponding spread of consumerist culture (Coleman and Agnew 2007; Dalby 2007; Dittmer 2005). Cultural Americanization (De Grazia 2005) implied the diffusion of environmentally aggressive practices of mass consumption which would later prove to be the leading cause of climate change and a whole host of other destructive effects (Steffen et al. 2015).

However, 1945 remains mostly a symbolic threshold. It can be contested from a variety of viewpoints. If we consider climate change as the critical detonator in shaping the new Anthropocene epoch, we need to set the clock forward by at least a couple of decades. From 1945, it took at least twenty to thirty years for the American capitalist economic model to expand and be accepted at all levels of society both at home and abroad and to have a decisive impact on the environment and the changing climate.

From the 1960s, mass consumerism began to pervade all aspects of everyday life in the West, leading to a sudden acceleration of the noxious gases released into the atmosphere. Recent research (Syvitski et al. 2020) puts the post-1960 'economic boom' into historical perspective, and speaks of 'extraordinary human energy consumption' in the second half of the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. According to this path-breaking research, it is now possible to date the beginning of the

Anthropocene more precisely in the 1950s and 1960s, although its environmental impact only became visible some years after that.

Thus, its dominant behaviour and ideology have been identified as the ‘culture ideology of consumerism’ (Sklair 2012). This mid-twentieth-century boundary level had been confirmed earlier by Zalasiewicz et al. as ‘stratigraphically optimal’ (Zalasiewicz et al. 2017). Is this compatible with the standard onset date for global warming, and climate change, as the Industrial Revolution?

Despite competing timelines indicating its inception date, there is abundant evidence identifying the catalyst event in the wave of unsustainable mass consumption that began during the late 1950s. It originated in the USA and quickly spread throughout the West, then expanded across the world—a one-way diffusion that has not halted since then, even during economic crises.

So one of the recently proposed beginnings of the Anthropocene epoch dates back to 1950 (Syvitski et al. 2020). This can be gauged in detail by looking at data on the burning of hydrocarbon fuels, as the 1950s indicate a significant threshold: 60% of all human-produced energy in history has been consumed since 1950—22 zetajoules (ZJ). That is, in the last seventy years, more energy has been consumed than in the entire Holocene (Syvitski et al. 2020), as average global atmospheric temperatures increased by a staggering 0.9 °C. Even more astonishingly, the amount of ~22 ZJ, accumulated in the last 40 years, exceeds that of the prior 11,700 years of the Holocene (~14.6 ZJ), mainly through fossil fuel combustion. Over 90% of the excess energy ends up in and is provisionally absorbed by the oceans, whose temperatures are rising rapidly. This gargantuan quantity of heat corresponds to about five Hiroshima atomic bombs of energy every second (Syvitski et al. 2020). However, even in this scenario much of the rise in greenhouse gas came after 1970, and it really began to speed up in the 1980s and even more so in the 1990s, after the fall of the Iron Curtain.

INDUSTRIAL SOCIETY OR CONSUMERIST POTLATCH?

Ernest Gellner was well aware of the limits of consumer society: in ‘a society of permanent *potlatch*, ... competitive status-seeking by consumers leads to an inherently pointless production and destruction. Something similar may have happened in late Rome. The large landowners managed to push free farmers off the land and make them go to Rome as proletarians’ (Gellner 1988: 230). A *potlatch* is a ceremony diffused among a few

Native American communities, particularly in British Columbia, in which wealth is destroyed and valuable items are given away in order to demonstrate a leader's wealth and power. Gellner adds: 'The question whether affluent liberal society is doomed to remain a perpetual potlatch society or whether it can convert itself into something else, is indeed one of the most intriguing of issues' (Gellner 1988: 231). He repeats the *potlatch* analogy in other works.

But how can Gellner's lenses help us understand the problem of mass consumerism in connection with climate change and nationalism? Can Gellner offer us some enlightenment about a crisis that exploded after his departure? The best possible way would be to historicize all of these concepts, particularly the latter, perhaps through the prism of historical sociology and social history, but with the substantial use of data from the hard science.

CONCLUSION: THE ANTHROPOCENE'S SHIFT FROM HISTORICAL TO GEOLOGICAL TIME

For Gellner, as for most historians, nationalism was entirely born with, and shaped by, modernity. But while for most scholars its political manifestations can be dated back to the French Revolution, Gellner argued that its roots should be located in the spread of industrialism. This view may be particularly relevant here, as both nationalism and the beginning of the Anthropocene have been dated back to the Industrial Revolution.

Yet, the current radical passage is no longer just about a change of minds, of worldviews, of politics, and all other human endeavours and enterprises. The rapid crisis we are witnessing runs much deeper, into every interconnected aspect of life, as we enter the Anthropocene (Crutzen and Stoermer 2000). In the space of a few decades, we have moved *beyond history into geological time*. The very surface of planet Earth has been so irreversibly altered by human activity, and the alteration is proceeding at such a breakneck speed, that our current socio-economic habits risk destroying everything, not just the precarious framework of the modern age, but all forms of human and nonhuman life (Elhacham et al. 2020).

Where does nationalism stand in all this? Nationalism has been identified as the dominant ideology and political movement of the modern era

and, as such, it has deeply shaped governmental policies across the West and subsequently across the world (Conversi 2012, 2014; Malešević 2019). Nationalism has pervaded the entire political sphere and everyday life since at least the French Revolution. Nationalism's impact is, accordingly, all-pervasive in contemporary politics—hence it also affects the politics of, and attitudes towards, climate change. The relationship between climate change and nationalism therefore deserves urgent consideration. Because nationalism can be identified as the *dominant ideology of modernity* (Conversi 2007, 2012, 2014: 46–48), we cannot escape its broader political implications for climate change mitigation.

In the modern era, nationalism has been ubiquitous and nearly inescapable. Even today, as we face the unprecedented threat of human, animal and plant extinction, nationalism remains omnipresent throughout the political spectrum and across geographical latitudes, either directly as ethnonational conflict, or indirectly as 'banal nationalism' (Billig 1995). This may mean that any political project aiming to change habits, politics and society needs to take nationalism into account.

Most, although perhaps not all, national boundaries have been conceived and shaped during the transition to the modern age (Conversi 2014). For nationalists, boundaries are self-evident—and need to be defended whenever they are questioned or contested by rival nationalists, the latter most often belonging to self-defined neighbouring nations.

Gellner argued that nationalism is a direct consequence of—and unthinkable without—industrialization. Industrialization led thus to both nationalism and climate change. Regrettably, the rapidly changing world we inhabit is confronting us with a series of existential threats and crises that can only be tackled by increasing levels of cooperation, coordination and, eventually, simultaneous action. In particular, the strictly interrelated challenges of climate change, biodiversity loss, pandemics and unprecedented forms of pollution have shaped a radical global emergency—a rapid output of scientific research and accumulated evidence has revealed their life-threatening extent. No single state can hope to solve this set of associated crises on its own (Parenti 2012; Rinawati et al. 2013). From being a distant hazard to be tackled by future generations, climate change and the concomitant crises of the Anthropocene now clearly appear as the greatest threat ever experienced by humankind.

The belated success of the Paris Agreement (2015) was preceded by decades of dubious and failures, culminating in the disastrous Copenhagen Agreement (2009) in which fake news, information

distortion and a kind of anti-science censorship began to prevail in media reporting of the events and, consequently, in the shaping of public opinion.

The unprecedented emergency created by the expansion of the American/Western model of mass consumption is, therefore, so critical that simultaneity and synergy need to be found at the global level to tackle the problem immediately. Nevertheless, this has so far been impossible, because efforts to break away from the current development path are often blocked by a gridlock of nation-state boundaries, whose governments are often aligned with petty interest groups that do not hesitate to use nationalism to advance their interests.

COMMENT ON DANIELE CONVERSI'S 'GELLNER
IN THE ANTHROPOCENE: MODERNITY, NATIONALISM
AND CLIMATE CHANGE'

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In this chapter, Daniele Conversi takes on the most urgent and significant political issue of our time, namely climate change and its implications. Arguing that the pervasiveness of the human ecological footprint has brought industrial modernity into a fundamental contradiction, he notes that Gellner did not take on these challenges in his far-reaching theorizing of nationalism. There are two obvious reasons for this. First, Gellner's (1983) main account of nationalism was largely historical and sought to account for its rise and predominance as a result of industrialization. Second, climate change was peripheral to the intellectual or political agenda in the 1980s and early 1990s. Gellner died two years before the Kyoto Protocol was signed. Regardless of climate change, even environmental history and ecological approaches to social science remained marginal until the early 1990s and were often written off as neo-Malthusian, dated and even dangerously reactionary.

Accordingly, Conversi's chapter does not criticize Gellner for having a blind spot, but discusses the way in which a broadly Gellnerian approach to the global system might shed light on the current crisis. At the outset, he simply asks: 'If the effects of the passage from agricultural to industrial society were so all-pervasive, which consequences can be envisaged in a forced exit from modernity due to its own short-circuit?'

A short answer might be that the current contradictions in which we find ourselves—wedged between a consumerist ideology and a growth economy, on the one hand, and the need to cool down the planet and consume less on the other hand—must lead not only to a reorientation in politics and economy, but also a rewriting of history. The Greek term *krisis* (κρίσις) may be supplemented by another Greek term, *hybris* (ὕβρις), henceforth.

Conversi's main concern, however, is with the relationship between the past and the future, and charting some possible or even likely Anthropocene effects, he argues that the transition from *Agraria* to *Industria* may seem retrospectively relatively minor compared to the shift to a fully fledged Anthropocene. This, he continues, will be a world without nations and possibly without us, homo sapiens. This is not an uncontroversial view. For the time being, well into a deepened climate crisis, nationalism seems to be strengthened, not weakened, owing to competition for increasingly scarce resources and the kind of nationalist blame game to which we have become accustomed. The ultimate outcome may nevertheless be different. Eventually, states may collapse owing to civilizational breakdown, but in all likelihood humans will survive, although perhaps in very diminished numbers and with much reduced social complexity.

A related argument concerns modernity and a kind of postmodernity which has relinquished the modern belief in progress and development. Also, Conversi's observation that nationalism is part of the problem, not of the solution, is pertinent and shows the necessity of a great deal of political imagination in the present if we are going to turn the global supertanker around.

Conversi quotes Gellner's reflections on 'the post-scientific age' when the latter writes about possibly cataclysmic effects of modern technology out of control. Following years of Trumpism and climate denialism, this term has perhaps never been more pertinent than today. Speaking from a vantage point in the seventh-largest oil exporter in the world—Norway—I note that this government has confirmed that giving up petroleum is not on the agenda, in spite of firm recommendations from the IPCC (2021) and a stern message from António Guterres, the UN General Secretary.

The fact that the Anthropocene began, at first tentatively and embryonically, as part of the same general historical process that produced nationalism is an important insight, and it is thought provoking, as Conversi mentions, that few theorists of nationalism have so far analysed the connection. The consumerism which began to flourish after World

War II, eventually accompanied by a relativism which morphed into post-modernism, is probably a key factor in accounting for the current situation, and Gellner told me, in the early 1990s, that consumerism was now the most powerful mode of legitimation for nationalism. Such desires now fuel and lubricate the global system, and this has accelerated environmental destruction and climate change, contributing to a phenomenal economic growth worldwide, but with no ultimate collective goal. In fact, since the end of the Cold War, we may speak of an *acceleration of acceleration*, especially as regards consumption and its scaffolding, including coal exports, air travel and world trade (Eriksen 2016).

Conversi endorses Gellner's view that industrialism and nationalism are unthinkable in separation from each other, going on to ask what will become of political identity after industrial society has exhausted itself. A related question can be asked of another major theorist of nationalism, Anderson (1983), whose account hinges on the significance of print capitalism as a tool for producing cognitive homogeneity. In the era of Anthropocene effects and digital media, nationalism comes across as distinctly dated. It can no longer offer existential security or the functional integration of nation-states. Yet, at the same time, we should keep in mind Hobsbawm's (1988) mistaken prediction that nationalism would wither away when economies became transnational and it ceased to be a functional ideology for national capitalism. In precisely the same period that economies have become outsourced, disembedded and globalized, certain forms of nationalism have been strengthened, but unlike the situation in the nineteenth century, it is no longer the ideology of modernity and the future, but of modernity and the past, a nostalgic clutching at straws amid accelerated, uncertain and frightening change. Quite clearly, the climate crisis has to be dealt with transnationally, both by scaling up (to international policy) and by scaling down (to transnational networks of communities representing alternatives). Yet, there is no historical necessity in this scenario unfolding. We may, I fear, see the global village fragment into so many warring factions founded in myths of kinship and place. If these collectivities do not attach themselves to a state, Conversi's prediction about the demise of nationalism will be confirmed.

Along with some of the author's other recent publications (e.g. Conversi 2020), this chapter may herald a new phase in research on nationalism. Taking the Gellnerian perspective as a point of departure, Conversi shows that it can still be useful, but that it will have to be grafted onto a new global reality where neither progress nor the integrity of the

state can be taken for granted, and where the problem does not consist in increasing productivity and efficiency, but reducing and scaling down. It is far from unthinkable that a slogan for the remainder of the present century could be: ‘Don’t just *do* something, *sit* there!’

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NOTES

1. As many have observed, the COVID-19 pandemic can be seen as an initial ‘warning’ or announcement of more serious troubles to come, at the same time providing lessons for how to deal with the climate emergency (Manzanedo and Manning 2020). The pandemic itself has been connected with a host of human-created consequences, ranging from globalization to biodiversity loss and, increasingly, climate change (Gorji and Gorji 2021).
2. The Postmodernism Generator, <http://www.elsewhere.org/pomo/>. Using it while writing this chapter, the algorithm automatically spawned an article titled ‘Feminism, social realism and Sontagist camp’: it began by self-referentially quoting an unknown author’s take on ‘deconstructive sub-capitalist theory’, then deriving from it a long series of nonsensical utterances couched (in this case) in what appears to be stereotypical ‘gender studies’ jargon. But we can be certain that the brave and independently-minded Susan Sontag would have never written in this way.
3. Koselleck’s *historical semantics* can help us to understand the interaction between modernity and nationalism as mono-cultural homogenizing forces (Koselleck 2002).
4. ‘In an age of diminishing aquifers, agricultural irrigation is depleting fresh-water resources ... of soil nutrients that would come with rotating different varieties of crops, which, in turn, leads to soil depletion’ (Robinson 2021: 49).

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