Book Reviews


Hoping to “rectify the foreshortened reception” (p. 7) of Gellner’s work, Malešević and Haugaard have collected here ten original essays on aspects of his thought – on civil society, coercion and liberty; on ideology, nationalism and modernity; and on Islam, postmodernism and Gellner’s metaphysic. Their lengthy introduction surveys Gellner’s career and previews the argument of each essay. Alan Macfarlane’s contribution on “Ernest Gellner on liberty and modernity” responds to Gellner’s thesis about the separation of the spheres of social life that allowed freedom to flourish without oppression. In Predation and production in European imperialism Michael Mann modifies Gellner’s view of empire, pointing out that only at home, not abroad, did Western societies permit the liberty that enabled industrialization. Mark Haugaard denies in Power, modernity and liberal democracy Gellner’s equation of power exclusively with coercion and commits himself instead to a middle course between power ‘over’ and power ‘to’, neither position relying wholly on coercion. In the last essay in the first section, Gellner versus Marxism: a major concern or a fleeting affair?, Peter Skalnik opines that whereas Marxist theory and practice can be interpreted as contrary to Gellner’s teachings about civil society, Gellner’s actual thinking was somewhat more subtle. Nicos Mouzelis notes in Nationalism: restructuring Gellner’s theory that the emergence of nationalism in the Balkans could falsify Gellner’s claim that nationalism and industrialization go together, but he then suggests that substituting modernity for ‘industria’ could save Gellner’s thesis. Gellner’s optimistic view of modernity, writes Siniša Malešević, in Between the book and the new sword: Gellner, violence and ideology, rejects the position that modernity enjoys a triumph of the producers over the coercers, citing instead the fact that “systematic
genocidal mass murder is largely an invention of the modern era…” (p. 140). Thomas Hylland Eriksen examines in Ernest Gellner and the multicultural mess Gellner’s claims about the correlation between nationalism and homogenization, concluding that Gellner’s account of what he termed ‘entropy-resistant groups’ does not conform to current reality.

In an excellent overview of Islam, modernity and science Michael Lesnoff begins by summarizing Gellner’s distinction between ‘high’ and ‘folk’ Islam. The high, or orthodox, tradition Gellner called ‘protestant’, thereby emphasizing its holy texts, its sober and puritanical vision, and its denial of mediators between man and God; all these features making it a faith for a “literate urban stratum” (p. 189). Folk Islam appealed to illiterate masses in its rites and festivals, was “joyous and ecstatic,” and enjoyed music, intoxication, and trances. Gellner regarded its ethic as loyalty to holy individuals and not rule-observance. It has been easy to blame folk Islam for Islam’s falling behind the West, and Lesnoff does not object to this claim, but he disagrees with Gellner’s claim that high Islam’s Protestantism serves it satisfactorily in modern society. Folk Islam is, Lesnoff agrees, non-protestant, but non-protestant Islam – especially Sufism – is not exclusively of the folk variety. With this said, Lesnoff turns to his main concern of examining both versions as they relate to modern science, all as part of a critique of Gellner’s interpretation of Islam. The rationalist Mutazilites of the eighth to twelfth centuries CE believed in objective standards of right accessible by reason. Their elitism worked against them, however, and in the eleventh century they were gradually succeeded by the non-rationalist Sunni Asharites, whose belief in God’s absolute sovereignty and in predestination resembled the doctrines of John Calvin. The greatest Asharite theologian was Ghazzali (1058–1111), who studied Greek philosophy extensively but only to refute it successfully and extinguish its rationalism. Lesnoff then spends several pages on Sharia, the Quran, and the centrality of tradition, all devoted to his thesis that “the mind-set of orthodox Islam could hardly be more alien to that ‘cognitive growth’ which, according to Gellner, characterises modernity” (p. 196). The last two essays are Truth, reason and the spectre of contingency, by Kevin Ryan, and Gellner’s metaphysic, by John A. Hall. Ryan charges Gellner with not having taken postmodernism seriously, sneering at Gellner’s Postmodernism, Reason and Religion as an “old Hollywood Western”: “The mythical gunfight also narrates the story of Western modernity, with violence routinely dispensed in the name of