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# Is Secularism History?

## Introduction: the postsecular turn

It seems uncontroversial to portray Gellner as a secular thinker, indeed as one of the surest defenders, amongst social theorists, of secularism as a mode of life and thought. Especially in *Postmodernism, Reason and Religion* (1992a) Gellner forced a three-way ultimatum between his own favoured Enlightenment secular rationalism, postmodernist relativism, and strenuous religious revival. In his excellent biography of Gellner, John Hall describes him as ‘a constant critic of religion’, pointing in particular to his contempt for modernist theology (Hall, 2010: 239). Most generally, Gellner’s consistent analytical approach towards religion was *functionalist*: observing its various affective qualities and effects, and placing these within the logic of a real historical world impossible to grasp, cognitively, in religious terms. That in turn would seem to constitute exactly the sort of ‘methodological atheism’ that has characterized the critical social science project from its beginnings.

So the task of this essay, to indicate how Gellner might response to the currently widespread critical re-appraisal of secularism as the basis for explanation, critique and normative-political engagement, would seem straightforward enough. In a very short period the status of the ‘secularization thesis’, for example, has ‘shifted markedly’ (Davie, 2014: 437). From a seemingly agreed empirical matter of historical process, the idea that religion steadily declines in salience and strength in modern industrial society is now held by many to be a

meta-theoretical projection of *sociology's* secularist values. Thus, a consistent secularization-ist such as Steve Bruce, strongly influenced by Gellner (Bruce, 2011: 26), feels unfashionable and beleaguered in mounting yet another clarification of the position. In the history of political ideas, in the USA, Mark Lilla's Gellner-like affirmation of a 'Great Separation' stemming from the seventeenth century between civic liberal-democratic politics and political theology has been roundly ticked off as a dangerous 'folly' (Lilla, 2007; Stout, 2008). In British multiculturalist discourse, previous core secular propositions – that religion became differentiated 'from the modern state, politics and public life; that religion and liberalism are inevitably at odds with each other; and that secularism has a more constitutive relation with liberalism than religion' (Woodhead, 2013: 93) – are strenuously under fire. In a related move, a firm contrast is drawn – with Michael Oakeshott's presence hovering in the background – between acceptable, sensible, 'moderate' secularism, in which the claims of religious identity and the presence of religion in politics can respectfully be accepted, and unacceptable, extreme, 'ideological' secularism (Modood, 2010). We can readily imagine Gellner rising up at this, not only to chastise anyone who finds themselves taken by Oakeshott's obscurantist upper-class traditionalism (e.g. Gellner, 1996a: 630-33), but also to remind us that circumspect middle-of-the road positions are generally every bit as ideological as the bolder ones they trade upon.

Moving slightly Leftwards, Jurgen Habermas continues to feel, as Gellner did, that 'the cleavage between secular knowledge and revealed knowledge cannot be bridged' (Habermas, 2010: 17). Yet reason, for Habermas, must now learn from religion in a new solidaristic 'awareness of what is missing' in secularized society – sentiments that Gellner would query. Within Marxist circles, a veritable 'theological turn' is said to be taking place (Therborn, 2010: 130-32), in Terry Eagleton's version of which a definite echo of Gellner's *Words and*

*Things* can be heard. Only this time it is not the Wittgensteinian domesticity of linguistic philosophy that is pilloried as the cosy ideological View from North Oxford, but secular rationalism itself (Eagleton, 2009: 34-5).

So we might expect Gellner to issue a sharp consumer health warning against the latest tepid products of what he liked to dub the ‘re-enchantment industry’. Yet what Gellner takes secularism to be, exactly, and how far secularism might be a big issue for him are not that easy to determine. There is no entry, for example, for ‘secular’ or ‘secularism’ in Hall’s biography, nor do the terms get more than a passing mention in prominent reviews of it (eg. Gray, 2011, Collini, 2011). In neither Gellner’s substantial (posthumously published) ‘Reply To Critics’ nor in the long and important volume covering the whole of his work, to which he was responding (Hall and Jarvie, 1996), is secularism – or even religion as such (though Islam features as a very specific social formation) – given more than incidental attention. The same can be said of the only significant retrospect to appear since then (Malesevic and Haugaard, 2007). Even in *Postmodernism, Reason and Religion*, Gellner no sooner declares for Enlightenment secular fundamentalism than this phrase slides without comment into rationalist fundamentalism, as though the ‘secular’ connotation did not greatly matter.

Of course, all discussions of secularism are tricky, just because of the slipperiness of the central terms. In *A Secular Age*, Charles Taylor identifies three senses of secularity as a long-term cultural phenomenon: the emergence of ‘secularized public spaces’, the ‘decline of belief and practice’, and ‘new conditions of belief’, the latter referring to the altered philosophical and social context, in modernity, ‘in which all search and questioning about the moral and spiritual must proceed’ (Taylor, 2007: 20). Borrowing from Taylor, but making his own triune intervention, Jose Casanova (2011) talks about secularity, secularization(s) and secularism(s). Then there are some more specific features of secular

politics in liberal societies: freedom of basic belief, equality of status of religions and non-religions (no structurally privileged faiths), and, latterly, an attitude of inclusion towards all faiths (and none) in determining the social and political identity of collective national life (see e.g. Levey and Modood, 2009). On top of all that, secularity and secularism can be filled out either *procedurally* in terms of a hospitable pluralistic scaffolding for the acceptance of different views, motives and practices, or *substantively*, in terms of – what? – some sort of atheism, materialism, naturalism, humanism, or socialism. For reasons of space, I will proceed in a rather intuitive way now that I have thrown into play these suggestive distinctions. I shall also concentrate on the socio-philosophical aspects of secularity/secularism rather than the constitutional-political aspects, partly because Gellner's thinking on the latter follows fairly consistently from his approach to the former (see *Conditions of Liberty* (1996b) for his last thoughts on the required political ethos of civil society).

One last introductory point is extremely important: critical re-appraisers of secularism, whether social-theoretical or political, are seldom *anti*-secular as such, though this is usually how the rhetoric shapes up (McLennan, 2010a). Rather, they are *intra*- or *post*-secular, in the sense that they want to reject or deconstruct past and present secularisms that are thought to be aggressive, unreflexive, or Eurocentric. So Taylor and others tend to say instead that good, procedural, inclusive secularity is 'much too important a matter to be left to "secularists"' (Taylor, 2009: xxii). Let us then try to work out how Gellner would have intersected with this congeries of tensions. Useful re-appraising volumes (e.g. Calhoun et al., 2011) encompass a long list of issues, which can be compressed for our purposes, beginning with two respects in which Gellner does not seem to fit the cartoon version of the firm secularist.

## **Secularization**

If the secularization thesis is taken to entail the steady disappearance of religion in modern societies, whereby modernity is almost by definition secular, such that fully religious people/societies simply cannot be regarded as fully modern, then reappraisers robustly counter it as a descriptive and analytical account. To that end, evidence to the contrary is drawn from non-Western societies, from the USA, from updated profiles of European nations, from widespread spiritual practices (even allowing for a decline of Christian church attendance), and from the new clamouring for recognition of the political pertinence of religion in existing secular contexts. Conceptually, questions are raised about historical causality, multiple modernities, and the presumption of generalised ‘disenchantment’. The conclusion is reached that ‘the secular’, supposedly once the norm, is now the exception, and under pressure.

Gellner would not greatly disagree. As a quintessential big picture thinker he frequently consigned rather major matters to the historically secondary category. Thus: ‘by and large’, ‘it would seem reasonable to say that it [secularization] is real...the secularization thesis does hold’. Even so, ‘secularization does assume many quite different forms’ and its ‘extent, homogeneity or irreversibility’ are debatable (1992a: 5). These are significant qualifications. The locution ‘it would seem reasonable to say...’ registers genuine provisionality, and we might reasonably take strong secularism to require the irreversibility of secularization as a central tenet. Moreover, Gellner strikingly argued, ahead of the postsecular game, that because Muslim society and Islamic fundamentalism are well enough suited to modernity, no invariable association holds between modernity and secularity/ism. He does think that it was

only because the original secular moment happened specifically in the Christian West that late-comer societies could work out how to by-pass outright secularism. He also detects elements of ‘generic protestantism’ in Islamic belief and practice, generic protestantism – alternatively couched as generic Reformation – being, for him, a definite secularizing force emerging out of the monotheistic era (1988: 103-5, 111-112). This, he says, attunes religion (Islam) to ways of working and thinking that are required for technological and economic growth. However, neither Islam nor non-Western, religion-prevalent modernity are destined to become steadily more secularized (1988: 218; 1992a: 22).

As for liberal capitalist secular societies, Gellner never equates the decline of organized religion and the material and cognitive dominance of science and technology with the actual or likely disappearance of religion-like needs and pursuits. True, he regularly comments, acerbically, that in a largely secularized society religious faith is upheld ‘symbolically’ rather than deeply, with beliefs systems inherited from agrarian societies being carried on in ‘Bowdlerized’, ‘selectively interpreted’ and ‘muted’ form (1988: 214; 1992b: 151). But Gellner does not accuse contemporary believers of being insincere, nor assumes that nonsense secularists are simply going to push them aside. In fact, he re-designated the Weberian iron cage of disenchanting rationality as a *rubber* cage, because the ‘impulse to systematize and eliminate incoherence’ is constantly deflected and counter-balanced by off-duty and come-back re-enchantment. When it comes down to it, ‘we do not know’, Gellner confesses, ‘how to decide’ between these ‘hard and soft aspects’ of our predicament (1987: 164-65). One feasible outcome is that a kind of ‘constitutional religion’ will prevail’ (on a parallel with constitutional monarchy), in which ‘lukewarm faith’ gives just sufficient enough cement to hold together the vying demands of contemporary experience (1992a: 93).

From this encapsulation, Gellner was certainly not one of those secular social scientists that – or so we are told by Calhoun et al. (2011: 4) – hugely underestimate religion and values as social motivation. We also need to remember that Gellner’s ‘by and large’ take on secularization as a central tendency within industrial modernity is remarkably similar to the version provided by Taylor himself, the most eminent opponent of secular ‘subtraction stories’ (McLennan, 2010b). Both thinkers highlight secularization as the pluralization and mutual ‘fragilization’ (Taylor) of belief systems in a context of relentless (and in its place necessary) instrumental rationality.

### **Secularity and religiosity: symbiosis**

Postsecularists tends to emphasize that the very notion of the ‘secular’ is inextricably rooted in Christian theology, so that it is impossible even to specify its meaning without grasping that profound semiotic entanglement. Thus, the definitive connotation of the secular as ‘this worldliness’ is bound up with contrasts and complementarities between the heavenly city and earthly existence; between the eternal time (of God) and the time of the ‘saeculum’ or ‘century’ (itself a pointer towards the return of Christ); between monastic spiritual discipline and priestly pastoral responsibility, and so on. Secondly, the whole history of secular inroads into previous ‘traditional’ certainties, all the key stepping-stone doctrinal and institutional moments, represent *internal* shifts within the devoted consciousness, not external penetrations or vanguard thrusts spearheading an always-existing unbelieving truth. But secularists (or so it is said) always assume the latter: they see secularity and secularism as what was always waiting to come into its own, and nowadays they think it has emerged fully

as the default state of the world, the *absence* of religion, the attainment of a ‘neutral’ world view. And all this, for post and anti-secularists, is deeply mistaken. Secularism is a world-*making* project, a set of (religiously derived) *presences*, a regime of truth. It follows that not only religion but secularity/ism too requires full investigation and *explanation* as a socio-historical phenomenon, without prior commitment either to its substantive content or to its ‘naturalized’ status within social science itself (Casasnova, 2011: 56). And in that regard, secularisms might simply be considered *variants* of faith and metaphysics, seeing as secularists tend to proselytize about the vibrant light of their own understanding and the dark absurdity of religion; and given the violence, tragedy, and evil visited on the world in the name of secular progress.

Again, Gellner would grant a fair amount of this. Like Taylor, he underlines as historically central the way in which successive bouts of reforming theological zeal led to the defeat of *magic* and socially *fused*, essentially ritualistic religion – the common obstacle facing monotheism and secularism alike. Gellner’s first ‘big ditch’ in history, crossing into the ‘Axial Age’, saw the true birth of the Transcendent, whose midwife was the development of *writing*, the Word. Freed from situations of co-presence involving speakers and listeners, doctrinal authority (‘generic Platonism’) became primary, with content outranking context and universality emerging as a matter of ever-more-refined conceptual ‘quality control’ in the hands of the intellectual priestly caste. The second big ditch, crossing into secular modernity, was driven by science, but always in a transcendence- and faith-obsessive fashion, with earnest enquirers seeking avidly to read aright the natural work of the ‘single, exclusive, jealous and iconoclastic deity’. The ethereal universality of Platonism thus gives way to a personalized, guaranteed Transcendent, with ‘centralized faiths offering generic all-purpose salvation’. And from here, Gellner develops an expanded Weberian account: protestant-style

Christianity does away with the ‘audio-visual aids’ of transcendence, denies the existence of any sacramentally distinct priesthood, internalises moral authority, holds all concepts and people under God’s jurisdiction to be equal and accountable, and as a result an ‘explosion’ takes place in both the cognitive ethic of appraisal and economic productivism (Gellner, 1979: 323; 1988: 73-89, 103-106). There is no suggestion here that, *historically*, society and human understanding *as a whole* can be treated as, first, definitively ‘religious’, then definitively ‘secular’. It was all more complicated and interwoven than that. There can be no doubt, then, that it is religion that provides the ‘main agency’ that endows man with reason, just as reason remains the pursuit of transcendence when ostensibly religious motivation fades (1992b: 51, 163).

Relatedly, Gellner confidently depicts the non- or anti-religious movements and doctrines of the high modern age – Marxism, Comteanism, nationalism, neo-Darwinian visions of progress – as ‘worldly religion’, ‘God surrogates’, a ‘new theodicy’ (1988: 141-44). He viewed Marxist socialism in particular as a messianic danger to liberal modernity, best analysed theoretically as the (failed) ‘secular Calvinism of emulative collective industrialisation’ (1996a: 671, 668), and something to be given, on those grounds, primarily anthropological attention – duly provided in two interesting books by Gellner on Soviet theories of history. He also came to decide that modern counter-religious ‘secular ideologies’ had become finally ineffective by around 1990 (1992b: 151), and was quite prepared – if somewhat archly – to admit that his own secular rationalism was a every inch a ‘fundamentalism’ in that it could not conclusively or rationally be justified as a life picture.

However, whether these first two areas of discussion suffice – for Gellner or anyone else – to overthrow secularism in every respect, or to obliterate all distinctions between religious outlooks and secular reason, is another matter.

### **Eurocentrism**

Postcolonial theorists and activists are especially prominent in charging western secular theories of socio-historical development with being viciously teleological and Eurocentric. The ‘stadial’ theories of the Enlightenment, it is said, based on supremacist ideas about racial rankings and laced with pseudo-biological notions of organic maturation, contrived to present western modernity as the ‘advanced’ stage of collective life and white westerners as the leading representatives of the species. Secularism is centrally implicated in all this, because all the main progressive outcomes are figured in terms of a decisive universalistic break out of local, global and historical religious darkness, with religious societies and practices definitively figured as backward. And these tropes, it is asserted, remain at work within contemporary (secular) social theory.

Gellner appears at first sight to be fair game for this postsecular assault, notably in *Plough, Sword, and Book*. He greatly admired the Scottish Enlightenment thinkers who invented historical sociology. He manages to *reduce* their number of paradigmatic stages from four to three (hunter-gathering, Agraria, Industria). He thinks of each stage as a kind of ‘species’ comprising particular combinations of production, coercion and cognition; and he declares that the decisive transitions are irreversible (1974: 202; 1988: 20). Of course, we are dealing here with issues of great complexity, requiring more than gestural treatment. One vital question is whether postcolonialism does in fact entail postsecularism (see e.g. Robbins,

2013); another is whether postcolonial analysis itself can plausibly do without sociological categories, aspirations to generalised theoretical validity, and a political morality of human progress (see e.g. McLennan, 2013); and a third is whether the classic Enlightenment theorists, though undoubtedly people of their ideological times, were in effect laying out the basis for the intellectual *critique* of ‘racial’ thinking about people and cultures. Gellner certainly thought so, though in typically arrogant fashion, he snappily brushed off the charge of Eurocentrism.

He had his conceptual reasons. The ‘truncated evolutionism’ that he advocated was designed to be the very opposite of a delusional ‘eternal and global story’ based upon ‘conceptual megalomania’ (Gellner, 1974: 202). Rather, it sought to identify specific, highly ‘idiosyncratic’ phenomena within a wider understanding of ‘pattern, preconditions and implications’ that then, taken together, pose significant normative ‘options’ for us all. ‘Preoccupation with development’, understood thus, was what Gellner held characterized sociology as an enterprise, and what made it distinctively valuable. If we want to grasp what is going on in the world, and over time, we have no alternative, he argued, to this way of scanning things.

As for regarding the European crucible being cast as culturally privileged and superior, the breakthrough to secular modernity for Gellner was just a matter of plain fact, the fact of being first, and the fact that what ensued was the most profound transformation imaginable. The shift of gear involved at least fifteen distinct and contingent items, thus representing a multi-causal outcome, an accidental concatenation of forces, something that happened to happen. Given all that contingency, Gellner could cheerfully concede that perhaps we didn’t really

have an ‘explanation’ for it at all, that it was something of a ‘miracle’ (1988: 158ff). So the arrival of secular modernity in the west was not pre-selected, nor were mankind’s intrinsic needs being appropriately met in the form of this society, this historical moment. When both of these features are present – pre-selection, general needs specially met – and invested with a pre-constructed moral vision such that the whole picture conveys historical necessity, then of course that does amount to illegitimate teleological projection. Gellner thought that it could be found aplenty in Hegel and Marx, a rather disastrous instance of secularism’s extension of religious modes of apprehension. But his own perfectly proper, *methodologically* secular, retrospective functionalist analysis of patterns and preconditions, founded on the empirical observation of threshold events, was not like that at all. A final point to make in this context is that Gellner regularly drew attention to the speed and opportunist intelligence with which ‘baton changing’ between societies occurs in the historical process. Winners and losers, therefore, can never be specified in advance. Overall, then, Gellner’s concern with patterned societal emergence had nothing to do with producing a ‘unilineal and single-track theory’ (1979: 338).

## **Positivism**

Gellner, I have said, did not think that a whole society or culture could move from being completely religious to completely secular, or that humans would ever be completely post-religious, or completely disenchanting. This is because *culture and identity*, including religion, touch parts of us, and serve social purposes, that science/reason cannot. But *culturalism* is not thereby vindicated, because the emergence of scientific rationality as demonstrably and consensually *cross-cultural* has, in Gellner’s view, uniquely and forever broken the grip of, and the prospects for, singular all-encompassing worldviews. One particular *strand* of

Western modernity, subsequently available to, and actively at work within, any number of alternative modernities, emerges as a profoundly context-breaking idiom. That strand is science, or more specifically the *cognitive ethic* of analytical scientific method. Once this mind-set is disseminated and seen to be uniquely effective, there is no going back to the characteristic amalgamated programmes of religion-dominated epochs, in which knowledge, the sacred, ritual, social belonging, moral authority, and sense of self are indissolubly entwined and mutually reinforcing. The ‘way back is blocked’, he claims, because a decisive shift has taken place, from ‘a world in which cognition is not sovereign to one in which it is’ (1988: 204; 1974: 4). All faiths and local cultures must and do make their peace with science, and none can survive otherwise. It is above all in this *positivism* that Gellner’s secularism chiefly consists, making the proposition that religion and secularity are ‘mutually constitutive’ (Casanova) not merely factually questionable, but intellectually slipshod.

Gellner does not put it quite like this, but the principal problem with such equations is the genetic fallacy, commission of which is startlingly pervasive in anti- and post-secular argumentation at the present time: ‘secular’ ideas originated in profoundly religious contexts, and were developed for theological reasons, *therefore* secular thinking must forever bear the mark of, and indeed be subordinate to, its religious progenitor. Gellner would view this form of reasoning as both gullible and lazy, perversely denying the reality of historical emergence and failing to grasp the specific logic of the momentous changes in the conditions of social life and self-understanding as a result of modern science and technology. Accordingly, for him, the real subject of philosophic history is not cultural continuity, but ‘our collective *change of identity*’ (1992a: 58, 1988: 194).

The logic is straightforward enough, yet Gellner is astonished how easily, in relativist and culturalist thought, the sheer epistemic power of the scientific ethos, though almost never *denied*, is all too conveniently overlooked. Especially in *Legitimation of Belief*, Gellner details the ‘Copernican revolution’ whereby the self-legitimizing, totalised, circular, closed, capricious, meaning-suffused, authority-assuming, problem-displacing religious cosmic canopy is penetrated, disaggregated, eroded, and eventually de-legitimated by an attitude of appraisal that takes nothing for granted, regards nothing as sacred, treats all sources, advocates and claims as unprivileged, subjecting all, and equally, to rigorous test procedures. Nothing should command our allegiance in advance or without passing through that fierce lens of critical, levelling scrutiny. Gellner honours Descartes, Hume and Kant as the classic philosophers of this stupendous shift in our relation to the world. Despite the (deep) flaws in their respective conceptual schemes, together these thinkers established the indispensability of rigorous ‘selector’ filters in separating out the decideable content of all comprehensive doctrines from their inspirational and ontological hinterlands. Henceforth, legitimation could only come from the reason within us, or externally, from nature. ‘The secularisation of the world can hardly go any further’ (1988: 126). Gellner’s point is not only that religions lack independent validation by these standards, it is also that faith-holders themselves become compelled to *conceive* of states of affairs existing outside the specifications of their discourses, and to postulate *real conditions* under which their beliefs do not hold. Thereafter, whether held imperatively or half-heartedly, faiths cease to ‘fill out the world’ or control the evidence (1974: 176, 206). Their *rationale* changes fundamentally.

A number of things about Gellner’s positivism can be underlined, relative to the postsecularism debates. One is that his motivation and arguments are as much *sociological* as epistemological. He wants us, for example, lucidly to attend not only to the fact of the big

ditch, but to what lies ‘on either side of it’ (1974: 183). And on the far side lies a tough, narrow social world of agrarian toil and doctrinal subservience, with coercion primary over production and cognition. Today’s ‘re-enchanters’ therefore, are being either delusional or politically foolish in summoning up the lost ‘wholeness’ of those ways of life as something feasible or desirable for ourselves. Another stark question is this: leaving aside all the niceties of philosophical conceptualization, is it or is it not the case, as a social fact about the global world, that scientific rationality and its technological spin-offs are indeed held as valid across very different cultural settings and traditions, and are radically transforming our shared condition? Gellner often goes off at this point into dismissive perorations to the effect that whenever people today, anywhere, want to pursue matters of wealth and health, or to make real decisions, they turn to secular scientific rationality, with matters of culture and religion merely doing service as ‘interior decorations’, ‘antiquated furnishings’ (1974: 147-48). But the underlying thought remains powerful (though we might want to add something about the *capitalist* structuration of science and technology). ‘Hard’ knowledge not only works its way out of the grasp of particular cultural settings and values, it works *against* culture conceived as an indivisible subjectifying force. Even if it is only certain methods and attitudes that transcend context, this is universality enough to render cultural diversity only ever partial and always under examination. Culture thus becomes a mixed, split, ‘ironically’ experienced phenomenology, in which not only formal sets of ideas but the ordinary world of everyday life becomes problematical, ‘interim’ in status, as we invest and populate it with a number of diverse, stratified criteria and purposes. Illuminatingly, Gellner calls this the ‘second secularization’, every bit as important as the first (i.e. side-lining the gods) (1974: 183, 193-8).

## **Re-endorsement**

Following from his admiration for the stern 'selector' epistemologies, Gellner is consistently sceptical about what he terms philosophical 're-endorsement' (e.g. 1974: Ch 3; 1987: Ch. 11). This involves a thoroughgoing contextualism when it comes to understanding ideas and cultural formations, and a tendency to regard sets of claims and practices as coherent wholes, unified 'forms of life'. Re-endorsing enquiries tend to be anti-positivist and expansively pluralistic in approach, denying any independent criteria with which to ground socio-cultural evaluation. Gellner conducts a career-long campaign against re-endorsement, taking on many thinkers in this broad mould, from Wittgenstein to Feyerabend, Geertz to Marcus and Clifford, Austin to Berlin, hermeneutics to postmodernism. As the label indicates, what he most dislikes is the inherent inclination of re-endorsement to leave the world and its component cultures as they are, looking whole and feeling wholesome. There are three problems with that presumption and result. One is that, in the modern world, cultures/identities are not in fact whole, they are cross-cut and split, largely because of the power and inroads of capitalism, science and technology. Accordingly, Gellner derides the way re-endorsers summon up the precious richness of the *Lebenswelt* only, in effect, to cheapen it: if the life-world really still existed in the deeply immersive form posited, we would be silently living its categories, not naming and blessing them (1974: 106). Secondly, re-endorsement construes social science and philosophy as essentially descriptive enterprises: you tease out the self-understandings of a social formation, reconstruct its everyday meanings-in-use, and that's about it. For Gellner, this amounts to a complacent 'cult of self-explanatoriness' in which cultural practices are treated as though they are chains of affective symbolic significance only, containing or implying no substantive claims about the world that are in need of further, external characterization and judgment. Meanings, he accepts, are

crucial, but they neither constitute nor exhaust the world. In short, re-endorsement jettisons the concept of *ideology*.

Perhaps the most important point for Gellner is the hypocrisy or dissimulation of re-endorsement. Although re-endorsers play up the irreducible singularities of what they describe, they *don't* actually endorse all forms of life as self-described: their own favoured cultures, groups and values are always smuggled in through some back door (1992a: 85). Nor do re-endorsers cease to think propositionally or ideologically. As products of the modern, analytical, scientific ethos, they are supplying 'external' rationalization and reconstruction *all the time*, even when the tone is piously appreciative. We should bear in mind here that, for Gellner, the problem with relativism is not so much its oft-cited self-contradictoriness – making a universal claim as to the non-universality of every claim – but its *emptiness* as a strategy for thought when strictly pursued. Genuine adherents to strong faiths, for example, are unlikely to be grateful to those seeking to honour them within a thinned out, uncommitted meta-level pluralism (1974: 47-50; 1987: 160; 1992a: 71-74).

Elements of re-endorsement theory, thus conceived, are visible within contemporary post-secularism. A common argument, for example, is that even to regard religions as essentially matters of *belief* is merely a secular ploy. 'Religion', it is held, defies clear description, because we are dealing with dense and multiple collective practices, ways of being and significances that are not well grasped as truth claims or scientific hypotheses or as pertaining to the causal properties of real supernatural agencies. For Gellner, this amounts to postmodern evasion and 'irresponsibly *a priori* ethnography', the kind of stripping out of 'all contentions about the world' from 'concrete traditions of faith' that in fact hugely distorts

them (1974: 143). One instance of this postsecular trait – all the more effective because its author would be appalled by the ‘postmodernist’ tag – is Terry Eagleton’s attempt, in the book cited earlier, to stave off bone-headed atheist demands that God’s being is something that needs to be demonstrated. Instead of the familiar ‘mega-manufacturer’ of the world, Eagleton wants us to think of God as what sustains us in his love, and the reason there is something rather than nothing. *Qua* love and political, humanitarian purpose, it makes no sense, Eagleton advises, to debate God’s actual existence (Eagleton, 2009: 6-8). But this is spurious, and something of an insult to millions of ordinary Christians. Whether conceived as loving mentor, peacenik, artistic genius, or the moral source of all that is decent in human existence, Eagleton’s image of God inescapably presupposes a super-attribute being or form having ontological status, causal powers, and remarkably human-like motivations. If it is true, as Eagleton insists, that fundamental metaphysical questions do not necessarily require God as an answer (Eagleton, 2009: 13), then invoking Him becomes strictly optional.

Gellner’s other criticisms of re-endorsement can be illustrated by reference to neo-vitalist takes on secularism and postsecularism. William Connolly, for example, asks us to notice that standard secularist thinking constantly manoeuvres to screen out any ‘metaphysics of the supersensible’, thereby constituting an exclusionary metaphysics of its own; a twisted, wintry doctrinal stance towards the ‘protean energies’ that flow through the organization of all things. Instead, a more life-enhancing approach of ‘multiple loyalties’ should be cultivated, as part of a new ‘democratic adventure’ of the soul, with loyalty to religious commitments as part of that. But it is not as though Connolly himself is advocating or directly supporting any specific religious belief, he is merely withdrawing from the committing parts of the secular endeavour. This is why he finally designates his own position as ‘ironic evangelical atheism’ and ‘non-theistic gratitude’, the agonistics of which a perceptive review on an Islamicist

website described as wholly lacking in confessional content and only intelligible within a secularist worldview (Connolly, 1999: 24, 54, 88, 95, 159).

In similar fashion, Rosi Braidotti (2008: 13-18) disavows any necessary connection between secularism and either critical theory or the feminist heritage. She advocates a positive political approach to religious groups and a spirituality-endorsing version of feminism, including feminist theology. As with Connolly, the goal is to work towards a new politics, one involving 'inter-relations with non-human, post-human and inhuman forces', thus producing affirmative 'counter-subjectivities'. These suggestive ideas are designed to embrace and harness the 'creative potential' that subsists in all beings and movements, not least religious ones. Yet as Gellner anticipated, it turns out that generous affirmation across the board proves mightily elusive. 'Classical vitalism' itself doesn't make the grade, for example, because Braidotti thinks it is tainted by fascistic political connotations. Her sense of the need for 'multiple modes of interaction with heterogeneous others' leads to an embrace of Muslims, but not the Pope. And the renewed endorsement of passionate life and lived realities doesn't remotely stretch to the vital energies of the heterosexual family, masculine competitiveness, or the visceral buzz of violent conflict.

Regarding Charles Taylor, there is a striking parallel to be drawn between his and Gellner's career-long concerns, each producing a series of books at a similar rate, handling many of the same themes, at a common remove from the philosophical mainstream. They even managed to concoct, with almost no reference to one other, nearly identical phrases in their descriptively congruent account of the coming of secularity: Durkheimian pre-agrarian religion, a generic notion of theological Reforming zeal, the spiritual 'malaise' of modernity,

socio-philosophical ‘package deals’, the fractured ‘phenomenology’ of modern experience, ‘our’ collective predicament, the ‘mutilated’ sense of being that the secular world instils in some people, the rise to prominence, and problematical nature, of ‘ordinary life’. Beyond those affinities, however, Taylor and Gellner marshalled very different evaluative stances, brought out to some extent in a head-to-head in *The Listener* (Gellner and Taylor, 1986), but definitively articulated in Gellner’s long review of Taylor’s book on Hegel. Gellner’s analysis is remarkable, because in dissecting the core of that 1975 production, he also accurately anticipates the background problematic of Taylor’s major later works, *Sources of the Self* and *A Secular Age*. Respectful and generous for once, Gellner commends Taylor’s ‘impressive’ Hegel scholarship, noting that it constitutes a ‘substantive contribution to social thought’ in its own right (1979: 18). But Taylor, Gellner notes, is drawn to Hegel for the very reason that we should all have pulled decisively away from him: the seductiveness of his philosophically loose ambivalence as between theism, pantheism, and atheism. Taylor’s update on this is labelled ‘expressivism’: the way in which identities situated in the (partially) alienated conditions of modernity are postulated to exude a certain local-collective cultural life, which in turn gains dignity from the part it plays in the story of humanity’s longer term self-realisation/redemption. Taylor lacks Hegel’s grotesque megalomania, Gellner allows, but the romanticism even of Taylor’s mundane version – The ‘Absolute in Braces’ is the witty title of the article – remains disturbing. Hegelianism is philosophically cowardly, for Gellner, because the divinization and humanization of the world are indiscriminately fused, and rationalized from the vantage point of the completed totality, with all the evidence already pre-judged. The Owl of Minerva always has a comfortable flight, we might say, with no one around to witness it. Moreover, expressionism under the sign of Hegel is politically dangerous: despite valuing the private freedoms of the bourgeois individual, a grand significance is conferred on the frustrated and rather pathetic modern self through its notional

participation in the higher mission of the social and indeed the cosmic order as a whole. For Gellner, this leads directly to Nuremberg rallies. As an antidote, we need to esteem and protect, more than Hegelians (or Marxists), the reviled atomism, liberalism, relative prosperity and intellectual secularity of the modern situation, and its distinction between public politics and personal life.

### **Conclusion: the triangle softens**

Gellner was particularly opposed to what he called ‘negative re-endorsement’, the sense that all would be well with cultural worlds if only the one ‘big error’ blighting outside evaluations of them were eliminated. This attitude comes to the fore in postsecular polemic whenever secularism is monolithically presented as anathema. Thus, Wendy Brown, Talal Asad Judith Butler, and Saba Mahmood (Brown, 2009: 8-18) wish to know, Is critique secular? Ostensibly subject to discussion, what is really being asked/asserted is Is critique necessarily secular, given that secularism is so clearly and awfully bad? As with Braidotti, this is a challenge to critical theory, feminism and the Left generally, as well as to western liberals of all complexions. After all – the key points are often framed, disingenuously, as curiously probing questionings – is not the very idea of secular/criticism the definitive product of ‘Enlightenment conceits’ that privilege dubious notions of realism and objectivity against supposedly mystified religious authority or prejudice? Does not secularism just schemingly veil ‘the religious shape and content of Western public life and its imperial designs’? Is it not about supporting the ‘daily coercions exercised by the inarticulate powers coursing through liberal orders?’ Being essentially Christian, can secularism possibly ‘fathom the violence or moral injury’ it visits upon non-western religious traditions and practices, as in the Dutch cartoon case of violence against Muslims?

These are largely rhetorical and highly leading questions, pursued to no serious extent; their very utterance is taken to be ‘devastating’. And yet Brown et al.’s own ‘conceit’ is to parade their convictions as ‘open-ended reflection’, aimed to ‘loosen critique’, to re-imagine ‘the work of critique’, pointing towards a more ‘open hermeneutic’, not to obliterate critique completely in the name of faith or anything else. Gellner was wholly unconvinced by negative re-endorsers, in two respects, and they both apply to this ‘critique of critique’ discourse. One was the implausibility of their underlying paradoxical neutrality, their deeper-than-liberalism liberality: ‘what are the motives of those who wish to endorse *all* cultures?’ What kind of moral substance requires no need for philosophy to judge ‘cultures and their faiths’? (1974: 54, 143). His other objection was that, as it turns out, and quite crucially, the full logic of negative re-endorsement never holds. In our postsecular case, critique in a fairly familiar and completely ‘secular’ sense cannot be abandoned, because the ‘work’ that it does involves setting up a form of rationalisation – here, secularism – as *ideological*, i.e. distorted, self-absorbed, false, doing violence, othering, and all this because it is expressive of the power interests of certain social groups or the structure-in-dominance of particular social formations as a whole. The replacement vantage point for critique then emerges as epistemically superior and attached to no special agenda other than egalitarian betterment and the broader truth. But the trouble specifically for postsecularism in this vein is that the whole pattern of condemnation relies upon and duplicates *precisely* those background regulative notions that are the very subject of the inquisition: a deeper realism, greater objectivity, and a more emancipatory version of progress.

I have been seeking to illustrate and extend Gellner's defence of a certain form of secular understanding. To my mind this continues to be extremely insightful, and intellectually necessary, in relation to today's preoccupations. Whilst postsecular questions – let me be clear – are interesting and important, Gellner's distinctive voice pushes us to work (in the phrase of another thinker he thought was a re-endorser, Alasdair MacIntyre) 'against the self-images of the age', even when those self-images may be progressive. Ultimately, Gellner's secularism is incomplete and internally tensed: it is not, was not intended to be, a grand or watertight worldview. As a methodological positivist, he had reservations about substantive philosophies of materialism, humanism, and socialism. As a liberal, he had qualms about his personal atheism taking on the mantle of public service ideology, except as unstinting opposition to theocracy.

Despite his formidable self-confidence, Gellner chafed and worried about the antinomies within his thought. For example, he was deeply stung to be thought personally devoid of the passions of cultural identity, responding that for him, like anyone else, nostalgia, common ritual and bonding with fellow human beings were the most important things in life (e.g. 1996a: 626). Yet his paeon to culture-transcending science and his insistence on the – *impossible* – rigours of philosophic 'cosmic exile' removed him from the pull of affective solidarities. These frictions are poignantly played out in the tribulations of 'Prometheus perplexed' in *Reason and Culture*. On the one hand, we have to accept that the correct and utterly 'mandatory' meta-theory for human *cognition* is *socially* 'worthless' (1992b: 174). This is because quasi-positivistic understanding, given its very logic, cannot be absolutized or elevated into anything grander and vaguer than knowledge itself, the process of tracking truth. On the other hand, and inconsistently, Gellner also argues that we need to propagate the ethos of cognition 'for Hegelian reasons' – that is to say, for the wider cultural, political and

effect and inspiration it might deliver, at least by way of countering more dangerous and spurious alternatives (Gellner, 1985: 66). This mixed message in turn leaves open the question of whether some kind of ‘Left Gellnerism’ might be developed, a secular(ish) project seeking to synthesise the liberating side of science, fearless intellectual scrutiny of self and others, and a collective politics of equality and diversity. Gellner himself thought not, but perhaps the fire of that radical modernist imaginary can be re-kindled, in spite of the times.

In conclusion, it needs to be added that Gellner’s image of a three-sided contest in which reason, relativism, and religion are strongly angled against one another is overdrawn, as he half-admitted when identifying the pros and cons of each (1992a: 84ff). Whether we call this the consequence of structural and cultural ‘de-differentiation’ or not, each of the component relationships – scientific rationality/religion, religion/relativism, relativism/reason (especially *sociological* reason, we should add, which cannot work without a hefty quantum of relativity) – can be figured more productively and integrally than Gellner allowed. The triangle does not melt away completely, but it softens, becomes a kind of Penrose triangle, with each side first appearing clean and distinct, then morphing into another line of approach. The resulting set of orientations might well be considered postsecular, but that would be the sort of postsecularism that only makes sense within a broader secular horizon in which our species is on its own, and consumed by history.

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