

Ernest Gellner's reply

'Do nations have navels?'

Well I would like to begin by thanking the two previous speakers for the kind things they have said. Obviously it is a source of great pride to me that my student Anthony Smith should become the leading specialist on nationalism and is making such an enormous impact on the subject. I won't labour this but it is a fact that I am very proud of. Again my admiration of Edward Mortimer is connected with the fact that he is a rare – I mean most of the time you know he is a journalist, not an academic – he is a rare journalist who generally gets things right. He actually managed to cover an entire page of the *Financial Times* about me without a single mistake, which was an astonishing achievement, so it gives me special pleasure to correct him on a factual matter in what he has just said. My ancestors were not natives of Prague. They were provincial Bohemian petty bourgeois, but that's not of great importance.

Now to get to the heart of the matter. It's useful in a subject of debate, when the battle lines are clear, when you get a very, very clear issue. Anthony and I now tend to get pitted against each other on what has become one of the major dividing lines in the study of nationalism, namely, the dividing line between what I now call primordialists and modernists, where one side says that nations were there all the time or some of them were anyway, and that the past matters a great deal; and where the modernists like myself believe that the world was created round about the end of the eighteenth century, and nothing before that makes the slightest difference to the issues we face. This is a clear dividing line which is important.¹ Now the question is how do you decide between us? I mean, what I really have been wondering is by what kind of evidence can we establish the reality of the past? Most of you may know the debate in which Bertrand Russell asked tongue in cheek how do we know that the world wasn't created five minutes ago complete with memories? Well, how do you know? Maybe it was! What is the evidence? And of course some of the real debates of this kind are embedded in the division between the creationists and evolutionists.² Was mankind the creator of Adam and did it slowly evolve? Well there is some evidence and of course the evidence was debated at the time this issue was very much alive, namely did Adam have or did he not have a navel? Now it's a very crucial question, you see. No, no, you may fall about laughing, but obviously if Adam was created by God at a certain date, let's say 4003 BC, obviously I mean it's a prima-facie first

reaction that he didn't have a navel, so to say, because Adam did not go through the process by which people acquire navels. Therefore, we do know what will decide whether the world is very old and mankind evolved or whether the world was created about 6,000 years ago. Namely, all we need to find out is whether Adam had a navel or not.

The question I'm going to now address myself to of course is: do nations have navels or not? Now the point about Adam's navel of course is not as simple as you might think. It's perfectly possible to imagine a navel-less Adam because navels, once they were engendered by the original process by which they were engendered, perform no further function. I mean you could live navel-less and there is no problem. Now on the other hand there are other aspects of a human organism, supposing creation did occur at a definite date and mankind was suddenly created, which are rather navel-like but which would have to be there anyway in a kind of misleading way. There are all kinds of rhythms; I'm not a physiologist, but there are all kinds of rhythms about one's breathing, about one's digestion, about one's blood-beat, which come in cycles and the cycle has to be continuous. So even if Adam was created at a given date, his blood circulation or his food consumption or his breathing would have to be in a condition such that he'd been going through these cycles anyway, even though he hadn't been, because he had just been created. For instance, I imagine his digestive tract wouldn't function unless it had some sort of content so that he would have signs of a meal, remnants of a meal which in fact he had never had because he had only just been created.

Now it's the same with nations. How important are these cyclical processes? My main case for modernism that I'm trying to highlight in this debate, is that on the whole the ethnic, the cultural national community, which is such an important part of Anthony's case, is rather like the navel. Some nations have it and some don't and in any case it's inessential. What in a way Anthony is saying is that he is anti-creationist and we have this plethora of navels and they are essential, as he said, and this I think is the crux of the issue between him and me. He says modernism only tells half the story. Well if it tells half the story, that for me is enough, because it means that the additional bits of the story in the other half are redundant. He may not have meant it this way but if the modernist theory accounts for half of 60 per cent or 40 per cent or 30 per cent of the nations this is good for me. There are very, very clear cases of modernism in a sense being true. I mean, take the Estonians. At the beginning of the nineteenth century they didn't even have a name for themselves. They were just referred to as people who lived on the land as opposed to German or Swedish burghers and aristocrats and Russian administrators. They had no ethnonym. They were just a category without any ethnic self-consciousness. Since then they've been brilliantly successful in creating a vibrant culture.³ This is obviously very much alive in the Ethnographic Museum in Tartu, which has one object for every ten Estonians and there are only a million of them. (The Museum has

a collection of 100,000 ethnographic objects). Estonian culture is obviously in no danger although they make a fuss about the Russian minority they've inherited from the Soviet system. It's a very vital and vibrant culture, but, it was created by the kind of modernist process which I then generalise for nationalism and nations in general. And if that kind of account is accepted for some, then the exceptions which are credited to other nations are redundant.

The central fact seems to me that what has really happened in the modern world is that the role of culture in human life was totally transformed by that cluster of economic and scientific changes which have transformed the world since the seventeenth century. The prime role of culture in agrarian society was to underwrite peoples' status and peoples' identity. Its role was really to embed their position in a complex, usually hierarchical and relatively stable structure. The world as it is now is one where people have no stable position or structure. They are members of ephemeral professional bureaucracies which are not deeply internalised and which are temporary. They are members of increasingly loose family associations. What really matters is their incorporation and their mastery of high culture; I mean a literate codified culture which permits context-free communication. Their membership of such a community and their acceptability in it, that is a nation. It is the consequence of the mobility and anonymity of modern society and of the semantic non-physical nature of work that mastery of such culture and acceptability in it is the most valuable possession a man has. It is a pre-condition of all other privileges and participation. This automatically makes him into a nationalist because if there is non-congruence between the culture in which he is operating and the culture of the surrounding economic, political and educational bureaucracies, then he is in trouble. He and his off-spring are exposed to sustained humiliation. Moreover, the maintenance of the kind of high culture, the kind of medium in which society operates, is politically precarious and expensive. It is linked to the state as a protector and usually the financier or at the very least the quality controller of the educational process which makes people members of this kind of culture. This is the theory.⁴

Now this is the process, the creation process, my equivalent to that event of 6000 BC of years ago when humanity was suddenly brought into being, that is, nationalist humanity, and I agree with Anthony that we are a nationalist population. Anthony's case contains a number of points with which I would in no way disagree. Cultures, even a shared number of symbols and communication, were important even in the pre-industrial age. That is indisputable. So one's navel, one's culture, was important then as well. Culture is sometimes deeply loved and its members are aware of it, there is no shadow of a doubt. The ancient Greeks knew the difference between people who read Homer and those who did not read Homer. They knew the difference between people who were allowed to participate in the Olympic Games and those who were not. They had a deep contempt for

Barbarians who fell into the negative class. In that sense obviously they were cultural chauvinists. All right, so cultures are sometimes conscious and sometimes they are invisible, they are sometimes loved and sometimes being invisible they are ignored. Now sometimes, but this is unlikely, they have political institutions connected with them and aspirations to a political unit, but generally speaking the condition of the agrarian world was made for political units which were local intimate communities, smaller than a culture or much larger than a culture, for example large empires. There was nothing in the logic of the political situation to lead political units to expand the boundaries of the culture or not to expand beyond them. They tended to be smaller or larger. Sometimes a culture had political expression, more often it did not.⁵ Sometimes there is continuity between the cultures which were loved in the pre-industrial age and sometimes there is discontinuity. To pick on a point of detail, Anthony, I wouldn't say that there is either genuine folk memory or any pre-occupation in modern Greece with Periclean Athens. There is some continuity with Byzantium or at any rate with the clerical organisation left behind by Byzantine church certainly; but sometimes there is and sometimes there isn't.⁶ So I would say in general there is a certain amount of navel about but not everywhere and on the whole it's not important. It's not like the cycles of respiration, blood circulation or food digestion which Adam would have to have in order to live at the moment of creation. You'd have to have a kind of fictitious past and the past would not be real. The cultural continuity is contingent, inessential.

Where does this leave us? I think Anthony was slightly unfair to me in saying that I was only interested in how it came about and not in the practical implications. Now obviously it does matter to predict which nations will assert themselves, which potential nations, which cultural categories, will assert themselves and which will not. I would say it is inherent in the situation that you cannot tell. You can indicate certain factors. Size is an obvious one, very small cultural groups give up. Continuity is another one, but not an essential one. Some diasporic communities have very effectively asserted themselves. Size, continuity, existence of symbolism are important, but again the Estonians created nationalism *ex nihilo* in the course of the nineteenth century. I think Anthony was a little bit harsh on the economic determinists. When a cultural category is either systematically underprivileged in contrast with its cultural neighbours who may be territorially interspersed or on the contrary excites envy by advantages, that again provides motivation.⁷ Size, compactness, presence of symbolism, motivation and historical accident. And given the fact that the agrarian world was enormously rich in cultural nuances whereas the modern world has only space for something of the order of 200 or 300 national states, not all the potential nations become real ones and many of them don't even try to, and I don't think you can have any kind of formula for identifying them. So I am in fact interested in that problem, and perhaps our difference of approach does make a difference in our

anticipation, in that the modernists have a greater sense of the kind of navel invention as opposed to the sense of continuity of navel.

I think I have done my best to highlight the issues which are before us, and I think at this point it might be good to turn to the general discussion.

Notes

- 1 On the debate between primordialism and instrumentalism, see McKay (1982), and Eller and Coughlan (1993).
- 2 On this debate, see Gellner (1964).
- 3 For a historical analysis of the formation of the Estonian nation, see Raum (1987).
- 4 The theory is fully set out in Gellner (1973, 1983).
- 5 This is elaborated in Gellner (1983, ch. 2); on ancient Greek chauvinism, see Fondation Hardt (1962).
- 6 On this question of continuity with Byzantium, see Campbell and Sherrard (1968, ch. 1).
- 7 On the economic aspects of nationalism, see Nairn (1977); on the nationalism of smaller East European communities, see Hroch (1985) and Gellner (1994).

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(The Notes and References were supplied by the Editors)