



## **Gellner's genealogy of the open society: biopolitics as fragment and remainder**

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Author(s)	Ryan, Kevin
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## **Gellner's genealogy of the Open Society: biopolitics as fragment and remainder**

### **Abstract**

A decade before Foucault began to work with the related concepts of biopolitics and biopower, Gellner posed a series of questions which are suggestive of a similar line of inquiry. Gellner did not pursue this strand of his thought as an historical sociologist however. Instead he packaged it into a functionalist account of how industrial society reproduces itself. In Gellner's writings, biopolitics is both present and absent, like a redacted text. This is the focus of this article, which locates Gellner's method of inquiry within a corpus of genealogical studies that includes the work of Polanyi, Weber and Foucault. What distinguishes Gellner is that the history he reconstructs is a story of achievement in the face of terrible historical odds, but this culminates in a normative genealogy that limits the scope for critical analysis. The article concludes by adopting an alternative – yet still Gellnerian – approach to the question of social reproduction, thereby using Gellner to critique Gellner.

**Keywords:** Biopolitics, Biopower, Foucault, Gellner, Genealogy

### **Introduction**

Ernest Gellner's *Thought and Change* (1964) is without doubt an accomplished and focused study, but it might also be compared to an artist's sketchbook in that it is a rich repository of ideas, some of which are highly developed while others are more like intuitive sparks of creativity. It is in this book that he plotted some of the coordinates of a line of inquiry that

Michel Foucault would pursue in much greater depth a little over a decade later, culminating in the related concepts of biopolitics and biopower. Gellner occasionally returned to what I will refer to as his incipient theory of biopolitics, but he never delved into it as an historical sociologist. Instead he packaged it into a functionalist account of social reproduction. Though Gellner wrote in praise of doubt and scepticism, on this particular issue he seemed content to adopt a stance of certainty, and I think the reason for this is to be found somewhere between the explanatory and evaluative strands of his method.

When Gellner examined the transition to from 'Agraria' to 'Industria' (1988) he was also tracking the emergence of what he referred to as 'civil society' (1994), but here I will opt for a term he borrowed from Karl Popper: the Open Society. For Gellner, Popper's notion of 'openness' was preferable to the more abstract conception of liberty as the absence of interference which, he claimed, 'lacks sociological realism'. Gellner's way of thinking about liberty was attentive to the 'all-embracing and pervasive way in which our social environment moulds our life, our thought, our being', with the degree of openness a matter of the extent to which we can 'tinker with the social organisation and culture which forms us' (1964: 111-12). He was also candid about the fact that he 'warmly subscribed' to 'the ethic of openness', noting that 'what gives life value and attraction seems to me precisely the fact that the future is open, that endless possibilities remain for exploration', and he was adamant that this openness was made possible by an historically unique process of transformation (1964: 112, 1988, 1994). Lest there be any doubt, Gellner laid his cards on the table when he wrote 'industrialisation is good, and industrialisation must happen' (1964: 69).

The Open Society is an industrial society, and according to Gellner, it is also the good society. Good because it delivers tangible benefits which are a major improvement when compared to the past, and most importantly, is a desirable alternative to what is on offer elsewhere (i.e. those social forms that 'rival' the Open Society). Yet there remains a question

concerning the 'all-embracing and pervasive way' in which the Open Society 'moulds our life, our thought, our being'. Here then is a first approximation of the problem that I want to examine, and in what follows I track this strand of Gellner's thought, using his own ideas to overcome the constraints of a functionalist account of social reproduction. The surprising thing is that Gellner himself points the way forward.

### **A (normative) genealogy of the Open Society?**

The labels used by sociologists to distinguish schools of thought inevitably fall short when it comes to Gellner. He was an agile thinker, capable of shifting ground while following a single line of thought. I am going to suggest that he was a genealogist, but this is not to suggest a singular or unified method. The genealogical method takes a variety of forms and Gellner's approach was very particular, assembled in part from analytical strands that exhibit features of functionalism, diffusionism and also pragmatism.

The functionalist strand comes into play on either side of the 'hump' (as Gellner called it), which denotes a rupture or discontinuity that articulates a transition from one type of social order to another. The most important transition for Gellner was from Agraria to Industria, or modern industrial society (1988), and in explaining the stability of the latter, he did not seem particularly averse to functionalist reasoning – so long as it was non-teleological. In *Thought and Change*, Gellner distils the functionalism of social anthropology as follows: 'each institution is explained by the way in which the functioning of the *other* institutions keep *it* going, and so on, until the circle is complete' (1964: 19). If this is functionalism, and according to Gellner it is, then he was in part a functionalist, evident when he summarises his argument in *Nations and Nationalism* by explaining that 'the economy needs both the new type of central culture and the central state; the culture needs the state; and the state probably needs the homogenous cultural branding of its flock' (1983: 140). But Gellner was

also interested in change and transformation, and as noted already, the question of stability applies to either side of the hump, but not the transition itself.

Gellner examines transformation as a process of emulation which is set in motion by structural dislocation, evident for example when he distinguishes 'imitative industrialism' from 'original industrialism' in explaining the 'diffusion of technological and economic might' (1983: 43). Similarly, he argues that nationalism has evolved unevenly and has spread through successive waves of emulation (1964: 166; 1983). But again, as with the functionalist strand of his analysis, diffusion kicks in only after a certain threshold has been crossed and tells us nothing about the conditions of possibility that trigger the transformation itself. This is the vital *how* question, and Gellner answers it by mapping a complex constitutive event. This is also where Gellner's genealogical method finds its anchoring point, and what makes this unique – but also in some respects problematic – is the relationship between explanation and evaluation. Before tackling that issue, a few words on genealogy are warranted.

Colin Gordon (1986: 77-8) has argued convincingly that the 'genealogical attitude' is best understood as a genre which has generated a corpus of studies that he refers to as a 'semiology of catastrophe': Cassirer's *The Myth of the State*, Hayek's *The Road to Serfdom*, Adorno and Horkheimer's *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Polanyi's *The Great Transformation*. In these works the 'German disaster' serves as a catalyst for forensic interrogation of the past as a way of conducting a diagnostics of the present, and for some of these analysts – Hayek most especially – the real and present danger was the possibility that the surviving democracies would inadvertently pave the way for a more totalising totalitarianism. Weber's genealogy is in some respects comparable (his chilling image of modern social life as an iron cage is hardly the view of a cheery optimist), but Gordon deems it appropriate to describe Weber's genealogical style as a 'permanent pragmatics of survival' – less concerned with catastrophe than with the undesirable (and irreversible) consequences of historical trends. There is no doubting Gellner's

debt to Weber, in particular Weber's genealogy of capitalism in *The Protestant Ethic*<sup>1</sup>, and if there is an equivalent to Weber's iron cage to be found in Gellner's work it is not his notion of the 'rubber cage' (Gellner 1987) but rather a figure derived from Goethe: the sorcerer's apprentice<sup>2</sup>. This is Gellner's way of pointing to the risks which are immanent to the science-industry-technology complex. Unlike the iron cage, which for Weber was already manifest, risk exists somewhere between possibility and probability, i.e. a threat looming somewhere in the future as opposed to extant danger. This caveat notwithstanding, Gellner's genealogy is neither pessimistic nor a story of catastrophe. On the contrary, the history he reconstructs is a story of achievement in the face of terrible historical odds. That the Open Society happened at all is, in Gellner's words, a 'miracle', and a very fortunate one at that (1988: 158, 1994: 207).

Gellner's genealogical method might be called, after Foucault, an 'historical ontology of ourselves', that is, an inquiry into our 'historical mode of being' (Foucault 1984: 45, 1982: 216). Otherwise put, this is an inquiry into who we are and how we have come to be what we are (Foucault 1984). The use of pronouns such as 'we', 'us' and 'our', which is common to both Gellner and Foucault, should not be seen to betray a navel-gazing ethnocentrism. Rather, the stance of critical introspection underscores the eschewal of meta-narrative and the centrality of contingency to the genealogical enterprise. But there is also a fundamental point of divergence that distinguishes Gellner from Foucault. Foucault was a master of suspicion, and his method was aimed at enlarging the scope of freedom by gaining a critical understanding 'of the limits that are imposed on us', so that we might transfigure the present and experiment with the possibility of 'refusing' what we are (1984: 45, 1982: 216). Gellner on the other hand openly embraced what we are.

In the way Gellner crafted his analyses, it must be acknowledged that his method was by no means static, and he was capable of approaching old questions in novel ways. His *Conditions of Liberty* (1994) for example is comparable to a detective novel: Gellner sifts

through the evidence for clues that can be deciphered and assembled into a compelling picture of an important historical event. It is not a 'who-done-it' so much as a 'what-is-it': something has happened, something important, and others (those emerging from the shadow of state-socialism) are talking about it by calling it civil society, but they do not fully understand what it is that we have. And neither do we for that matter. That others want what we have is testimony to its importance and its value, but what it is exactly? And so Gellner sets out to solve the mystery, and does so by using the past to construct a vantage point on the present, thereby enabling us to take critical distance from ourselves so that we can better understand (and appreciate) the conditions of our liberty. The partisan Gellner – pinning his colours to the mast of the Open Society – comes to the fore as he entreats the reader to follow his lead in 'trying to understand that which we have suddenly discovered we possess and value....we need to know just what it is we love' (1994: 12).

In terms of specifying the normative criteria that support this stance Gellner was nothing if not consistent, and he acknowledged that his position might be characterised as a 'kind of pragmatism'<sup>3</sup> in that the yardstick against which *Industria* should be evaluated is 'success' (1988: 204). As early as *Thought and Change*, Gellner had discerned the importance of identifying the criteria that might serve to guide the 'new power' of industrial society, and he offered an answer in two very uneven parts. On one side is the old adage that the proof of the pudding is in the eating – to be able to live a longer life without being at the mercy of disease, hunger, deprivation, violence, and oppression counts as progress. The other part of the answer is opaque, not in the sense of theoretical abstraction but in the sense that Gellner posits this as a question 'we' (those of us who inhabit the Open Society) need to wrestle with. Moreover he admits to the impossibility of providing a final and definitive answer, because to insist on one would amount to dogmatism, thereby violating the ethos of an Open Society (1964: 219, 1988: 201-4). Gellner revisited this question much later, in his *Conditions of Liberty*,

and he answered it as an advocate of the Open Society. Having surveyed civil society's 'rivals' he concluded that the concept of civil society, as a way of thinking about liberty, helps to clarify *our* social norms and what it is that *we* endorse, and why this appeals to *us* (1994: 211). Gellner was untroubled by the fact that 'we are the fruit of that which we endorse' because he was confident that the 'cognitive code of conduct' that structures the Open Society makes it possible to weigh up the alternatives: those that have existed in the past and those that exist in the present. Indeed this is what Gellner spent his life doing, and he makes no secret of his own preference. To embrace the Open Society is his choice, and it also our choice to make, or not, but we are only free to make such a choice because we are the fruit of the Open Society. So Gellner's answer to the problem of validation is not in fact an answer but rather an attitude shaped by doubt and scepticism: there is no escaping the 'regress of justification' by 'freeing our choice from the charge of arbitrariness'; all we can do is weight up the evidence, consider the options, and live with the consequences of our actions (1994: 214).

To sum up: when the explanatory and evaluative strands of Gellner's method are aligned, they combine as a normative genealogy of the Open Society. In the next section I examine how this stance places constraints on the scope of a critical genealogy, and in particular, how the functionalist strand of Gellner's method became an instrument of historical redaction.

### **Modular man and the educational machine: biopolitics as fragment and remainder**

Modular man makes a late appearance in Gellner's writings, though there are already glimpses of this figure in his earlier work. The question of *how* this subject appears – not in the realm of Gellner's thought, but historically – is important to the present discussion and will be examined in detail later, but first it is necessary to review Gellner's claim that modularity is an constitutive feature of the Open Society (1994: 101).

What are the characteristics of modular man? This is a subject bound by the rules of context-specific practices and institutions, with the freedom and independence of mind to enter voluntarily into associations without being irrevocably bound to a code of loyalty or ritualised membership. Exit remains a possibility, and though this may meet with minor sanctions these bear no resemblance to punishments historically attached to treason or heresy. Modularity is also the general (common) ability to perform a diverse range of tasks in 'the same general cultural idiom', which generates a complex division of labour, occupational and geographical mobility<sup>4</sup>, and also a plurality of ideas and values. Furthermore, Gellner argues that it is the 'political consequences of modularity which are really important', because it generates associations and institutions 'capable of effective cohesion against the state', thus establishing a defence against tyranny (1994: 102-3).

Gellner insists that that the 'reproduction' of modular man is 'the crucial problem of Civil Society'. In other words a modular 'mode of cognitive conduct' is 'not a birth-right but an accomplishment', and 'somehow this must be taught and its principles internalised' (1994: 102). The mechanism that drives the process of reproduction and ensures its ongoing accomplishment is mass compulsory education, and the functionalist strand of Gellner's method is perhaps nowhere more in evidence than when he discusses the 'educational machine' in his *Nations and Nationalism*. The machine works in the service of production, or as Gellner himself puts it: a complex and highly specialised division of labour is possible only because of a 'common foundation of unspecialised and standardised training' (1983: 27). Further to this, the 'reproduction of fully socialised individuals itself becomes part of the division of labour', and this is how the mode of production is conjoined to the mode of social reproduction: the machine is a 'centralised method' of 'exo-training' which is managed and financed by the state, and even in countries where parts of the machine are in private hands or managed by religious organisations, the state oversees 'quality control' because only the state

can manage and finance 'so large a burden', and only the state can 'control so important and crucial a function' (1983: 29-38). In short, mass education is the engine that drives industrial production and social reproduction, and what it 'manufactures', according to Gellner, is 'viable and usable human beings' (1983: 38). It is not that Gellner is fundamentally wrong in what he argues here, but his account of the educational machine is profoundly ahistorical. It exists – according to Gellner – because it needs to exist: it is a 'structural requirement' and a 'functional prerequisite' of industrial society (1983: 35-7). When Gellner discusses the manufacture of viable and usable human beings, he is referring to concrete social practices that can and ought to be historicised, but this history is eclipsed by the combination of functionalist reasoning and normative commitment to the Open Society.

Nearly twenty years before he wrote *Nations and Nationalism*, Gellner outlined a number of insights that suggest a very different approach to modular man and the educational machine. These insights, which are really no more than fragments of thought, strain against Gellner's functionalism and move in the direction of a critical history of the present. One such fragment appears in the midst of a discussion on the strengths and weaknesses of utilitarianism, and it is perhaps worth mentioning that by comparison to Gellner's critique of anything even vaguely Marxist, Freudian or Wittgensteinian, utilitarianism emerges relatively unscathed. In the passage below he refers specifically to Bentham and both Mills when he writes in praise of Utilitarianism's 'tough-mindedness, empiricism, and freedom from donnish artificiality' (1964: 95). I will have cause to return to these words in the next section, but here I follow Gellner as he first counsels the reader to ignore the 'hackneyed and irrelevant objections' to utilitarianism found in the academic literature, before offering a sociological explanation for the 'failure of utilitarianism in a modern context':

The more we approach a situation in which the attainment of the really *given* and obvious ends become easy (this generally means: the avoidance of the obvious

sufferings of hunger, illness and generally those arising from shortages and ignorance)...the more we are dealing with alternatives in which our 'real desires' are *not* given, by experience or anything else. On the contrary: the situation of technological power which enables us so easily to satisfy the needs which really are 'given' by nature, also enables us to manipulate our own experience, to form ourselves (1964: 99-100, see also 1988: 194-5).

Gellner often cited Durkheim when he discussed the ways in which 'social life forms us', and he cut his argument from the cloth of Durkheim's notion of the collective conscience. In Gellner's hands this becomes shared concepts which, he says, exert a 'grip' or 'hold' over our thoughts and feelings: this is what shapes our expectations, constrains our conduct and compels us to fulfil our obligations (Gellner 1964: 183, 1988: 57, 250). In the quote above however Gellner is saying something *more* than this. That 'technological power' has practical application at the level of population (nutrition and health are mentioned specifically), and that this 'forms us' by manipulating our desires and experiences: this is the political consciousness from which biopolitics was born. Without wishing to force Gellner into a Procrustean bed built from Foucauldian concepts, it is worth pointing out the degree of overlap between what Gellner is saying here and what Foucault would later write when he used the concepts of biopolitics and biopower to examine a 'positive' mode of power. This is 'power that exerts a positive influence on life, that endeavours to administer, optimise, and multiply it, subjecting it to precise controls and comprehensive regulations' (1998: 137). What Foucault had in mind when he combined 'bios' and 'power' was an historically specific form of power/knowledge that emerged during the eighteenth century and which entered into a process of imbrication with disciplinary power and sovereign power. For Foucault this was an event that marked 'the entry of life into history, that is, the entry of phenomena peculiar to the life of the human species into the order of knowledge and power, into the sphere of

political techniques' (1998: 142). This reference to *techniques* is crucial, and I will return to it below as a way of examining how – historically – technologies of power such as the educational machine have attempted to take hold of life so that it could be – as Gellner suggests – manipulated and formed.

There is another fragment from *Thought and Change* that warrants mention, this one from a passage on nationalism where Gellner discusses the 'production' and 'manufacture of a human being', and here again he invokes the centrality of the educational machine: 'only a nation-size educational system can produce...full citizens: only it has the resources to make men of the raw biological material available', and such a machine

...must operate in some medium, some language (both in the literal and extended sense); and the language it employs will stamp its products. If the educational machinery is effective, its products will be, within reason, substitutable for each other, but less readily substitutable for those produced by rival machines (1964: 159-60).

Here is a sketch of modular man long before Gellner coined the phrase itself, and again there is a clear overlap with Foucault's genealogy of power and subjectification, which he described as 'a history of the different modes by which, in our culture, human beings are made subjects (Foucault 1982: 208). Of equal importance to the present discussion is that Gellner's words above could well have been written by the innovators who built the educational machine, or at least its prototypes. For Gellner the birth of the Open Society makes possible 'a genuine and sustained cognitive turning-upon-oneself...a self-conscious and in some way free self-moulding, based on actual understanding and control' (1964: 74). This idea of a free self-moulding subject is an intrinsic feature of the Open Society, it is how modularity was assembled as a problem requiring innovation so that – to paraphrase Gellner – it could be manufactured from the raw biological material available. In other words, modular man came

into being not simply as a figure of thought but as a practical and technical task, and to get to grips with this requires more than simply piecing together the fragments of Gellner's incipient theory of biopolitics. We also need to know more about the educational machine itself: the forms of knowledge and the practices that have combined through a whole series of attempts to take hold of life with a view to constituting a modularised social subject.

Gellner tended to temper his optimism with a sprinkling of sober realism. On one side was his pragmatism: 'concepts whose employment leads to vastly increased control are of course "truer" than those which do not', and so the proof of the pudding is in the eating. On the other was his implicit grasp of biopower as one such concept: 'it is perhaps regrettably inherent in the advancement of knowledge, that the more we understand and control, the more we also see how we ourselves can be understood and controlled' (1964: 213). This cuts to the heart of the matter at hand, because this is also a 'cognitive turning-upon-oneself', yet it appears as a question within the space of Gellner's genealogy only to be redacted. But redaction is not the same as erasure, and though the question is obscured it remains present as a remainder or residue. In the next section I sketch an outline of the educational machine when viewed through the lens of biopolitics.

### **Biopolitics and the Open Society**

*How is modern man possible at all? How could he emerge? (Gellner 1988: 68-9).*

*What genuine Civil Society really requires is...modular man (Gellner 1994: 97).*

As noted earlier, in Gellner's writings the educational machine plays a key explanatory role in accounting for the diffusion of a shared idiom or language. Further to this, Gellner intended 'language' to be understood in both the literal sense – as in the English or French language – and in a much broader sense, so that it becomes coextensive with culture. The same might be

said of the educational machine itself which, in the way it was assembled, can be examined both narrowly (in the form of the school) or more broadly, and I want to start with an example of the latter. This brings me back to Gellner's appraisal of classical utilitarianism, which invokes a particular context: late eighteenth and early nineteenth century Britain. One of the ways in which utilitarian thought was made practical and technical was the New Poor Law of 1834. The main architects of this apparatus, Edwin Chadwick and Nassau Senior, were Benthamite advocates of the 'tough-mindedness, empiricism, and freedom from donnish artificiality' that Gellner expresses admiration for in his appraisal of utilitarianism.

The New Poor Law was a biopolitical technology designed to operate with a minimum of interference with regard to economy or the liberty of the individual, and the dreaded workhouse was its instrument. As a deterrent to indolence, the workhouse was tasked with the job of coaching the poor in how to practice their freedom, so that without being subject to coercive interventions, and based only on the consequences of their own choices, the poor would be obliged to weigh up the balance between misery and happiness in opting for public assistance over paid labour, and in this way would acquire habits of prudence and foresight. But it would be a hard lesson, taught through the temporary loss of liberty in the case of those who entered the miserable conditions of the workhouse, where they were required to labour in exchange for their keep, often by picking oakum or breaking rock. Combined with the Benthamite principle of 'less eligibility' (conditions inside the workhouse were to afford a lower standard of comfort than could be obtained through wage-labour), this would teach the poor to submit to the discipline of the labour market. It thus placed public assistance in the service of economy by compelling workers to compete for wages while allowing the market to set the price of labour (Dean 1991; Ryan 2007).

The reform of 1834 provides an important perspective on Gellner's analytical trinity of production, coercion and cognition at a key moment in the history of the Open Society, and it

also tells us something of *how* a modular social subject was constituted. Modularity was assembled at the intersection of two problems. On one side was the pauper, which is how the dependant poor were codified by the New Poor Law, and the problem of pauperism was one of deficiency: individuals either unable or unwilling to exchange their labour for a wage. On the other side was the criminal – a figure of excess – someone who transgresses the law while also evading the choice between wage labour and workhouse. It is not that the criminal suddenly appeared on the scene during the nineteenth century, but then neither did the pauper, and yet both took on new significance in the context of the twin processes of industrialisation and urbanisation, and this too is part of the transition from Agraria to Industria. In this regard it is worth noting that the modern penitentiary appeared at more or less the same time as the newly configured workhouse, and it was built on the same ideational foundation as the reformed poor law, captured succinctly by David Garland when he writes that ‘at that instant when the destitute individual was forced to turn to crime, to seek parish relief or to beg for charity, he or she was greeted by a discourse of liberty and moral choice and was administered according to its terms’ (1985: 45).

There were other important innovations that ran parallel to the birth of the workhouse and penitentiary, and these aimed to take hold of life in its ‘unfinished’ or ‘incomplete’ form, i.e. the child, so that habits could be instilled that would obviate the need for both poor relief and punishment. This then is the narrower conception of the educational machine, i.e. mass education. Gellner insists that once it became necessary to produce a ‘literate and unified culture’, then it also became necessary to ensure that the products of the educational machine were not ‘shoddy or sub-standard’. As noted earlier, according to Gellner only the state has the capacity to oversee and manage this type of quality control (1983: 38). But this is not entirely correct, because the machine originates, at least in part (and it is an important part), through initiatives on the part of non-state actors working in the field of preventative and

reformatory education, the aim of which was to tackle pauperism and crime at the root by taking hold of the 'biological material' (Gellner) and forming this into a body of industrious, honest and self-disciplined subjects. It is also necessary to modify Gellner's argument that the Open Society orchestrates a shift in social control, from a 'monopoly of legitimate violence' to a 'monopoly of legitimate education' (1983: 34). By expanding the concept of the educational machine so that it traverses the problems of pauperism and crime, it becomes apparent that these two monopolies are actually one.

This is in part the significance of the penal reformatory school, an innovation born from a vision of social control that used the twin vectors of pauperism and crime as a sight-line on the future. Arguing for industrial training and reformatory education as a solution to these problems, educationalists insisted that young offenders should be removed both from the demoralising influence of inadequate parenting (codified as the problem of 'neglect') and the corrupting environment of the adult prison (see Barnes 1989). The problem from this perspective was that slum-dwelling children were on a collision course with the workhouse and prison, and on both counts this amounted to wasted lives (here it is worth recalling Gellner's remark that the educational machine manufactures viable and usable human beings). Preventative and reformatory education was tasked with transforming this stock of wasted life into a productive and compliant citizenry, and it aimed to do so by going to the root cause of the problem: untrained life. It was with this end in sight that campaigners adopted the language of treatment and cure: delinquency was a 'moral disease' and the new schools would function as a 'moral hospital' by restoring those who exhibited criminal propensities to good moral health (Carpenter, 1851: 15-16, 81, 366).

As a hybrid of school, hospital and prison, the strategic aim of the penal reformatory school was to secure society against the dangers posed by young life which has been debased by demoralizing associations and circumstances. However the scope of the practice was

constrained by the fact that it was limited to children in breach of the law, because only this class of child could be forcibly removed from the domestic sphere associated with parental neglect and placed in residential care. More specifically, it was limited by the way it replicated the disciplinary power of the workhouse and prison as an insular institution that operated through exclusion from the wider society (see Ryan, 2007). However by the end of the century a far more encompassing and distinctly biopolitical apparatus was taking shape, and this incorporated preventative and reformatory education into a strategy of public hygiene that reached well beyond the figure of the delinquent child.

One of the disagreements articulated by discourses of health and hygiene at the end of the nineteenth century concerned the method of prevention, which could be operationalised in the form of environmental measures such as the improvement of housing and the provision of green spaces, but also through eugenic interventions targeting 'feeble-mindedness' and 'mental deficiency' (I will discuss Gellner's views on eugenics below). These techniques were not necessarily antagonists however, and in Britain they were brought into alignment by a political imperative to protect 'infant life', a discourse codified by the Infant Life Protection Act of 1872 and bolstered by an emergent science of childhood. Alongside its counterpart in the US, the British Child Study Association (established in 1894) pioneered this new field of expertise (Cunningham 1991: 198), which helped to extend the scope of preventative and reformatory education by conjoining law to norm. What ultimately made this possible was the technique of school medical inspection.

In 1910, Theophilus Kelynack – a Fellow of the Royal Society of Medicine and consultant to the National Association for the Feeble-Minded – explained that the aim of the school medical inspection was 'to secure the prevention of all disorder and disease in early life' (1910: iii). Why was this important? The answer to that question was continuous with the penal reformatory school, and it may well have been penned with Gellner's theory of

nationalism in mind: that the future of state and nation hinges on the 'efficiency' of the rising generation. It is this discursive interweaving of disorder, disease, and efficiency that constitutes the power of the norm, which is an imbrication of disciplinary power and biopower. Henceforth, norms would be derived by examining and codifying the minds and bodies of children grouped together on the basis of criteria such as age (Rose 1990). By aggregating this data, the trained inspector would 'discover' those children who 'presented some deviation from the normal': those of a 'low mental grade' who would not be educable in the context of 'ordinary day schools', and thus required special treatment (Howarth 1910: 36-40). The experts trained in the technique of school medical inspection, and thus empowered to pass judgment on individual children, were required to be vigilant in recording signs of abnormality, and it is important to note that this was not limited to problems of a medical nature ('disease'), but also behavioural problems ('disorder') such as mischievousness, disobedience, and angry outbursts (Howarth 1910: 44-5). In this way the technique of medical inspection augmented the strategy of preventative and reformatory education by stretching it across the social body so that it encompassed not simply children in breach of the law, but childhood *as such*.

As noted earlier, the overarching strategy was framed by a discourse of infant life protection, which encompassed but was not limited to the problem of neglected and delinquent children. The political imperative to protect infant life instituted a relay between multiple fields – education, medicine, juvenile justice, social work, child welfare – and conjoined law to norm as a biopolitical apparatus that also entered into the space of the home, and in two ways: by examining the child for signs of neglect, and by using the trained child to influence the conduct of parents and guardians. Moreover, childhood was framed as a 'national asset' to be harnessed through a blend of surveillance, regulation and coercive

controls, thereby minimising 'the manufacture of criminals and paupers' while maximising the numbers equipped to serve the nation as healthy and efficient workers (Millin 1917).

When Gellner reflects on this period of British history, he notes that 'psychiatrists and practitioners of related skills have inherited the burden of pastoral care and solace from the old clerics'<sup>5</sup>. But when it comes to the crucial biopolitical question of how the scientific pastorate has 'manipulated human material' (these are Gellner's words) with a view to achieving specific political ends, Gellner turns away from the past and looks to the future: 'the techniques available to these specialists amount to very little other than the crudest trial and error'. Insofar as this has any bearing on the past, Gellner notes that 'the one major and initially plausible doctrine to have emerged in this area at the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries comes in the end to consist of hardly anything other than a skilful evasion of its own falsification' (1988: 267). Thus the liberal version of eugenics – more waste management than waste disposal to be sure, and the difference is by no means trivial – is an anomaly, a temporary dogmatism on the part of those who embody the Open Society's 'code of cognitive conduct'. But this simply will not do by way of explanation. The sifting and partitioning of the population was part of the 'quality control' that Gellner attributes to the educational machine, and Foucault is correct when he argues that this was not simply politics masquerading as science. It was a 'real way of thinking' about race, crime, poverty and insanity, or more generally, about how to take hold of life with a view to augmenting the health, wealth, and strength of the nation (2003: 257). In other words, this is an intrinsic feature of the production-coercion-cognition spiral: it is the history of modular man, and thus also the history of the Open Society. To bring this back to Gellner, this is the price of living in the 'rubber cage' of modern industrial society: it is 'the Faustian purchase of cognitive, technological and administrative power' (1987: 153).

## Conclusion

At the end of *Thought and Change* Gellner returns to the failure of Utilitarianism as a way of posing a troubling question: as life becomes increasingly malleable, then 'who or what decides the direction of this manipulation?' (1964: 217). Here is the nub of the issue, which is not simply that the Open Society is capable of unleashing some type of technological or indeed biotechnological monster. The fundamental problem is that the question of validation floats on the sea of politics. If the Open Society represents genuine historical progress, and for Gellner it does, then on what basis can we conclude that it is better than those social forms that rival the Open Society? Gellner responds to this question as a pragmatist, but his answer is buoyed by an analytical blind-spot which, curiously, he himself was able to see reasonably clearly. In Gellner's writings the question of biopolitics is like a redacted text: both present and absent, or more specifically, presented initially in fragments and then gradually remaindered. What I have tried to show is that to allow biopolitics into the frame of analysis would greatly enhance the critical strand of Gellner's method.

## Notes

1 See Gellner's discussion on 'generic' versus 'specific Protestantism' (1988: 100-12).

2 Gellner uses the idea of the rubber cage in the context of advanced industrialisation, his point being that the inhabitants of such societies can make use of science and technology in their everyday lives without having to be 'specialists without spirit' (Weber 1992: 124).

3 According to Gellner the pragmatists overlook two things which are central to his own work: the somewhat paradoxical relationship between 'radical discontinuity' (between past and present) and 'excessive stability' (on either side of the 'hump') (1981).

4 Gellner characterises this aspect of modularity as 'a permanent game of musical chairs' (1983: 25).

5 This would make for an interesting comparison with Foucault's work on pastoral power (see Foucault 2000)

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