In Memory of Hobsbawm

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An assessment of Hobsbawm based on the contexts and contradictions which marked his life and work. Using insights from his autobiography, *Interesting Times*, this tribute attempts to understand his politics and academic contributions which make him one of the greatest historians of the 20th century.

A long life, amazingly rich and productive till the very end, is now over. It is, indeed, the passing of an era: of a tradition of committed Marxist history writing which peaked, especially in post-War Britain. Hobsbawm belonged to the “Historians’ Group” of the Communist Party of Great Britain which founded the journal *Past and Present* and which, at one point, included Christopher Hill, E P Thompson, Rodney Hilton and many other towering figures. It was a generation that was directly engaged with tumultuous world historical events in ways that had seldom been the lot of historians in other times and places. Hobsbawm himself was born in 1917. He and his contemporaries saw the rise and fall of socialist revolutions the world over. Many fought in one of the bloodiest wars in history. They lived for very large stretches of their lives under the shadow of an imminent nuclear holocaust. They also saw some remarkable triumphs: the defeat of fascism, of formal imperialism in Asia and Africa, and the American defeat in Vietnam.

Creative Contradictions

A historian’s tribute, however, cannot rest with the iconic evocation of tradition or of great achievements alone. It needs to encompass paradoxes which set Hobsbawm apart from many of his other comrades.

I can recall three stories about Hobsbawm that might help situate him as a communist historian. The first two are ironical; the third, in contrast, speaks of the depth of his own kind of communist political conviction. They indicate, perhaps, an inner tension that could, ultimately, find no resolution.

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Shortly after the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968, a group of us – leftists who ran a study circle called the Marx Club in Calcutta – invited Hobsbawm, then visiting the city, to speak about the Soviet “intervention”. He condemned it unequivocally and openly. He then went on to remark that the Soviet Party should be seen as something similar to the Indian Civil Service: joining it was a lucrative job option. The meaning of Party membership in a situation where the Party ruled the state was vastly different, he said, from being a communist in a capitalist country.

His criticism of communisms in power was not restricted to the Soviet model alone. He extended it to the Chinese experience that had attracted so many across the world at that time. He once said that Mao’s *Little Red Book* – one brandished by all political rebels and radicals around the globe at that time – made him nostalgic even for Stalin’s infamous *Short Course on the History of the CPSU(B)*, a classic example of doctored and self-serving historical narrative. So extreme were the absurdities of the former that the lies of the latter seemed modest in comparison.

Taken together, these two stories establish Hobsbawm’s growing scepticism about communist hopes of revolutionary change, and his acute awareness of the myths spun by Stalinism and adjacent ideologies to disguise the horrors of “actually existing socialist regimes”. One may, perhaps, wonder if this sense of hopelessness – most acute and painful in someone who would not abjure the Party – might not have influenced certain decisions that may seem cynical: his acceptance of the Order of the Companions of Honour is a case in point. More consequentially, his support for Neil Kinnock and the Labour Right in the 1980s, at the peak of Thatcherism, has been, justifiably, a subject of fierce criticism from the British Left.
The third story, by contrast, points in the opposite direction. It illuminates what appears to be the most puzzling of Hobsbawm’s decisions: his retention, till his death, of his Party membership. Unlike his associates in the Historians’ Group, his acceptance of the truths of Khrushchev’s revelations did not lead him to publicly relinquish his Party affiliation. Nor would he do so after the Soviet invasion of Hungary, when several British Marxist historians – E P Thompson, most notably – left the Party and founded their relationship with Marxist theory and praxis on very different terms. Hobsbawm neither revised his stance towards the Party, nor did he formally reconstitute his older Marxist understanding about the mainspring of historical processes even after such catastrophic shocks.

The third story, perhaps, helps us to understand why it was so. It comes from his autobiography, *Interesting Times*, and it speaks of the precise moment at which his decision to become a communist became written in stone. It was in the middle of the last march of the German Communist Party through a dark Berlin just before Hitler came to power. A decision taken at such a momentous turning point in history, in the face of such odds, seems to have led Hobsbawm to see his communism as a political identity which simply could not be given up, however purely formal its presence in his public life increasingly became.

**Orthodox Yet Innovative**

His historical practice is difficult to define precisely. He continued to adhere to a largely orthodox economic determinism, organising historical processes around the structures of modes of production. In contrast, Thompson and Raymond Williams would develop powerful critiques of the base-superstructure model. At the same time, in his own research and writings, Hobsbawm was drawn, again and again, to historical figures and events which orthodox Marxism tended to ignore, marginalise or dismissively castigate as residual elements and misfits in a neat and confident narrative of progress, which moves from an anti-feudal to an anti-capitalist transformation in forces and relations of production under organised working class leadership.

Some of his most profound and sensitive writings relate to outlaw figures: *Bandits*, *Primitive Rebels*, or his work on Luddite machine breakers. These people were not representatives of the vanguard revolutionary class and they belonged to defeated forces who, as Thompson, famously said, had been seen, at best, with an enormous condescension by posterity, which would include progressive historians. Studying doomed revolutions was hardly a classically Communist choice. His preference, or his irresistible attraction for such moments, then, indicates an outside-of-the-orthodoxy that he never repudiated.

However, this tension was not characteristic of British Marxist historians even in earlier times. Thompson wrote a study of William Morris’ utopian socialism while he was still in the Party; Morton had uncovered the history of the Ranters some time previously, thus reorienting the history of the English Civil War in ways which Christopher Hill would elaborate and enrich. Raphael Samuel once pointed out that, in a political life defined by constant exhortations to “scientific method” and an acceptance of iron laws of progress, history furnished “the playground of the Communist unconscious”. So if Hobsbawm wrote about subjects that were unorthodox from a Communist political perspective, this choice was, in Britain at least, hardly unusual for a Marxist. It was an orthodox Marxist’s undying passion for unorthodox themes.

In a slightly different vein, Hobsbawm also underlined occasions in Marx’s own analytical practice where Marx departs from a fully economistic understanding of history. This is clearest in Marx’s *Eighteenth Brumaire* where the analysis of Bonapartism had to move away from a simple reduction of the state to class power. I also sometimes speculate that the rather abrupt entry of Bonapartism in Hobsbawm’s late essay, “Marx, Engels and Politics” was possibly implicitly conditioned by his awareness of the nature of actually existing socialist regimes which, in their operation, could not be fully understood within strictly class digits.

**Detailed Larger Picture**

There was a radical difference with other Marxist historians, nonetheless. The fact that Hobsbawm never broke with the Party, and, further, that his particular brand of Marxism, unlike Thompson’s or Hill’s, was far more deliberately shaped by economic explanations of the big forces of historical change, imbued his work with certain specific qualities and strengths. Unlike Thompson or Hill, some of his greatest work spanned very big slices of time and space – the ages of revolution, capital and empire, moving from Europe to the globe – even though, strangely, the global history excluded a sustained engagement with India or China. He was a master of the grand narrative in the best sense of the term.

There were other productive differences. Hill, Hilton and Thompson confined their detailed research to British, or even English, historical experiences. Hobsbawm, born of mixed European descent and staying on in Germany till the rise of Nazism, was the most European of the British Marxist historians. His work, therefore, had a sweep and range, across both time and space, which his contemporaries could not claim. His life story, told by himself, is imbued with this cosmopolitanism.

What he shared with them, nonetheless, was his interest in details and smaller events which cohered to produce the larger picture. The details were important in themselves and not just as a prelude to large conclusions, such as those, for instance, in the work of Perry Anderson, the other British Marxist with a comparable sweep.

Hobsbawm’s unswerving faith in Marxism depended on a very interesting paradox. This is indicated in a passage in one of his last essays, “Marx Today”. He gave two reasons for what he saw as the abiding and even growing general interest in Marxism from the late 20th century. He attributes it partly to the collapse of the erstwhile socialist countries, which emancipated Marx from the iron cage of official Marxism-Leninism. Second, the globalised capitalism of today is “uncannily” like the world predicted in the Communist Manifesto.

The worldwide triumph of capitalism becomes, ironically, in Hobsbawm, an argument for the perennial strength of Marxist analysis. It is a memorable point for us all.