

DONALD SASSOON

ERIC HOBSBAWM

1917–2012

ERIC HOBSBAWM OUTLIVED the ‘short twentieth century’ of 1917–1991 by more than twenty years. Right to the end, he was still an object of scandal for having been a Communist for much too long. ‘You see’, he might have said—‘you see’ was one of his habitual verbal tics—‘You see, there have been many Communists among major historians, but they quit. Some, like Edward Thompson, stayed on the left; some moved right, like Annie Kriegel or François Furet. I stayed until the bitter end.’ Since even the mainstream media agreed that Hobsbawm was a great historian—some even said, ‘the greatest living historian’, which he found unconvincing and a little embarrassing—the question was unavoidable: how could an impenitent Communist be a great historian?

Whenever Hobsbawm was interviewed, especially in Britain or the United States, the issue would be raised; sometimes with the implicit sub-text: ‘The producer insisted I should ask you this because it would look odd if I didn’t.’ Why had he supported the USSR? Why had he stayed so long in the Communist Party? Tacitly, the interviewer would be offering a challenge: ‘Here is the opportunity to denounce your past, to repent, to say sorry. Take the chance—admit it: you were wrong!’ Hobsbawm consistently refused to abjure, but he freely admitted mistakes or erroneous interpretations, and his belated realization of the gravity of Stalin’s crimes: Khrushchev’s speech was to him a revelation. However, on the substance, ‘Are you sorry to have been a Communist?’, he always remained unrepentant.

What kind of Communist was he? He belonged, he explained in his autobiography *Interesting Times*, to the generation for whom the hope of world revolution was so strong that to abandon the Party would have been like giving in to despair. But he must have been tempted. After the Soviet invasion of Hungary a letter was sent to the *Daily Worker*, then the Party paper. It was signed by Hobsbawm as well as other CP intellectuals such as Christopher Hill, Edward Thompson, Ronald Meek, Rodney Hilton, Doris Lessing and the remarkable Scottish poet, Hugh MacDiarmid, who somewhat eccentrically is supposed to have rejoined the Party over Hungary on the grounds that one does not desert friends in need. The letter declared:

We feel that the uncritical support given by the Executive Committee of the Communist Party to the Soviet action in Hungary is the undesirable culmination of years of distortion of fact, and failure of the British Communists to think out political problems for themselves . . . The exposure of grave crimes and abuses in the USSR, and the recent revolt of workers and intellectuals against the pseudo-Communist bureaucracies and police systems of Poland and Hungary, have shown that for the past twelve years we have based our political analyses on a false presentation of the facts.

Of course the Party refused to publish it, so it appeared instead in the *New Statesman*. Other statements made at the time suggest that Hobsbawm, unlike perhaps the majority of his co-signatories, thought the intervention was a regrettable necessity, a kind of humanitarian intervention *ante litteram*. (We know the formula: if the USSR had not intervened, fascism would have prevailed.)

By then Hobsbawm had already lost any admiration he might have had for Soviet society. In *Interesting Times* he explained that his first trip to the 'Socialist Camp' in 1954–55 had proved disappointing. He found the USSR and the system depressing and though he continued to defend the Party line, his scepticism grew as supporters were increasingly asked to believe the unbelievable. As he said, Communists of his generation regarded themselves 'as combatants in an omnipresent war'. Like their counterparts on the anti-Communist side, they were prepared to disregard human rights in order to fight against what they regarded as a greater evil. But how else could one tolerate evil, if not by believing that the alternative would have been much worse? This does not justify anything; but it explains much, including Hobsbawm's fondness for

Brecht's famous poem written in the 1930s, *An die Nachgeborenen*, 'To Those Born After Us':

Alas, we
 Who wanted to prepare the ground for kindness
 Could not ourselves be kind.
 But you, when the time comes
 When man can be a helper to his fellow man
 Remember us
 With forbearance.

Be that as it may, the question of why he decided to remain in the CP was, ultimately, one of personal psychology. It was perhaps a desire not to give in, an affirmation that he preferred to remain loyal to the choice of his younger days, when the international fight against fascism was the main motivation. After all, he could have easily joined the establishment. In a way he did: he was made Companion of Honour in 1997, joining national treasures such as David Attenborough, Alec Guinness and David Hockney, and less treasurable treasures such as Tebbit and Heseltine.

In *Interesting Times*, Hobsbawm alluded to the 'pride' of having gone so far without conceding an inch; almost as if to say 'If I can "make it" as an old commie, imagine what I could have achieved as an ex-commie?' There was, after all, not the slightest personal advantage in remaining in the CPGB, a tiny grouping irrelevant in almost all areas of British life—unlike in France or Italy, where a mass Communist Party offered some form of collective protection to a besieged community. Though not really involved in the everyday politics of the CPGB, except when a student at Cambridge, he was always more than willing to give talks, write in the party press, not least *Marxism Today*, and be generally available—provided no one told him what to say.

Britain in the 1950s was overwhelmingly anti-Communist. Even being a Marxist constituted a problem. To give younger readers an idea of what was at stake: at University College London in the 1960s, I took a course in British economic history. The lecturer in charge (whose name I have forgotten, so undistinguished has he remained) distributed a lengthy bibliography at the beginning of the academic year. He invited us to turn to a particular page and warned us: 'Note on page X: E. J. Hobsbawm, *Industry and Empire*. Now Hobsbawm is a perfectly good historian, but be careful: he is a Marxist. Turn now to page Y: E. P. Thompson, *The*

Making of the English Working Class. Thompson too is a good historian, but be on your guard: he too is a Marxist.' He mentioned no one else. At school I had not heard of either of them. Naturally when the lecture was finished many of us trooped across the road to the bookshop to acquire Hobsbawm and Thompson with the excitement of teenagers buying dirty books.

From the 1970s onward, Hobsbawm's closest allegiance was with the Partito Comunista Italiano, probably the only party in which he could have been entirely comfortable; and of which, as he explained, he had become a 'spiritual member'. He could have joined the Labour Party in the 1980s, the heyday of Thatcherism, when its leader Neil Kinnock had made it clear that he would be happy to have a prestigious personal guru like Hobsbawm; everybody on the left, and not just on the left, had been reading the 1978 Marx Memorial Lecture, 'The Forward March of Labour Halted?'. But Hobsbawm kept his independence.

He had not really joined the Communist Party of Great Britain, except in the technical sense. The CPGB was the local branch of an international movement which, when Hobsbawm became a member in the 1930s, was at its most centralized. But it was also the time when the threat of fascism was at its most vivid and when Communists had moved on from the more sectarian 'Third Period' phase and espoused the policy of the Popular Front. Once he told me: 'That's the kind of Communist I am: a Popular Front Communist.' After 1945, the movement began to disintegrate with increasing speed almost in the process of extending itself. First there was Tito's great refusal (1948), then the uprisings in East Germany (1953), Poland (1956) and Hungary (1956); then the break with Albania and the Great Schism with China (1960), the Prague Spring (1968), Romania's nationalist declaration of independence from the USSR (1968) and Eurocommunism (1976). Far from being a monolithic movement, world communism was less and less international once Moscow ceased to be 'home'. Someone like Hobsbawm could stay in the movement and take any position he liked, without having to leave.

Past and Present

His works were certainly not 'Communist', whatever that may mean. *Industry and Empire* was not the call to arms I had hoped for as an undergraduate. Hobsbawm's contribution to the then-raging debate

on whether the standard of living of the working classes declined or improved during the Industrial Revolution—conducted in the 1950s and 1960s in journals such as the *Economic History Review*—was unimpeachably scholarly. The only slightly ironic note he allowed himself was in persistently calling those who held the view that working-class conditions of life had ameliorated throughout the period of industrialization, ‘the cheerful ones’. This was a highly specialist *querelle* which lay somewhat outside the dominant trend in British historiography, whose chief concern at that time was with political and diplomatic rather than social and economic history; with the short-term and the conjunctural, rather than with structures.

This was why Communist and Marxist historians made a common front with others who were close to the French *Annales* school. The outcome was the creation of the journal *Past and Present*. Like *Annales*, the group around *Past and Present* were committed to a study of structures, to analysis and synthesis. They liked comparisons; they liked the *longue durée*. At first non-Marxist historians were reluctant to work with the journal or to publish in it, but eventually distinguished scholars such as Moses Finley, Lawrence Stone and John Elliott joined Marxists such as Hill, Hilton, Thompson and others on the editorial board. Hobsbawm supported the journal indefatigably, even managing to attend a board meeting in Oxford at a time when his mobility was seriously impaired.

Hobsbawm, at least in his scholarly production, remained quite distant from the preoccupations of so many ‘organic’ left intellectuals. In his historical work he wrote nothing about the USSR until *Age of Extremes* (1994), and little about Communist history. When he did he was fiercely independent. In 1969 he wrote a scathing review in *NLR* of the first volume of the ‘official’ history of the CPGB by James Klugmann, whom Hobsbawm accused of being ‘paralysed by the impossibility of being both a good historian and a loyal functionary’, contrasting the book unfavourably with Paolo Spriano’s history of the PCI: ‘a debatable, but serious and scholarly work’.

Unwilling to defend Communism—at least, when the integrity of historical research was at stake—he did defend Marx and Marxism. Such defence, however, was seldom intransigent. Hobsbawm acquired his earliest renown and a distinctive voice as a historian on a subject with which traditional Marxist historiography—or, indeed, any historiography—had

not dealt: social banditry and pre-capitalist rebellions. *Primitive Rebels* appeared in 1959, *Bandits* in 1969 and *Captain Swing*, co-authored with George Rudé, in 1968. Since then the scholarship on these themes has expanded enormously, yet it is difficult to encounter a book or an article on pre-capitalist social unrest or millenarian movements without some reference to Hobsbawm—initially deferential, then, with the passing of time, less so. Yet his work could not be ignored, something he recollected with not a little satisfaction in the interview, one of the last, he gave to Simon Schama for *Archive on 4* on the BBC.

Given the success obtained with ‘primitive rebels’, other, lesser historians would have continued to plough that particular furrow; Hobsbawm was more interested in sowing ideas on a broader canvas. His four volumes on the history of capitalism from 1789 to 1991 will remain a monument of *haute vulgarisation*—a term occasionally used as a pejorative, but Hobsbawm gloried in it: it meant that he was not writing just for the academy. His *Nations and Nationalism since 1780: Programme, Myth, Reality* (1990) articulated his profound dislike of nationalism and of identity politics. *Echoes of the Marseillaise* (1990) was levelled against Alfred Cobban, whose revisionist *The Social Interpretation of the French Revolution* (1964) had preceded François Furet’s better known *Penser la Révolution Française* (1978) which became all the rage as France prepared to celebrate the bicentenary of the Revolution. Blessed with an uncommon facility of expression, a lively style and an ability to synthesize complex events, these works made him known in wide circles of non-specialists.

Alongside them he produced myriad articles on a variety of topics, in journals ranging from *Marxism Today* to NLR, the *New York Review of Books*, *Times Literary Supplement*, *New Statesman* and *London Review of Books*, to mention only the English-language journals. They were representative of a notable strand in the tradition of European Marxism: a pessimism of the intelligence barely tempered by an optimism of the will. Hobsbawm himself remarked, as the hopes of a socialist future waned and as he got older, that pessimism of the intelligence was all one had left. Lucid to the very end, he was preparing a volume on the decline of bourgeois culture. The last book published while he was still alive, *How to Change the World: Tales of Marx and Marxism*, was a collection of essays, including many that had appeared in Italian but not in English. Some were new. All were centred on Marx (and Engels), except for two on Gramsci.

Hobsbawm's last Marx was not the theoretician of the world revolution and the leading role of the proletariat, but the theorist of globalization and of crises, a Marx finally emancipated from the USSR. This was a Marx for a world in which few parties of significance were anti-capitalist, in which the hopes generated by the events of 1968—events that had left Hobsbawm fairly sceptical—had not materialized; a world in which many advocated a retreat from the Enlightenment and in which the last great social revolution was led by an Islamic fundamentalist, Ayatollah Khomeini. The triumph of neo-liberal economic policies, particularly in the West, had also constituted a defeat for traditional social democracy since this required, for the accomplishment of its 'minimum' programme, a strong state. As Hobsbawm puts it: neo-liberalism attempted to destroy not Communism, whose stagnation had become clear, but the kind of gradualist reformism advocated by Eduard Bernstein and the Fabians.

Hobsbawm located the crisis of Marxism in the crucial decades after 1980. The crisis was not purely political and economic but cultural as well. Increasingly, the possibility of understanding the structures of human society was being challenged by post-modern attitudes; there was a return to merely narrative history, a disdain for generalizations and for the study of reality, a new relativism. He saw the retreat from Marxism as part of a wider change in the social sciences, where intellectuals were giving up rationalist attempts to produce a global picture of our times. Here Hobsbawm attributed great importance to the revolt of the intellectuals of the 1960s, of which he was quite critical. He disliked their anti-centralism, their love of spontaneity and localism, their third-worldism.

This could be seen as the complaint of an old Marxist, generationally separated from 1968. But that generation too is now old, and perhaps it should begin to come to terms with itself. During one of our last conversations he noted that it was rather strange that that generation (mine), with such a commitment towards intellectual pursuit and culture, should have produced so little historical analysis of its own itinerary. While he probably over-estimated the importance of post-modern irrationality in the cultural crisis of the last thirty years, it is true that totalizing explanations have been put in the attic, along with Marx; but this mainly applies to the liberal intelligentsia. Elsewhere, totalizing explanations rule the roost. The enemies of the West are seen either in terms of irrationality—Islamic fundamentalism, fanaticism, terrorists

dreaming of restoring the Caliphate—or in terms of a defence of ‘vested interests’ against the individualism of the market. Market fundamentalism is just as over-comprehensive as the statism of the old left. It declares, along with Hayek, that the decisions of millions of consumers are more ‘rational’ than those taken by planners.

Where Hobsbawm was right was when he pointed out that what had disappeared, for now, was a belief, shared by all the protagonists of the great revolutions of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries—the French, the American and the Industrial—that it was possible to change the existing social order and to substitute a better one for it. We may have lost, he wrote, but the supporters of ‘let the market rip’, so hegemonic in the years 1973–2008, had lost too. Was there an element of consolation in his belief that the stage was set for a return to Marx, the theoretician of capitalism? Possibly. But one should take seriously Hobsbawm’s injunction to take Marx seriously—and, let me add, take history seriously, and rescue it from those who would simply treat it as if it were a supermarket, where one gathers some attractive facts, piles them on the trolley and uses them to justify whatever policies one likes.