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The Popular Front and Marxism in Eric Hobsbawm's Historical Works

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in Eric Hobsbawm's Historical Works**

This essay attempts to offer an understanding of the relation between Eric Hobsbawm's historiography and politics. In order to grasp effectively this complicated relationship, we need to distinguish between his Marxist methodology (that he used in his historical studies as the main, though not exclusive, analytical framework) and his popular national frontist understanding of politics along with the support for the USSR in the postwar era, as the former is not reducible to the latter and vice-versa. The Marxian analytical tools Hobsbawm used in his works, chosen according to the needs of those studies, derived from debates developed mainly within the Communist Party Historians Group and, secondly, in discussion with other historians and intellectuals. The National Popular Front politics that he projected as the ideal strategy in different historical conjunctures and the endorsement of the USSR as a global counter-pole to the USA's hegemony were an outcome of Hobsbawm's politicisation during the 1920s and 1930s in the ranks of the Communist International. It is true that those formative experiences were coincidental and inextricable, but they are characterized by a relative autonomy. Keywords: Marxism, Eric Hobsbawm, National Front, Communist Party of Great Britain.

**A Frente Popular e o Marxismo
na obra historiográfica de Eric Hobsbawm**

Este artigo procura compreender a relação entre a historiografia e a política em Eric Hobsbawm. De modo a interpelar esta relação complexa, precisamos de distinguir entre a sua metodologia marxista (que foi o quadro analítico por si mais utilizado – ainda que não o único – nas suas investigações historiográficas) e o seu entendimento frentista (nacional e popular) da política, paralelo ao seu apoio à URSS no pós-guerra, evitando assim tomar uma coisa pela outra. As ferramentas analíticas marxistas que Hobsbawm utilizou nas suas obras, escolhidas de acordo com as especificidades das investigações que foi desenvolvendo, provieram de debates desenvolvidos, em primeiro lugar, no interior do Grupo de Historiadores do Partido Comunista e, em segundo lugar, de discussões mantidas com outros historiadores e intelectuais. A política de frente nacional e popular que assumiu como estratégia ideal em diferentes conjunturas históricas e o seu apoio à URSS como pólo global de oposição à hegemonia norte-americana eram um efeito da politização de Hobsbawm nos anos de 1920 e de 1930 no quadro da Internacional Comunista. Se é certo que estas duas realidades coincidiram no tempo e são indissociáveis uma da outra, guardam entre si uma autonomia relativa.

Palavras-chave: Marxismo, Eric Hobsbawm, Frente Nacional, Partido Comunista da Grã-Bretanha.

The Popular Front and Marxism in Eric Hobsbawm's Historical Works

George Souvliis*

Introduction

Eric Hobsbawm is possibly the only historian who has been both so praised for his work and so criticised for the politics he endorsed throughout his life. Still today, most accounts of his work reproduce the same understandings, with a polemical zeal against his political stance that even ardent cold warriors would have been hesitant to use in the public debates of the time. This essay, conversely, attempts to offer a temperate though critical understanding of the relationship between Hobsbawm's politics and his work as a historian. I argue that if we are to grasp this complicated relationship effectively, we need to distinguish between the Marxist methodology that he used as his main, though not exclusive, analytical framework, and his popular frontist understanding of politics as well as his support for the USSR in the postwar era. The former was not reducible to the latter, or vice versa. The Marxist analytical tools that Hobsbawm used in his studies were chosen according to the demands of the research that he was undertaking. They derived from the debates developed, firstly, within the Communist Party Historians Group and, secondly, in discussion with other historians and intellectuals. The popular-front politics that he promoted as the optimal strategy in different historical conjunctures and his endorsement of the USSR as a global counter-weight to US hegemony was an outcome of Hobsbawm's politicisation during the 1920s and 1930s in the ranks of the Communist International. It is true that these formative experiences

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coincided and were, in some senses, inextricably linked, but they were also characterised by a relative autonomy.

I will illustrate this central argument by periodizing Hobsbawm's work in four analytically distinct historical phases. The first period covers the years of his formation, the interwar period and World War II. The following section examines Hobsbawm's intellectual production during the 1960s, a decade in which he wrote some of his most influential studies, building on the interests of the British Marxist tradition that has been named "history from below". The third period reconstructs his tetralogy on the formation of the modern world. Last but not least, the article engages with the political debates in which Hobsbawm was involved from the 1980s onward, a period in which he acquired the status of public intellectual.

Hobsbawm's formative years

Eric Hobsbawm was born on 9 June 1917, a few months before the October Revolution and one and a half years before the conclusion of World War I, which signalled the end of European empires and the formation of modern nation states. The first twenty years of Hobsbawm's life can be described as the outcome of these two wider historical processes. He became a communist as he grew up in an Europe polarized between communism and the various versions of fascism or authoritarianism that emerged throughout the continent. These developments displayed the collapse of the liberal order across Europe and were responsible for the formation of what he later named the "Age of Catastrophe". Hobsbawm became a communist after several changes of homes, countries and continents. Mobility was quite common for the peoples of the empires, where borders between different regions were fluid, most of them only later becoming distinct nation-states with clear borders. Hobsbawm's place of birth was, in fact, outside Europe, in Alexandria: a multinational society until the rise of pan-Arab nationalism in the 1950s.¹ His parents – an Austrian mother and a British father – were Jewish. After the end of World War I, Hobsbawm moved to Vienna,

¹ Eric Hobsbawm, *Interesting Times: A Twentieth-Century Life* (New York: antheon Books, 2002), 2.

the capital of the federation that was formed after the dissolution of the Habsburg Empire.² The 1929 financial crisis struck and destabilized the Hobsbawms. The resulting financial uncertainties made their mark on the health of Eric's parents, leaving him and his younger sister orphans after the death of their father and mother in 1929 and 1931, respectively.³ In mid-1931 – a few months before official unemployment figures in Germany reached the historical peak of 6 million – the orphaned Eric and his sister moved to Berlin in order to live with their aunt and uncle.⁴ The historical context of interwar Germany could not leave him unaffected in political terms. In autumn 1932, Eric joined a communist secondary school students' organization, the Sozialistischer Schülerbund (SSB).⁵ This political engagement in the communist cause would last until the end of his life, even if in changing forms. The systematic purges of the Jewish population by the Nazi regime prevented Hobsbawm from continuing to live in the German capital. In 1933, Eric and his sister moved to London.⁶ After completing school, he started his undergraduate degree at King's College, Cambridge, where he studied History. There, he encountered Marxist historical analysis and joined the student branch of the Communist Party of Great Britain (CPGB).⁷

The most crucial political experience for Hobsbawm and many of his communist peers came between 1934 and 1939, in the Popular Front years. His politicisation in the ranks of the CPGB during the 1930s accounts for his adoption of this type of political *vue*. As he admitted in his autobiography, this had a lasting influence on him throughout his life: "Popular Front politics continues to determine my strategic thinking in politics to this day".⁸ However, the Popular Front did not influence only

2 Hobsbawm, *Interesting Times*, 8.

3 Hobsbawm, *Interesting Times*, 26-33.

4 Hobsbawm, *Interesting Times*, 43; Florian Wilde, "Divided they fell: the German left and the rise of Hitler." *International Socialism* 137 (2013). <http://isj.org.uk/divided-they-fell-the-german-left-and-the-rise-of-hitler/>.

5 Hobsbawm, *Interesting Times*, 63.

6 Hobsbawm, *Interesting Times*, 76.

7 Hobsbawm, *Interesting Times*, 100.

8 Hobsbawm, *Interesting Times*, 218.

the way in which Hobsbawm perceived politics, but also, to a certain degree, the type of historiography which he practiced. The Comintern's policy was based on analyses that linked the conjunctural political assessments of that time with struggles and figures from the past. The echoes of this approach were illustrated by the efforts of the Communist Party Historians' Group, of which Hobsbawm was a prominent member. The Group sought to unearth past traditions, experiences, and struggles of the British people in order to create a political lineage that could inform the politics of its own time. In other words, this group made a conscious effort to produce a counterhegemonic invented tradition of the British nation, which could challenge the dominant narrative and be politically inspirational in the context of Britain.

During the Second World War, Hobsbawm's army service was much less active than he wished due to his Central European upbringing and political affiliations. He served in the Royal Engineers and in the Royal Army Educational Corps.⁹ After the war, he devoted himself to academia. In 1947, he became a History lecturer at Birkbeck, an institution specialised in evening higher education classes, and continued to teach there until his retirement in 1982.¹⁰ His academic career was, however, blocked several times because of his political affiliations. For example, Hobsbawm was prevented from getting the Cambridge lectureship he wanted in the 1950s, an event connected with the soft McCarthyism that was implemented in the UK as well as in the United States, which blocked and sometimes ended the careers of communists in public institutions.¹¹

Over the years, Hobsbawm became less and less politically engaged, having a less active role within the CPGB's politics. The event that contributed most to this process was Khrushchev's secret speech. Hobsbawm aptly described its importance for the world communist movement: "There are two 'ten days that shook the world' in the history of the revolutionary movement of the last century: the days of the

9 Hobsbawm, *Interesting Times*, 155.

10 Hobsbawm, *Interesting Times*, 176.

11 Martin Kettle and Dorothy Wedderburn, "Eric Hobsbawm obituary," *Guardian*, October 1, 2012. <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2012/oct/01/eric-hobsbawm>.

October Revolution... and the Twentieth Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (14-25 February 1956). Both divide it suddenly and irrevocably into a 'before' and 'after'... To put it in the simplest terms, the October Revolution created a world communist movement, the Twentieth Congress destroyed it".¹² Hobsbawm stayed in the party, in contrast to most of his peers from the Communist Party Historians' Group, who left or were excluded. This decision can be explained by reference to his particular intellectual formation. He was a child of the Russian Revolution and a geopolitical realist who considered the USSR non-capitalist internally and anti-imperialist externally on account of its support for the anticolonial struggles in the Global South in the postwar decades.¹³ While the USSR had largely lost its legitimacy as a normative model of socialist construction, its role in opposing the expansion of the capitalist mode of production in the developing world, especially considering the absorption of social democracy by the status quo, was considered worthy of support. The dream of revolution may have been lost but the reality of capitalism was an ever-present threat to the planet.

Writing people's history

The first monograph that Hobsbawm wrote was *Primitive Rebels: Studies in Archaic Forms of Social Movement in the 19th and 20th centuries*.¹⁴ This ground-breaking study focuses on explaining the different ways in which traditional societies – and, more precisely, specific groups of people with know-how in weaponry – react to market integration. The time period that the study covers is the last thirty years of the long 19th century. During these decades, the logic of the market was economically embedded throughout much of the world via imperialist forms of domination. Politically, a series of nation states began to emerge, a process that was completed with the end of World War I and the two revolutions of 1917.

¹² Hobsbawm, *Interesting Times*, 201.

¹³ Gregory Elliott, *Hobsbawm: History and Politics* (London: Pluto Press, 2010), 120.

¹⁴ Eric Hobsbawm, *Primitive Rebels: Studies in Archaic Forms of Social Movement in the 19th and 20th Centuries* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1971 [1959]).

These processes were not, however, without resistance from below, from the people that experienced the dissolution of their societies as markets were entrenched. The traditional forms of resistance and rebellion corresponded to the historical context from which they emerged. Thus, in this study Hobsbawm examines the predecessors of the modern revolutionaries. The main concept on which the study builds is the “social bandit”, referring to those “peasant outlaws whom the lord and state regard as criminals, but who remain within the peasant society, and are considered by their people as heroes, champions, avengers, fighters for justice, perhaps even leaders of liberation, and in any case men to be admired, helped and supported”.¹⁵ Why, then, “social”? The answer lies in the fact that there are explicit class connotations in the way Hobsbawm builds his arguments. This type of bandits is structurally bound to the peasantry; they are its defenders, to the extent that the rule of law has not yet been universalised and several social layers were left unprotected by the antinomies of modernity that emerged in the transitional phases of state-building. The political outlook of the bandits was a primitive one, corresponding to the class they represented. Hobsbawm explains this primitivism on the basis of Marx’s analysis in *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*. In this essay, Marx claims that peasants were unable to get organised as a class in itself since they were “incapable of enforcing their class interest in their own name, whether through a parliament or through a convention”.¹⁶ Considering that the “traditional primitive rebels are united by a common and inherited set of values and beliefs about society so strong as hardly to need, or to be capable of, formal articulation”, their political action never seeks to challenge the official power as such.¹⁷ Their repertoire of action, informed by traditional values, attempts to bring back the previous order of things and not to build a new one. These features make them different from the modern labour movement, which is organized as class in itself, with a specific ideology (socialism) and with the

¹⁵ Hobsbawm, *Primitive Rebels*, 13.

¹⁶ Karl Marx, *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1972), 106.

¹⁷ Eric Hobsbawm, *Bandits* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1981), 158.

aim of transforming the existing order of things into a new one which will qualitatively differ from its predecessor.

Hobsbawm's text on bandits had a strong explicit political character. Implicitly, it was an account of what a modern movement, and more precisely the contemporary labour movement, should not do if it was to achieve its aims. He implicitly adopted Marx's evolutionary perspective, as condensed in the famous phrase: "human anatomy contains a key to the anatomy of the ape".¹⁸ The examination of banditry contributes to the understanding of modern political action and presupposes that historically, and thus analytically (that is, in order to understand modern political action), we should understand its predecessors. This conception has a progressivist understanding of the forms of political action, and aims among things to reject the anarchist view that considers this type of politics to have a revolutionary content. Bandits were the forerunners of the politics of the twentieth century characterised by solid ideological discourses, discipline, and clear acceptance of modernity and its rules. However, the ineffective strategy they adopted to block the integration of their societies into the capitalist order of things does not discredit their struggles as such, and Hobsbawm did attempt to investigate their anatomy. Rather, they were used as a test-case, as he provided an anatomy of past political action in order to inform a current vision of the traps that should be avoided in an effective political strategy.

Despite its epistemological issues and the problems inherent in the study – from the concept of the "social bandit" itself to the uncritical use of myths on bandits as trustworthy sources – this study opened up new approaches and themes of research with regard to the forms of pre-modern political action. Hobsbawm's provocative analytical model inspired and continues to inspire a series of studies on the issue of banditry, the daily lives of these people all around the globe and their interconnections with the rest of society. Later research challenged

¹⁸ Karl Marx, *Grundrisse* (New York: Vintage Books, 1973), 105.

Hobsbawm's model on banditry, leading him to refine his arguments in his next study on this same topic, titled *Bandits*.

Published a decade later, *Bandits* built upon the themes and issues raised in *The Primitive Rebels* by re-elaborating the concept of social banditry and expanding its geographical horizon beyond the European continent. The topic of social protest is also central to his study *Captain Swing*, co-written with George Rude, which reconstructs, at the title indicates, the history of the English agricultural wage laborers' uprisings of the 1830s.¹⁹ *Captain Swing* was the name attributed to the threatening letters during the rural English Swing Riots of 1830, when labourers rioted over the introduction of new threshing machines. The labourers, like the social bandits, did not aim at revolution but at the restoration of the previous order of things. The forms of protest derived from a traditional repertoire of action that was already known to them.²⁰ This, among other factors, led to the defeat of the movement, though the struggle was not without value, insofar as both farmers and nobility thus became aware of their political potential, which had until then gone unsung.²¹ In other words, Hobsbawm and Rude registered struggles waged by people who were defeated because of the powers arrayed against them, but which had crucial consequences for future moments of class struggle.

Hobsbawm's next study is about collective action, this time of a modern type, was *Labouring Men*. It examines the transformation of collective action during the 19th century in the United Kingdom.²² Further developing his earlier reasoning, the essays in this volume concerned "the working classes as such (as distinct from labor organizations and movements), and ... the economic and technical conditions which allowed labour movements to be effective, or which prevented them

19 Eric Hobsbawm and George Rudé, *Captain Swing* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1975).

20 Hobsbawm and Rudé, *Captain Swing*, 65.

21 Hobsbawm and Rudé, *Captain Swing*, 281-82.

22 Eric Hobsbawm, *Labouring Men: Studies in the history of Labor* (London: Weinfeld & Nicolson, 1964).

from being”.²³ Hence, this attempt was informed by the Marxist pairing of base and superstructure combined with detailed historical research. Three main themes are examined in this study: the transformation of traditional political action into modern forms of organisation; the role of religion in nineteenth-century British society, especially among the working classes; and the impact – or more accurately the non-impact – of Marx’s theories on the making of the Labour Party. The most significant contribution in this volume is Hobsbawm’s refined concept of the labour aristocracy. This term was coined by Bakunin, used as an analytical concept by Marx and Engels, and thematised more systematically by Lenin in his treatise *Imperialism, the Highest Stage of Capitalism*.²⁴ The concept of labour aristocracy refers to an upper and privileged stratum of the manual working class, but for many Marxist scholars it is also a basis for an explanation of working-class activity in Victorian and Edwardian Britain and beyond. According to Hobsbawm, the labour aristocracy as a historical phenomenon emerges “when the economic circumstances of capitalism make it possible to grant significant concessions to its proletariat, within which certain strata of workers manage by means of their special scarcity, skill, strategic position, organizational strength, etc., to establish notably better conditions for themselves than the rest”.²⁵ These developments took place between 1840 and 1890. Many premodern crafts mechanized having as result the transformation of the traditional craftsmen to unskilled workers. A new strata of specialized workers appeared in sections such as cotton textiles and metallurgy of skilled workers in new industries such as cotton textiles and metal-working, “where machinery was imperfect and depended on some significant manual skill”.²⁶ This new strata set up unions that through the apprenticeship were in position to reduce the antagonism making “their labour artificially scarce, by restricting entry

23 Hobsbawm, *Labouring Men*, vii.

24 Jonathan Strauss, “Engels and the theory of the labor aristocracy,” *Links: International Journal of Socialist Renewal* 25 (January–June 2004).

25 Eric Hobsbawm, “Lenin and the ‘Aristocracy of the Labor’,” *Monthly Review* 64, no. 7 (2012). <https://monthlyreview.org/2012/12/01/lenin-and-the-aristocracy-of-labor/>.

26 Hobsbawm, *Labouring Men*, 282-83.

to their profession".²⁷ This condition gave the opportunity to this layer to become a labor "aristocracy" having higher salaries and more employment jobs compared to the less-skilled workers. In political terms, Hobsbawm argues that the impact of this new stratification within the British working class can account for the non-revolutionary character that the Labour movements took throughout the second half of the 19th century. Labor-liberalism in that way became the hegemonic trend with the labor movement backed up by the Labor-Aristocracy

Hobsbawm's 1984 study *Worlds of Labour* develops similar themes and topics to *Labouring Men*, though since his first study on this topic Labour History had become established as a discrete field of research.²⁸ Thus, the book built upon the issues and problems that had been raised by a series of works about labour history. However, Hobsbawm's studies in labour history were not informed by the normative ideal of value-free research that started to dominate the field of social sciences around the time that his second study on labour was published. He considered that it should go hand in hand with an explicit political commitment. Researching and writing for the labour movement should be combined with sound scholarship: the task of academic historians should be "to consolidate the new territories won by the committed".²⁹

The tetralogy of the Modern World

While Hobsbawm's studies on banditry and the British labour movement established him as an authoritative historian within CPGB circles and the academic world, his tetralogy on the making of the modern world – especially its last volume – was responsible for his professional journey from the corridors of the universities to the public sphere. This made him one of the most noted and widely read historians of the last

²⁷ Hobsbawm, *Labouring Men*, 290-91.

²⁸ Eric Hobsbawm, *Worlds of Labour: Further Studies in the History of Labour* (London: Weinfeld & Nicolson, 1984).

²⁹ Eric Hobsbawm, "Commitment and Working Class History", *Universities & Left Review* 6 (Spring 1959): 72.

three decades, all around the world. It was written over a time span of more than 30 years: *The Age of Revolution* was published in 1962 and the last part of the tetralogy – *The Age of Extremes* – 32 years later, in 1994. This time distance between the writing of the four volumes had an impact on the narration, the epistemology, and the politics that underpinned the project due to the seismic shifts that happened in the geopolitical arena at the same time. In 1962, the USSR was at the zenith of its influence; 32 years later, not only had it dissolved but its various republics were dominated by the cruellest forms of neoliberal regulation. At the same time, Marxism as an analytical framework was no longer one of the main theories for understanding social reality, let alone the belief in a socialist future where the main contradictions of the capitalist mode of production would be abolished. Equally important was the demise of Social Democracy’s guarantees and the reduction of social conquests under the guise of “individual freedom”, to the extent that the organisation of labour and collective bargaining by trade unions were considered market distortions that impeded the formation of a natural hierarchy of winners and losers. These changes could not but affect the work and politics of Eric Hobsbawm.

The first and second volumes are each organised with two major sections on ‘developments’ and ‘results’. (There is a background chapter that introduces the world as it was in the 1780s’ chapter and ‘bridging’ chapters which end this volume [‘Conclusion: towards 1848’] and lead into *The Age of Capital* [‘Revolutionary Prelude: the springtime of peoples’].) There is an implicit ‘materialist’, if not Marxist, message in the logic of the architecture of these volumes. The developments are economic, then political and military, while results are discussed in terms of social structures, then ideologies and, finally, ideas, science, religion, and arts. More precisely, the first volume of the tetralogy focuses on the “dual” revolution that largely shaped the modern world as we know it now: the Industrial and French revolutions.³⁰ The former was responsible for the establishment of economic liberalism, the latter for its political form:

³⁰ Eric Hobsbawm, *The Age of Revolution 1789-1848* (New York: Vintage Books, 1996), ix.

the modern institutions through which the popular will was expressed, with parliament being the most prominent.³¹ In Hobsbawm's narration on the sociopolitical developments of the 19th century, the bourgeoisie was the class that best expressed these values and realities. It was the central rational political actor that consciously asserted its domination throughout this century by establishing an efficient legal-political system of property relations as the new canon for social being, as it slowly but steadily sidelined the feudal lords of the *ancien régime*.

The second volume, *The Age of Capital*, focuses, as its title indicates, on the ascendancy of global capital in the period between 1848-1875. The revolutions of 1848 set the tone for this quarter-century. In this period, though, the European bourgeoisie lost its progressive political role as it pursued compromises with the existing conservative-aristocratic status quo that was threatened by the European working classes. Indeed, the latter had organized more effectively than at the beginning of the century, when the Industrial Revolution had not yet spread throughout the continent.³² According to the British historian's apt description of this shift, "The British (industrial) revolution had swallowed the French (political) revolution".³³ The political promises of 1789 were forestalled and the aims of the revolutions of 1848, far from being fulfilled, remained an open historical chapter for the next generations of revolutionaries.

These defeats explain the capitalist advance that took place in the following decades. The technological innovations that accompanied this new cycle of capitalist accumulation allowed a new expansive phase in new lands outside the European continent. A new epicentre of capital was created – this of United States – newly independent from the European powers. Its ability to integrate a dynamic industrial sector with ample raw materials, agriculture commodities, markets, and labour into one national economy forced the European powers to focus on African

31 Hobsbawm, *The Age of Revolution*, 2-3.

32 Elliott, *Hobsbawm*, 93.

33 Eric Hobsbawm, *The Age of Capital 1848-1875* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1995), 15.

colonialism outside the continent and on violent territorial expansion within Europe itself. By the end of this period, the capitalist integration of the globe was almost complete. Most regions were now an integral part of the capitalist mode of production, a process that was partially interrupted only by the two world wars and their political consequences.

The *Age of Empires* concludes Hobsbawm's trilogy on the long 19th century. The century of the triumph of capitalism ends with the cataclysm of the Great War. The imperial expansion that took place in the last quarter of the 19th century was the capitalist solution to the crisis of profitability of 1873-1896. The 19th century ended up giving shape to a world governed by a combined and uneven development between dominant and dominating states, a geopolitical equilibrium that changed substantially only with the liberation movements that emerged in the postwar period. As a response to the ongoing crisis of the period, European governments started one after the other to give up on the *laissez-faire* policies and adopt protectionist tariffs. Additionally, after the industrialization of other European powers and the emergence of American capitalism, by the end of the century Britain lost its central role as global hegemony. Its hegemony was transformed into a multipolar system where different national powers antagonised each other abroad in order to gain a privileged position within the new world order in the making. In Hobsbawm's narrative of imperialist development, capitalism takes a specific shape as an outcome of internal contradictions. The subaltern classes' response to the storm of the crisis was to organize in trade unions, (working-class) parties, and peasant cooperatives (the agrarian population) or to emigrate to the New World. This was a potentially explosive situation for liberal elites, forcing them to include the new working-class parties in the national parliaments. These parties constituted the chief parliamentary opposition in most European countries during this period. The international institutional crystallization of this working-class movement took place through the formation of the Second International. In 1889, on the centennial of the French Revolution of 1789, the Second International was founded, with 384 delegates from 20 countries representing about 300 labour and socialist organisations.

These developments constituted the social catalyst from which the new century emerged: on the one hand, collapsing empires that were substituted by industrialised nation states with potentially revolutionary working classes, and on the other hand intensified endo-imperialist struggles for the exploitation of large parts of the non-western world and its populaces – contradictory inner processes of capitalist development that would be resolved with the explosion of World War I.

Hobsbawm's synthesis of the making of the modern world culminated with a panorama of the 20th century, *The Age of Extremes*. The narrative starts where *The Age of the Empires* ends, with the outbreak of the First World War, and concludes with the dissolution of the Soviet Union. The base-superstructure scheme – if not conceived in a strict causal relation – informs this book, just like in the rest of the tetralogy. In this study there is an explicit and structuring chronological periodisation in three dialectically interlinked phases. The first, 'The Age of Catastrophe', extends from the First to the Second World War. The second, 'The Golden Age', covers the first quarter of the postwar period up to the oil crisis of 1973, the affluent period of the western capitalist world with the emblematic welfare state, a product of Keynesian regulation. The third phase, 'Landslide', is the era of neoliberal order where the global economy was dominated by international banks and multinational corporations outside the control of nation-states.

The first period – the 'Age of Catastrophe' – was dominated by the two world wars and the two main social movements that challenged the established liberal order – Fascism and Communism. While the First World War started as an inter-imperialist conflict for global hegemony between the dominant powers of the period, it unintentionally gave rise to its potential political gravediggers – the Bolsheviks and the nationalists who soon transformed into fascists – who assumed political leadership in several states and within two decades abolished liberalism, both economically (through protectionist policies) and politically (through proletarian and authoritarian dictatorships). This process was accelerated by the financial crisis of 1929. After the two revolutions that dismantled Tsarist Russia during the war, the Bolsheviks creat-

ed politically centralised and hierarchical forms of representation and nationalised all industry: “The Soviet recipe for economic development [was] centralized state economic planning aimed at the ultra-rapid construction of the basic industries and infrastructure essential to a modern industrial society”.³⁴ In a liberal world that was collapsing without any adequate systemic response to the global crisis of 1929, the Soviet Union was the only alternative to the fascist version of modernity that developed throughout the European continent.

In Hobsbawm’s narrative, however, this systemic antagonism between fascism and communism, and particularly World War II, was not just a competition between two different political projects but an apocalyptic struggle between “on the one hand the descendants of the eighteenth-century Enlightenment and the great revolutions including, obviously, the Russian revolution, [and] on the other, its opponents”.³⁵ In other words, it was a battle between the forces of Enlightenment and those of counter-Enlightenment. The contribution of liberal forces to this struggle and the making of popular fronts was considered critically important, as “the hinge of the twentieth century and its decisive moment”.³⁶ The “moral centre gravity” of Hobsbawm’s short twentieth century lies in the moment when the forces of “progress” stood together against those of “reaction”: the antifascist struggle that developed from the mid-thirties onward.³⁷

The second phase of his periodisation of the twentieth century covers the period of western capitalist prosperity in the three decades that followed the war. The dominant feature of this period, according to Hobsbawm, was the systemic antagonism between the USA and the USSR: “the entire period was yielded into a single pattern by the peculiar international situation which dominated it until the fall of the USSR: the constant confrontation of the two superpowers which

34 Eric Hobsbawm, *The Age of Extremes, The Short Twentieth Century 1914-1991* (London: Abacus, 1994), 376.

35 Hobsbawm, *The Age of Extremes*, 114.

36 Hobsbawm, *The Age of Extremes*, 7.

37 Elliott, *Hobsbawm*, 112.

emerged from the Second World War the so-called 'Cold War'.³⁸ This new geopolitical framework worked as an ideal arena for an empowering and expansive capitalist accumulation, in turn accounting for the long economic boom. For the two antagonistic global projects, consolidating power implied huge investment – from the expansion of the welfare system to the maintenance of military bases all around the world – that guaranteed a wide circulation of the American dollar and the Soviet ruble to parts of the world where in many cases national economies had been destroyed completely because of World War II. An integral aspect of the stability of the new geopolitical order was the second round of decolonisation processes that took place after 1945.

Both superpowers were opposed to the old type-colonialism and attempted to integrate the countries of Africa and the other continents into their own spheres of influence. The US and the Western world mainly benefited from importing the products of the former colonies, produced by adopting the Soviet economic model of heavy industrialisation. In this narrative, however, there is no explanation of the making of the post-modern world based on the internal economic logic of the geopolitical system, or any solid theoretical interpretation of the nature of the antagonism. Here, the political determines the economic and not vice versa.

The last phase that the *Age of Extremes* examines, the era between 1973 and 1991, is defined by two global shifts, one political and one economic. The first is the collapse of the USSR, one of the two main pillars of the post-World War II international order. The second is the paradigm shift from an organised to an unorganised form of capitalism – in other words, the arrival of the neoliberal order. The image of the new world order that Hobsbawm provides is rather bleak. The economic stability of the previous decades was replaced by recurrent periodic crises that put in doubt all the certainties (employment, social security, pensions etc.) that had to some extent been taken for granted in the Western world. The role of states in this new state of affairs was reduced significantly, their fate now dictated by international financial

³⁸ Hobsbawm, *The Age of Extremes*, 226.

capital and its needs. The Western economies were not the only ones affected by this global shift. The planned economies of the Third World states experienced equal if not greater difficulties because of this new global regulatory regime. In several cases, these economies could not sustain themselves, so they resorted to IMF financing that “adjusted” them to the new global order. The collapse of the socialist world – both the Russian and the Yugoslav versions – can also be explained with reference to this shift. Yet the change also triggered wider transformations at the ideological level. Since then, the mainstream imaginary worldwide considered that humanity should mainly concern itself with the more effective embedding of liberal institutions and ideas. Class struggle disappeared from the majority of discourses on “what is to be done”. The fact that the greater part of social democracy fully signed up to this new economic and sociopolitical paradigm in many cases contributed substantially to the further advance and the institutionalisation of neoliberal dogma around the globe. Again, though, the sea-change of the 1970s that swept across the world is not interpreted with tools deriving from Marxist economic analysis. Absent, then, are the two types of explanation that are common in Marxist economics – the horizontal structure of antagonism between capitals and the vertical conflict between labour and capital.

From an organic to a public intellectual?

The fourth phase of the periodisation of Hobsbawm’s life and work deals with the last part of his life, covering the period between his retirement (even a bit earlier) from Birkbeck in 1982 and the end of his life in 2012. This last period can be described as one in which a shift took place in Hobsbawm’s career, from his role as an organic intellectual of the CPGB to that of a public intellectual. This conceptualisation is a schematic one and seeks to grasp the reality of a historian with an organic role within CPGB ranks who now adapted to a new conjuncture of regulated capitalism where the political game was conducted in different terms. The need, though, for political responses was still there. The new turn in the UK context forced the British Left to deal

with the Thatcherite attack on the British working class. Thatcherism was the quintessence of the new economic, political and societal paradigm that elites attempted to impose from above, exporting it both inside the Europe and beyond.

Hobsbawm, with the status of an established left intellectual that had revised some of its past political commitments, played a key role within the debate on the future of the Labour Party and its strategy in the 1980s, despite being from another party (CPGB) and writing for *Marxism Today*, the theoretical journal of the CPGB. This reality, beyond the Popular Frontist tone of the call for anti-Thatcherite forces to unite against the common enemy, was indicative of Hobsbawm's increasing distance from his old party. The CPGB had lost its specific identity and now seemed to function more like a think tank attempting to influence the Labour Party rather than a real party unto itself. His lack of belief in class politics, and his rise as an intellectual figure who transcended specific political affiliations and enjoyed a large audience, were significant in this regard.

The most important intervention in this debate was Hobsbawm's Marx Memorial lecture, "The Forward March of Labour Halted?" (1978). This was the opening shot in a series of interventions appearing in *Marxism Today*, which three years later published it in a Verso collection.³⁹ In this lecture, Hobsbawm provided an account of the history of the British working-class movement from its origins up to the present. His ambition was not just to offer historiographic insights on its historical formation but to diagnose the current shifts in its physiognomy and thus to draw strategic insights as to how it should move forward. For Hobsbawm there had been a fundamental shift in the main actor of social transformation as seen by traditional Marxist theory. The working class could not continue to be the only point of reference for the Labour Party because its size had been reduced. Given Britain's shift from an industrial to a service-oriented economy, the blue collar workforce was no longer what it was. Thus, for the Labour party to win elections, it would have to appeal to a broader electoral audience, forming a pro-

³⁹ Eric Hobsbawm, ed., *The Forward March of Labour Halted?* (London: Verso, 1981).

gressive alliance with other political parties and social movements that were not self-identified necessarily as leftist ones'. The political outlook that informs this position is once again that of the Popular Front. Hobsbawm's 1980s position was informed by Georgi Dimitrov, the mastermind of this strategy, considered as a leading communist figure who articulated in the 1930's under the threat of fascism a "realistic" tactical position because he insisted that the masses "must be taken as they are, not as we should like to have them," which, Hobsbawm argued, "made sense then and still makes sense".⁴⁰ In his lecture, Hobsbawm repeatedly stated that the method he used in order to reach these conclusions was a Marxist one because it dealt with the concrete and historically specific just as Marx did in his texts. But he ended up suggesting a Popular-Frontist political strategy as most appropriate to the new conjuncture. So, having asked whether the 'forward march of labour' had been halted, he responded in the affirmative. The suggested strategic recipes for remedying this did not seem to propose something new that could integrate the new 'subjects' in a counterhegemonic project providing effective political responses in the new state of affairs. Rather, this was a case of old recipes for new problems.

Hobsbawm's interventions in the public debate on the future of the Labour Party were even more frequent after Labour's second general election defeat by the Conservative Party in June 1983. Hobsbawm argued that one of the reasons for Labour's failure was the Labour Left's insistent focus on a classical class-based analysis that focused on reasserting postwar social welfare guarantees. The appropriate political response in the new conjuncture, as he saw it, was the formation of an anti-Thatcherite front that included the liberal split from Labour – the SDP – and their Liberal allies also conceived as "anti-Thatcher forces".⁴¹

With the events of 1989, communism lost all its material underpinnings and allowed neoliberal dogma to dominate the globe, a process which according to Perry Anderson was "virtually uncontest-

40 Eric Hobsbawm, "Labour: Rump or Rebirth?," *Marrism Today* 28 (1984): 10.

41 Hobsbawm, "Labour," 10.

ed".⁴² Within the Left, this reality established Antonio Gramsci's quote "Pessimism of the intellect, optimism of the will" as the most common phrase for evaluating the new conjuncture. If the beginning of the 1980s brought a general crisis in the socialist ideal, its end buried any political or ideological aspiration connected with it. Hobsbawm's mood was not very different from the rest of the Left. Evaluating the USSR in an article in *Marxism Today*, he noted that its main contribution had been at the geopolitical level, pushing for welfare reforms in the Western part of the globe: "The main effect of 1989 is that capitalism and the rich have, for the time being, stopped being scared. All that made Western democracy worth living for its people – social security, the welfare state, a high and rising income for wage-earners, and its natural consequence, diminution in social inequality and inequality of life-chances – was the result of fear. Fear of the poor, and the largest and best-organized bloc of citizens in industrialized states – the workers; fear of an alternative that really existed and could really spread, notably in the form of Soviet Communism. Fear of the system's own instability".⁴³ Thus, the disappearance of the communist bloc unleashed a market capitalism with much less interest in its own social legitimisation, no longer having to fear that another societal paradigm could substantially challenge its foundations. The USSR had not been an anticapitalist political experiment and had not challenged the capitalist order of things – it had contributed, on the contrary, to its stabilisation. Yet it had also pushed the regulation of the capitalist system, a reality that the events of 1989 reversed completely.

In the book *The New Century: In Conversation with Antonio Polito*, published at the turn of the new century, Hobsbawm offered some reflections on the new global realities that took form after the collapse of the USSR.⁴⁴ One of the key processes that followed the USSR's dissolution was the implementation of uncontrollable free market poli-

42 Perry Anderson, "Renewals," *New Left Review* 1, no. 2 (2000): 6.

43 Eric Hobsbawm, "Goodbye to All that," *Marxism Today* (October 1990): 21.

44 Eric Hobsbawm, *The New Century: In conversation with Antonio Polito* (New York: Little Brown, 2000).

cies through privatisations, deindustrialisation, the lowering of labour costs, skyrocketing public debts, and a sharp increase in social inequalities. For Hobsbawm, the extent of this tragedy was not yet clear a decade after it had occurred: “The scale of the human catastrophe that has struck Russia is something we simply don’t understand in the West. It is the complete reversal of historical trends: the life expectancy of men has dropped by ten years over the last decade and a large part of the economy has been reduced to subsistence agriculture. I don’t believe there has been anything comparable in the twentieth century... I believe it is (entirely due to the application of free market rules) if for no other reason than that free market rules, even if adapted, require a certain kind of society. If that kind of society does not exist, the result is a disaster”.⁴⁵ He added that the global historical shift triggered by the collapse of the Soviet Union is of greater consequence than either 1918 or 1945. In short, Hobsbawm diagnosed the effect of the events of 1991 as a general condition whose impact the world is still experiencing.

How to Change the World: Tales of Marx and Marxism was Hobsbawm’s last book published while he was still alive.⁴⁶ In contrast to what one might have expected to read considering this provocative title, this was not a book with instructions on how a global revolution can be successful. It can be better described as a collection of a texts on the intellectual history of Marx and Engels, the founders of tradition that named Marxism and the intellectual trajectories of some of their successors, an analysis that Hobsbawm ends with the final years of the 20th century. The essays were written over a time-span of 54 years (the first was written in 1956 and the last in 2010). Schematically speaking, the book can be divided into two parts: the first series of texts focuses on the content and history of some of Marx’s and Engels writings, the second on the history of Marxist theory with a special focus on the Italian communist leader Antonio Gramsci, who was after Marx the figure who most influenced the British historian’s work. Hobsbawm, not

⁴⁵ Hobsbawm, *The New Century*, 45 and 74.

⁴⁶ Eric Hobsbawm, *How to Change the World: Tales of Marx and Marxism* (London: Little Brown, 2011).

surprisingly, did not aim with this book solely to a historiographical intervention but also to a political one. Marx's work and analysis thus have an explicit normative content, offering a critique of the existing order of things which, Hobsbawm argues, is absolutely relevant to the new conjuncture of the twenty-first century and more precisely for the evolving global financial crisis.⁴⁷ So, far from being a theoretical treatise on Marx's work, the book was intended as a source of inspiration for political praxis for the people who are involved currently in struggles against the different forms of capitalist oppression.

By adopting this line of reasoning, Hobsbawm suggests that Marx's work should be approached both as an engagement with the conjuncture – an attempt to connect theory and praxis in a constructive way – but also T as texts that have an analytical value that go beyond the historical context within they emerged.⁴⁸ This latter aspect of his work should not be treated as a manual of what should be done in order to change the world in the current circumstances, but rather as intellectual cues to reflect on the era of late capitalism. Given their evident differences, no direct analogies can be drawn across different historical period. In this sense, Marx's strategic instructions, according to Hobsbawm, have a limited analytical value for current struggles considering them “dangerous even to use (...) as a set of precedents (...) What could be learned from Marx was his method of facing the tasks of analysis and action rather than readymade lessons to be derived from classic texts”.⁴⁹ In Hobsbawm's reading, Marx's work tells us more about the method he used to approach social phenomena than about how to conduct revolutionary politics.

However, Hobsbawm did not have the same hesitations over Antonio Gramsci, believing that he could still inform the strategic decisions of socialists today. For Hobsbawm, the Sardinian communist was the “most original thinker produced in the west since 1917”. In his account

47 Hobsbawm, *How to Change the World*, 14.

48 Hobsbawm, *How to Change the World*, 11.

49 Hobsbawm, *How to Change the World*, 89.

of Gramsci's contribution to Marxist thought, Hobsbawm attempted to offer an open-ended approach to his work, which differentiated him from sectarian readings that claimed a specific understanding of his heritage. Hobsbawm argued that "He is a Marxist, and indeed a Leninist, and I don't propose to waste any time by defending him against the accusations of various sectarians who claim to know exactly what is and what is not Marxist and to have a copyright in their own version of Marxism".⁵⁰

Did Hobsbawm though succeeded in offering an open-ended understanding of Gramsci's Marxism distant from any specific political prism? A careful reading of Hobsbawm's account clearly shows that it was close to the version of Gramscianism developed within and around the CPGB, where "Gramsci is squarely a post-Leninist, a theorist of broad alliances which are negotiated rather than pre-given, popular-democratic and not just class alliances. He is the theorist of war of position rather than frontal assault on the state, the figure who provides the conceptual keys (organic crisis, hegemony, national-popular) which enable one to unlock the mysteries of the Thatcherite solution to the crisis of British capitalism and simultaneously to expose the weaknesses of Labourism and ultraleftism in resisting and transcending it".⁵¹

Spelling out the aforementioned argument, Hobsbawm proposes that one of Gramsci's main insights was his emphasis on the "struggle for hegemony" and he argues that "naturally the winning of hegemony, so far as possible, before the transfer of power is particularly important in countries where the core of ruling-class power lies in the subalternity of the masses rather than in coercion. This is the case in most 'Western' countries, whatever the ultra-left says, and however unquestioned the fact that in the last analysis, coercion is there to be used. As we may see in, say, Chile and Uruguay, beyond a certain point the use of coercion to maintain rule becomes frankly incompatible with the use of apparent or real consent, and the rulers have to choose between the

⁵⁰ Hobsbawm, *How to Change the World*, 316.

⁵¹ David Forgacs, "Gramsci and Marxism in Britain," *New Left Review* 1, no. 2 (1989): 83.

alternatives of hegemony and force, the velvet glove and the iron fist".⁵² From this quote it is difficult to be argued that Hobsbawm offers an open-ended value free reading of the Gramscian Marxism. Rather, it seems that he articulates a specific polemic against an understanding that promotes coercion as an equally necessary aspect of the transition to socialism. Was Gramsci an advocate of the long march through the institutions as the necessary strategy for the transition to a non-capitalist social formation, and of violence as a means that could be used toward this end only in "the last instance"? Against Hobsbawm's understanding, Dylan Riley offers an alternative, more balanced and historically accurate reading of Gramsci's Marxism and politics. He starts with the diagnosis that "Gramsci was a Leninist. He did not think that socialism could be established without a transitional dictatorship. All those many interpretations that obscure this point are misguided".⁵³ This though does not mean that Gramsci ignored or underestimated in his texts the significance and the stability of liberal institutions in modern Western societies that were combined with robust civil societies. On the contrary, he believed that during periods of stability parliamentary politics is one of the main institutional loci through which the political struggle is conducted. Political stability is though only the one face of the modern Janus of bourgeois politics that is succeeded by crises and turbulences that alter radically the certainties of the previous era. In the conditions of a state of exception, it has been historically registered that the balance between consensus and coercion changes in favour of the latter. The moment of crisis it would be difficult to imagine Gramsci to propose as prescriptive tactic the long-term fight through the parliamentary institutions, It would be rather for his the time where the possibilities for radical transformation are opening, a situation that most of the times implies a radical shift of the traditional political repertoire on behalf of those who were inside the cyclone of political conflict. For that reason, Dylan Riley proposes a different

⁵² Hobsbawm, *How to Change the World*, 327-28.

⁵³ Dylan Riley, "Fascism and Democracy," *Jacobin Magazine* (2016), <https://www.jacobin-mag.com/2016/08/trump-clinton-fascism-authoritariandemocracy/>.

understanding of the Italian communist as a theorist of the conjuncture that he understood that the radical social transformation is one of the possibilities in conditions of revolutionary crisis that implies different political methods, endorsing that “Gramsci was also a revolutionary, not a Eurocommunist or theorist of radical democracy... He was a man who deeply understood and appreciated the value of democracy and liberalism, yet he never abandoned his essentially Leninist conception of revolutionary transformation. Indeed, for him social revolution, with its inevitable transitional dictatorship, was the path to the realization of the utopian dream of a regulated society implicit in all liberal accounts of political order”.⁵⁴

Conclusion

Hobsbawm was an erudite historian whose work was mainly informed by the problematics and the concepts of Marxist tradition, though not exclusively by this. The dogma of empiricism and concepts from other historiographical traditions also informed the way in which he conducted historical research, if not always consciously. The Marxism he used as a historian did not take the form of closed nomothetic theoretical schemas – it was mediated by open-ended concepts. Most of the time they were used as starting points to rethink and conceptualize the historical phenomenon under examination, rather than as means of reconfirming general schemas of social transformation. The main criterion for the selection of these concepts was the object itself and how to more effectively grasp the historical phenomenon which he sought to understand. The politics with which Hobsbawm was affiliated derived from the CPGB, particularly its Popular-Frontist strategy, which he endorsed throughout his life across the different historical conjunctures. The Popular-Frontist politics he endorsed can, however, neither explain nor account for his historiography, let alone be reduced to this. Hobsbawm’s work as a historian is characterized by a relative autonomy in regard to his politics. Hence, critics like Michael

⁵⁴ Dylan Riley, “Hegemony, Democracy and Passive Revolution in Gramsci’s Prison Notebooks,” *California Italian Studies* 2, no. 2 (2011).

Burleigh, who have argued that Hobsbawm's historical work must be rejected because of his support for the USSR and other Stalinist states, should not be taken seriously, as they do not take into account the difference between these two levels.⁵⁵ The reason why most of Hobsbawm's critics took this kind of view was not because he endorsed the USSR, which failed to offer radical alternatives to the capitalist order of things. The reason lies in his non-acceptance of the neoliberal political spectrum and refusal to reject Marxism as a valid analytical repertoire, especially after the collapse of the Soviet world. On the contrary, until the end of his life, Hobsbawm searched for answers to the very complex problems that humanity was confronted with as a result of its capitalist conditions, even when the political solutions with which he was familiar had disappeared as alternatives. He thus subscribed to Marx's call for "ruthless criticism of all that exists". Hobsbawm's answers were not always persuasive, but this did not prevent him from asking these questions in difficult times. He thus realised Edward Said's definition of the intellectual as "someone whose place it is publicly to raise embarrassing questions, to confront orthodoxy and dogma (rather than to produce them), to be someone who cannot easily be co-opted by governments or corporations, and whose *raison d'être* is to represent all those people and issues that are routinely forgotten or swept under the rug".⁵⁶

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⁵⁵ Michael Burleigh, "Eric Hobsbawm: A believer in the Red Utopia to the very end," *The Telegraph*, October 1, 2012, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/politics/9579092/Eric-Hobsbawm-A-believer-in-the-Red-utopia-to-the-very-end.html>

⁵⁶ Edward Said, *Representations of the Intellectual: The 1993 Reith Lectures* (New York: Vintage Books, 1996), 11.

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