In Memoriam; Eric Hobsbawm (June 1917-October 2012)

Eric Hobsbawm's achievement as a historian was to 'de-provincialize' the story of the rise of the West, putting it in its proper global context, linking it to the uneven surges of capitalism and class formation, grasping the force of nationalism, exploring and even appreciating the cultural dimension of bourgeois civilisation while remaining aware of its often vicious exclusions.

These successes owed much to the clarity of Hobsbawm's prose, his wonderful eye for detail, his power of synthesis and his willingness to allow readers to draw their own conclusions. His remarkable histories of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries did not preach at the reader, nor regale them with methodology. A Communist from the age of 16 until the party dissolved itself, he was happy to be described as a 'Marxist historian'. His collection *On History* furnished a detailed and discriminating account of his intellectual debts - to Marx but also to the *Annales*, structuralism and cultural anthropology. The grandeur of his historical vision allowed him to become an extraordinarily perceptive, prophetic - and hard-headed - interpreter of the spirit of the times.

Hobsbawm made his first impact on fellow historians with an essay on the 'Crisis of the Seventeenth Century' published in 1954 in *Past and Present*, a journal he had helped to found. In an argument that owed something to Keynes as well as Marx he explained that the 17th century surge of commercial agriculture in Eastern and Central Europe was undermined by its roots in a 'second serfdom' that boosted luxury display but failed to generate 'mass demand'. The serflords might give work to 'scores of chefs, stucco artists and *perruquiers*' but this was too narrow a basis for real growth. The latter would have to await the broader market of an emergent capitalism based on wage labour.. This argument provoked an important debate. In an age of inequality, export zones and weak demand it has a certain contemporary resonance. At any rate the *American Historical Review*, fifty years after the essay's first publication, deemed Hobsbawm's argument to be worthy of a round table reassessment, an tribute to which few could aspire.

Hobsbawn established himself as the indispensable modern historian with his great trilogy on the long 19th century *The Age of Revolution, The Age of Capital* and *The Age of Empire*, books which focussed on the European core states and their moment of global ascendancy. This was a Europe whose industrial advance was facilitated by colonial markets, elaborating an argument already broached in his *Industry and Empire* (1964). While stressing the British debt to India, and noting that the French revolution could arouse an Indian reaction response, Hobsbawm's abiding concern was with 'the triumph and transformation of capitalism in the historically specific form of bourgeois society in its liberal version'.

Hobbawm warned that despite its apparent universalism, race and gender powerfully shaped bourgeois class formation, and that economic liberalism could spell disaster for peasant populations, as in Ireland, Asia or Latin America.. In China the mighty Taiping rebellion nearly toppled a dynasty but ultimately led to an extraordinary pact between the Chinese imperial authorities, the European colonial powers and the United States, who jointly took command of the country's customs.

It is a sign of Hobsbawm's achievement in the trilogy and its prodigious sequel - *Age of Extremes:* the Short Twentieth Century (1995) – that he provoked others to venture beyond the well-worn paths of national historiography and to aim at a less parochial account of global modernity. At their best these authors helpfully supplement the Hobsbawmian account. But, with rare exceptions

(Giovanni Arrighi) these writers have yet to match Hobsbawm's dialectical grasp of bourgeois development and capitalist contradictions. Hobsbawm's distinctive cast of mind reflected a cosmopolitan education - acquired on political travels and in Soho jazz clubs as well as at the universities of Cambridge and London (see his fascinating autobiography, *Interesting Times*, 2002).

The *Age of Extremes* was a splendid achievement but its relationship with the trilogy offered a central puzzle. What had happened to the bourgeoisie whose ascendancy had been so vividly portrayed in the trilogy? How had it survived the Great War, the Bolshevik Revolution, the devastating dislocations of the interwar, the rise of fascism, World War II? These had, in different ways, ruined great swaths of the capitalist classes. In this grim landscape a progressive bourgeoisie struggled to be reborn in the Popular Front, the New Deal and the allied victory of 1945. Western messianism provoked a Cold War which menaced this rebirth. But at the core of the world system a difficult peace was kept, and super-power rivalry actually promoted a 'Golden Age' of regulation, growth and social security. The war destroyed the colonial mystique. Pressure from Moscow and a sequence of third world revolutions helped the West to decolonise.

Hobsbawm believed that the alliance of anti-fascism and anti-colonialism represented a continuation, in new conditions, of the values of the Enlightenment and French Revolution, but he stresses that the alignment was contingent and fragile, even if also progressive and coherent.

The fragility of the progressive alliance was rooted in a waning ability and desire to regulate a capitalism which still generated great inequality, periodic delirium and a succession of crises. . Ominously, the heroic bourgeoisie and its labor reforming allies were replaced with bankers and economists scurrying with their laptops through a pseudo-modernist world of airports, international hotels, business schools and institutes of statistics. The *Age of Extremes* warned of looming catastrophe.

Hobsbawm believed the Left had contributed to the debacle through its own divisions, crimes, blunders and excesses. .(From 1956 onwards – contrary to what is sometimes claimed - Hobsbawm was scathing in his indictment of Stalin and the Soviet regime). Hobsbawm's commitment to the study of labor movements did not stop him registering in 1978 in a famous essay in *Marxism Today* that the 'forward march of labour' had been halted. Few realized it at the time but this was a real watershed for the European Left, with a string of real defeats and false dawns to follow.

The debate over 'the forward march of labour halted' was to prepare the way for the stunning consequences of Soviet collapse. It turned out, as Hobsbawm had warned, that the gains of organized labour in the West and of national liberation in the South had all profited from the mere existence of a Cold War rival. Hobsbawm's theses on the radical change in the global conjuncture fed into *The Age of Extremes* (1995), a work based on a series of lectures given at the New School for Social Research in New York..

For Hobsbawm Soviet collapse weakened progressive movements on a global scale and presaged disaster for the Russian people. Western triumph went together with widening inequality, rising unemployment and a squeeze on social spending it was bad news for almost everyone, including capitalists who need customers.

Western politicians and financiers held out the delusion that all could become 'middle class' if only they sunk themselves in debt with the right mortgage, credit card or student loan. This turned out to be either a mirage or a trap. In China and Russia there really is a new bourgeoisie but its progressive potential, if any, remains unclear. Hobsbawm deplored the degradation of bourgeois values (eg the return of torture) while remaining stubbornly attached to a Popular Front script that posited a progressive bourgeoisie.

In his youth Eric witnessed Nazi bully boys attacking trade unionists, Jews, and Communists. In Britain he found himself in his army unit thrown together with a group of British workers whose outlook astounded him. For him the Nazi's sweeping victories and British military unpreparedness were deeply disheartening. But his new comrades remained cheerful and confident. Things might look bad but Britain would win out in the end, just as she always did. Hobsbawm was both impressed and exasperated, seeing proletarian stoicism allied to national feeling. Eric thereafter had a soft spot for British nationalism, but not for nationalism more generally, something that pitted him against some New Left writers, notably Benedict Anderson and Tom Nairn. The debate between them led to books, including Hobsbawm's *Nations and Nationalism* (1988), which reached a wide public.

The author of a landmark account of the modern period, Eric Hobsbawm would seem the arch exponent of a 'master narrative'. Yet Hobsbawm was meticulous in registering contingencies, accidents and paths not taken. He also had great sympathy for those marginalised by the mainstream as he showed in *Primitive Rebels* (1957) and *Bandits* (1969). His writings on jazz and blues (published under the name Francis Newton), the collection he co-edited on *The Invention of Tradition* (1984) and his lectures on the failure of the Avant-Garde, *Behind the Times* (1998) displayed his insight into the arts and the wider cultural ethos. For Hobsbawm African American music had succeeded, where much of the Avant Garde had failed in producing the counter-culture of modernity. Hobsbawm's last writings, collected in *How to Change the World* (2011) – offered proof that the Marxist historian had not mellowed and remained as radically engaged as ever.

Eric Hobsbawm was not only an eminent scholar but also a public intellectual, speaking out on issues of the day - opposing the Vietnam war and its 'humanitarian' successors, addressing 'teach ins' and labor movement events. His death on October 1st was prominently reported on the main British TV news channels and in the London newspapers. Listening to the paeans of praise one could not help wondering why Hobsbawm, the great communicator, had been denied the British historian's ultimate accolade, a TV series.)

The passing of this outstanding and engaged historian leaves a gaping hole yet his inspiration will live on in so many fields.

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1984-1997.He had honorary doctorates from universities spread across the globe. He is survived by his wife, Marlene, a daughter and two sons.