

Eric Hobsbawm, Marx & Marxism: Indomitable

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• ***How to Change the World: Marx and Marxism 1840-2011* by Eric Hobsbawm**
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In 1976, a good many people in the West thought that Marxism had a reasonable case to argue. By 1986, most of them no longer felt that way. What had happened in the meanwhile? Were these people now buried under a pile of toddlers? Had Marxism been unmasked as bogus by some world-shaking new research? Had someone stumbled on a lost manuscript by Marx confessing that it was all a joke?

We are speaking, note, about 1986, a few years before the Soviet bloc crumbled. As Eric Hobsbawm points out in this collection of essays, that wasn't what caused so many erstwhile believers to bin their Guevara posters. Marxism was already in dire straits some years before the Berlin Wall came down. One reason given was that the traditional agent of Marxist revolution, the working class, had been wiped out by changes to the capitalist system – or at least was no longer in a majority. It is true that the industrial proletariat had dwindled, but Marx himself did not think that the working class was confined to this group. In *Capital*, he ranks commercial workers on the same level as industrial ones. He was also well aware that by far the largest group of wage labourers in his own day was not the industrial working class but domestic servants, most of whom were women. Marx and his disciples didn't imagine that the working class could go it alone, without forging alliances with other oppressed groups. And though the industrial proletariat would have a leading role, Marx does not seem to have thought that it had to constitute the social majority in order to play it.

Even so, something did indeed happen between 1976 and 1986. Racked by a crisis of profits, old style mass production gave way to a smaller scale, versatile, decentralised 'post-industrial' culture of consumerism, information technology and the service industries. Outsourcing and globalisation were now the order of the day. But this did not mean that the system had essentially changed, thus encouraging the generation of 1968 to swap Gramsci and Marcuse for Said and Spivak. On the contrary, it was more powerful than ever, with wealth concentrated in even fewer hands and class inequalities growing apace. It was this, ironically, which sparked the leftist rush for the exits. Radical ideas withered as radical change seemed increasingly implausible. The only public figure to denounce capitalism in the past 25 years, Hobsbawm claims, was Pope John Paul II. All the same, another couple of decades later, the fainthearted witnessed a system so exultant and impregnable that it only just managed to keep the cash machines open on the high streets.

Eric Hobsbawm, who was born in the year of the Bolshevik revolution, remains broadly committed to the Marxist camp – a fact worth mentioning as it would be easy to read this book without realising it. This is because of its judiciousness, not its shiftiness. Its author has lived through so much of the political turbulence he portrays that it is easy to fantasise that History itself is speaking here, in its wry, all-seeing, dispassionate wisdom. It is hard to think of a critic of Marxism who can address his or her own beliefs with such honesty and equipoise.

Hobsbawm, to be sure, is not quite as omniscient as the Hegelian World-Spirit, for all his cosmopolitan range and encyclopedic knowledge. Like many historians he is not at his sharpest in the realm of ideas, and he is wrong to suggest that the disciples of Louis Althusser treated Marx's *Capital* as though it were primarily a work of epistemology. Nor would Hegel's *Geist* treat feminism, not least Marxist feminism, with such cold-eyed indifference, or consign one of the most fertile currents of modern Marxism – Trotskyism – to a few casual asides. Hobsbawm also thinks that Gramsci is the most original thinker produced by the West since 1917. Perhaps he means the most original Marxist thinker, but even that is dubious. Walter Benjamin is surely a better qualified candidate for that title.

Even the most erudite students of Marxism, however, will find themselves learning from these essays. It is, for example, part of the stock-in-trade of historical materialism that Marx broke decisively with the various utopian socialists who surrounded him. (One of them believed that in an ideal world the sea would turn into lemonade. Marx would probably have preferred Riesling.) Hobsbawm, by contrast, insists on Marx's substantial debt to these thinkers, who ranged from 'the penetratingly visionary to the psychically unhinged'. He is clear about the fragmentary nature of Marx's political writings, and rightly insists that the word 'dictatorship' in the phrase 'dictatorship of the proletariat', used by Marx to describe the Paris Commune, means nothing like what it means today. Revolution was to be seen not simply as a sudden transfer of power but as the prelude to a lengthy, complex, unpredictable period of transition. From the late 1850s onwards, Marx did not consider any such seizure of power either imminent or probable. Much as he cheered on the Paris Commune, he expected little from it. Nor was revolution to be simply opposed to reform, of which Marx was a persistent champion. As Hobsbawm might have added, there have been some relatively bloodless revolutions and some spectacularly bloody processes of social reform.

An absorbing chapter on Engels's *The Condition of the Working Class in England* claims it as the first study anywhere to deal with the working class as a whole, not merely with particular sectors or industries. In Hobsbawm's view, its analysis of the social impact of capitalism is still in many respects unsurpassed. The book does not paint its subject in too lurid a colour: the charge that it depicts all workers as starving or destitute, or living purely at subsistence level, is groundless. Nor is the bourgeoisie presented as a bunch of black-hearted villains. As so often, it takes one to know one: Engels himself was the son of a wealthy German manufacturer who ran a textile mill in Salford, and used his ill-gotten gains to help keep the down-at-heel Marx family afloat. He also enjoyed a spot of fox-hunting, and as a champion of both the proletariat and the colonial Irish maintained a unity of theory and practice by taking a working-class Irish woman as his mistress.

Did Marx see the victory of socialism as inevitable? He says so in *The Communist Manifesto*, though Hobsbawm denies that it is a deterministic document. Yet this is partly because he does not inquire into what kind of inevitability is at stake. Marx sometimes writes as if historical tendencies had the force of natural laws; but it is doubtful even so that this is why he saw socialism as the logical outcome of capitalism. If socialism is historically predestined, why bother with political struggle? It is rather that he expected capitalism to become more exploitative, while the working class grew in strength, numbers and experience; and these men and women, being moderately rational, would then have every reason to rise up against their oppressors. Rather as for Christianity the free actions of human beings are part of God's preordained plan, so for Marx the tightening contradictions of capitalism will force men and women freely to overthrow it. Conscious human activity will bring revolution about, but the paradox is that this activity is itself in a sense scripted.

You cannot, however, speak of what free men and women are bound to do in certain circumstances, since if they are bound to do it they are not free. Capitalism may be teetering on the verge of ruin, but it may not be socialism that replaces it. It may be fascism, or barbarism. Hobsbawm reminds us of a small but significant phrase in *The Communist Manifesto* which has been well-nigh universally

overlooked: capitalism, Marx writes ominously, might end 'in the common ruin of the contending classes'. It is not out of the question that the only socialism we shall witness is one that we shall be forced into by material circumstance after a nuclear or ecological catastrophe. Like other 19th-century believers in progress, Marx did not foresee the possibility of the human race growing so technologically ingenious that it ends up wiping itself out. This is one of several ways in which socialism is not historically inevitable, and neither is anything else. Nor did Marx live to see how social democracy might buy off revolutionary passion.

Few works have sung the praises of the middle classes with such embarrassing zest as *The Communist Manifesto*. In Marx's view, they have been by far the most revolutionary force in human history, and without harnessing for its own ends the material and spiritual wealth they have accumulated, socialism will prove bankrupt. This, needless to say, was one of his shrewder prognostications. Socialism in the 20th century turned out to be most necessary where it was least possible: in socially devastated, politically benighted, economically backward regions of the globe where no Marxist thinker before Stalin had ever dreamed that it could take root. Or at least, take root without massive assistance from more well-heeled nations. In such dismal conditions, the socialist project is almost bound to turn into a monstrous parody of itself. All the same, the idea that Marxism leads inevitably to such monstrosities, as Hobsbawm observes, 'has about as much justification as the thesis that all Christianity must logically and necessarily always lead to papal absolutism, or all Darwinism to the glorification of free capitalist competition'. (He does not consider the possibility of Darwinism leading to a kind of papal absolutism, which some might see as a reasonable description of Richard Dawkins.)

Hobsbawm, however, points out that Marx was actually too generous to the bourgeoisie, a fault of which he is not commonly accused. At the time of *The Communist Manifesto*, their economic achievements were a good deal more modest than he imagined. In a curious garbling of tenses, the Manifesto described not the world capitalism had created in 1848, but the world as it was destined to be transformed by capitalism. What Marx had to say was not exactly true, but it would become true by, say, the year 2000, and it was capitalism that would make it so. Even his comments on the abolition of the family have proved prophetic: about half of the children in advanced Western countries today are born to or brought up by single mothers, and half of all households in large cities consist of single persons.

Hobsbawm's essay on the *Manifesto* speaks of its 'dark, laconic eloquence', and notes that as political rhetoric it has 'an almost biblical force'. 'The new reader,' he writes, 'can hardly fail to be swept away by the passionate conviction, the concentrated brevity, the intellectual and stylistic force of this astonishing pamphlet.' The Manifesto initiated a whole genre of such declarations, most of them from avant-garde artists such as the Futurists and the Surrealists, whose outrageous wordplay and scandalous hyperbole turn these broadsides into avant-garde artworks in themselves. The manifesto genre represents a mixture of theory and rhetoric, fact and fiction, the programmatic and the performative, which has never been taken seriously enough as an object of study.

Marx, too, was an artist of sorts. It is often forgotten how staggeringly well read he was, and what painstaking labour he invested in the literary style of his works. He was eager, he remarked, to get shot of the 'economic crap' of *Capital* and get down to his big book on Balzac. Marxism is about leisure, not labour. It is a project that should be eagerly supported by all those who dislike having to work. It holds that the most precious activities are those done simply for the hell of it, and that art is in this sense the paradigm of authentic human activity. It also holds that the material resources that would make such a society possible already exist in principle, but are generated in a way that compels the great majority to work as hard as our Neolithic ancestors did. We have thus made astounding progress, and no progress at all.

In the 1840s, Hobsbawm argues, it was by no means improbable to conclude that society was on the verge of revolution. What was improbable was the idea that within a handful of decades the politics of capitalist Europe would be transformed by the rise of organised working-class parties and movements. Yet this is what came to pass. It was at this point that commentary on Marx, at least in Britain, began to shift from the cautiously admiring to the near hysterical. In 1885, no less devout a non-revolutionary than Balfour commended Marx's writings for their intellectual force, and for their economic reasoning in particular. A whole raft of liberal or conservative commentators took his economic ideas with intense seriousness. Once those ideas took the form of a political force, however, a number of ferociously anti-Marxist works began to appear. Their apotheosis was Hugh Trevor-Roper's stunning revelation that Marx had made no original contribution to the history of ideas. Most of these critics, I take it, would have rejected the Marxist view that human thought is sometimes bent out of shape by the pressure of political interests, a phenomenon commonly known as ideology. Only recently has Marxism been back on the agenda, placed there, ironically enough, by an ailing capitalism. 'Capitalism in Convulsion', a *Financial Times* headline read in 2008. When capitalists begin to speak of capitalism, you know the system is in dire trouble. They have still not dared to do so in the United States.

There is much else to admire in *How to Change the World*. In a suggestive passage on William Morris, the book shows how logical it was for a critique of capitalism based on the arts and crafts to spring up in England, where advanced industrial capitalism posed a deadly threat to artisanal production. A chapter on the 1930s contains a fascinating account of the relations between Marxism and science – it was the only period, Hobsbawm points out, when natural scientists were attracted to Marxism in significant numbers. As the threat of an irrationalist Fascism loomed, it was the 'Enlightenment' features of the Marxist creed – its faith in reason, science, progress and social planning – which attracted men like Joseph Needham and J.D. Bernal. During Marxism's next historical upsurge, in the 1960s and 1970s, this version of historical materialism would be ousted by the more cultural and philosophical tenets of so-called Western Marxism. In fact, science, reason, progress and planning were now more enemies than allies, at war with the new libertarian cults of desire and spontaneity. Hobsbawm shows only qualified sympathy for the 1968ers, which is unsurprising in a long-term member of the Communist Party. Their idealisation of the Cultural Revolution in China, he suggests with some justice, had about as much to do with China as the 18th-century cult of the noble savage had with Tahiti.

'If one thinker left a major indelible mark on the 20th century,' Hobsbawm remarks, 'it was he.' Seventy years after Marx's death, for better or for worse, one third of humanity lived under political regimes inspired by his thought. Well over 20 per cent still do. Socialism has been described as the greatest reform movement in human history. Few intellectuals have changed the world in such practical ways. That is usually the preserve of statesmen, scientists and generals, not of philosophers and political theorists. Freud may have changed lives, but hardly governments. 'The only individually identifiable thinkers who have achieved comparable status,' Hobsbawm writes, 'are the founders of the great religions in the past, and with the possible exception of Muhammad none has triumphed on a comparable scale with such rapidity.' Yet very few, as Hobsbawm points out, would have predicted such celebrity for this poverty-stricken, carbuncle-ridden Jewish exile, a man who once observed that nobody had ever written so much about money and had so little.

Most of the pieces collected in this book have been published before, though about two-thirds of them have not appeared in English. Those without Italian can therefore now read a number of important essays by Hobsbawm which first appeared in that language, not least three substantial surveys of the history of Marxism from 1880 to 1983. These alone would make the volume uniquely valuable; but they are flanked by other chapters, on such topics as pre-Marxian socialism, Marx on pre-capitalist formations, Gramsci, Marx and labour, which broaden its scope significantly. *How to*

Change the World is the work of a man who has reached an age at which most of us would be happy to be able to raise ourselves from our armchairs without the aid of three nurses and a hoist, let alone carry out historical research. It will surely not be the last volume we shall be granted by this indomitable spirit.

Terry Eagleton

P.S.

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