

The voice of Hobsbawm

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How the Marxist ideas of a British historian ended up on the bookshelves of Indian civil servants and Brazilian housewives

Almost all Marxists have imagined themselves to be part of a global community. More than perhaps any other modern ideology, Marxism has given its adherents a sense of being connected across regions, countries and continents. The activists, thinkers, politicians, students, workers, guerrilla fighters and party apparatchiks who, throughout the 20th century, claimed Marxist ideals for themselves rarely agreed on what Marxism was or where it was headed. But they knew that they were not alone. At its height, Marxism created a web of interconnected communities at least as powerful as the Muslim *ummah*, complete with its own heretics, infidels, rogue saviours and clerics.

Historically, the impetus for this came from Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels themselves. Many of the concepts they deployed – such as ‘capitalism’ and ‘class’ – were transnational in theory and in practice. Some of their best-known political slogans – above all, the final line of *The Communist Manifesto* (1848), popularised as ‘Workers of the world, unite!’ – explicitly invoked the global power of their prophesy. Marx and Engels were hardly the only European political thinkers in the 19th century to paint their political aspirations on a global canvas, but their ideas proved to be extraordinarily influential.

In the 150 years following the publication of *The Communist Manifesto*, generation after generation of activists, intellectuals, and party apparatchiks were inspired by Marx and Engels’s global vision. A huge variety of Marxisms flourished across Europe, and in countries as diverse as Cuba, Vietnam, China, Algeria and Chile. Even today, long after the collapse of the Soviet Union, Marxist ideas retain a global reach. Communism might not hold the appeal it once did, but ‘socialism’ remains a perfectly acceptable political label in many parts of the world, and Marxist analyses of the world economy have experienced a revival since the financial crisis of 2008.

For committed Marxists, the explanation for the remarkable reach of Marxist ideas is self-evident: since capitalism is a global phenomenon, so a critique of capitalism must highlight the transnational reality of capitalist domination. For the historian of ideas, however, the creation and persistence of a global language of Marxism is anything but self-evident. There is no obvious reason why, in the 1970s, a Uruguayan trade unionist, a French philosopher and an Indian communist activist should have shared a common set of words, images, ideas and metaphors to describe the world. It is not enough to say that this extraordinary convergence is a consequence of the intrinsic rightness of Marxist explanatory frameworks. It also has to do with how certain ideas travelled across continents, carried along by the writing of Marxist intellectuals and Marxist-inspired political leaders.

Of the many 20th-century Marxist figures whose ideas travelled the world, Eric Hobsbawm is perhaps an unexpected choice. While many know of his writings, he is not usually considered to be a Marxist ‘thinker’. He did not, at first glance, contribute much to Marxist theory during his seven productive decades from the early 1940s to the late 2000s. As a life-long communist, few would dispute his Marxist credentials, but there is precious little in the way of explicit invocation of Marxist concepts

in most of his texts from the early 1960s onwards. Indeed, young people who first encountered him through his history of the 20th century, *Age of Extremes* (1994), could be forgiven for not knowing that he was a Marxist at all.

However, when it came to global influence, there were few Marxists who could match him. By the time Hobsbawm died in 2012, he was probably the best-known English-language historian, and quite possibly one of the most famous historians in any language. His books were read in a remarkable range of countries by an equally remarkable range of people. Crucially, this included all kinds of non-Marxists – from students to curious members of the literate public – who would never have dreamed of voting for a communist or socialist party, much less engage with the writings of other Marxists, such as Louis Althusser or Antonio Gramsci. All of which makes Hobsbawm the ideal case study of how Marxist ideas travelled across the world at specific historical moments.

My focus here is on two countries with rich and highly developed Marxist cultures: India and Brazil. The story of how Hobsbawm's work arrived in these countries and interacted with emerging political trends, debates and arguments is only a minor footnote to the broader history of Marxist thought in these places. But it offers a fascinating insight into how the writings of a bright, slightly nerdy, British academic could end up gracing the shelves of Indian civil servants and Brazilian housewives.

Hobsbawm's engagement with South Asia went back to his undergraduate student days at Cambridge in the late 1930s. It was here that he met some of the sons and daughters of India's powerful dynastic families, many of whom were drawn to Marxism as a potential cure for their country's economic and social 'backwardness'. Galvanised by the political changes taking place during and after the Second World War, these students returned to India in the 1940s and joined their local communist party. Thanks in large part to their family connections – and the relatively benign way in which communists were treated in India in the 1950s and '60s, compared with many other parts of the developing world – this generation of talented personalities quickly rose to positions of prominence in local and national government. As a result, when Hobsbawm first travelled to India in late 1968, he came with a bulging address book of important names, including the communist politicians and thinkers Mohan Kumaramangalam, Parvati Krishnan, Renu Chakravarty and Indrajit Gupta.

If these friendships gave him a welcome taste for the ways of the Indian elite, they did not offer him the kind of scholarly reach he craved as a young academic. For that, we need to look at how his ideas reached a younger generation of Marxists in the 1950s and '60s through the so-called 'transition debate'. This debate hinged on a classic problem in Marxist theory, namely when and how the transition from feudalism to capitalism took place. The debate began with the publication of the British Marxist economist Maurice Dobb's seminal *Studies in the Development of Capitalism* (1946), and was followed by a vigorous exchange between Dobb and other Marxists such as Paul Sweezy, H K Takahashi and Georges Lefebvre in the early 1950s. Hobsbawm himself contributed to the debate with two long articles on the 'crisis of the 17th century', which he argued was the final phase of feudalism before the advent of capitalism.

Initially, this debate was focused on English history, since England was the paradigmatic case study of 'transition' in Europe. But it soon attracted attention in other parts of the world. For Indian Marxists, the transition debate showed that Marxist theory was not fixed in stone. It offered the possibility of meaningful intellectual disagreement and divergence among Marxists, without compromising the unity of the cause or incurring the wrath of local communist parties. As a result, Indian Marxists such as Irfan Habib used the transition debate to ask new questions that were either absent or neglected in the initial flurry of articles from the early 1950s. Had India ever been feudal and, if it had, was it still feudal? How did colonialism challenge Dobb and Sweezy's Eurocentric assumptions? Was it even necessary for a non-European country such as India to follow the same

model of transition? Could historians 'change' the order in which transition might have taken place? Making India fit into the transition debate was a way of showing that Indian society could achieve socialism, despite its distinct historical trajectory.

It was through the transition debate that Hobsbawm first made an entry into the Indian intellectual scene. In the early 1960s, he was asked by the British communist publisher Lawrence & Wishart to write an introduction to the first English translation of the part of Marx's *Grundrisse* that became known as *Pre-Capitalist Economic Formations*. Published in 1964, this cheap volume brought to an English-speaking audience for the first time some of Marx's early reflections about pre-capitalist social and economic systems, and macro-level historical social change. The subject matter made it of interest to Indian historians since this was one of the few places where Marx discussed the 'Asiatic' or 'Oriental' mode of production, which was supposedly characterised by a 'despotic government' extracting surplus from an overwhelmingly rural village economy.

The fact that Hobsbawm had written the introduction to the text made him into Marx's privileged interlocutor on these issues – and his interpretations were soon under scrutiny. It was an indicator of how important the text was for Indian Marxists that the influential Delhi-based journal *Enquiry*, set up by the historian Bipan Chandra in 1959, devoted almost an entire issue in 1969 to a reprint of Hobsbawm's introduction and a lengthy reply by Habib, who accused Hobsbawm of interpreting Marx in such a way as to minimise the importance of class struggle in pre-capitalist economies. This sort of engagement did much to enhance Hobsbawm's profile. Given the prohibitive cost of books published in Europe, non-Indian Marxist debates could only circulate through locally produced journals, cheap Indian editions, illegal photocopies, word of mouth, and the handful of Marxist bookshops in Delhi and Calcutta.

Throughout the 1970s, Hobsbawm's star rose in India. This was not because of anything special he did to draw attention to himself, although his two visits there in the late 1960s and again in the late 1970s did not do his reputation any harm. Instead, it was because his writings began to appeal to a wider range of scholars. By the mid-1970s, a new generation of Indian Marxists was coming of age. They were tired of discussing 'transitions' and 'modes of production'. What they wanted was a guide to revolutionary action. As the world erupted into guerrilla rebellions inspired by Mao and Che Guevara – and as India struggled through its only period of non-democratic rule, the 'Emergency' of 1975-77 – the orthodox communist obsession with uncovering and emancipating an industrial proletariat seemed too narrow, especially in an overwhelmingly rural society such as India.

It was this search for agents of revolution that brought to prominence another strand of Hobsbawm's work – his studies of rebels and bandits – about which he had been writing since the late 1950s. In the 1970s, young Indian Marxists enthusiastically read Hobsbawm's *Primitive Rebels* (1959) and its sequel *Bandits* (1969), alongside other texts such as E P Thompson's *The Making of the English Working Class* (1963). These serious historical analyses of neglected figures such as mafia men and bandits gave Indian Marxists the tools to search for different kinds of revolutionary subjects closer to home. It was, for instance, with Hobsbawm and Thompson in mind that young journalists in the mid-1970s went out into the dusty flatlands of Uttar Pradesh to write about India's version of the bandit, the *dacoit*.

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While many appreciated the attempt to enlarge the revolutionary canvas, not everyone agreed with the way it had been done. In particular, Hobsbawm's orthodox communist insistence that peasant and bandit movements were 'prepolitical' – in other words, not politically conscious in a revolutionary sense – provoked a hostile reaction from many Indian Marxists. This critique was most clearly articulated by the historian Ranajit Guha in his *Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency in*

Colonial India (1983), which became the foundational text of the so-called 'subaltern studies' school of historiography. One of the central premises of Guha's book was that Hobsbawm had been wrong about peasant movements. In his view, peasant revolt represented an entire universe of political activity in colonial India that had been systematically neglected by 'elitist' historians of both Right and Left. The job of subaltern studies was to correct this bias - and this meant shedding the Hobsbawmian view of the peasant as 'prepolitical'.

In some ways, the success of the subaltern studies school marked the end of Hobsbawm's direct impact on the cutting edge of Indian intellectual life. The postcolonial critique developed by Guha and his followers pushed younger scholars away from Hobsbawm's arguments in the 1980s and '90s. He was still admired as one of the 'founding fathers' of Marxist history, but his Eurocentrism made him appear less and less useful. Still, there was one area where Hobsbawm continued to exert influence: the university curriculum. The Marxist wave that swept across Indian academia in the 1970s left its mark on the teaching of the humanities and the social sciences at some of the country's most prestigious institutions.

At the University of Delhi - a vast, college-based university established in 1922 - the history curriculum underwent a major overhaul in the mid-1970s, under pressure from new staff who were either Marxists or sympathetic to Marxism. One of the legacies of this reform was a core course entitled 'The Rise of the Modern West' that aimed to teach students about the development of European society and economy from around 1500 to 1800. The course - which still exists today - was a veritable rundown of the intra-Marxist historiographical controversies of the 1950s and '60s, including the transition debate, the crisis of the 17th century, mercantilism and trade, and the origins of the industrial revolution, as well as other less obviously Marxist topics such as the Renaissance and the early modern European state system. Predictably, the syllabus was stacked with classic Marxist texts, including Hobsbawm's textbooks on the Industrial Revolution, *Industry and Empire* (1968), and the European 19th century, *Age of Revolution* (1962), alongside books by Dobb, Rodney Hilton, Christopher Hill, Perry Anderson and Immanuel Wallerstein.

Hobsbawm's influence was also felt at one of India's premier research universities, Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU) in Delhi. Founded in 1969 and subsequently known for nurturing generation after generation of Marxist-inspired academic talent, it was exactly the sort of place where Hobsbawm's work would be discussed in detail. Over the past half-century, hundreds of research students on MA, MPhil and PhD programmes in history and the social sciences have taken courses that have included Hobsbawm's writings on labour history, historiography and nationalism.

Perhaps the most remarkable thing is that this legacy has persisted, despite the liberalisation of the Indian economy in the 1990s and the success of the Hindu nationalist Right in the 2000s. In recent years, both Delhi University and JNU have found themselves under severe pressure from a hostile government that wants to root out supposedly 'Left-wing', 'seditious' and 'anti-national' thought in Indian universities. For the first time since the 1970s, suspect academics have been targets of mob violence and administrative censure - and the future of these institutions as places of outstanding research is in doubt.

Nevertheless, it is hard to overstate the influence of almost half a century of university teaching. The mere fact that thousands of Delhi University history students have struggled through classes on the transition debate - including almost every single professional historian in India today, and a large swathe of its upper civil service - demonstrates the extraordinary power of particular Marxist debates to transcend their original context. Hobsbawm was a direct beneficiary of this institutional configuration. The longevity of his written work owes much to the fact that, still today, young Indian Marxist student activists know his name - and will turn to his essays or his textbooks as part of their general political education.

In many ways, the story of Hobsbawm's success in Brazil followed a similar pattern to India. In Brazil, too, he benefited from personal contacts, academic patronage and a certain amount of good fortune. But there was one element that played a much greater role in Brazil: the politics of publishing. Unlike in India, where his writings mostly circulated in English, Hobsbawm – and other foreign Marxists' – ability to reach a wide audience anywhere in Latin America depended on translation.

Hobsbawm first visited Latin America in late 1962 as part of a three-month Rockefeller Foundation-sponsored research trip. The stated purpose of his travels was to 'study early forms of social revolt' in the region, but the reality was that he used the money to hop from one capital to another meeting bright academics. When he returned, he wrote some journalistic articles about poverty in Brazil's shantytowns and the wonders of *bossa nova* music, but he did not leave an obvious scholarly trace.

What cemented Hobsbawm's reputation in Brazil was his involvement in two crucial political and intellectual debates: the first had to do with banditry and rebels; the second related to the emerging history of the labour movement. As in India, there was intense interest in Hobsbawm's work on bandits and rebels among young Brazilian Marxists in the 1960s. In common with their Indian counterparts, Brazilian Marxists wanted to identify indigenous forms of class struggle and alternative (pre)revolutionary actors. This required stretching a Marxist model of historical change to encompass economic and social systems that had little to do with those of modern Europe. In particular, Brazilian Marxists began to explore patterns of resistance among marginalised groups such as slaves and early colonists.

Hobsbawm's work spoke directly to these concerns. His writing about bandits and rebels demonstrated how a different kind of Marxist history could be written. The first to see its potential were a group of anthropologists, including Otávio Velho and Moacir Palmeira, who completed their PhDs in Europe in the late 1960s and early '70s. These young scholars sought to develop Hobsbawm's insights in their own research. Among other things, they published formative studies of the *cangaçeiro* peasant bandits of northeastern Brazil that engaged directly with the vexed question of whether banditism was prepolitical or not. For the most part, they disagreed with Hobsbawm's interpretation, but their sustained discussion of his work ensured that *Primitive Rebels* and *Bandits* became required reading for every anthropology student.

Alongside this lively debate in anthropology, Hobsbawm found himself at the heart of a crucial discussion surrounding the history of the labour movement. Until the 1970s, most labour history in Brazil had been written either through accounts of former activists or within a strictly institutional frame that revolved around trade unions and organised labour. But, to a new generation of historians steeped in the Marxist debates of the time, this limited approach was unsatisfactory. It failed to acknowledge the specifics of an 'underdeveloped' Latin American economy, and it was ill-suited to the sheer range of wage labourers in Brazil, many of whom were not represented by trade unions. To capture this multilayered history, Brazilian labour historians shifted the emphasis away from institutions to workers themselves. They began to write about the 'agency' of workers, and they broadened the definition of workers to encompass everyone from rural plantation workers to slaves.

Once again, Hobsbawm acted as a necessary reference point. A growing number of senior historians in the 1970s began to recommend his essays on labour history to prospective graduate students. These texts were not necessarily at the cutting edge of scholarship – some had originally been published back in the mid-1950s – but they were given a new lease of life through a series of Portuguese translations. As Hobsbawm's reputation grew, he also benefited from an institutional presence. A key moment was when he was invited to speak at a high-profile history conference at the recently founded Unicamp university in Campinas in São Paulo state in 1975. The aim of this event was to showcase the potential of Brazil as a magnet for scholarly activity at a time when the

iron grip of the military dictatorship was loosening. It was a spectacular success. Hobsbawm joined other famous historians such as Arno Mayer, Juan Linz and Guillermo O'Donnell in an impressive show of scholarly strength. The conference was covered in the national press – pictures showed the university lecture halls full to bursting – and commentators wondered whether this might mark the start of a more open phase of military rule.

By the late 1970s, Hobsbawm's writings had become obligatory reading for Brazil's progressive elite. In material terms, he was now being published by the well-respected Left-wing press Paz e Terra, which immediately improved the quality of the translations and guaranteed him a wider reach. His influence was also being sustained by a changing political context that supercharged the Marxist debates of the 1960s and '70s. The emergence of the Partido dos Trabalhadores (PT) – the Workers' Party – in the early 1980s offered the possibility for a fresh generation of young Left-wing activists to bring their ideas to the forefront of the political scene. Intellectual disagreements that had originally been confined to clandestine publications and darkened seminar rooms began to influence political strategy. This strategic shift was complemented by an intellectual shift as Brazilian historians and social scientists began to seek out American or British authors as a counterpoint to the long-standing dominance of French social thought since the 1940s.

To straddle these two different worlds, Hobsbawm needed a split intellectual personality

In such favourable circumstances, it was almost inevitable that Hobsbawm would become an influential voice. He was by no means the only foreign scholar to occupy such a role – figures such as Thompson and Michel Foucault were bigger influences among Marxist scholars – but there can be no doubting the sustained impact of Hobsbawm's writing through the 1980s and '90s. His grand syntheses of world history – by now widely available in Portuguese – offered the perfect historical canvas for young Marxists. The multivolume history of Marxism he had co-edited with a group of French and Italian historians in the late 1970s became an essential addition to any progressive book collection, even though the Brazilian edition was spread out over 12 volumes. And his writing on working-class movements continued to provide a template for Marxist-inspired scholars to renew the history of the Brazilian working class.

Whereas in India Hobsbawm's attachment to the history of the industrial working class proved to be an impediment, this was not a problem in Brazil, a country in which a genuine worker-led political party – the PT – was becoming a reality. It is ironic that, at precisely the moment when Hobsbawm was incurring the wrath of the British Left by announcing the death of the labour movement in his lecture 'The Forward March of Labour Halted' (1978), he was simultaneously celebrating the power of a labour-based working-class political organisation in Brazil. But this contradiction perfectly captured the fragmentation of global Marxist debate in the 1980s. To straddle these two different worlds, Hobsbawm needed a split intellectual personality.

The 1990s and early 2000s were the apotheosis of Hobsbawm's success in Brazil. He was personally acquainted with both the centrist president Fernando Henrique Cardoso, who was in power from 1995 to 2003, and his successor, the ex-trade unionist and larger-than-life leader of the PT, Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, who happily claimed the British historian as one of his leading influences. In 2003, he appeared as the headline act at the newly launched FLIP literary festival in Paraty in the state of Rio de Janeiro to wild acclaim. And his books continued to fly off the shelves. At the last count in early 2018, the Brazilian edition of *Age of Extremes* was in its 59th edition.

With the belated arrival in Brazil of a postcolonial critique, Hobsbawm's success has waned somewhat in the past decade. Excerpts of his work still appear in Brazilian school textbooks, but a newer generation of Left-wing activists and scholars, more aware of the country's fraught racial dynamics, are skeptical of his workerist approach. As the PT has lost power and entered a period of

protracted crisis, Hobsbawm's association with the party has begun to count against him. Moreover, his instinctive and deep-seated hostility to identity politics makes his analyses appear out of step with the exponential growth in identity-based social movements in Brazil and beyond. Hobsbawm might have celebrated the 'return' of Marx in some of his very last writings and interviews in the early 2010s, but there are some doubts as to whether the Marxism that is making a comeback conforms to his vision of what Marxism should be.

Even if the influence of Hobsbawm's writing has begun to wane in India and Brazil, there can be no regrets. By all accounts, he has had the kind of impact of which most nonfiction authors can only dream. Nevertheless, it is important to remember that he was able to reach such a wide audience only in a very specific context. In the period from the early 1960s to the late '80s, Marxists in noncommunist countries were increasingly able to participate in a transnational discussion over the past and future of capitalism, and the most promising agents of revolutionary change. Hobsbawm played a starring role in these discussions – and, occasionally, set the agenda.

This success was not all about ideas. The cards were also stacked in Hobsbawm's favour. His ability to contribute to global debates was a direct result of the disproportionate influence of a small group of postwar British and French Marxists, and the prestige accorded to European thought in Latin America and postcolonial South Asia. This ideological configuration – which began to come apart from the 1980s as non-Western intellectuals struggled to decentre Marxist thought – greatly facilitated his infiltration into local debates.

It helped, too, that Hobsbawm knew how to take advantage of the politics of the publishing industry. It was the availability of affordable Penguin editions of Hobsbawm's texts in India, and the proliferation of decent translations in Brazil, that guaranteed his outsize success. Yes, the content of those books mattered, and Hobsbawm rode several waves of interest in Marxist ideas in the 1960s and '70s in India, and the '80s and '90s in Brazil. But there were many others writing about the same subjects and intervening in the same debates. The difference was that their work was not so easily accessible. It was, in the end, the dog-eared paperbacks and the discoloured illegal photocopies that made Hobsbawm's name. Paradoxically, his most vital contributions to the global Marxist imagination were a result of his astute mastery of the capitalist book market.

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