

# **From Captain Swing to Pancho Villa. Instances of peasant resistance in the historiography of Eric Hobsbawm**

Thursday 1 June 2006, by [LÖWY Michael](#) (Date first published: 2000).

Eric Hobsbawm is a man of the Enlightenment: does he not define socialism as the last and most extreme heir of the eighteenth century's rationalism? [1] So it is not surprising that the distinction between 'modern and 'primitive or 'archaic has an important place in his work. [2] However, examining some of his writings, and in particular the three books from the period 1959-69 devoted to so-called archaic forms of revolt, it is evident that his approach differs markedly from the 'progressive orthodoxy in its interest, sympathy, even fascination — these are his own words — for 'primitive movements of peasant anti-modern (anti-capitalist) resistance and protest. I refer to *Primitive Rebels* (1959), *Bandits* (1969) and *Captain Swing* (1969). [3]

This attitude — at one and the same time methodological, ethical and political — implies a distancing in relation to a certain type of historiography that tends — because of what he criticizes as a rationalist and 'modernist bias — to ignore these movements, seeing them as strange vestiges or marginal phenomena. But Hobsbawm insisted that these 'primitive, and in particular rural, populations were still today — that is, in the 1950s — the overwhelming majority of the nation in most of the countries in the world. Furthermore, and this is the decisive argument for this historian, 'their acquisition of political consciousness has made our century the most revolutionary in history. [4] In other words, far from being marginal, this kind of movement is the source or root of the great revolutionary upheavals of the twentieth century, in which peasants and the mass of the rural poor have played a crucial part: the Mexican Revolution of 1911-19, the 1917 Russian Revolution, the 1936 Spanish Revolution, the Chinese and Cuban Revolutions. This idea is merely suggested by Hobsbawm, who does not deal directly with any of these events, but it forms a sort of backdrop to his research on the 'primitives'. [5]

In the remarks that follow I shall attempt to systematize a line of thought that is rather fragmentary and dispersed through the studies of concrete cases that make up the historian's work.

Hobsbawm says that, in order to understand these revolts, you have to start from the realization that modernization, the intrusion of capitalism into traditional peasant societies and the advent of economic liberalism and modern social relationships, is truly catastrophic for them, a genuine social cataclysm that leaves them completely out of joint. Whether the arrival of the modern capitalist world is a gradual process, through the working of economic forces the peasants do not understand, or a sudden one, brought about by conquest or a change of regime, they perceive it as an aggressive act that destroys their way of life. Mass peasant revolts against this new order, which is experienced as unbearably unjust, are often inspired by nostalgia for the traditional world, the 'good old days — that belong more or less to the realm of myth — and take on the appearance of a kind of 'political Luddism. [6]

For instance, epidemics of social banditry are largely the reaction of peasant communities to the destruction of their way of life by the modern world. As for the rise of rural anarchism in nineteenth-century Andalusia — one of the most impressive movements of 'revolutionary millenarianism (to

which we shall return) — it should be understood as the peasants' reaction to the introduction of capitalist social and legal relations into their region. [7] But the example of rural anti-capitalist resistance that Hobsbawm has studied most systematically is the 1830 English agricultural workers' revolt, a mass movement of protest which used 'archaic methods — setting fire to haylofts, destroying machines — under the name of the mythical 'Captain Swing'. In the book he devoted (with his friend Georges Rudé) to this rebellion, which was cruelly put down by the authorities — 19 executed, 481 deported to Australia, and 644 condemned to long prison sentences for a revolt that destroyed property but did not end in the death of any of its enemies — he describes the movement as an improvised, spontaneous, 'archaic resistance to the logic of the market, the total triumph of rural capitalism. It is no accident that the most advanced areas of the country, as far as the mechanization of production and the development of commercial agriculture were concerned — such as East Anglia — should have been the revolt's main epicentres. [8]

Hobsbawm writes that it is hard to find words to describe the deterioration in the working conditions of English rural labourers as a consequence of the advent, during the period 1750-1850, of the industrial society. One by one, 'with the inevitability of tragic drama, the agricultural worker's defences against poverty's traditional ills — sickness, old age, unemployment — were wrenched away from him and he lost the few traditional rights and the little security he still had. Because of new initiatives introduced from 1795 onwards — the notorious 'Speenhamland system — wages gradually fell, only to be replaced by the appalling 'charity of the Poor Laws, with their humiliating, degrading, repugnant rules. Agricultural labourers found themselves trapped in a tougher, less egalitarian, more inhumane economic and working environment than in the past. It was thus a bilious accumulation of fury, hate, resentment and despair that provoked the labour explosion of 1830. [9]

In this context it is understandable that 'Captain Swing's revolt was largely inspired by nostalgia for the past, defence of the customary rights of the rural poor and the wish to restore the traditional order that had guaranteed them; in this sense, Hobsbawm says, the movement was a kind of 'a general manifesto of past against future'. [10]

However, refusing to follow a certain 'modernist tradition — one that is liberal as well as left-leaning — the historian does not by any means describe this movement as 'reactionary'. Rather than criticizing it for a 'yearning for the past', he attributes its failure to the fact that it did not manage to spread into the urban areas: 'Perhaps "Swing's" greatest tragedy was that it never succeeded in linking up with the rebellion of mine, mill and city. [11] Even the act by which the revolt directly challenged technological progress, the destruction of threshing machines — the type of practice despised by historians who are trapped in the fetishism of 'the means of production — he finds socially and humanly understandable. Those machines, which took away from agricultural workers their main occupation during the long and difficult winter months, by condemning them to unemployment and starvation, seemed to them 'an unmitigated tragedy and the very symbol of their poverty. Which explains the universal hostility, the general hatred for this mechanical tool, which was widely destroyed with hammers and iron bars by the 'Swings'. Instead of condemning these acts as 'archaic or 'irrational, Hobsbawm — who acknowledges that 'the historian of this uprising was fascinated, touched and moved by his subject — sees the threshing machines' destruction and their partial neutralization for several decades as the most successful consequence of the revolt! Noting the superiority in this regard of 'Captain Swing compared with 'King Ludd, he concludes his historical survey of the 1830 events with these words: 'The threshing machines did not return on the old scale. Of all the machine-breaking movements of the 19<sup>th</sup> century that of the helpless and unorganized farm-labourers proved to be by far the most effective. [12]

What is true of the 'Swings can also be applied to other movements of 'political Luddism or traditionalist revolt against 'what the outside world ... considers "progress", such as the peasant

uprisings in Russia or southern Italy in the name of the Tsar or the Bourbons. [13]

Do these movements challenge the established order? Here we come to one of the main questions exercising Eric Hobsbawm: in what conditions and forms can 'primitive revolt transmute into revolution?

As far as social banditry is concerned, the transformation is difficult. Movements in favour of national independence are more easily understood in terms of the archaic political culture of the social bandits than are modern revolutionary movements, which are not simply directed against a foreign power. However, it may be that the two worlds overlap, as happened in the case of the 1911-19 Mexican Revolution: 'The great Pancho Villa was recruited by Madero's men in the Mexican Revolution and became a formidable general of the revolutionary armies. Perhaps of all professional bandits in the Western world, he was the one with the most distinguished revolutionary career. [14]

Of all the forms of 'primitive revolt, the millenarian movements seem to the historian the most likely to become revolutionary. One could say there is a sort of 'elective affinity — this is my terminology and not Eric Hobsbawm's [15] — a structural analogy between millenarianism and revolution: 'The essence of millenarianism, the hope of a complete and radical change in the world which will be reflected in the millenium, a world shorn of all its present deficiencies, is not confined to primitivism. It is present, almost by definition, in all revolutionary movements of whatever kind, and 'millenarian elements may therefore be discovered by the student in any of them, insofar as they have ideals. And he adds that archaic millenarian movements in Europe have three characteristic features:

(1) a revolutionary aspect, for instance deep and total rejection of the existing evil world and a passionate aspiration to another, better one;

(2) a 'chiliastic type of ideology, usually of messianic Judeo-Christian origin;

(3) a fundamental vagueness as to the means of bringing about the new society. [16]

Thanks to the problematic of millenarianism, Eric Hobsbawm's historiography incorporates all the richness of socio-cultural subjectivity — the depth of beliefs, feelings and emotions — into his analysis of historical events, which, from this viewpoint, are no longer perceived simply as products of the 'objective interplay of economic or political forces. This openness to the subjective dimension means that analysis in terms of social classes does not preclude the irreducible part played by individuals — both famous and anonymous — whom the historian often allows to speak.

Although he makes a careful distinction between primitive millenarianisms and modern revolutionisms, Hobsbawm nevertheless emphasizes their elective relationship (or affinity): 'Even the least millenarian modern revolutionaries have in them a streak of "impossibilism" which makes them cousins to the Taborites and Anabaptists, a kinship which they have never denied. [17]

This does not mean that 'all revolutionary movements are millenarian in the strict sense or — which is even worse — that they are connected to a primitive type of chiliasm. [18] And vice versa, not every millenarian movement is necessarily revolutionary, like for example the messianic uprising around the Joachimite prophet Davide Lazzaretti in Tuscany in the 1870s, studied by Hobsbawm in *Primitive Rebels*. [19]

All the same, the affinity between them is a basic fact in the history of peasant revolts against capitalist modernization. It seems to me that this is one of the most interesting research hypotheses outlined by Hobsbawm in his work of that period. He illustrated his idea in two utterly enthralling case studies: rural anarchism in Andalusia and the Sicilian peasant leagues, both arising at the end

of the nineteenth century and continuing into the twentieth.

Spanish agrarian anarchism is perhaps 'the most impressive example of a modern mass millenarian or quasi-millenarian movement . With its simple revolutionism, its total and absolute rejection of this perverse and oppressive world, its absolute faith in the 'great change , the advent of a world of Justice and Liberty, this libertarian communist movement — which in an uncanny way chimed with the feelings and spontaneous aspirations of the Andalusian peasantry and their refusal of the new capitalist order — was 'utopian, millenarian, apocalyptic. [20]

Hobsbawm's attitude to the Andalusian anarchists is thoroughly ambivalent. On the one hand, he does not conceal his admiration for their social energy, their passionate fervour, their belief in education, science and progress, their hunger for knowledge — even when riding a donkey, the militant was still reading, leaving the reins loose on the animal's neck! — their simple but grandiose ideal of a just and free society, their internationalist spirit of solidarity, which 'made the village cobbler in a small Andalusian town conscious of having brothers fighting the same fight in Madrid and New York, in Barcelona and Leghorn, in Buenos Aires . Even their 'messianic uprisings every ten years or so, always doomed to failure because of their isolation, were maybe 'under the circumstances ... the least hopeless among available revolutionary techniques . In short, Andalusian anarchism is a phenomenon that cannot fail to be 'intensely moving for anyone who cares for the fate of man. [21]

Nevertheless, Hobsbawm considers — and here it is obviously the English communist speaking — that because of a lack of organization, strategy, tactics and patience, the Anarchists 'wasted their revolutionary energies almost completely . This brusque verdict is partly belied by the recognition, a few paragraphs earlier, of the fact that, when the conditions were right, as they were in July 1936, anarchist villages were fully able to carry through 'a classical revolution — 'taking power from the local officials, policemen and landlords. [22] The proof of their ineffectiveness and their incorrigibly pre-modern nature, according to Hobsbawm, is that 'in defeat anarchism was and is helpless . In Andalusia only the communists were able to organize an illegal movement and pockets of armed resistance after the civil war or around 1944-46. [23]

This somewhat one-sided verdict is challenged by the existence of groups of anarchist guerrillas, especially in Catalonia; for instance there was one — in an urban context, admittedly, not a rural one as was the case in Andalusia — directed by the militant libertarian Francisco Sabaté Llopart, known as 'Quico , a veteran of the 26<sup>th</sup> Durruti Division, who led spectacular clandestine actions in Barcelona from 1945 to 1960: 'expropriation of banks, attacks on the police, etc. [24] In this case study of a revolutionary Catalan 'expropriator , Hobsbawm passes a further brief judgment on the anarchist movement. Preserving a critical distance, he nevertheless expresses a deep respect that is rarely matched in the work of a communist historian: the Catalan libertarian militants, he writes:

The 'idea of anarchism was their motive: that totally uncompromising and lunatic dream which a great many of us share, but which few except Spaniards have ever tried to act upon, at the cost of total defeat and impotence for their labour movement. Theirs was the world in which men were governed by pure morality as dictated by conscience; where there is no poverty, no government, no jails, no policemen, no compulsion and discipline except that of the inner light; no social bond except fraternity and love; no lies; no property; no bureaucracy. [25]

Should we see in this surprising homage the influence on the historian of the spirit of May '68 (the book was published in 1969)?

The other millenarian revolutionary movement studied by Hobsbawm is the Sicilian peasant leagues. He finds it a prime example, in that it is a 'primitive agrarian movement that becomes 'modern by

aligning itself with socialism and communism. As happened in Andalusia, which is strikingly similar to Sicily, the peasants revolted at the end of the nineteenth century against the introduction of capitalist relationships into the rural environment — with consequences that were aggravated by the world depression in agriculture of the 1880s. The movement arose with the foundation and growth of the peasant leagues, usually under socialist leadership, followed by riots and strikes on a scale that scared the Italian government, causing it to make use of troops to stamp out the threat. ([26])

This movement was 'primitive and millenarian to the extent that the socialism preached by the leagues was seen by the Sicilian peasants as a new religion, the true religion of Christ — betrayed by the priests, who were on the side of the rich — that foretold the advent of a new world, without poverty, hunger and cold, in accordance with God's will. Crosses and images of saints were carried when they demonstrated and the movement, which included many women, spread like an epidemic during 1891-94: the peasant masses were urged on by the messianic belief that the start of a new reign of justice was imminent. At the same time, as innumerable accounts reveal — for instance impressive statements from a peasant woman from the village of Piana dei Greci (published among the documents in the book's appendix) — 'there is no doubt at all that revolution was what the peasants hoped for, a new and just, equal and communist society. [27]

Despite the 1894 defeat, permanent peasant movements were set up in certain areas of Sicily, thanks to the socialists' modern organizational methods, and after the Great War the communist movement built on these. The story of the village of Piana dei Greci is illustrative of this continuity: epicentre of the late nineteenth-century revolts, it was a communist stronghold still in the 1950s: 'their original millenarian enthusiasm has been transmuted into something more durable: permanent and organized allegiance to a modern social-revolutionary movement. As far as Hobsbawm is concerned, this development is not simply a substitution of the 'modern for the 'archaic, but a kind of 'dialectical integration — in the sense of the Hegelian-Marxist *Aufhebung* — of the former into the latter: Piana's experience 'shows that millenarianism need not be a temporary phenomenon but can, under favourable conditions, be the foundation of a permanent and exceedingly tough and resistant form of movement. [28]

In other words, millenarianism should not be seen only as 'a touching survival from an archaic past, but as a cultural force that is still active, in another guise, in modern social and political movements. The conclusion he offers at the end of his chapter devoted to the Sicilian leagues has a clear historical, social and political resonance that is wider and more universal: 'when harnessed to a modern movement, millenarianism can not only become politically effective, but it may do so without the loss of that zeal, that burning confidence in a new world, and that generosity of emotion which characterizes it even in its most primitive and perverse forms. And no one can read the testimony of such people as the anonymous peasant woman of Piana without hoping that their spirit can be preserved. [29] This remark may be taken almost as the 'moral of the story for the whole of his work on millenarianism and primitive revolts.

I think that here Eric Hobsbawm has opened a fascinating avenue for research that is worth pursuing, not only by historians but also by political sociologists or anthropologists studying contemporary (late twentieth-century) phenomena. I would quote just two examples from my own research field, as a sociologist interested in Latin America: the Zapatista National Liberation Army (EZLN) in Chiapas (Mexico) and the Landless Peasant Movement (MST) in Brazil. Both are peasant movements protesting against (and resisting) capitalist modernization, both contain millenarian elements that are similar to the phenomena studied by Hobsbawm, and both are fundamentally modern movements in their agenda, their demands, their activities and their organizational forms.

The EZLN arose in the Chiapas mountains out of the fusion of the Guevarism (which itself is not without its millenarian dimension) of a handful of urban militants with the 'archaic revolt of native Maya communities and the Christian messianism of the communities ecclesiastical base (founded in

the 1970s by the Bishop of Chiapas, Mgr Samuel Ruiz), all under the supreme banner of the millenarian legend of Emiliano Zapata. The result of this explosive political, cultural, social and religious cocktail has been some of the most original peasant rebellions of the 1990s.

It is true that the January 1994 Zapatista uprising was directed against the age-old oppression of the indigenous Mayas by the authorities and landowners, but it was immediately motivated by the neo-liberal modernization measures introduced by the federal government: privatization of the rural communities (ejidos) created by the Mexican Revolution, and the free-trade agreement with the United States (ALENA), which threatened with collapse the traditional growing of maize by indigenous communities — the basis of their cultural identity over thousands of years — by opening Mexico up to GM maize from North American agro-businesses.

The Zapatista movement is also distinguished by a libertarian element, which can be seen both in the self-management of the villages and in its refusal to play the political game and even to accept the possibility of 'taking over power'. That is why anarchist or anarcho-syndicalist movements, which are experiencing a certain revival, particularly in southern Europe, have made solidarity with the Chiapas rebels one of the main planks of their platform.

As for the Brazilian MST, which has its socio-cultural roots in the Church's Land Pastoral, church communities and liberation theology, it is also marked by an amazing mixture of popular religiosity, 'archaic peasant revolt and modern organization, in a radical struggle for agrarian reform and, eventually, for a 'classless society'. This movement, which has a high emotional and 'mystical component — 'mystical is the term the militants themselves use to describe participants' state of mind — or even 'millenarian (in the broad sense) — the similarity to the 1890s Sicilian leagues is striking — brings together hundreds of thousands of peasants, tenant farmers and agricultural laborers and has now become the biggest social movement in Brazil and the main force protesting against the neo-liberal modernization policy of successive Brazilian governments.

To judge by these examples, revolutionary millenarianism — the most radical form of peasant resistance against capitalist modernization — as Eric Hobsbawm studied it, is not necessarily a phenomenon of the past.

## FOOTNOTES

1. E. Hobsbawm (1959), *Primitive Rebels. Studies in Archaic Forms of Social Movement in the nineteenth and twentieth Centuries* (New York, Norton Library), p. 126.

2. I systematically put quotation marks round the words 'primitive or 'archaic — which Hobsbawm does not always do — to indicate a certain critical distance with regard to terms that are useful but nevertheless quite closely linked with an evolutionist or 'modernist view of history.

3. I shall not be dealing here with Hobsbawm's work on the peasantry published during the 1970s and included in the admirable collection *Uncommon People* (1998, New York, The New Press). Its problematic is different and it does not refer (or very little) to the two aspects that concern me in this article: resistance to capitalism and revolutionary millenarianism.

4. *Primitive Rebels*, pp. 2, 3.

5. Sadly this notion is not taken up by Hobsbawm in his history of the twentieth century: he demonstrates very pertinently how the process of modernization led to the spectacular decline of the peasantry after the Second World War, but he does not raise the question of peasant resistance to this decline, nor does he study more systematically the part played by 'primitive peasant groups in the century's great revolutionary movements. Cf. E. Hobsbawm (1994), *Age of Extremes. The short*

*twentieth century, 1914-1991* (London, Penguin), pp. 289-294.

6. *Primitive Rebels*, pp. 3, 67, 119.

7. E. Hobsbawm (2000), *Bandits* (London, Weidenfeld & Nicolson, first published in 1969), p. 27 and *Primitive Rebels*, pp. 82-83.

8. E. Hobsbawm and G. Rudé (1969), *Captain Swing* (London, Weidenfeld & Nicolson), pp. 15, 16, 19, 83. All the passages quoted, like those that follow, refer to the chapters of the book written by Hobsbawm, according to the division of labour with his co-author Rudé indicated in the preface. It is clear that the England of the 1830s was at a much more advanced level of modernization of agriculture and development of rural capitalism than regions in the south of Europe, where social banditry principally arose.

9. *Primitive Rebels*, pp. 46, 52, 75, 76. Hobsbawm's analysis owes much to the book by Karl Polanyi (1945), *The Great Transformation*, which he praises in a footnote of *Captain Swing* — p. 54 — as a 'brilliant and unduly neglected book.

10. *Swing*, p. 16.

11. *Ibid.*, p. 19.

12. *Ibid.*, pp. 281, 298. Many years before his colleague E. P. Thompson, Hobsbawm had defended the Luddites and other 'machine breakers against attacks inspired by 'nineteenth-century middle class economic apologists . See 'The Machine Breakers (1952), in *Uncommon People*, pp. 5-17.

13. *Primitive Rebels*, p. 119; *Bandits*, p. 31.

14. *Bandits*, p. 114. Curiously Hobsbawm seems to take no interest in that other great Mexican revolutionary, Emiliano Zapata. His name does not appear in *Primitive Rebels*. He mentioned him later, in the 1973 article on peasants and politics, but I feel he much underestimates the scope of that millenarian, revolutionary peasant movement when he writes that 'the political influence of Zapata's agrarian programme derives from the fact that his peasant levies were close enough to occupy the capital of Mexico . (E. Hobsbawm, 'Peasants and Politics , in *Uncommon People*, p. 154.).

15. M. Löwy (1990), *Redemption and Utopia. Libertarian Judaism in Central Europe* (London: Athlone).

16. *Primitive Rebels*, pp. 57-58. Other religions, to the extent that they see the world as stable or cyclical, are less conducive to the rise of millenarianism.

17. *Ibid.*, p. 64. Where does Hobsbawm's interest in millenarianism, in his work of the late 1950s, spring from? When I interviewed him on 20 March 1982, he suggested three possible explanations: 'Perhaps it's because I belonged to a revolutionary movement. Then it was the moment of the 20<sup>th</sup> congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, and we felt we needed to sum up, ask some basic questions. And finally I was influenced by anthropologists who had worked on that topic, in particular Max Glucksmann and his followers, such as Peter Worsley, who was a fellow-comrade in the party at the time.

18. Hobsbawm dissociates himself here from Norman Cohn's work — *The Pursuit of the Millennium* (1957) — which he accuses, not without reason, of blurring the difference between the two.

19. *Primitive Rebels*, pp. 68-73.

20. Ibid., pp. 83-90.

21. Ibid., pp. 82-90, 107.

22. Ibid., pp. 90-91. Strangely, Hobsbawm does not mention the experience of the libertarian agrarian communities in 1936-7. In other writings from the 1966-69, Hobsbawm dealt with anarchism, expressing his admiration but above all reservations and criticisms. Though he was convinced of the 'ineffectiveness of anarchist methods, he nevertheless rejected Stalin's attacks on libertarian ideas during the 1930s, in the context of the Spanish conflicts, putting them down to 'the attempt to give a theoretical legitimation to the Stalinist development of a dictatorial and terrorist state ('Bolshevism and the Anarchists', 1969, in *Revolutionaries* (New York, Meridian Books, 1975) p. 70).

23. *Primitive Rebels*, pp. 91-92.

24. The story of this group and its main leader is told in detail by Hobsbawm in his book *Bandits*. Though critical of his lack of realism, the author is literally fascinated by 'Quico Sabaté, that 'public legend, that 'tragic hero, who died in 1960 in a final battle with Franco's police. He devotes no less than 15 pages to him — in a slim volume of only 145 in the French edition. Curiously enough, the chapter has almost no footnotes: it is clear that Hobsbawm unearthed his character's biography by means of detailed primary research among 'Quico's old comrades and friends in exile in France. For Hobsbawm, who virtually rescued him from oblivion, 'it is just that he Francisco Sabaté should be so remembered, in the company of other heroes. See *Bandits*, p. 138.

25. *Bandits*, p. 114.

26. *Primitive Rebels*, pp. 96-97. These peasant organizations were also called 'fasci, but in order to avoid unfortunate confusion I prefer to use the term 'leagues, which figures in Hobsbawm's book.

27. Ibid., pp. 98-101.

28. Ibid., pp. 101-105.

29. Ibid., pp. 106-107.

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\* Michael Löwy is from the CNRS, Paris. Michael Löwy was born in Brazil but has lived in France since 1969. A research director of the National Centre for Scientific Research (CNRS), he teaches at the École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales (EHESS). He was awarded the CNRS silver medal in 1994 and is the author of numerous works, translated into twenty-five languages, including, *Redemption and Utopia: Libertarian Judaism in Central Europe* (1990); *Révolte et mélancolie: le romantisme à cours-courant de la modernité* (with Robert Sayre), (1992); and *The War of Gods: Religion and Politics in Latin America* (1998).