

Eric Hobsbawm: 1917-2012

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"I, who belong to a people of refugees whose experience has been such as to make me still vaguely uneasy if I don't possess a valid passport and enough cash to transport me to the nearest suitable country at short notice, can understand the situation of the Kenyan Asians and feel horrified by British immigration officials in a more profound and visceral way than those from whom the question is primarily one of equal rights and civil liberty in general." – Eric Hobsbawm, 1969

Eric John Ernest Hobsbawm, one of the most read Marxist historians of the twentieth century, passed away at the age of 95. While in no sense an adequate survey of his works and ideas, Radical Socialist presents a short view of his life and politics.

Born of a father of Polish-Jewish descent, who was a British official, and an Austrian Jewish mother, Hobsbawm spent his early years in Austria. After his parents' death, he and his sister were taken care of by relatives, and he studied in Berlin till 1933, the year Hitler took power. His family then moved to Britain. Hobsbawm did his Ph D from Cambridge University and worked for a long time at Birkbeck College. During World War II he served in the Royal Engineers. Living to the age of 95, and fighting leukaemia, he died on 1 October 2012.

Hobsbawm had been attracted to Communist politics while in Berlin, as a youth. He joined the Communist Party of Great Britain in 1936, and became part of its famous Marxist Historians' Group. Unlike others, such as Christopher Hill or E. P. Thompson, who, disgusted by the revelations about Stalinism, and the brutal suppression of the Hungarian Revolution, left the CPGB, Hobsbawm remained a staunch party member, and a subtle defender of Stalinism.

This does not mean that Hobsbawm was a lesser historian. Indeed, he was one of the finest historians of the twentieth century. He was concerned about the dual revolution that created capitalist modernity in Europe – the French Revolution and the Industrial Revolution. His books on these subjects – *The Age of Revolution*, *The Age of Capital*, *The Age of Empire*, and *Industry and Empire*, have, despite customary warnings by teachers of right-wing bent that these were written by a Marxist, become standard text books across the world, or at least wherever English is used in higher education. He was also one of the initiators of *Past and Present*, one of the most influential historical journals, in which Marxists and non-Marxists cooperated.

Hobsbawm was also one of the seminal figures involved in developing the "invention of tradition" concept. His writings also show a serious attention to social history, for example in his study of *Social Banditry*.

Hobsbawm's weakness was his "take" on the twentieth century and the Russian revolution and Stalinism. He tended to present an objectivist apologia, arguing in essence that even if someone less ruthless than Stalin had been in power, the circumstances would have resulted in similar mass scale violence in the interests of socialist construction. This involves, first of all, an assessment that the European revolutions were bound to fail. Secondly, it means looking at Stalinism not as a system of bureaucratic rule, a domination by a bureaucratic social layer that had usurped power, but as certain personality traits of Stalin. In the name of avoiding counterfactuals, Hobsbawm avoids looking at alternative programmes and policies seriously.

Why do we object to this? After all, Trotskyists have also argued for a long time that Stalinism was not an inevitable outgrowth of Marxism, but the result of objective developments – the isolation of the Russian revolution in a backward country, the failure of the German revolution, the historic backwardness of Russia, etc. The difference lies in Hobsbawm denying much role (one could even say, at times any role) of subjective forces, of parties, programme, politics.

Hobsbawm however disliked the ultraleft lurches as well as brutalities of Stalinism. Coming into the international communist movement during the rise of fascism, what motivated him, and many like him, was not the self-emancipation of the working class but anti-fascist popular frontism. His late writings show him an unrepentant supporter of popular frontism. At the same time, the Spanish Civil War was for him headed for defeat because people did not accept the necessary centralisation. He claimed that the POUM [dissident Marxists, accused of being Trotskyists though in fact they were formed by the fusion of one group splitting from the Trotskyist ranks and another group never Trotskyist] were small and irrelevant, but fails to even try to explain why the party of his friend Santiago Carrillo murdered so many POUM-ists and anarchists.

It is a measure of Hobsbawm's dilemma, that he knew the problems of being an official pro-Moscow communist and writing truthful accounts of the twentieth century, that he avoided it for a long time. His writings about the Hungarian Revolution show an awareness that it was a workers' revolution, not a Horthyite counter-revolution as pretended by Moscow and its acolytes. But his letter published in the CP newspaper had said that he approved, though with a heavy heart, the Soviet invasion of Hungary.

In British politics, Hobsbawm had become part of the Eurocommunist wing of the CPGB. In his famous Marx Memorial Lecture, *The Forward March of Labour Halted?* he related the fortunes of the working class with the fates of electoral, reformist workers' parties. Not surprisingly therefore he was to become the Marxist admired by Neil Kinnock, the same Labour leader who would purge the Labour Party of the Militant Tendency, a Trotskyist current that was trying to work inside the Labour Party and had achieved some influence.

At the same time. Hobsbawm remained keenly aware of imperialism and racism. He was not touched by nationalism of the dominators, as his quotation at the beginning of this note shows.

As we fight to build a revolutionary movement in the twenty first century, we are aware that Marxists must come to grips with the realities of the twentieth. Hobsbawm, perhaps the most important Marxist historian, indeed the most powerful historian of the nineteenth century, stumbled when writing about the twentieth because he could never make a materialist assessment of Stalinism and the counter-revolution it involved. As we continue to learn from his strengths, we will also learn to identify and criticise his mistakes.

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