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Between Clio and Party — Eric Hobsbawm (1917-2012)

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Christopher Hill's *The English Revolution 1640* and Eric Hobsbawm's *The Age of Revolution* were the first two books by Marxist historians that I ever read. I think that this is true of a large number of history students of my generation and of those who were a little older than us. It is difficult to describe the deep influence this kind of history-writing had on me in my formative years. In this sense, the death of Eric Hobsbawm last week closes a significant aspect of the past — the past as it influenced some of us and also the way we learnt to interpret the past.

Hobsbawm was the last of that remarkable group of historians who were part of the Historians Group of the Communist Party of Great Britain before 1956 — Rodney Hilton, E.P. Thompson, Christopher Hill, John Saville, Victor Kiernan and Dorothy Thompson. He was the only one of the group to retain his party membership after the Soviet invasion of Hungary. This fact is of some consequence.

I read the two books that I mentioned at around the same time. This was of course a chronological coincidence. But in retrospect, it seems to me that the books represented two very different trends in history writing. One was the analysis focused on a single event or episode; the other, the grand sweep across a whole continent, based on a synthesis of the works of other scholars.

Hobsbawm's fame rests on the quartet of books in which he surveyed, with enviable lucidity, European history from 1789 to 2000. He divided his survey into four ages — those of Revolution, Capital, Empire and Extremes. This limelight has somewhat obscured the pieces of solid historical research that Hobsbawm did before he embarked on his great surveys. I believe that Hobsbawm's reputation as a historian — as distinct from a writer who made history popular — rests upon these essays that brought together archival research and analytical insight. Those surveys were possible because Hobsbawm had learnt the historian's craft through reading and interpreting documents.

There are many such essays, some of them available in the collection entitled *Labouring Men: Studies in the History of Labour* (1964). I have in mind an essay like "The Tramping Artisan" (1951), a pioneering attempt based on the available material on various trades and their unions to recreate and analyse the world of the migrant workman in the 19th century. It was a world in which craftsmen tramped across a network of "stations" stretching from Exeter to York. The tramping artisan's work and movement were governed by a set of customs and rituals. But for Hobsbawm's essay this unique set of labouring men would have been lost to history.

The same volume also includes Hobsbawm's essays on "The Standard of Living" debate which engaged many historians studying the Industrial Revolution and its impact in England. In these essays, Hobsbawm marshalled qualitative and quantitative evidence to make his argument that the standard of living of vast sections of the population in the first half of the 19th century had, in fact, declined. The articles were written in the late 1950s and Hobsbawm left the argument open with the words, "It may be that further evidence will discredit it [this argument]." The blending of qualitative and quantitative evidence was also the hallmark of Hobsbawm's *Industry and Empire*, which remains

even today the best short introduction to the Industrial Revolution in England.

Perhaps a nodal point in Hobsbawm's career as a historian was an essay he wrote in 1954 on "The General Crisis of the Seventeenth Century". In this essay, Hobsbawm drew on the histories of different parts of Europe and on books and documents in various European languages. It sparked off one of the most fertile debates in the historiography of early modern Europe in which many eminent historians participated, including, Hugh Trevor-Roper. The essay was important because it was one of the earliest instances of Hobsbawm venturing out into comparative history. In this sense, it foreshadowed the surveys that made him famous. But none of those four volumes had the sheer brilliance and analytical fecundity of the "general crisis" hypothesis.

The three books that made Hobsbawm famous even before he wrote the four-volume survey were *Primitive Rebels*, *Bandits* and *Captain Swing* (co-authored with George Rude). In these books Hobsbawm, in a pioneering manner, looked at protests of the poor and the marginalized against the emergence of capitalist forms of production in agriculture and manufacturing. These began the trend of looking at history from below which influenced many historians across the globe and generated some very fine pieces of history writing.

I have kept the four volumes till the end because they lack the analytical rigour and the depth of research that informed Hobsbawm's earlier essays and the work of his ideological peers like Hill, Hilton and the Thompsons. *The Age of Capital* contained egregious errors about India which Hobsbawm failed to correct in reprints even after they were pointed out to him. It is entirely possible that historians of Latin America also noticed similar lacunae when he referred to the histories of Latin American countries. Paradoxically, the quartet made Hobsbawm a celebrity among Left historians; yet, perhaps, it did irreparable damage to his reputation as a historian within his peer group.

But more severe harm to his integrity as an intellectual and scholar was inflicted ironically by Hobsbawm himself. This was done by the political positions he adopted and by the publication of his memoirs, *Interesting Times*. Hobsbawm became a communist when, as a teenager, he witnessed the rise of Nazism in Berlin. These convictions were strengthened in Cambridge where he took a starred first in History from King's College. He remained loyal to the party he joined, to the cause of communism and to Stalin and the Soviet Union. A large part of his memoirs is no more than an elaborate justification of these loyalties. As a historian, he refused to face the reality of the brutality and oppression of the Stalinist regime. Once, when Michael Ignatieff asked him if the killing of 20 million people in Russia under Stalin would be justified if communism had succeeded, Hobsbawm answered in the affirmative. There was more than a hint of arrogance and smugness in Hobsbawm's defence of the Soviet Union and the violence it perpetrated. The party line and loyalty to Soviet Russia could be more important to Hobsbawm than history. The historian in him surfaced on issues regarding which the party had no position.

A similar turning away from history was manifest in Hobsbawm's attitude to the British Empire. He wrote in his memoirs that the saving grace of the British Empire was that it was free from megalomania. This, about an empire whose paladins believed in the permanence of Pax Britannica, and among whom many had nothing more than contempt for the culture and civilization of India.

Hobsbawm's death sees the passing of a certain type of intellectual: a man with enviable gifts of language, intelligence and analysis who failed to overcome his own blindness about the violence that his chosen faith had perpetrated. Doubt everything — so Karl Marx said was his motto. In the exercise of his intellect, Hobsbawm failed to live up to this high standard.

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