

«The last Marxist»? In memoriam: Eric Hobsbawm, 1917-2012

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On 1 October 2012, Eric Hobsbawm, surely the best-known and most important historian active in the English-speaking world in recent times, left us at the ripe age of 95, and the world of knowledge will be the poorer. Few historians could aspire to the erudition or the range and sweep of the author of such classic works as « Industry and Empire », « The Age of Revolution », « The Age of Capital », « The New Century » or, most recently, « How to Change the World: Tales of Marx and Marxism », his final book published only last year.

A professor at Birkbeck, University of London, Hobsbawm was not only a historian and academic. He was also an intellectual in the fullest sense of the word – incarnating, indeed, his peer the late Edward Said's conception, as expounded in his « Representations of the Intellectual », of the public intellectual - as generalist (no narrow specialist he), as committed to a secular and rationalist reading of the world, and as a thorn in the flesh of orthodoxy. Eric Hobsbawm may be considered a leading public intellectual of the time between the second world war and the present, one who intervened both within his chosen field and outside it – the equal of such figures (not all of them always or necessarily on the left) as, in the Anglophone world and its hyphenated variants, Said himself, Harold Bloom, Christopher Hitchens or Salman Rushdie, or, outside that world, Carlos Fuentes, Octavio Paz, Mario Vargas Llosa, Gabriel García Márquez, José Saramago or Umberto Eco.

Hobsbawm also embodied Said's intellectual, for whom exile is the condition par excellence, by being of hybridated and deracinated status. A British citizen from the beginning, he was nonetheless born in Egypt, to parents who were both of Central European (and ultimately Russian) Jewish origins, and was brought up in Vienna and Berlin – thus with German as his first language – before his family relocated to the UK in 1933. Given this background, his Cambridge degree and doctorate and London professorship were not sufficient to constitute him as a « true Brit ». There was therefore – and not to the delectation of the more insular denizens of Britain's groves of academe – always something « foreign » about him, though this could be seen as an enrichment: historiography à la Hobsbawm, one might argue, succeeded in achieving a unique synthesis of « Anglo-Saxon » empiricism with a more « continental », totalising approach. Eric Hobsbawm was at one and the same time a « British », « European » and « world » historian, whose work encompassed the entire period from the industrial revolution to the present. Two examples from « The Age of Capital » may serve to exemplify both his ability to combine the broader picture with telling detail, and his refreshing lack of Eurocentrism: his evocation, as instance of the workings of empire, of Britain's deliberate and systematic destruction of the Indian textile industry; and his highlighting of the Taiping civil war in China (which left twenty million dead but is all but unknown in the West) as one of the major events in nineteenth-century world history. His fame extended, indeed, far beyond Britain and Europe: his major works were translated into multiple languages and he was, for instance, an invited lecturer at Mexico City's Colegio de México.

Also of course, and as all who read him knew, Eric Hobsbawm was a Marxist, and remained so till the end. A lifelong member of Britain's Communist Party, he held on fast to Marx's Enlightenment-forged principles of rational, secular inquiry - politically in the face of the collapse of the Soviet bloc, and intellectually despite the siren calls of postmodernist and relativist fashion. To stick to his guns in this way into the twenty-first century was to court

controversy, and Hobsbawm's vexed status in British intellectual and political life has – how could it not be? – been reflected in the public response to his demise.

The British press reactions, across the political spectrum, included reflective and respectful tributes in *The Guardian* and (more surprisingly) *The Times*; a rather more ambivalent obituary in *The Economist*; and a vitriolic piece in the *Daily Mail* by the novelist and critic A.N. Wilson, who, to put it bluntly, saw nothing good whatever in Hobsbawm or any of his work. *The Guardian* published both a news report and a full-length obituary. The former quoted Ed Miliband, currently leader of the Labour Party and Her Majesty's Opposition, as paying warm tribute to Hobsbawm's skills as «an extraordinary historian» - without fear, curiously, of being tarred with the brush of being «soft on Marxism» (Miliband comes from a family of left-wing intellectual traditions; earlier Labour leaders Neil Kinnock and Tony Blair are also known to be Hobsbawm admirers). The obituary, co-written by the political journalist Martin Kettle, described Hobsbawm as «arguably Britain's most respected historian of any kind, recognised if not endorsed on the right as well as the left», praising his «sweep combined with ... telling anecdote and statistical grasp» and «unrivalled powers of synthesis» and declaring that «few historians have ever commanded such a wide field in such detail or with such authority». Concerning Hobsbawm's Communist Party membership, the obituary calls him a «licensed free-thinker within the party's ranks», pointing out that, while remaining within the party, he condemned the Soviet invasion of Hungary in 1956 and that «not one of his books was ever published in the Soviet Union».

The unsigned, two-page obituary in *The Times* placed Hobsbawm's key works «among the masterpieces of historical writing», lauding his «breadth of comparison» combined with «use of concrete examples» and the appeal of his writing to specialists and the general reader alike. While locating his communism in a «hard 18th-century rationalism», it took care to dissociate his Marxism from Stalin's, and recalled that in later years his positions were identifiably «Eurocommunist». *The Economist*, a newspaper not famed for touchy-feely attitudes to Marxism, rather provocatively subtitled its – also unsigned - obituary (on the contents page, though not on the obituary page itself) 'The last Marxist', and, while stating that Hobsbawm's scholarship «deserved, and won, an audience well beyond leftist circles and academe», taxed him with «kneejerk political obsessions», «naive idealism», and, effectively, a stubborn refusal to change his views in the face of the evidence (while allowing that he distanced himself over time from Stalin).

This was, however, nothing compared to A.N. Wilson's extraordinary diatribe in the *Daily Mail*. Wilson, starting out from what he claimed to be Hobsbawm's unequivocal support for Stalin in the 1930s, appears to be one of those on the British right who believe that if anyone has ever had a good word for Marxism or the Soviet Union at any time in their life, then they are by definition an apologist for the gulag and everything they have ever said about anything is utterly worthless and deserves to be binned. Thus, he dismisses Hobsbawm's books as 'lousy' and 'badly written', and predicts that Hobsbawm 'will sink without trace' and that 'his books will not be read in the future'.

Such a vituperative attack on a respected intellectual cannot simply be passed over. The detail of Hobsbawm's attitude to Stalinism and its evolution over time is something to be argued over by experts on his work from both sides, though it may be noted that Wilson's worst strictures apply to a time before Hobsbawm had written his major works. It may be affirmed in Hobsbawm's defence that it is no defect in a public intellectual to refuse to change one's mind, certainly not on things one believes in passionately. Intellectuals, after all, are in a stronger position than most when it comes to explaining, justifying and documenting their

standpoints. Hobsbawm did not budge on Marxism – and nor did Saramago, another lifelong member of his country's communist party. Nor did Said on Palestine; nor did Hitchens on religion. Nor has Bloom on the literary canon; nor has Rushdie on freedom of speech. Hobsbawm's fidelity to Marxism, of which his final book is an eloquent distillation, may be set against the rejection of that same doctrine in their later careers by Paz or Vargas Llosa, but debate is of the essence of intellectual life, and whether one agrees with Hobsbawm or not his carefully substantiated arguments merit careful examination. Meanwhile, Wilson's egregious piece of character assassination may serve as a salutary reminder of a fact all too well known to the likes of Said or Rushdie, namely that to be a public intellectual inevitably means courting unpopularity in some quarters: if you have deep convictions and express them forthrightly, not everyone is going to like you and - to quote Bob Dylan from 1965 - « you're gonna have to get used to it ».

Of the figures beside whom I have set Hobsbawm, only Vargas Llosa, García Márquez, Eco, Bloom and (despite some people's best efforts) Rushdie are still with us, and it is difficult to see whose voice can replace, on the issues they knew and cared most about, Said or Hitchens, both prematurely snatched away by illness. Hobsbawm believed, and passionately reaffirmed in his valedictory book, that Marxism is still valid today as a tool for the rational understanding of the world (he also argued in that book that the latest financial crisis has strengthened, not weakened that position). Time will prove him right or wrong, but meanwhile it is hard to imagine who among living historians could now debate Marxism so informedly, or offer a global analysis of modern times and be able to draw on the wealth of specialist knowledge combined with breadth of perspective that was Eric Hobsbawm's. In our confused and unpredictable times, his was a voice that will be sorely missed.

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My own review of « How to Change the World », shortly to be published in a Spanish journal, is at:

<http://yatrarollason.info/files/Hobsbawm.pdf>