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## Eric Hobsbawm, Marxism and social history

Eric Hobsbawm's death last year robbed us of the last of that generation of Marxist scholars who did so much to transform the writing of history in the 1950s and 1960s – and in Hobsbawm's case into the first decade of this century. There have been many tributes.<sup>1</sup> The purpose of this essay is not to survey the full breadth of his contribution which, in terms of period, geography and scope, was characteristically more far-ranging than that of Hill, Thompson, Saville, Hilton or even Kiernan. It is to focus on just one central, though perplexing, aspect. This is Hobsbawm's understanding of Marx and Marxism and its relevance to his approach to social history.

This is central in the sense that it remains directly relevant to debates on the nature of social history: how far 'social history' should be conceived holistically, the unfolding development of human society as a whole, or how far such grand narratives conceal and overlay its real substance. Within this debate Marxism, now and in the past, has been particularly in contention: its narratives are generally viewed as privileging just one concept, that of class and class struggle. And of all the Marxists of the immediate post-war generation, far more than Thompson, Hill or Kiernan who moved to more culturalist positions, most historians would associate this approach with Eric Hobsbawm.

However, this focus is at the same time problematic and indeed perplexing, for Hobsbawm's method of writing history was in reality far more complex, contradictory and unpredictable. To borrow a phrase from Geoff Eley, his work as a Marxist historian followed 'a crooked line': not in terms of any historical criminality, though he may have been guilty of some, but in the heroic sense of Brecht's observation that, wherever there

<sup>1</sup>Roy Foster in *Past and Present*, 218, 1 (2013), 3–13, has provided probably the fullest academic assessment of Hobsbawm's impact on the writing of history. Simon Schama, *Financial Times*, 2 October 2012, argued that Hobsbawm's achievement was to have 'uncoupled Marxism from Communism' and liberated socialist humanism from 'the mechanical certainties of class doctrine'. A. N.

Wilson in the *Daily Mail*, 2 October 2012, presented Hobsbawm as an apologist for Stalin. My earlier review in *Labour History*, LXXVIII, 3 (2013), 364–71 attempted to demonstrate the substantive robustness of Hobsbawm's historical analysis rather than, as here, to give a more critical assessment of his approaches to history.

are obstacles, a crooked line is the shortest route – except in Hobsbawm’s case it may not always have been the shortest.<sup>2</sup> Contradictions abound.

#### A MARXIST OF HIS AGE

Take his Marxism. He was the most ‘theoretical’ member of the Communist Party’s Historians’ Group. He was on the Editorial Commission of the Moscow-based publication of Marx and Engels’s *Collected Works* and on the editorial board of *Marxism Today* from 1979. He helped initiate the first English publication of Gramsci’s prison notebooks in 1957 and in 1964 those sections of the *Grundrisse* dealing with pre-capitalist economic formations.<sup>3</sup> One of his very first academic interventions, to the *Economic History Review* in 1952, could be read as an attempt to propose a dialectical materialist methodology for the study of working-class mobilization, one that prioritized, over long time periods, the identification of qualitative ‘leaps’, the transformation from quantitative to qualitative change and subsequent reversion to slow quantitative accommodation.<sup>4</sup> One of his last interventions, his Introduction to the 1998 edition of the *Communist Manifesto*, combines, in sparkling prose, unparalleled textual knowledge with a sweep of historical application that spans three centuries, a veritable summing up, as Lenin defined Marxism, of the experience of the working class in its struggle for socialism.<sup>5</sup>

Yet. In some ways Hobsbawm was not a Marxist or at least sought to modernize Marx in ways that a number of his contemporaries saw as compromising its central core – a deviation rather than the shortest route. In his contribution to the early 1960s debate on the transition from feudalism to capitalism he privileged trade and market forces as the key solvent – a position taken by Max Weber, Henri Pirenne and at the time by Paul Sweezy. He was quickly reminded by Maurice Dobb and Rodney Hilton that, in their opinion, Marx saw the transition politically, in state power terms, as driven by the emergence of a stratum of labour-employing larger peasants and cloth manufacturers, by a nascent capitalist class.<sup>6</sup> In the 1950s Hobsbawm had already taken a somewhat similar dissident perspective into his analysis of the seventeenth-century crisis. Here he privileged the conquest of the Atlantic market, the slave trade, population growth, regional economic interaction and the development of capitalist production techniques for colonial commodities.<sup>7</sup> It was this, rather than any political changes – for he hardly

<sup>2</sup>Geoff Eley, *A Crooked Line: From Cultural History to the History of Society* (Michigan, 2005), 2.

<sup>3</sup>Antonio Gramsci, *The Modern Prince and other Essays*, ed. and trans. Louis Marks (London, 1957); Karl Marx, *Pre-Capitalist Economic Formations*, Introduction by Eric Hobsbawm (London, 1964), 9–66. Gregory Elliot, *Hobsbawm: History and Politics* (London, 2010), 65–6, notes Hobsbawm’s role in introducing Gramsci to Britain and his early links with the Communist Party of Italy through Piero Sraffa. I have relied significantly on Elliot’s excellent monograph.

<sup>4</sup>Eric Hobsbawm, ‘Economic fluctuations and social movements since 1800’, *Economic History Review*, v, 1 (1952), 1–25.

<sup>5</sup>Frederick Engels and Karl Marx, *The Communist Manifesto: A Modern Edition*, Introduction by Eric Hobsbawm (London, 1998).

<sup>6</sup>E. Hobsbawm, *Marxism Today*, August 1962; M. Dobb, *Marxism Today*, September 1962, reprinted in *The Transition from Feudalism to Capitalism*, Introduction by R. Hilton (London, 1976), 159–69.

<sup>7</sup>E. Hobsbawm, ‘The general crisis of the European economy in the seventeenth

discusses these – which explained England’s ability to resist the forces of agrarian reaction that swept through almost all other parts of Europe. In doing so, Hobsbawm took a step that was to characterize much of his subsequent work. He drew extensively, and for the 1950s in Britain in a highly innovative way, on the work of the French *Annales* school.<sup>8</sup> The preoccupations, and indeed language, of Fernand Braudel echo through much of Hobsbawm’s subsequent work, particularly his four volumes of world history stretching from the late eighteenth century to the Cold War. Yet the *Annales* school was, if not precisely anti-Marxist, seen as providing philosophical and methodological positions that fairly consciously offered an alternative to those of post-war French Marxism (and was heavily funded as such by the Rockefeller Foundation).<sup>9</sup> The ultimate inspiration of Georges Lefevre and his followers was Durkheimian: structuralist *mentalités* of *la longue durée* divined by the close examination of custom and tradition – and sustained in the 1950s and 1960s by the new methodologies of demography and area studies.

Hobsbawm was no less eclectic in his use of Marx’s economics. In the *Age of Revolution* (1962) Hobsbawm is combatively orthodox. He explains the deepening crises that punctuated the earlier nineteenth century in terms of Marx’s tendency for the rate of profit to decline, an analysis predicated on the labour theory of value.<sup>10</sup> Yet this is not so in the *Age of Capital* (1984) or, more noticeably, as Simon Bromley has pointed out, in the *Age of Extremes*.<sup>11</sup> Here crisis is explained not so much in terms of any inherent contradictions within capitalism as politically in terms of great power contests or technologically in terms of cycles of innovation.<sup>12</sup> By then Hobsbawm was identifying with what he described as a Schumpeterian Marxism.

An equal dissonance can be found in Hobsbawm’s approach to issues of nationality and nationalism, a topic in which he had an abiding interest and on which he published a great deal. At first sight, Hobsbawm’s deep suspicion of any prioritizing of nationality in politics – an example would be his 1977 denunciation of Tom Nairn’s *Break-Up of Britain* – might be seen in terms of a wish to prioritize the politics of class.<sup>13</sup> Experiencing at first hand the rise of Nazism and politically maturing in the 1930s, a gravitation towards the sceptical positions of Rosa Luxemburg (and possibly even the early writings of Stalin) might seem natural enough.

century’, *Past and Present*, 5, 1 (1954), 33–53 and 6, 1 (1954), 44–65.

<sup>8</sup>Christopher Hill, R. H. Hilton and E. J. Hobsbawm, ‘Past and Present’, *Past and Present*, 100 (1982), 3–14, note the early links with the *Annales* school from the 1950 International Historical Congress in Paris; see also his Preface to *On History* (London, 1998), xi, where Hobsbawm talks about the ‘convergence’ of *Past and Present* and *Annales* approaches.

<sup>9</sup>Emmanuelle Loyer, ‘Transatlantic conversations: “Americanization”, modernization and cultural transfers’, *Comparativ. Zeitschrift für Globalgeschichte und vergleichende*, 16 (2006), Heft 4, 219–28; B. Mazon, *Aux origines de l’École des hautes études en sciences sociales: Le rôle du mécénat américain*, Preface by Pierre Bourdieu

(Paris, 1988). Between them the Rockefeller and Ford Foundations provided the bulk of the funds for Lucien Lefebvre’s Ecole des Hautes Etudes.

<sup>10</sup>E. Hobsbawm, *Age of Revolution, 1789–1848* (London, 1962).

<sup>11</sup>Simon Bromley, ‘The long twentieth century’, *Radical Philosophy*, LXXVII (1996), 38–41.

<sup>12</sup>E. Hobsbawm, *Age of Extremes: The Short Twentieth Century 1914–1991* (London, 1994), 8, where Hobsbawm’s overview invokes ‘long waves’ as an explanatory principle.

<sup>13</sup>E. Hobsbawm, ‘Some reflections on “The Break-Up of Britain”’, *New Left Review*, cv (September–October 1977).

Yet this was not the stance of the Popular Front as defined by Dimitrov or that of Lenin – or, for that matter, of Marx himself. All three saw nationality and national identity as profoundly modulated by class forces, as itself an arena of struggle, of a contest between progressive and reactionary trends at each stage of social development – so that, in Marx's words, in order to acquire political supremacy the working class had to 'constitute itself *the* nation, it is, so far, itself national, though not in the bourgeois sense of the word'.<sup>14</sup> Certainly, in his later and more comprehensive writings on the subject, Hobsbawm explicitly endorses the position of Ernst Gellner which, in traditional Weberian terms, saw national identities emerge as ideological constructs, specific to, and serving the needs of, capitalist market rationality.<sup>15</sup> By this stage, despite his earlier promotion of the *Grundrisse*, Hobsbawm seems to have had limited sympathy for dialectical method. His nations remain largely one-dimensional in class terms – a source of ideological contamination and not much more.

We will return to the issue of Hobsbawm and dialectics in our concluding attempt to assess his contribution to history writing and social history. But, before doing so, it is important to turn to another key facet of his work as a Marxist historian: his political engagement with the present and his use of history to do so.

#### HISTORY AS POLITICS

Of all the historians of his generation Hobsbawm was the most political and the most engaged – even more so than Thompson. When most of his comrades in the Historians' Group left the party in 1956–8, he remained with it until it split and his section dissolved itself in 1990–1. Like his close friend Victor Kiernan, Hobsbawm worked politically within Comintern-linked organizations in the 1930s – in Hobsbawm's case in association with James Klugmann – and remained a defender of the politics of the Popular Front until his death.<sup>16</sup> In his later years, when challenged on radio and television, he steadfastly refused any apology. He would, on the contrary, take the offensive – as he did in the famous Oxford Union debate in 1965 when his opposition to Britain's intervention in Vietnam was stated in terms that it would be on the 'wrong side'. Until very shortly before his death he used his position as a public intellectual, and his consummate grasp of historical detail, to provide assessments of current events, magisterial and unfailingly eloquent, that sustained the continuing relevance of Marx and Marxism. His voice, instantly recognizable though strangely archaic, still resonates.

<sup>14</sup>Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *The Manifesto of the Communist Party, Collected Works*, vol. 6 (Moscow, 1976), 502–3. Lenin stressed the importance of understanding the class inflection of every national culture in *Critical Remarks on the National Question* in his *Collected Works*, vol. 20 (Moscow, 1972), 17–51, while Dimitrov, in the founding text for the Popular Front, to which Hobsbawm always paid allegiance, stressed the importance of identifying the progressive and democratic

trends. See Georgi Dimitrov, *The Fascist Offensive and the Tasks of the Communist International* in his *Selected Works* (Sofia, 1972), 11, 7–88.

<sup>15</sup>E. Hobsbawm, *Nations and Nationalism since 1780: Programme, Myth and Reality* (Cambridge, 1992), 10.

<sup>16</sup>Hobsbawm covers some of this activity in his tribute to Victor Kiernan in Prakash Karat (ed.), *Across Time and Continents: A Tribute to Victor Kiernan* (Delhi, 2003), 7–13.

And yet. His most fateful political intervention, and one which can be said to have played at least some part in changing the course of British politics, was one that many would say was not progressive. His analysis of 'Thatcherism' and of a claimed crisis in the British trade union movement helped create the ideological context for the emergence of New Labour. This intervention was no temporary aberration – even though it may have started with a few apparently off-the-cuff remarks in a lecture to a small audience in the Marx Memorial Library in 1978. It was an intervention that was collective – in so far as it involved a group of like-minded intellectuals – and also sustained, continuing for a dozen years.

It also involved changing history – or at least the history that Hobsbawm himself had already written. His first book, *Labour's Turning Point*, an edited collection of documents published in 1948, was framed within an explicitly Leninist perspective.<sup>17</sup> It sought to illustrate the practices and assumptions of the Lib–Lab leaders of the trade union movement prior to 1889, labour aristocrats as previously described by Marx and Engels, and then to make the contrast with those of General Unionism and its (at least temporarily) socialist leadership, a transformation that led to the formation of a separate Labour Party constitutionally based within the trade union movement. The identification of this turning point was not itself new. It was part of the common sense of the Labour Party as documented by the Webbs and further theorized by G. D. H. Cole. But Hobsbawm set it in a definitively new context, one that linked the labour aristocracy to Britain's monopoly of world markets in the mid-nineteenth century and, critically in the twentieth century, its transformation into the dominant right-wing trend within the Labour Party itself. This, he argued, in Leninist terms, was a product of Britain's new imperialism, fed by capital export and the contest for new territories. And the most sustained of Hobsbawm's academic interventions, one initiated by his paper in John Saville's *Democracy and the Labour Movement* in 1954, was his attempt to validate this analysis by statistical documentation.<sup>18</sup>

But no longer in the 1980s. In this new phase of political polemic, Hobsbawm found it to be an intellectual offspring he did not wish to acknowledge. He wrote in 1983–4: 'Even though it [the labour aristocracy] is no longer, or ought not to be, important, it raises the question whether historians have not been discussing a question of working-class stratification in the nineteenth century in terms invented by outsiders for quite unhistorical purposes.'<sup>19</sup> Marx and Engels were now 'outsiders' with unhistorical purposes.

This volte-face was in the context of a total reconfiguring of nineteenth-century history. The work of revision was mainly undertaken by others – Eugenio Biagini, Gareth Stedman Jones and Alastair Reid, to name a few – but Hobsbawm also added a distinctive element.<sup>20</sup> The new interpretation, now so well known it scarcely needs

<sup>17</sup>E. Hobsbawm, *Labour's Turning Point: The Nineteenth Century, 1808–1900*, ed. Dona Torr (London, 1948).

<sup>18</sup>E. Hobsbawm, 'The labour aristocracy in nineteenth-century Britain' in John Saville, *Democracy and the Labour Movement in Britain* (London, 1954).

<sup>19</sup>E. Hobsbawm, 'The aristocracy of labour reconsidered', *Worlds of Labour* (London, 1984), 228.

<sup>20</sup>Eugenio Biagini, *Liberty, Retrenchment and Reform. Popular Liberalism in the Age of Gladstone, 1860–1880* (Cambridge, 1992); Gareth Stedman Jones, *Languages of Class*

description, stressed continuity. Chartism, it was argued, did not represent an upsurge of working-class struggle or consciousness. On the contrary, its discourse or *mentalité* was essentially radical and followed on from the radical anti-establishment movements of the late eighteenth century. By the third quarter of the century its objectives had been largely achieved within Gladstonian liberalism and thereby gave the Liberal Party a genuinely mass base, one that encompassed the emancipatory agenda developed over the previous century. In this context the formation of the Labour Party at the end of the nineteenth century represented a tragic mistake. It destroyed a natural majoritarian alliance uniting the subaltern classes.

As a political party, the Labour Party only ‘worked’, and this was Hobsbawm’s specific historical contribution, because it temporarily rested on a new homogeneous working-class mass culture, one which came into being in the 1890s but which was visibly decaying in the affluence of the 1950s and 1960s, a culture based on the availability of cheap consumer goods to a manual working class that by the 1890s, but not before, existed in large numbers in all urban centres.<sup>21</sup>

However, it was this rather limited social base which, according to Hobsbawm, restricted and ultimately doomed the Labour Party. Even at the best of times, its politics were too narrowly economic and instrumental, subordinated to the agenda of the trade union movement. Its grand political objectives, public ownership and the welfare state, were in reality statist, unleavened by the libertarian traditions of the old Liberal Party and increasingly experienced as such by those whom they were meant to benefit. And this, warned Hobsbawm, was the danger. As the manual working class faded away, as its culture decomposed and the trade union movement became increasingly strident and self-seeking, a political vacuum was being created that a populist Thatcherism would triumphantly fill. This was why a new popular front was required, one that unshackled the Labour Party from the trade union movement, bridged the gap with the Liberal Party and incorporated the emancipatory ‘new social movements’, feminism, ecology and the libertarian individualism of identity politics. The ‘forward march of labour’ was halted. A new political formation was needed.<sup>22</sup>

Hobsbawm’s many articles on this theme, originally printed in the Communist Party’s theoretical journal *Marxism Today*, were routinely syndicated in the *New Statesman*, *Guardian* and *Independent* and latterly also in the *Times* and the *Telegraph*.<sup>23</sup> In recounting this episode, Gregory Elliot, in his friendly and appreciative monograph on Hobsbawm, becomes harshly critical of his role in the genesis of New Labour. He sadly records ‘the consequences of Hobsbawm’s prestigious support for *Marxism Today*’s campaign against

(Cambridge, 1983); Alastair J. Reid, *Social Classes and Social Relations in Britain, 1850–1914* (London, 1991).

<sup>21</sup>Hobsbawm, *Age of Extremes*, *op. cit.*, 305–10 largely defines the emergent working class of the earlier twentieth century in terms of an emerging uniformity of cultural consumption.

<sup>22</sup>Hobsbawm wrote many articles on this subject. Some of the most central were his original 1978 article in *Marxism Today*

(September 1978), his response to the ensuing debate in M. Jacques and F. Mulhern (eds), *The Forward March of Labour Halted?* (London, 1981), 64–71 and ‘The 1970s: syndicalism without syndicalists’, *Worlds of Labour* (London, 1984), 273–81.

<sup>23</sup>H. Pimlott, ‘From “old left” to “New Labour”: Eric Hobsbawm and the rhetoric of “realistic Marxism”’, *Labour/Le Travail*, LVI (2005), 175–97.

Labourism and the Left generally – a meretricious iconoclasm which at the hands of some of its keynote writers ended up “painting Adam Smith Red”.<sup>24</sup> Hobsbawm did later distance himself from New Labour.<sup>25</sup> But still, in his autobiography *Interesting Times*, published well after New Labour had shown its true colours, he continues to congratulate himself on ‘playing a small but worthy part in saving the Labour Party from Bennism’.<sup>26</sup>

Why did Hobsbawm intervene in this way – which put him at loggerheads with so many on the Left as well as his own erstwhile comrades such as Saville and Thompson? It may be precisely because he did remain in the Communist Party and felt the responsibility of coming to terms with, and learning the lessons from, the movement’s history internationally – together with a personal loyalty to others inside the party who thought the same way. The period after 1956 saw him effectively transfer his political allegiances to the Italian Communist Party and develop a dialogue, politically as well as linguistically, with the translators of Gramsci. From the late 1960s he gave an increasingly explicit endorsement to Euro-Communism and in the 1970s published his discussions with Giorgio Napolitano, the prime architect of Italy’s Historic Compromise, as *The Italian Road to Socialism*.<sup>27</sup> It was this proposed concordat between two political parties, the Communists and Christian Democrats, rather than the traditional politics of the Popular Front – always predicated on a mobilized working class – that bears the closest resemblance to the political realignment urged by Hobsbawm and *Marxism Today* in the 1980s.

Two other factors may also have been at work. One was his increasingly semi-detached relationship with the Communist Party’s membership after 1956, as well as his fairly intense engagement with academic life, which left him – in a practical sense – out of touch with what was happening in the trade union movement and with the real people who constituted it (the 1970s were, in fact, years of fairly unprecedented politicization). The other was the cumulative effect of his methodological experimentations in the writing of history – which brings us to our concluding section.

#### HISTORY AND THE HISTORY OF SOCIETY

Hobsbawm wrote far more on ‘history’, and how it should be written, than any of his Marxist contemporaries. In the late 1940s and 1950s he seems to have been the prime strategist of the Communist Party Historians’ Group, winning allies, establishing international contacts and identifying targets for intervention.<sup>28</sup> He turned *Past and*

<sup>24</sup>The phrase attributed to Hobsbawm comes from Elliot, *Hobsbawm, op. cit.*, 84; E. Hobsbawm, *Interesting Times* (London, 2002), 263–79 contains a fairly unapologetic defence of his intervention in the defeat of what he describes as the ‘sectarian Left’.

<sup>25</sup>E. Hobsbawm, ‘The death of neo-liberalism’, *Marxism Today*, special issue (November–December 1998) and far more strongly in E. Hobsbawm, *Globalization, Democracy and Terrorism* (London, 2007).

<sup>26</sup>Hobsbawm, *Interesting Times, op. cit.*, 263–71.

<sup>27</sup>E. Hobsbawm, *The Italian Road to Socialism: An Interview by Eric Hobsbawm with Giorgio Napolitano* (London, 1977). Napolitano’s secret liaison with the US ambassador, Richard Gardner, with the objective of moving the PCI ‘to western-style social democracy’, did not begin until 1978: Richard N. Gardner, *Mission Italy: On the Front Lines of the Cold War* (Lanham, 2005), 184–5.

<sup>28</sup>E. Hobsbawm, ‘The Historians’ Group of the Communist Party’, *Rebels and their Causes: Essays in Honour of A. L. Morton*, ed. M. Cornforth (London, 1977).

*Present* into a practical proposition, was one of the three writers of its opening manifesto and somewhat later did the same for the Society for the Study of Labour History. In all this, he sought to put a Marxist approach to history at the leading edge of the discipline. He was by nature an experimenter and fascinated by whatever was new, a characteristic that made him such an exciting mentor to younger historians.

Yet it is here also that we return to the crooked line. In terms of historical method and assumptions there are indeed basic continuities. But there are also discontinuities, epistemological breaks to use the term adopted by Louis Althusser, a philosopher with whom Hobsbawm briefly flirted and then very firmly discarded.<sup>29</sup>

In terms of continuities there are perhaps three. None is trivial. First, history is a study of causes. Hobsbawm continued until his death to defend the objectivity of history, its potential knowability in the eighteenth-century Enlightenment sense. He welcomed E. H. Carr's *What is History?* in 1962 as a 'brilliant salvo against obscurantism' and in 1997 polemicized against those, including some on the Left, 'who deny that objective reality is accessible'.<sup>30</sup> Second, the study of history has a social purpose. Its role, as far as humanly possible, is to ensure that an objective understanding is made available to the men and women who make history – as set out in the initial statement for *Past and Present* in 1952.<sup>31</sup> Third, history requires, again as far as humanly possible, the study of societies as a whole and their interconnection. As he put it in 1961: 'The web of history cannot be unravelled into separate strands without destroying it.'<sup>32</sup> This probably explains his rather bad-tempered description of social history as re-invented in Britain and the United States in the 1970s as 'a shapeless container for everything from changes in human physique to symbol and ritual', a comment made in his critique of Lawrence Stone for abandoning the possibility of over-arching structures of explanation.<sup>33</sup>

What are the discontinuities? They mainly refer to the *way* in which history is written – but they are important none the less. In the 1952 Introduction to *Past and Present* there are two complementary statements that characterize its stance and objectives (often overlooked in preference to its combative sub-title: 'a journal of scientific history'). 'Each form of human society, and each individual phase therein, has its own special laws of development.' This is linked to the complementary assertion: 'Consequently we believe that fashionable attempts to explain history in terms of much simpler changes in the natural sciences (for instance, in terms of biological evolution, statistical growth curves or invariant psychological mechanisms) oversimplify and falsify it.' A little further on this is amplified to include 'totalizing' concepts imported from 'academic anthropology, sociology, psychology and economics'. The ones specified include the 'structural functionalism' and 'status systems' of sociology and the techniques of econometricians.<sup>34</sup>

The phrases 'special laws of development' for 'each form of human society' represented an implicit assertion of a Marxist methodology. If Hobsbawm did not actually draft these phrases, which is highly likely, he certainly did not dissent. Twelve

<sup>29</sup>Elliot, *Hobsbawm, op. cit.*, 58–61.

<sup>30</sup>E. Hobsbawm, 'Progress in history', *Marxism Today* (February 1962); E. Hobsbawm, *On History* (London, 1997), viii.

<sup>31</sup>'Introduction', *Past and Present*, 1 (1952), i–iv.

<sup>32</sup>E. Hobsbawm, Preface to the 1961 edition, *The Age of Revolution* (London, 1973), 12.

<sup>33</sup>E. Hobsbawm, 'The revival of narrative: some comments', *Past and Present*, 86 (1980), 5.

<sup>34</sup>'Introduction', *Past and Present*, 1 (1952), i.

years later he was instrumental in the first publication in English of selections from the *Grundrisse* on pre-capitalist social formations. His Introduction, almost as long as the *Grundrisse* translation itself, outlines his understanding of how Marx sought to analyse social development. It is probably the best piece of sustained argumentation Hobsbawm ever produced, a passionate endorsement of Marx's dialectical method. 'Marx's vision', he writes, 'is thus a marvellously unifying force. His model of social and economic development is one which (unlike Hegel's) can be applied to history to produce fruitful and original results rather than tautology ... a dialectical working out of the contradictions of labour/property, and the division of labour'.<sup>35</sup> He refers to Marx's note on *The Method of Political Economy*, the *locus classicus* for his exposition of materialist dialectics, as being as 'brilliant, profound and exciting as everything that Marx wrote in this crucial period of his thought'.<sup>36</sup>

Hobsbawm then clarifies his understanding of these dialectics. 'Economic development cannot be simplified down into "economic growth"' – nor, echoing the 1952 formulations, can it be 'discussed except in terms of particular historical epochs and particular social structures'. And, he added, it was quite wrong to think of historical materialism as 'an economic (or for that matter a sociological) interpretation of history': the 'social relations of production (i.e. social organization in its broadest sense) and the material forces of production, to whose level they correspond, cannot be divorced'.

In doing so he notes the full complexity of this relationship.<sup>37</sup> The material forces of production include human knowledge and science, constantly changing in form and application and in terms of the divisions of labour they enable. The relations of production comprise the *particular* structures of social relationship required, in all historical class-based societies, to extract a surplus. From this 'base', inherently contradictory and changing in its nature, though temporarily sealed within a particular mode of production, the superstructure of ideology arises. Hobsbawm warns against 'over-simplifying' this relationship in a mechanical fashion, not understanding its inherently dialectical character, or, on the contrary, attempting to over-compensate and seeing the superstructure as able to determine the base itself: out-running the material dialectic of the forces and relations of production and, for instance, attempting revolutions for which there is, in Marx's terms, no material basis.<sup>38</sup>

It was this commitment to Marx's dialectics that put Hobsbawm so out of sympathy with Althusser's attempt to substitute a static conceptualization of structures. Any reading of *Capital*, Hobsbawm commented, should be preceded by a study of the *Grundrisse* which shows Marx actually '*thinking*'.<sup>39</sup> The bulk of his Introduction consists of a commentary on *how* Marx himself tackled the question of modes of production – concretely, on the basis of emerging research in the 1860s and 1870s, and quite experimentally in terms of potentially different pre-capitalist modes, Asiatic, Germanic, Slavonic, as well as Feudal and Slave. He argues that Marx's attempts, though never fully

<sup>35</sup>Karl Marx, *Pre-Capitalist Economic Formations*, Introduction by Eric Hobsbawm (London, 1964), 16.

<sup>36</sup>*ibid.*, 16.

<sup>37</sup>*ibid.*, 17.

<sup>38</sup>*ibid.*, 18.

<sup>39</sup>*ibid.*

successful, show him thinking through specific laws of motion and processes of transition and change, never *a priori*, always concretely and historically.<sup>40</sup>

Sixteen years later Hobsbawm's critique of Lawrence Stone covered some of the same ground but with a different emphasis. He refers twice to a 'simple base/superstructure' explanation not being, or no longer being, enough for 'some historians'.<sup>41</sup> But he does not explain it. His very adoption of the adjective 'simple' echoes the hostile caricature of processes that can never be simple – and would appear to indicate a new defensiveness. There is no mention of dialectics at all. Three years later he wrote an article to mark the one hundredth issue of *Past and Present*, jointly with Hill and Hilton, in which the role of the methodologically structuralist *Annales* school is given a central position in the development of the journal after 1957. It had also been the *Annales* school to which Hobsbawm deferred when defending 'over-arching' schemes of explanation in his critique of Stone. These are perhaps small, subtle changes, but Hobsbawm's own practice reflects them.

His classic articles on the dynamics of working-class mobilization were written mainly in the late 1940s and 1950s. They focused on the complex interaction of employment levels, trade union tactics and political assumptions and ideology. Dates – months, days – are critical. So is the triggering effect of events in different locales. Rapid advances occur, as do rapid reversals. Each action by workers has to be considered in terms of the answering tactics of employers and the state.<sup>42</sup> This is equally the case for his joint study undertaken with George Rudé of rural unrest in the 1820s and 1830s.<sup>43</sup>

But this approach changes by the end of the 1970s and into the 1980s. Hobsbawm's consideration of the working class becomes far more framed within the culturist assumptions of the *Annales* school.<sup>44</sup> His key explanation in 'The forward march of labour halted?' is the loss of a solidaristic working-class culture that had been historically 'set' in the 1890s. His definition of the working class itself changes from the dynamic one of Marx, of all those who sell labour power by hand or brain, to the more static category of Weberian sociology, the 'manual' working class. And the explanation of change is largely framed within the sociological assumptions of embourgeoisement and instrumentalism.<sup>45</sup>

Yet, of all periods, the 1970s demand a dialectical approach in the full Marxist sense. It was a decade of extremely rapid change.<sup>46</sup> Measured in terms of the number of political strikes, the density of solidarity actions and joint activity with local communities on rents, housing and services, the decade had no equal. Governmental and employer tactics clashed and changed year by year. Unionization increased at a rate only previously experienced during the First World War – and in doing so changed the movement's

<sup>40</sup>*ibid.*, 61.

<sup>41</sup>Hobsbawm, 'Revival of narrative', *op. cit.*, 6.

<sup>42</sup>Most are collected in Hobsbawm's *Labouring Men* (London, 1964), including 'British gas-workers 1873–1914', 155–78; 'General labour unions', 179–203; and 'National unions on the waterside', 204–30.

<sup>43</sup>E. Hobsbawm and G. Rudé, *Captain Swing* (London, 1969).

<sup>44</sup>Hobsbawm, *Age of Extremes*, *op. cit.*, 305–10.

<sup>45</sup>E. Hobsbawm, 'The forward march of labour halted?', *Marxism Today*, (September 1978).

<sup>46</sup>J. McIlroy and A. Campbell, 'The high tide of trade unionism: mapping industrial politics' in *The High Tide of British Trade Unionism: Trade Unions and Industrial Politics 1964–79* (Ashgate, 1999), 93–132 well illustrates the speed of change.

balance and character. To a degree not seen before, it was feminized and encompassed white-collar and salaried sectors. Grunwick, its fitting symbol, was a dispute mainly of women workers, mostly from the Indian sub-continent, backed by the solidarity action by workers from surrounding factories *and* public services.<sup>47</sup> It was also, more menacingly, a lock-out financed and sustained for political purposes by those aligned to the Thatcherite faction in the Conservative Party.

Hobsbawm presents the new militancy of the 1970s as essentially sectional and economistic: syndicalism without syndicalists. In doing so, his narrative directly complemented the media framing of the (largely imaginary) 'Winter of Discontent' as an existential crisis of British society, a crisis then used, as Colin Hay has pointed out, to justify the most intense and concerted attack on the working-class movement in eighty years.<sup>48</sup>

‘HUMAN KNOWLEDGE IS NOT (OR DOES NOT FOLLOW) A STRAIGHT LINE  
BUT A CURVE’

A conclusion, particularly a judgemental one, would be out of place. Hobsbawm lived far too long on the frontline of history, an inherently political subject, to have traced anything but a crooked line. He had to circumnavigate more obstacles than any of his Marxist contemporaries. In his youth he had to abandon his comrades in Germany battling the most inhuman variety of fascism. In middle age he had to come to terms with the Twentieth Congress of the CPSU in 1956, the loss of his Historians' Group colleagues and the ending of *Past and Present* as a (relatively) coherent Marxist project. In the 1970s and 1980s he had to face a full-scale ideological counter-attack against Marxism and the splintering of that concept of the history of society to which he had devoted his intellectual life. In old age he faced the dismantling of the Soviet Union and the dissolution of that section of the British Communist Party of which, to that point, he had loyally remained a member.

Yet still, at the very end of the twentieth century, he could write an Introduction to the *Communist Manifesto* validating its continuing relevance, even if with more than a touch of pessimism about immediate prospects, that fully engaged with contemporary scholarship across a raft of disciplines. Rather than a crooked line, we might look to Lenin's comment on dialectics: that 'human knowledge is not (or does not follow) a straight line but a curve ... a spiral' – and, in the contemporary turn of that spiral, ask what the key elements are that might be taken forward from Hobsbawm's work.<sup>49</sup>

Hobsbawm himself made it clear what he valued most. First, history had a purpose. It was to inform those who made history – as envisaged with *Past and Present* in 1952:

<sup>47</sup>J. Dromey and G. Taylor, *Grunwick: The Workers' Story* (London, 1978); Ruth Pearson, Sundari Anitha and Linda McDowell, 'Striking issues: from labour process to industrial dispute at Grunwick and Gate Gourmet', *Industrial Relations Journal*, XLI, 5 (September 2010), 408–28.

<sup>48</sup>Colin Hay, 'Narrating crisis: the discursive construction of the 'Winter of Discontent'', *Sociology*, XXX, 2 (May 1996), 253–77.

<sup>49</sup>V. I. Lenin, 'On the question of dialectics' (1915) in his *Collected Works*, vol. 38 (Moscow, 1967), 361.

'about changing as well as interpreting the world'.<sup>50</sup> Second, as stated in 1952 and closely linked, history should be scientific – not in the sense of any spurious claim of the special objectivity for those using a Marxist methodology, but in terms of the need for scrupulous honesty in assessing evidence and a continual and necessarily experimental search for most effective techniques by which to analyse it. Because, if history was to be used, and lessons drawn, then its practice also carried with it a heavy responsibility to get these judgements right – even if it meant giving, as Hobsbawm did to the end, somewhat unpopular and pessimistic assessments. For historians today, obliged to write principally for the approbation of other historians in an ever more academicized discipline, this might seem a utopian echo from a distant and easier past – until the perils faced by Hobsbawm and his fellow Marxists as academics in Britain and the United States in 1952 are remembered.

Not all of Hobsbawm's experiments were successful. Some may indeed, as we have argued, have taken him in an unhelpful direction. But he always adhered to the wholeness of history. He warned in 1974 about 'excluding' methodologies. History could not be restricted to what could be measured or to sub-sets of social experience. Societies, 'or rather particular societies', had to be studied as a whole: 'classes are relationships *between* classes or strata'.<sup>51</sup> His own most successful work was probably in the 1950s and 1960s when he adhered to the principles set out in his Introduction to the *Grundrisse*: studies of precise, focused and almost momentary interactions between people and governments, employers and workers. But still in 1998 Hobsbawm gave no quarter to those who dismissed the continuing relevance of class and class exploitation. The *Communist Manifesto*, he wrote, had recognized 'even at the outset of the triumphal march of capitalism, that this mode of production was not permanent, stable, "the end of history", but a temporary phase in the history of humanity – one due, like its predecessors, to be superseded by another kind of society (unless – the *Manifesto's* phrase has not been much noted – it founders "in the common ruin of the contending classes")'.<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>50</sup>E. Hobsbawm, 'Labour history and ideology' (originally published in 1974), *Worlds of Labour* (London, 1984), 13.

<sup>51</sup>*ibid.*, 12.

<sup>52</sup>Frederick Engels and Karl Marx, *The Communist Manifesto: A Modern Edition*, Introduction by Eric Hobsbawm (London, 1998).

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