

Eric Hobsbawm, 2011. *How to Change the World: Tales of Marx and Marxism*. London: Little, Brown*

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Review of *How to Change the World: Tales of Marx and Marxism* (2011), a collection of essays by Britain's veteran Marxist historian, Eric Hobsbawm, tracing the history of Marxism as a belief-system and arguing for its continued relevance in the light of the current crisis of global capitalism.

The city of Trier, in Germany just over the border from Luxembourg, once seat of an archbishopric and later part of Prussia and subsequently, the former West Germany, enjoys the curious distinction of still boasting a Karl-Marx-Strasse, thanks to the circumstance that the founder of Marxism was born there in 1818. The same city is also the former capital of the Western Roman Empire and imperial seat of Constantine, the first Roman emperor to convert to Christianity. The stones of Trier serve as a reminder of the life and death of belief-systems, and interrogate the thoughtful visitor as to whether the once seemingly impregnable system of Marxism has any more life left in it today than the old pagan religion.

Certainly, eleven years into the twenty-first century, it might seem difficult to imagine a less fashionable theme to consecrate a long and appreciative volume to than Marxism. However, if anyone can get away with it, it has to be Eric Hobsbawm, who, publishing this book at the ripe age of 93, occupies the unassailable position of the English-speaking world's foremost Marxist historian, and, having unreconstructedly stuck to his Marxist guns in the years since the fall of the Soviet Union, has the necessary credentials and weight to offer the world a study of this nature.

Hobsbawm, the product of hybridated identities (born in Alexandria of Jewish-Germanic origins, long since resident in Britain) and author of such essential historical works as *The Age of Revolution*, *The Age of Capital* and *Industry and Empire*, now presents what he calls "a set of studies in the history of Marxism" (399) – sixteen chapters

encompassing multiple aspects of the thought of Karl Marx, Frederick Engels and their Italian successor Antonio Gramsci, and of the history of Marxism as an intellectual and political movement and its changing fortunes up to the present. Most of the texts have been published before, though not necessarily in English, but Hobsbawm has carried out a systematic revising and updating exercise on his pre-existing material, with a care and skill that allows the whole thing to be read as a logical sequence.

The previously published material takes various forms. Some pieces appeared in the first place as introductions to works by Marx (the *Grundrisse*), Engels (*The Condition of the Working Class in England*) or both (*The Communist Manifesto*). The two chapters on Gramsci reprise earlier introductory material, in the case of the second originally in Italian. Three chapters on the reception of Marxism were originally published in Italian as part of a multi-author historical conspectus of Marxism; a further three chapters are excerpted from a book published by Hobsbawm in Britain in 1982, *The History of Marxism*. The first and penultimate chapters are largely new; the closing chapter, “Marx and the Labour Movement: the Long Century”, is based on a lecture given in German in Linz, Austria, in 2000. Even if we are dealing essentially with material that is not new to print as such, the author’s updating effort has visibly been far more than perfunctory: in recycling these writings, he has been fully aware of the need to make them pertinent to the second decade of the present century. None of the material that started life in Italian or German has been published before in English, and here Hobsbawm shows a commendable desire to make as much as possible of his writing available to a wider public, and, implicitly, an even more laudable absence of the Anglocentric parochialism that too often characterises British intellectuals (it helps, of course, that he is not British by origin).

Along the way, Hobsbawm as a historian displays his by now familiar impeccable analytic and expository skills and in-depth knowledge of his subject-matter. The book contains, notably in the chapters on the *Manifesto* and “the fortunes of Marx’s and Engels’ writings”, invaluable information on the textual and publication history, translation and international reception of some of the major

works in the Marx/Engels canon, *Capital* included. It should be added that the only Marxist philosopher apart from Marx and Engels themselves singled out for detailed discussion is Gramsci (apparently for his indeed useful concept of hegemony) – there is no close analysis of, say, Georg Lukács, Walter Benjamin, Herbert Marcuse or (to cite a British name) Raymond Williams. Nonetheless, here as in a book like *The Age of Capital*, Hobsbawm signally eschews the trap of Eurocentrism, treating world history as an interrelated totality and giving Asian and Latin American Marxism, in particular, their due. Considering all that is there, as a general research aid this book should rapidly earn its spurs: of the author’s scholarship there is not the slightest doubt.

It is worth stressing that the book’s material is organised as a coherent, chronological *narrative*, its sequence corresponding in broad terms to the time-frame of the subjects discussed. Thus, it validates Marxism in terms of narrative form as well as of content. Here, one might conclude that Hobsbawm is throwing down the gauntlet to the postmodernists. It is not always sufficiently noted that the celebrated critique of “grand narratives” (the English term being, incidentally, a portentous and somewhat dubious translation of the French “grands récits”) launched by postmodernism’s high priest Jean-François Lyotard in his manifesto of 1979, *La condition postmoderne*, is aimed not only at classical liberalism but also at Marxism, devaluing not only the Enlightenment notion of progress but also its Marxist successor: in other words, the replacement of Marxism by postmodernism as ruling discourse on the Western left is a phenomenon not of continuity but of rupture.

Hobsbawm’s book takes its title from the celebrated aphorism from Marx’s “Theses on Feuerbach”, “The philosophers have only interpreted the world (...): the point is to change it”. The author thus affirms Marxism as, even for our days, more than a philosophy – as a recipe for political and social change, of continued validity and relevance. At the same time, he admits that Marxism as a belief-system no longer exerts the intellectual fascination that it did until two decades ago; as he puts it in the chapter “The Influence of Marxism 1954-83”, as the world entered the 1980s “few observers predicted the speed and scale of the reversal”, adding self-deprecatingly,

“Certainly I did not”. He closes that chapter with the observation: “The twenty-five years following the centenary of Marx’s death were to be the darkest years in the history of his heritage” (384).

Darkness or no darkness, our historian remains a Marxist, with not the slightest hint of conversion to postmodernism, deconstruction, multiculturalism, cultural relativism, postcolonialism, or any other of the discourses that have to a large extent replaced Marxism on today’s Western left. Nor has he become any kind of cyberprophet or acolyte of the new technologies. What needs to be gleaned, then, from the pages of this book is what Eric Hobsbawm believes Marxism is, and what characteristics he finds in it as a belief-system that continue to convince him, flying in the face of fashion, to offer it as a remedy for our times.

Among the components of Marxian or later Marxist theory, those which might appear striking for our day as elements for debate – whether to be accepted, revised or refuted – include the labour theory of value, the alienation/reification/fetishisation triad and the related concept of false consciousness, the mastery of nature, the contradiction between the forces and relations of production, capitalism as a system prone to periodic crisis, the classless society as ultimate goal, and the project of universal emancipation (with, for classical Marxism, the proletariat as standard-bearer). Especially controversial today might prove the notion of a historically static “Asiatic mode of production”, less oriented to development and transformation than Western modes, and the prediction, as made notably by the Belgian Marxist Ernest Mandel a few decades back, of the inevitable absolute immiseration of the peoples of what was then known as the “third world”.

It is further important to recall that these specifically Marxist concepts are underpinned by a number of epistemological assumptions which Marxism shares with the liberal world-view of the Enlightenment – some of which, however self-evident they might have appeared thirty years ago, may now look quaint to those reared on postmodernism. These include the belief in reason and the rationalist preference for the secular over the religious, the concept (even if qualified) of progress and the validity of a teleological perspective, the

assumption that a coherent and all-embracing narrative of history is possible and makes sense, the elevation of totality over fragmentation, and, perhaps above all, the notion of *universals* - of universal human nature, human potential and, ultimately, human liberation.

Such, I would argue, are the traits of Marxism as a belief-system that implicitly emerge from Hobsbawm's book. Only in passing does he specifically allude to Marxism's postmodern detractors, as in stray references to "extreme forms of postmodernist relativism" (392) or "the imagined communities of ethnic, religious, gender, lifestyle and other collective identities" (417). However, what might be called an X-ray picture of Marxism can be deduced from his pages.

Thus, Hobsbawm speaks approvingly of the Enlightenment-derived Marxian concept of progress, "the belief in human history as progress towards what must eventually be the best possible society", within an intellectual framework in which "reason provided the basis of all human action and the formation of society" (20). He clearly believes in a positive mutation from Enlightenment values into Marxism, seeing both as manifestations of a secular world-view and arguing for a "continuity with the pre-Marxist tradition of rationalism and progress" (296). In this philosophical framework, he affirms, "for Marx progress is something objectively definable, and at the same time pointing to what is desirable", namely the "triumph of the free development" of all, a concept underpinned for Marxists by the "assumed correctness" of historical-materialist analysis (130). At the same time, if progress is to mean anything one also has to admit the possibility of its converse, namely regression. Here, Hobsbawm repeats the stark message of twentieth-century Marxism that the choice is between "socialism and barbarity" (121), as well as more generally evoking "historical decay and regression" as a legitimate issue (145).

Further, Hobsbawm conceives Marxism as a form of depth reading, and therefore as antagonistic to empiricism and empowered by its hermeneutic nature to refute more surface-oriented readings as erroneous: "The fact that analytically it penetrated deeper than the superficial phenomena accessible to empirical criticism implied an analysis of the 'false consciousness' which stood in the way, and the

(historical) reasons for it” (44). Here there is surely a conflict, perhaps irresolvable, with postmodernism and its multiple surfaces and colliding subjectivities. Hobsbawm also considers Marxism to be a system grounded in a conception of *totality*, “a comprehensive, all-embracing and illuminating view of the world” (381). It follows that he believes that universals exist, the dictatorship of the proletariat as conceived by classical Marxism thus being not an end in itself but a staging-post on the way to the full “emancipation of humanity” that will be achieved “through the historically inevitable rise and triumph of the proletariat” (361). For Hobsbawm, then, Marxism conceives the proletariat not as a vector of sectional group rights, but as a metonym for a humanity envisioned (in however utopian a fashion) as a *whole*.

Hobsbawm is aware enough that Marxism is currently beleaguered (as, it might be added, is, the parallel edifice of another rationalist, secular, anti-empiricist and hermeneutic world-view, namely Freudianism). He remains convinced that Marxism’s totalising vocation is far more intellectually credible than the kaleidoscope of fractured subjectivities that have taken its place; and at his age, if he believes he has better things to do than read up on postmodernist thought (Lyotard is conspicuously absent from the book’s index), any such decision should surely, even more so given his intellectual eminence and record of hard work, be respected even by the most passionately intense detractors of anything remotely resembling a coherent narrative.

It may reasonably be suggested that if Marxism is to return in our day as an intellectual and political force, it will necessarily have to adapt itself to a number of phenomena which have arisen on the world agenda since its eclipse. These include: the environmental challenge (here Walter Benjamin offers a lead, with his proposal of replacing the “mastery of nature” by the mastery of relations *between* humanity and nature); the rise of the so-called “emerging economies”, above all China and India, which adumbrates a coming multi-centred world economy with the US no longer in pole position, thus burying Marxian and post-Marxian notions of either an immobilist “Asiatic mode of production” or inevitable non-Western immiseration; and the growth of information and communications technology (another phenomenon anticipated by Benjamin), which has created a

networked world that, capitalist though it may be, makes Soviet-style isolationism all but impossible and has given rise to paradoxes like that obtaining between a hyper-wired South Korea and an all but IT-dead (and ten times less prosperous) North Korea. Indeed, one of the harshest challenges today to anyone still calling themselves a Marxist may be to ask whether, in whatever circumstances, the old Soviet Union could have invented the Internet (which, despite its Pentagon origins, none will deny escaped the grip of the Western state apparatus with remarkable speed ...)

The question, then, is whether the Marxist world-view, with its currently ill-regarded baggage of scientific rationalism and attachment to a much-derided logic of coherent narration, has anything to offer to the twenty-first century. Certainly, Hobsbawm offers a compelling accumulation of historical evidence for the validity of Marxist perspectives. His defence, at the beginning and end of his book, of Marxism's relevance to our time, however, relies primarily on economics, foregrounding how the current economic and financial crisis bears out Marx's analysis of the internal contradictions of capitalism – “endless bouts of tensions and temporary resolutions, growth leading to crisis and change, all producing economic concentration in an increasingly globalised society” (14) – or, again, “a built-in mechanism that generates potentially system-changing periodic crises” (418). It is on this basis that Hobsbawm affirms that anyone confronting “the problems facing the world in the twenty-first century ... must ask Marx's questions” (15), and that he concludes the book by reiterating that “capitalism is not the answer, but the question” (417) and that “once again the time has come to take Marx seriously” (419).

Hobsbawm does not attempt a detailed defence of the philosophical aspect of Marxism, as a depth-reading of the world predicated on the possibility of progress. Nonetheless, to “take Marx seriously” surely also means to take him seriously philosophically. Such an ontological defence may be extrapolated from the pages of Hobsbawm's book, which do very visibly imply the validity as concepts of both progress and regression. If, as postmodernist theory and practice might seem to suppose, there is no such thing as regression – if, on relativist grounds, the world-view of certain Central Asian

theocratic movements is just as valid as that of a Western liberal - can there ever be progress, for anyone? If a concept like barbarism is deemed inadmissible – if (one might here recall certain recent debates in France) there is no such thing as vestimentary retrogression, or if any criticism of punishments or customs that impair physical integrity can be written off as culture-bound – then, conversely, is any concept of civilisation also and equally meaningless?

It is surely not beyond the bounds of belief that there may still be a case for arguing in favour of the continued utility of Marxist analysis, in a rapidly mutating world – a world the multipolar and networked nature of which was not foreseen by the philosopher from Trier whose insights may yet nonetheless, subject to their necessary adaptation to new realities, prove of greater use to the future of humanity than the siren lucubrations of a thousand Lyotards. Eric Hobsbawm's book certainly defies fashion; the jury is out on whether it, and the Marxism it narrates, will also prove to have the capacity to defy gravity.

NOTES

Eric Hobsbawm died on 1 October 2012, as this number was going to press. I have chosen, however, not to modify the present text.

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