



Eric Hobsbawm: A Renowned Historian and Marxist Critique

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Hobsbawm, a Marxist and historian, was an ardent champion of revolution. He found that social change centres upon revolution, hence his important collection of essays and books cover all aspects of revolution such as the nature of anarchism, the history of communism, the influence of Marx and Lenin and class struggle. As revolution is the basis of social change, his writings are crucial for understanding twentieth century history truly.

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Eric John Ernest Hobsbawm was born in Alexandria in 1917. His father L.P. Hobsbawm, a merchant from London, was of Polish Jewish descent and his mother Nelly, an Austrian Jewish lady, was a translator and a novelist. After his birth the family moved to Vienna and then to Berlin and to Germany. In Germany he witnessed the downfall of Weimar Republic, the rise of the Nazis and Adolf Hitler rising to power. This situation and death of his parents compelled him move to London with his uncle in 1933 thus becoming an English citizen. It is significant to note that he was born at the time of the Russian Revolution and that the talents he got from his mother enabled him to imbibe the essence of revolution. It is apt to say that he was Egyptian by birth, Jewish by descent and British by nationality. In England he got the opportunity to be a part of the scholars of Cambridge. Though he decided to do his research in the agricultural revolutions of North Africa, he was diverted to the study of the Fabian communists.¹ This venture opened up possibilities of studying the events of the 19th century. He served as a soldier during the Second World War. He was a member of faculty in Birbeck College. He provided free classes to the enthusiastic students from poor bourgeoisie.

Reading Marx while in Berlin, Marxian ideals touched Hobsbawm. Thus he became a lifelong Communist. He had a pragmatic approach to Marxism. He was not a fundamental Marxist and criticized some of the aspects of international communism. It is evident in his words: "We were not told the truth about something that had to affect the very nature of a communist's belief. Moreover, we could see that the leadership would have preferred us not to know the truth... One could understand why party organizers find this convenient, but it was neither Marxism nor genuine politics."² The Journal *Past and Present* was published to create a shift from the history of the patricians to the history of the plebeians.

Hobsbawm was not a turn coat. In the midst of problems he remained a faithful member of the party. He created a unique identity as a communist and this gave him fame and reputation. His independence over Communism attracted many eminent people such as Neal Kinnock.³

Hobsbawm has to his credit many historical works, including a trilogy on the nineteenth-century; *The Age of Revolution 1789-1848* (1962), *The Age of Capital 1848-1875* (1975), and *The Age of Empire 1875-1914* (1987) and is the author of *The Age of Extremes: The Short 20th Century 1914-1991* and his recent autobiography *Interesting Times: A Twentieth-Century Life*. Ian Kershaw said that Hobsbawm's take on the twentieth century, his 1994 book, *The Age of Extremes*, consisted of "masterly analysis." Meanwhile, Tony Judt, while praising Hobsbawm's vast knowledge and graceful prose, cautioned that Hobsbawm's bias in favour of the USSR, communist states and communism in general, and his tendency to disparage any nationalist movement as passing and irrational, weakened his grasp of parts of the 20th century.⁴

As a Marxist historiographer he focused on the analysis of the French Revolution and the British industrial revolution (dual revolution). Many of Hobsbawm's books reflect contemporary social situations. For example, the book, *Age of Extremes* exposes the contemporary history of Europe during Hobsbawm's period. His books influenced the intellectuals of his time and, above all, they were a boon to the students of History. Hobsbawm got fame in the realm of Students of History and political observers through these books. But his first published book was *Labour's Turning Point*. This book deals with Fabian situation, which he went in contact with at the time of writing his dissertation. *Primitive Rebels* (1959) was the first independent work of Hobsbawm. *Captain Swing* (1969), a book published along with George Rude, in which he unveils the critical situation of the villages after the intervention of thrashing machines. His book, *Industry and Empire* (1968) unravels the history of Industrial Revolution in England. *Labouring Men* (1964) deals with the needs and suffrage of the Industrial labourers. For his brilliant analysis of the troubled history of twentieth-century Europe and for his ability to combine in-depth historical research with great literary talent he got the Balzan Prize in 2013. In 2003, *The New York Times* described him as "one of the great British historians of his age, an unapologetic Communist and a polymath whose erudite, elegantly written histories are still widely read in schools here and abroad."⁶ He published numerous essays in various intellectual journals, dealing with subjects like conflict between anarchism and communism. Among his final publications were *Globalization, Democracy and Terrorism* (2007), *On Empire* (2008), and the collection of essays *How to Change the World: Marx and Marxism 1840-2011* (2011).

Hobsbawm tried to interpret the Marxian ideologies to make it available in current discussions of world politics. He applied a distinctive style of interpretation to analyze Russian and English Revolutions. Hobsbawm observes that the relationship between agriculture and landlordism that was eliminated because of the French Revolution in 1789 and the Industrial Revolution of England in 1848.⁷ The influences of these revolutions were the root causes that shattered feudalism. This also helped Britain to attain political and military supremacy over other nations.⁸

French Revolution sent a message around the globe: Independence, equality and fraternity. Hobsbawm appraises the French Revolution differently.⁹ According to Hobsbawm, though French Revolution was the product of bourgeois it gave a new consciousness to the newly emerged working class in Europe. It was evident in the labour movement which started during the early 19th century. The new class confidence given by the French Revolution and the impression made by the Industrial Revolution revealed the need for permanent mobilization. In his view, a decent livelihood could not be achieved merely by the occasional protest which served to restore the stable but temporarily disturbed balance of society. Radical change should happen only through continuous work. He defined the ways of continuous work as: "It required the eternal vigilance, organization and activity of the 'movement' - the trade union, the mutual or co-operative society, the working-class institute, newspaper or agitation."¹⁰

As a Marxian critique, Hobsbawm's evaluation of Marxism is worthy to be noted. He observes that:

"Marxism' is not a body of finished theories and discoveries, but a process of development, that Marx's own thought, for instance went on developing throughout his life. That Marxism doubtless has potential answers, but often no actual answers to the specific problem we face, partly because neither of them may actually have said anything about certain problems which existed in their time and are important to us."¹¹

According to him the population of working proletariat will dwindle because of the development of a middle class. He suggests that, in no time the middle class will increase in size and the working proletariat will make up a consistently diminishing proportion of the total population even if it grows in absolute numbers. This tendency of the growing of a bourgeois society will be the result of working-class movement.

He criticized the leaders of the Communist party without any hesitation. He wrote:

What disturbed the mass of the [party members] was that the brutally ruthless denunciation of Stalin's misdeeds came, not from the bourgeoisie press, whose stories if read at all, could be rejected apriori as slanders and lies, but from Moscow itself. It was impossible not to take notice of it....¹²

He states that nobody could predict in 1883 that Marx would be a failure because his views had influenced the intellectuals in Germany and Russia. During this time the interference of the disciples of Marx became more active in the realm of Trade Union Movement in Germany. But the depth and contribution of *Das Capital* was not properly understood by the contemporaries. Even in 1883 there was only an incomplete manuscript of *Das Capital* and a few pamphlets in his credit. After the failure of the Revolution of 1848, the main engagement of Marx was for the formation of First International (1864-1873). Though he spent half of his life as a refugee in Britain, Marx had no significant role in the political and intellectual sphere of the country. This criticism of Hobsbawm was reluctantly accepted by the European scholastic world in later years.¹³

But it is noteworthy that, the political parties influenced by him could get 15 to 45 percent of votes in democratically conducted elections – 25 years after his death (Britain was an exception). After 1918 many of those parties rose to power and posed a threat to Fascist power politics and ameliorated their position after the fall of Fascism. The disciples of Marx formed revolutionary groups in third world countries without democracy. One third of the world population came under the rule of Communist parties formed on the Marxist concept, 70 years after the death of Marx. The 20% of people in the present world is still under the influence of Marxian ideologies.¹⁴ Thus the prophetic declaration of Hobsbawm becomes true.

According to Hobsbawm, Marx was the most powerful thinker who influenced the people of the 20th century. The fall of Soviet Union almost ended the flourishing period of Communist parties and governments. Rudiments of Communism remains in India and China but it has dropped Marxist Leninist scheme. Marxian ideologies have been abandoned. As Marxian ideas were built upon the theory of Communism, Marxist—Leninist Movement was a deviation from communism. Hobsbawm envisions that Marxian ideas still have prominence and importance in the present society.

With the fall of Soviet Union and Official Marxism, Marxism was set free from Leninist ideas and administration. Many writers who are not Communists consider Marxist ideas seriously. Some scholars have the opinion that Marx had facts to be revealed to people who dream of an ideal world. This attitude is more essential in evaluating Marxian concept at present.

Conclusion

Though there were many historians in England during his time, no one was as famous as Hobsbawm. He was a quick interpreter of contemporary world politics since he was a close observer and viewer of nano political changes in the world. He was walking through world political incidents and communist scenario. Eric J Hobsbawm has given a great deal of autobiographical information about his unusual life and times. Indeed, no British historian has peppered his books on world history with more personal details and allusions than Hobsbawm. Having lived through immense political turbulence, Hobsbawm's books testify to the fact that he is a brilliant writer and erudite critic of the ideologies he believed in. Various writings, ranging from notes on prehistory and the contemporary reception of Marxism to musings on Marxist thought in the postwar world, are all concerned with Marxism as one major intellectual influence and current in the history of ideas.

Thus, making out the work of Eric Hobsbawm is a type of liberation and always an exercise in deepening one's knowledge and understanding. The seven decades of theoretical and historical work of Eric may accurately be described as why and how capitalism successfully resists transformation.

References:

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3. Neil Gordon Kinnock, Baron Kinnock (born 28 March 1942) is a British Labour Party politician.
4. Ian Kershaw, *Hitler: 1889–1936: Hubris* (London: Penguin, 2001), P. 597; Tony Judt "The Last Romantic," *The New York* (20 November 2003), *Review of Books* 50 (18).
5. Banditry is taking property by force or the threat of force, often done by a group, usually of men. The idea "Social Banditry" was fleshed out by Eric J. Hobsbawm in his book *Bandits*, which touched off research on crime and social deviance around the world. See Eric J. Hobsbawm, *Social Bandits and Primitive Rebels*, Glencoe, Illinois.: Free Press, 1960, p.164.
6. "A Communist Life With No Apology," *New York Times*. www.nytimes.com/2003/08/23/.../a-communist-life-with-no-apology.ht.
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8. *Ibid*
9. Hobsbawm, *The Age of Revolution*, p.79.
10. Hobsbawm, *The Age of Revolution*, p. 254.
11. Eric Hobsbawm, *Revolutionaries*, London: Abacus, 1999, pp.5-6.
12. Hobsbawm, "Socialism has failed. Now capitalism is bankrupt. So what comes next?", p.204.
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