Introduction to a 1995 Conversation with Eric Hobsbawm

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Eric Hobsbawm, who died on October 1, 2012, was one of a handful of extraordinary labor historians who emerged from the British Communist Party Historians' Group in the 1940s and 1950s.[1] Today he is widely acknowledged as one of the great historians of our era. His influence is truly international. For a long time, a significant limitation on the extent of his renown was the USSR where, during the era of "actually-existing socialism," his works were never translated or published. This was ironic since he was a card-carrying member of the Communist Party of Great Britain (CPGB) from 1936 until its dissolution in 1991.

To an unusual degree Eric Hobsbawm's life was bound up with major events in the evolution of the capitalist system that he so relentlessly opposed. He was born in 1917, the year of the Russian revolution, in colonial Alexandria, Egypt, the son of an always-enterprising but mainly unsuccessful small businessman. Although a British citizen, his family was of Austro-Polish Jewish background. In 1933 in Berlin, returning home from school, he remembered seeing newspaper headlines proclaiming Adolf Hitler as German Chancellor. In the relative calm of 1930s Britain he won a scholarship to King's College, Cambridge. In 1947 his first academic position was as a lecturer in history at Birkbeck College of the University of London; but during the most bitter years of the Cold War he was not promoted, probably because of his public membership in the CPGB. Yet his growing international reputation allowed him to travel and to research in foreign countries until, in 1971, he became an Honorary Fellow of King's College, Cambridge, and, in 1978, a Fellow of the British Academy; in subsequent years fellowships and awards accumulated. He was president of Birkbeck College from 2002 to 2012. Although he lost relatives to the Holocaust and comrades to the fascists, he thanked the fates that allowed him to be a close-up observer of world-historical events without having to endure their horrors.

Hobsbawm first achieved academic renown for a two-part article on the "general crisis of the seventeenth century," published in 1954 in *Past and Present*, a journal that he helped found.[2] There he argued that seventeenth-century Europe underwent a severe economic, social, and political crisis because the time was not yet ripe for capitalism and bourgeois ascendancy;

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this era was the last phase in the general transition from feudalism to capitalism. Hobsbawm's reputation also increased due to his prominent role in what was then known as "the standard of living debate." In the 1950s much time and scholarly attention was devoted to whether the English standard of living declined during the era of the Industrial Revolution. Hobsbawm was a leader of the affirmative side.[3]

In the course of his work on the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, Hobsbawm became increasingly interested in "archaic" and "primitive" forms of contention. He studied the ways in which laboring people expressed their sense of injustice—before the rise of the mill and factory and in advance of the spread of trade unions, strikes, and socialist parties. Looking for preindustrial rebels he discovered "social banditry," a term he coined. In a sweeping survey that stretched from Britain, to southern Italy, to Australia he described bandits who became popular heroes in agrarian folklore as expropriators of the rich, and avengers of popular wrongs. He saw social bandits as "counterparts of the general passivity of the poor" and concluded that, "[t]hey are the exception which proves the rule."[4] Social bandits could become revolutionaries when they established relationships or connections with modern social movements of the Left, as some did. In *Captain Swing* (1969), written with George Rudé, he greatly expanded his field of study, reconstructing and analyzing "an entire epoch of the English farm-laborers' history, that of the rise and fall of their impressive, archaic movements of resistance to the final triumph of rural capitalism."[5] Hobsbawm and Rudé discovered a rich and extensive world of contention that lay unsuspected only just below the surface of the English countryside.

Hobsbawm's work, along with that of Edward Thompson and George Rudé (two other members of the British Communist Historians' Group) challenged conventional histories of the labor movement that presented preindustrial contention as chaotic and confused, finally yielding to the rational modern world of institutional labor movements.[6] His work on preindustrial protest brought him to the forefront of labor and social history, areas of study only beginning to gain recognition as distinctive fields of history in the 1950s.[7]

Our Interview: October 16, 1995

Beginning with a handful of seminal articles in "social" and "labor" history and going on to a vast multivolume history, Hobsbawm was a master of several literary genres, but the interview was one in which he particularly excelled. The present conversation shows us why. It was conducted on October 16, 1995, at the Center for the Study of Social Change of the New School for Social Research in New York City. It was provoked in part by discussion among New School students and faculty in response to the publication in 1994 of *The Age of Extremes*, the last volume in Hobsbawm's four-volume study of the world created by the French and Industrial Revolutions.[8] The interview was originally intended for an Iranian theoretical review in exile that stopped publication before the interview appeared. Next, it was offered to *ILWCH*, but its

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publication was deferred because the editorial board hoped to present it as part of a larger issue. Hobsbawm's death brought the interview back to our attention.

Despite its age, Hobsbawm's interview remains relevant. It focuses on important aspects of his work and intellectual evolution at a time when these were undergoing great change. This introduction briefly identifies and discusses some highlights of this change. Among the topics Hobsbawm addressed that will especially interest labor historians are (1) his discussion of his Marxist approach to history, (2) his thoughts on the proper scope of historical study, and (3) his perspective on democracy. After this interview, Hobsbawm would go on for a rich and productive seventeen years, and our introduction will briefly discuss the relationship between this essay and a few key themes of his subsequent work. Some of the issues he discusses in this interview should help us understand more fully his later concerns about the future of social equality in an era of globalization.

A Paleo-Marxist?

In this interview Hobsbawm describes himself as a Marxist who grew up in an intellectual tradition that was based on the classic texts but then expanded to include more recondite studies, including the works of Central European philosophers and Soviet thinkers. Even though he subsequently "adjusted" his approach, it still ran against the intellectual currents of the 1960s and 1970s where figures such as Herbert Marcuse and Louis Althusser loomed large. In an academic world where Leftists were fashionably scornful of "primitive" and "vulgar" Marxism, Hobsbawm delighted in identifying himself as a "Paleo-Marxist." Such pronouncements could have concealed a sophisticated appropriation of Marx. During the Second World War he learned of a large body of Marx's manuscripts that had escaped the attention of most historians. In 1964 he published a pioneering English language translation of excerpts from these works, *The Grundrisse*, the notebooks Marx drew on to write *Capital*.[9] Hobsbawm read widely in Marx and Marxism and his philosophy became ever more self-conscious and synthetic. For political analysis he drew on the works of the Italian theorist, Antonio Gramsci, the philosopher of praxis and theoretician of hegemonic power.[10] He admired the work of analytic philosopher G.A. Cohen for his efforts to adapt Marxism to modern academic discourse.[11] For models of historical practice he drew on the idea of a total history associated with the Annales school in France.

As Hobsbawm explains in this interview, by the 1980s he did not subscribe unconditionally to a base and superstructure model of historical development. He concluded that "the economic-technological base provides to some extent the framework, the limitations, within which culturally a variety of different forms of organizations can develop."[12] Although not applicable in every instance, he did think that the base/superstructure model might be a useful, if crude, tool in understanding how "things hang together," an understanding that was, in his view, one of the two major goals of historical explanation—the

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other being how humanity evolved from the cave dweller to the present. Always searching for connections, he wondered "why fashion designers, a notoriously non-analytic breed, sometimes succeed in anticipating the shape of things to come better than professional predictors."[13] He was always interested in the obscure connection and the telling detail that illustrated or suggested larger relationships. He was proud that all the volumes of his history of capitalism had chapters on science and the arts, for they must be part of his history of society.

Hobsbawm also came to reject classic determinism. The historian may show the necessary and inevitable steps that explain an historical process *a posteriori*, but prediction of the relationship between base and superstructure *a priori* was impossible. Hobsbawm grudgingly admitted the reality of contingency but felt this acknowledgement an intellectual embarrassment.[14]

It is surprising that, despite his spending so much time as a public Communist and his training in the British Communist Party, the major currents of his work are so little influenced by Stalinist orthodoxy. Although he was not above taking a whack at the opponents of Stalinism, whether Social Democrats on the Right or New Leftists and Trotskyists on the Left, his objections were never couched in the shrill hysteria and intolerance of classic Stalinist polemics but were, rather, presented as considered judgments subject to discussion and revision. His own work was not dogmatic. For example, his concept that the years between 1789 and 1848 witnessed a "dual revolution"—a political revolution in France and an industrial revolution in Britain—did not follow a base-superstructure model and confounded established Marxist interpretations.[15] But his ideological freedom and tolerance came with a price. As he explained: "I soon became essentially a nineteenth-century historian, because I soon discovered . . . that, given the strong official Party and Soviet views about the twentieth century, one could not write about anything later than 1917 without the likelihood of being denounced as a political heretic."[16]

Historian of Capitalism: Metanarrative Man

Another characteristic of Hobsbawm's history is his strong commitment to the long view and to total history. For him social history was not a subfield of history but a characteristic of all good history. There is irony in the academic portrait of Hobsbawm as a patron saint of labor and social history. Fighting to no avail in the 1950s and 1960s, he was strongly opposed to demarcating a specific discipline of "labor history" or "social history."[17] He argued that the history of labor was incomplete without understanding the history of capital; relationships, not fixed essences, were the real stuff of history. The interaction of labor and capital was the most appropriate focus of a new discipline built around the history of capitalism. Hobsbawm was not the first to state this objective, but he was among the most successful in showing how it might be done. His book *Industry and Empire, from 1750 to the Present Day* (1968), his three volumes, *The Age of Revolution, 1789–1848* (1962), *The Age of Capital:*

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1848–1875 (1975) and *The Age of Empire: 1875–1914* (1987), along with its sequel, *The Age of Extremes: the Short Twentieth Century, 1914–1991* (1994) are among the most impressive of Marxist efforts to write the history of capitalism in the post-1789 era.[18] Originally Hobsbawm seems to have conceived of his work as a history of capitalism from 1789–1914. He later added *The Age of Extremes,* a book much longer than the preceding volumes, with three parts, as a kind of sequel. Whatever his intentions, *The Age of Extremes* turned out quite differently from its predecessors.

Hobsbawm's periodization and characterization of historical stages in the first three volumes draw on classic Marxist interpretations. *The Age of Revolution* looks at "the formation of a new society that the revolutionary masses had the potential to turn the moderate liberal revolutions into social ones."[19] *The Age of Capital* chronicles the transformation of capitalism from the failure of 1848 and triumph of the "party of order" to the first Great Depression—that of the 1870s—and explores the inability of the laboring masses to turn the events to their own benefit. The triumphant bourgeoisie and its liberal order and with it a *de facto* hegemonic British industry will be followed by a new phase in the history of capitalism: "the period of imperialism." *The Age of Empire* completes his study of the years between 1789–1914 and recalls Lenin's arguments that imperialism represented an advanced stage of capitalism, the "latest"—not the "last"—phase of capitalism. He concludes "there is no return to the world of liberal bourgeoisie society … for better or worse, since 1914 the century of the bourgeoisie belongs to history."[20]

Despite dismaying changes in the political climate in which Hobsbawm concluded his work, the trilogy ends on a hopeful, though hardly triumphant, note. "Is there still room for the greatest of all hopes, that of creating a world in which free men and women, emancipated from fear of human needs will live the good life together in a good society? Why not?"[21]

Yet, in the sequel, *The Age of Extremes*, or what he calls the "history of the short twentieth century," the mood becomes darker. New fears arise that lack obvious solutions. Part of the reason for his anxiety is due to his new worries about the threat of globalization and the decline of state capacities. Another reason is his fears about the destabilizing effects of the breakup of the USSR and the Soviet satellites and the free reign this would give American power. As a British Communist, he had long been willing to sacrifice democratic commitments for strategic political reasons.

Democracy; a Nuanced View

While the search for equality played a large role in his thinking, from first to last, the struggle for democracy always figured less prominently. Many on the Left, sympathetic to his general approach, have been troubled by his continued membership in the CPGB Party, especially after 1956 when the Red Army suppressed a socialist regime in Hungary seeking national independence and democratization. Many Marxists in Britain and around the world, including

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his friend Edward Thompson, left the Party in 1956, but Hobsbawm did not. Partly his intransigence was shaped by recollections of his Berlin adolescence, where he joined a Communist youth group to combat fascism. He also retained powerful memories of labor solidarity in the Popular Front when he traveled through Paris filming the great Bastille Day demonstration of July 1936 in a camera truck.[22] Partly his character was shaped by his loyalty to a generation of Communists, his elder and peers, some of whom had given their lives for the cause.

Hobsbawm's membership in the CPGB was also influenced by his weak faith in parliamentary democracy. His attitude towards democracy was predominantly skeptical. He conceived of democracy as a form of government that might flourish in good times but was unsteady and unreliable in times of economic and political crisis. He himself had experienced the collapse of European democracies during the Great Depression when democracy only survived in the historically richest and most stable of the Western democracies. Throughout most of Europe, elites turned to vulgar and stupid dictators to protect their privileges, and many supported fascism.

His experiences in the 1930s were not the only reasons for Hobsbawm's lack of democratic enthusiasm. He was not convinced, as he makes clear in this interview, that democracy was of any help in promoting growth in developing countries. His advice to elites in post-Maoist China and the post-Gorbachev USSR was economic growth first, democratization later.

Many of those who puzzled over Hobsbawm's support for Soviet rule and indifference towards democratic rights ignored the critique of bourgeois democracy inherent in orthodox Marxist theory: Hobsbawm's relatively orthodox Marxism made him particularly susceptible to such views. The rise of Social Democracy had produced a general softening in socialist attitudes toward formal democracy in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries as socialists entered into coalitions with "bourgeois" politicians and even entered their governments. But Marx himself had given short shrift to institutions he labeled "bourgeois democracies." Classical Marxism taught that successful revolutions would produce a "proletarian dictatorship"—a dictatorship of the proletarian majority over the capitalist minority, but this state would wither away as socialism took root. Between the transitional regime of the proletarian majority and the future regime of anarchy, orthodox Marxism offered little space for the development of a regime of universal civil rights. This problem loomed particularly large in a Russia where a substantial majority of the population was not proletarian.

By the time he was free of possible CPGB sanctions to write about the Russian Revolution, he did not seem interested in problems of democratic development. Hobsbawm never expressed much interest in the growth of soviets (popularly elected councils based on occupation) in the Russian empire after 1905 or their role in the Russian Revolution. Norbert Bobbio warned that this attitude might make socialists dangerously callous toward struggles for democratic rights.[23]

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Post 1995 Developments: Inequality, States, and Globalization

Our interview came at a key time in Hobsbawm's intellectual evolution. In the early 1990s, while writing *The Age of Extremes*, Hobsbawm decided that, *pace* Marx, capitalism did not create its own gravedigger in the form of the proletariat, as *The Communist Manifesto* asserted. In fact, capitalism was its own gravedigger, creating crises that forced the system toward change but not necessarily towards socialism. Not only was there no prospect for socialist revolution in the present but, Hobsbawm announced, there probably never had been.

By the time of our interview in 1995, those familiar with Hobsbawm's work would not be surprised by the drift of his thinking, although they might have been startled by the extent of his change. But Hobsbawm's conclusions were rooted in the disillusionments and frustrations that resulted from European socialist and British Labour experiences in the late 1970s and 1980s. Already in 1978 at the Marx Memorial Lecture, he announced that "the forward march of labor and the labor movement … appears to have come to a halt in this century about twenty-five to thirty years ago. Both the working class and the labor movement since then have been passing through a period of crisis."[24]

Hobsbawm's arguments in this lecture were quickly adopted by Labour politicians in Britain—like Neil Kinnock, leader of the Labour Party (1983–1992), and Tony Blair, the future Prime Minister—and helped to provide an intellectual foundation for "New Labour," which would dominate British politics at the end of the twentieth and beginning of the twenty-first centuries. In this lecture he noted that the size of the manual working class, the old stronghold of the Labour movement, was shrinking. Social stratification within the working classes, among skilled workers, white-collar workers, and less-skilled workers was increasing; differences of gender and immigration background sometimes tested traditional labor solidarity as did regional nationalism. This talk provoked widespread debate on the Left. Many argued that Hobsbawm underestimated the gains to working class power that might arise from the organization of previously immobilized groups, such as women and migrants. Others accused Hosbawm of glorifying a traditional working-class culture that often repressed women. The debate about the failing appeals of Labour was greatly intensified by the 1979 elections in England, which revealed a dramatic loss of working-class support for the Labour Party and brought Margaret Thatcher to power.

By the late 1980s, Hobsbawm had become a supporter of Neil Kinnock's efforts to build a widely encompassing party of social reform that had more room for independents and moderates (and no room for a fractious far Left). In 1988, addressing a conference of German Social Democrats, Hobsbawm lamented the Conservative triumph that threatened to "eliminate the labor movement, the Labour Party and the entire left as a factor in politics." He feared that these same factors were at work throughout Europe. To oppose

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the Conservatives, he called for a "coalition of all democrats around those mass parties of the Left which still exist in Europe."[25] Initially he was sympathetic to Tony Blair's efforts to build a New Labour, but he was disenchanted by New Labour's lack of commitment to social equality. "We wanted a reformed Labour, not Thatcher in trousers," he remarked.[26]

He deplored Blair's support for the Iraq war, noting in 2002 that "Labour prime ministers who glory in trying to be war lords—subordinate war lords particularly—certainly stick in my gullet."[27]

In our 1995 interview he was in the process of reassessing where Marx had got it right—and wrong. In so doing he returned to problems of immiseration and technological change that had inspired his earliest writings. If the working class was not to be the primary agent of social change as Marx predicted, still Marx's larger analysis of the immiseration produced by globalization was vindicated. As always, free-market capitalism created problems it could not solve. The Great Recession of 2008–2009 confirmed this amply. The "Occupy Movement" gave this view a voice even if it lacked meaningful solutions. Increasingly, Hobsbawm saw a choice between socialism and barbarism. More and more, Hobsbawm revived, reinforced, and emphasized arguments that he had tentatively advanced as early as *The Age of Empire*. The victory of socialism was far from inevitable, but the destructive capacity of free-market capitalism was unlimited and certain. As trade unionism shrank and economic crises became more intense and frequent and as globalization threatened state capacity, his vision of the future darkened. In a 2000 talk he concluded that "the solution or mitigation of these problems will require—it must require—measures for which almost certainly no support will be found by counting votes or measuring consumer preferences. This is not an encouraging prospect either for the long-term prospects of democracy or for those of the globe."[28] In 2006, he argued that, "We cannot imagine the barbarism that will happen but it is obvious that it will. The only way to imagine a solution will be to organize on a worldwide level, a compromise between the market and democracy."[29]

What increasingly concerned Hobsbawm was the effect of globalization on states' capacity to protect the disadvantaged. Historically, in advanced industrial nations, when capitalism failed or became too oppressive, states had stepped in to restore at least a modicum of equality, a smidgeon of fairness. But modern-day globalization was undermining states' capacities and limiting states' very ability to intervene should they so choose. In his last years Hobsbawm was searching for solutions to these problems. He always remained a man of the Left, and his determination for social equality and the possibility of a rich life for all continued as his central concerns.

Although we asked some tough questions in this interview, all the interviewers greatly respected Eric Hobsbawm. As students, colleagues, or unaffiliated fans of Hobsbawm at the New School for Social Research we looked forward to his yearly visits. We learned from his classes, debated his lectures and enjoyed his stories and humor. We will miss him.

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NOTES

1. Shortly after the interview was transcribed, it was edited and approved by Eric Hobsbawm.

2. Eric Hobsbawm, "The General Crisis of the European Economy in the 17th Century," *Past & Present* 5 (1954): 33–53 and "The Crisis of the Seventeenth Century," *Past and Present* 6 (1954): 44–65. For the modern state of the debate, see Geoffrey Parker and Lesley M. Smith, *The General Crisis of the Seventeenth Century*, 2nd edition (New York, 1987).

3. Eric Hobsbawm, "The British Standard of Living Debate, 1790–1850," *Economic History Review* 10 (1957): 46–68.

4. Eric Hobsbawn, *Bandits* (New York, 1969), 30.

5. Eric Hobsbawm and Georges Rudé, *Captain Swing: A Social History of the Great English Agricultural Uprising of 1830* (New York, 1968), 15.

6. *Primitive Rebels: Studies in Archaic Forms of Social Movements in the 19th and 20th Centuries* (Manchester, 1959); Eric Hobsbawm and Georges Rudé, *Captain Swing* (New York, 1968).

7. For some critiques of Hobsbawm's approach by social and economic historians and anthropologists, see Anton Blok, *The Mafia of a Sicilian Village, 1860–1960: A Study of Violent Peasant Entrepreneurs* (New York, 1975) and Jerome R. Mintz, *The Anarchists of Casas Viejas* (Bloomington, 1994).

8. Eric Hobsbawm, *The Age of Revolution, 1789–1848* (London, 1962); *The Age of Capital, 1848–1875* (London, 1975); *The Age of Empire, 1875–1914* (London, 1987); *The Age of Extremes, 1914–1991* (New York, 1995), 178.

9. Eric Hobsbawm ed., *Pre-Capitalist Economic Formations: Karl Marx* (New York, 1964); Karl Marx, *Grundrisse* (New York, 1968).

10. David Forgacs, ed., *The Antonio Gramsci Reader Selected Writings, 1916–1935* (New York, 1988).

11. G. A. Cohen, *Karl Marx's Theory of History: A Defence* (Princeton, 1978).

12. Eric Hobsbawm, "Interview," 7.

13. Hobsbawm, *The Age of Extremes*, 178.

14. See the accompanying interview.

15. Hobsbawm, *The Age of Revolution*.

16. Eric Hobsbawm, *Interesting Times: A Twentieth Century Life* (New York, 2002), 291.

17. Eric Hobsbawm, "From Social History to the History of Society," *Daedalus* 100 (1971): 20–45; and Eric Hobsbawm, "Looking Back Half a Century," in *Histories of Labour: National and International Perspectives*, eds. Joan Allen, Alan Campbell, and John Mcllroy (London, 2010), 1–5, 5.

18. *Industry and Empire: From 1750 to the Present Day* (London, 1968); His three volumes, *The Age of Revolution: 1789–1848, The Age of Capital: 1848–1875*, and *The Age of Empire: 1875–1914*) along with its sequel, *The Age of Extremes: The Short Twentieth Century, 1914–1991*.

19. Hobsbawm, *The Age of Capital*, 2.

20. Ibid., 12.

21. Ibid., 340.

22. Hobsbawm, *Interesting Times*, 86.

23. Norbert Bobbio, *Which Socialism? Marxism, Socialism and Democracy* (Minneapolis, 1987).

24. Eric Hobsbawm, "The Forward March of Labour Halted," in *The Foreign March of Labour Halted*, ed. Eric Hobsbawm, (London, 1978), 1.

25. Eric Hobsbalm, *Politics of a Rational Left* (New York, 1989), 165.

26. Hobsbawm, *Interesting Times*, 276.

27. Eric Hobsbawm, "Eric Hobsbawm: A Life in Quotes," *The Guardian*, October 1, 2012.

28. Eric Hobsbawm, "The Prospects for Democracy," in *Globalisation, Democracy and Terrorism*, Eric Hobsbawm, ed. (New York, 2007), 95–114, 113.

29. Eric Hobsbawm and Jacques Attalli, "The New Globalisation Guru?" *The New Statesman,* September 27, 2010.

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