

# Blind Faith

May 27, 2010

AMONG THE GREAT BRITISH MARXIST historians Eric Hobsbawm is the only one to remain in the Communist Party until the late 1980s. His decision to do so has never fully been explained. Thus the publication of his autobiography, *Interesting Times*, is an exciting event, as it has the potential of addressing this question. How did Hobsbawm manage to reconcile himself, for example, to 1956? Did he not at least feel disillusioned when he learned about Stalinist atrocities? However, despite the undoubted value of the book in letting us see the twentieth century through the eyes of a fine historian who has lived through it, Eric Hobsbawm remains an enigma.

Hobsbawm is the author of over twenty scholarly books, including *The Age of Revolution* (1962), *Industry and Empire* (1968), *The Age of Capital* (1975), *The Age of Empire* (1987) and *On History* (1997). But his distinguished career is not allotted much space in his autobiography. Instead Hobsbawm focuses on the world of politics, keeping personal information and academic gossip to a minimum. The true fascination of the book lies in its first half dealing with Hobsbawm's childhood and youth in 1930s Berlin and his life as a Communist in Britain after WWII. Hobsbawm is at his best when writing about places and events he knows very well and cares about very deeply. The second half, dealing with Hobsbawm's friendships and experiences abroad, while providing entertaining anecdotes and intriguing reflections, particularly for those interested in the historical profession, is something of an anticlimax by comparison.

Hobsbawm was compelled to think politically at an early age. As a schoolboy in Vienna he noted that Vienna was a "red" city and saw himself as a "red." Afterwards in Berlin he admired his dashing Communist elder cousin who sported a badge with the Russian initials of the Young Communist International. But his first political act was in 1932 when he joined the Sozialistischer Schulerbund, a branch of the Young Communists for secondary school students. As a member of this organization he marched in the KPD's last legal demonstration on January 25, 1933 and distributed leaflets for the party after the burning of the Reichstag building. This experience was the beginning of a life-long love affair with Communism. It was also the most dangerous work Hobsbawm was ever to do for the party and, arguably, the most overt political activism he would ever engage in.

His subsequent activities were largely confined to writing and debating politics with other intellectuals, partly due to his academic temperament and partly due to circumstances. He might have fought in the Spanish Civil War if he had not been deported by a disgruntled border patrol officer shortly after crossing into Spain. He passionately wanted to fight in the Second World War, but had to be content with serving as a sapper in Cambridge and in the Army Education Corps in Gloucester. His language skills gave rise to dreams of doing intelligence work but the British government failed to make use of him (they were suspicious of his Austrian background and his politics). While he made some efforts at activism after the war, by his own admission he had little interest in it after 1956. One of the later chapters is aptly titled "A Watcher in Politics." When compared with the life of another eminent Marxist historian, E.P. Thompson, this seems a quiet existence for a man who feels so strongly about the Communist cause.

A comparison with Thompson also makes one wonder why the working class is almost completely absent from Hobsbawm's account of his life. Thompson worked on the Yugoslav Youth Railway construction project and in adult education at the Workers' Educational Association. The only time Hobsbawm encountered some working-class men was when he was in the British army during WWII. For the first time he met the proletariat face to face and found them politically disappointing. But in retrospect, he praises their capacity for collective action and remembers fondly the "real proletarian

experience" of operating a road drill. During these years with the working class he acquired "a permanent, if often exasperated, admiration for their uprightness, their distrust of bullshit, their sense of class, comradeship and mutual help. They were good people." (159)

Still, he did not seek out this contact, it came to him by accident. We also hear nothing about the troubles of British workers in the 1930s. While Hobsbawm writes eloquently about this in *The Age of Extremes* (1994), it does not seem to have affected him at the time. Fully engrossed by his studies at Cambridge, this young communist seems to have had little time for the proletariat. We would expect more from a historian of labor and the author of *Bandits* (1969) and *Primitive Rebels* (1959).

Nevertheless, Hobsbawm gives us a truly valuable account of what it felt like to belong to a mass political movement. The party dominated every aspect of the lives of its members. In Hobsbawm's case this extended even to his erotic imagination. The memory of the KPD demonstration of January 25, 1933 provokes the following reflection: "Next to sex, the activity combining bodily experience and intense emotion to the highest degree is the participation in a mass demonstration at a time of great public exaltation. Unlike sex, which is essentially individual, it is by its nature collective, and unlike the sexual climax, at any rate for men, it can be prolonged for hours. On the other hand, like sex it implies some physical action — marching, chanting slogans, singing — through which the merger of the individual in the mass, which is the essence of the collective experience, finds expression." (73)

This is one of several comparisons between lovemaking and Communism in the book. A young Viennese boy's coming to political awareness is linked to his coming to sexual awareness, radicals' language describing great social revolutions is said to resemble the language of romantic love, the prospect of a Communist mating with a non-Communist is named unthinkable and among the good Communist's many sacrifices is listed the duty to abandon his lover immediately and without question if ordered by the party.

The comparison with a charismatic religious sect may seem a cliché, but it is employed very effectively by Hobsbawm. The Communist movement was like religion in that one was fully consumed by it and gave oneself over to it entirely: "The party was what our life was about. We gave it all we had. In return, we got from it the certainty of our victory and the experience of fraternity." (134) One followed "the line" without wavering, regardless of what it was. If one disagreed with it, one strove to convince oneself that it was right, much like devout Christians might strive to reconcile themselves to God's will.

BUT THERE IS ONE IMPORTANT aspect in which belonging to the Communist Party was not like belonging to a religious group: the party claimed to rely not on blind faith but on rational arguments and "scientific socialism." Thus, when the party line was ridiculous, one would expect a reasonable individual to refuse to endorse it. Hobsbawm stresses numerous times that the brightest lights and the finest minds were Communists in the 1930s, 1940s and 1950s. What drove them to reconcile themselves to party policy was a notion of self-sacrifice: they put away their personal objections for the sake of the greater good. Still, the question of how a sharp, critical mind can be content to follow any sort of line so devoutly is not resolved.

Signs that the party was flawed were present early on. In the early 1930s they made the argument that social democracy was a greater danger than the rise of Hitler and devoted their energy to fighting capitalism rather than fascism. In Hobsbawm's own words this "bordered on political insanity." Though for a while it came to recognize fascism as the chief enemy, in 1939 Moscow reverted to its earlier rhetoric, proclaiming that the war was no longer anti-fascist and that

Britain and France were as bad as Nazi Germany. Hobsbawm can't remember what he thought or felt when he heard this but a look at his diary reveals he had "no reservations about the new line." (153-4)

There is one issue, however, on which Hobsbawm flatly refused to follow the party line: jazz. The Soviets saw jazz as a decadent bourgeois art form and advised Communists to stay away from its corrupting influence. In *The Jazz Scene* (1959) Hobsbawm dismisses this position as shortsightedness or a Russian prejudice. His love for jazz and the culture surrounding it has been an important part of his life since he discovered the music when he moved to Britain in the 1930s. In comparison with Berlin, thirties-era Britain did not seem an exciting place to the young Hobsbawm until he heard the music of Armstrong, Ellington, Fletcher Henderson and Bessie Smith. He recalls the thrill of being present at Duke Ellington's concert in London which left him feeling "captured for ever."

In the fifties, Hobsbawm started contributing a monthly column on jazz to the *New Statesman* under the pseudonym Francis Newton. He writes engagingly about the broader social significance of jazz. Far from associating it with the bourgeoisie he emphasizes its origins among American blacks, the most oppressed social class. Because it is a "poor man's music," jazz is inherently oppositional, but its potential for social protest is further enhanced by leftist intellectuals who understand it as a form of dissent. As for its contribution to Hobsbawm's own life, jazz not only brought emotion to an otherwise cerebral existence, it allowed him to discover new worlds: he would not have been so interested in the United States nor made so many friendships there without jazz.

With the exception of this one issue, Hobsbawm did not deviate from official Communist policies and seldom gives us the reasons. Thus *Interesting Times* can be frustrating and tantalizing. We are dying to know the motivations behind some of Hobsbawm's actions, but too often he fails to explain himself, so we must be content with "I can't remember" and "who can tell what was in the mind of a young man 60 years ago?" No less disturbing than the party's stance toward fascism was the USSR's treatment of Yugoslavia, Hungary and Czechoslovakia. Hobsbawm was upset, but decided that the USSR was more important to the world Communist movement than these small, though "proud and heroic," countries.

Of all the Soviet policies toward the rest of Eastern Europe, the most shocking was the 1956 suppression of the Hungarian uprising. Hobsbawm gives this date the same significance as the 1917 Revolution. It virtually destroyed the world Communist movement. The Communist Party's Historians' Group objected to Soviet aggression and most of them left the party. But Hobsbawm did not. He did however, lose faith in the party's future in Britain and stopped being politically active.

SO WHY DID HE REMAIN? He does wrestle with this question and must be given credit for his honesty. First, he stayed out of rebelliousness and pride — he had been criticized so long for being a Communist that he was not going to admit defeat now. There was also vanity — he would show the academic establishment that he was a good enough historian to get all the best posts and honors despite the fact that he was a Communist. If he were to give up his membership, colleagues might say he was simply hungry for money and prestige. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, it was hard for Hobsbawm to give up the cause to which he gave his youth, his dreams and ambitions. It was hard to leave the cause for which so many men and women had given their lives. It was harder to leave than to stay.

Although he felt an outsider to the radical movements of the sixties and seventies, Hobsbawm writes of them with more sympathy than one might expect. In May, 1968 Hobsbawm was in Paris for

a UNESCO conference on Marx. He recalls watching the protesters from the conference hall and urging his colleagues to support the youths. He felt excited but could not understand what the radicals' aims were: "For middle-aged leftwingers like me, May 1968 and indeed the 1960s as a whole were both enormously welcome and enormously puzzling. We seemed to be using the same vocabulary, but we did not appear to speak the same language." Hobsbawm compares the radicals of the 1960s to the heroes of his *Primitive Rebels*, because they lacked a coherent political program. However, he accepted an invitation to address a crowd of occupying forces in the Cambridge Old Schools by one of their leaders. (253) He even ponders whether changing traditional relations between people as well as personal behavior may not be a better way to improve society than fighting to bring down capitalism.

One would think it is not a large step from this to understanding identity politics, but Hobsbawm's belief in a particular version of global socialism makes it impossible for him to relate to this phenomenon. He argues that since identity is defined against someone else it implies not identifying with the other. The consequences of this are disastrous both in terms of politics and in terms of writing history. Identity history, such as queer or feminist history, cannot be good history because "no identity group, however large, is alone in the world; the world cannot be changed to suit it alone, nor can the past." Hobsbawm is right in that it is important not to let one's own suffering blind one to the suffering of others. However, there is no reason why the effort to recover the voices of these minority groups has to imply failure to identify with the other or ignorance of the rest of the world.

Still, Hobsbawm's effort to understand and engage with radical politics since the sixties, as well as the numerous times he speaks critically of the Communist Party and expresses regret for the suffering of people at the hands of Communism gives the lie to the notion that he is some sort of unrepentant Communist, untouched by the actual history of his movement. In some ways, the book raises more questions than it answers but it is written with sincerity and passion, and like all good memoirs it conveys a powerful sense of what it was like to be alive in a world very different from our own.