

The Age of Capital

E.Hobsbawm

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This is the second of Hobsbawms trilogy of the long 19th century. It takes off where the first - the Age of Revolution, stopped, namely with the failed revolutions of 1848. The period it covers is rather brief in a historical perspective, roughly that of a quarter century, and, unlike its initial date with no convenient closure to terminate.

Hobsbawm is a Marxist historian and hence he uses, as if they would be unproblematic, concepts like Capitalism and the political consciousness of the masses. In short the period under consideration depicts the triumph of Capitalism and the finest hour of that class - the burgeoise, most closely connected with its rise. The sympathies of the author are clearly not with either, but as historical phenomena they cannot be evaded.

For most of history the overwhelming majority of humans alive have been engaged in subsistence farming, out of whose marginal excess, the superstructure of civilization has been founded. The dull process of feeding yourself in order to have enough energy to procreate and continue feeding yourself is not the stuff of which arresting history is made, thus the historian directs his gaze instead on the encrusting thin veneer of wealth, luxury and the adventure of intrepid human creation. With the 19th century something crucial happened, namely the deliverance of a large part of the population tied to the land, now being freed to be exploited in other ways, thus forming the mass of the uneducated and the unskilled known as the proletariat. This would not have been possible without agriculture becoming more efficient enabling fewer to feed more. Demographically population started indeed to increase significantly. Rural life is usually sentimentally contrasted to the harsh conditions of the urban poor, while in reality life on the land has traditionally been a living on the brink, subjected to the hazards of periodic mass starvations. Thus more miserable indeed, although not so visible as the obvious misery of the downtrodden factory worker. Hobsbawm does note the dramatic increase in arable land, but does not consider in detail why and how the productivity of the land increased, one obvious reason being the introduction of new crops, like that of the potatoe. The availability of a more extended work-force enabled the dramatic increase of production of matters not agricultural. Hobsbawm illustrates this by some statistical excerpts to show how the availability of steampower dramatically increased as did production of say cast-iron. In particular the highest per-capita production of heavy industry was due to Britain and Belgium with Germany quickly catching up passing France in the process. However, the author makes no attempt to really study what such figures really means, and the tables appended at the end of the book, also seem less chosen to make a point than to add mere statistical ornamentation. Natural questions as to what all that iron was used for are never asked. One obvious answer would be the investment into railways that took place during the time. It would have been a simple exercise to compare the amount of annual laying of rails as well as say the annual addition to tonnage of the merchant marines to the annual production of iron.

Capitalism seems to simply be a logical continuation of the industrial revolution wedded to the liberal dogma of free trade and unbridled individualism expressed through the passionate seeking of profit. Particularly the development was most striking in the emerging United States with its expanding frontier, once the Civil War had gotten out of its way. The Civil War, the author notes, was less a question of freeing the Slaves than a confrontation between a conservative plantation economy and a highly industrial society. The South won all the battles, Hobsbawm notes sarcastically, but the North won the war, its economy being the most resourceful.

The expansion of production was also reflected in a similar increase in trade, something that is easily borne out by statistical figures. Trade also involved migration, the most common one being internal, being the relentless drain of the cities on the human superfluity in the countryside. Initially the cities were not able to regenerate themselves demographically (which may be an indication that life indeed may have been harder in the cities, contrary to the suggestions above) but once they were able to maintain an increase there was a corresponding growth of traditional cities into veritable megalopolis, as well as of the number of merely big ones, the situation being most dramatic on the American plains. But there was also a huge migration from Europe across the Atlantic with labour eager to seek out new possibilities, a migration that greatly bloated the population of the geographically expanding United States abetting its rapid industrialization. In addition to that there were also a migration of Chinese to the rims of the Pacific including California, as well as the importation of indentured labours from India to prominently the West-Indies (but later also the African colonies).

With the liberal dogma of free trade and unfettered industrialization there came an awareness of liberal values of egalitarianism as illustrated by the abolition of slavery in the States (the British had taken the lead in the beginning of the 19th century and actually played an active role in the inhibition of its trade) and the rapid relinquishment of serfdom in eastern Europe, first in Habsburgian lands and Prussia later also in Russia. But, as noted above, one should be wary of ascribing too disinterested motives to the process.

In fact what was characteristic of the age was the confluence between nationalistic sentiments and political radicalism or at least liberalism. The main political event during the period was the unification of Germany under the tutelage of Bismarck. An adroit politician, the actual coiner of the phrase 'politics being the art of the possible', deeply conservative in temperament, he skillfully exploited the muddleness of liberal politics controlling events by tactical concessions. The pinnacle of his career was the successful campaign against Napoleon III, leading to the down-throw of the Second empire and acquisition of (reluctant) German territories concluding the German unification, signed, to the lasting humiliation of the French, in the hall of mirrors in the palace of Versailles. The collapse of the Second Empire led to the short-lived Paris-commune, an actual experiment in communism, enacted in the style of the previous revolutions of 1830 and 1848 replete with barricades. The uprising was bloodily thwarted, and, according to Hobsbawm instilled in the bourgeois a permanent terror of the workers insurrection. Parallel to the German unification, although of much less import, was the Italian, intermittently conducted by leftist rethorics, projecting the image of the romantic revolutionary in the form of the largely ineffective Garibaldi.

The Industrial Revolution initially did not involve very sophisticated science, in fact science did not start to have a definite impact on the lot of men until the middle of the 19th century. But with the exploitation of electrical phenomenon, towards the end of the 19th century, the electrical telegraph connected large parts of the world via cables, some of them undersea¹. This enabled almost simultaneous transmission of information between physically widely dispersed centers of civilization; thus shrinking the world and making the modern concept of world-news not only a possibility but an imperative. In fact this is a fact generally underrated, which both widened the gap between the contemporary worlds of the technologically sophisticated and the geographically dominant exterior, as well as between the immediate past and the present. One may well argue that this technological invention ushered us into the modern world and that we have more in common with the modern people of that age than they had with those of a generation before. During the revolutions of 1848, information basically did not travel faster than the physical deployment of men, thus the spread of it was limited by the time it did take actually to travel.

The world which now emerged was global, thus the notion of Globalization, so regretted nowadays, was already with us more than a century ago. The happy state of non-intervention and free passage of men and goods were later to be reversed. Thus a history of the time has to be one of the world. The British merchant marine and its navy dominated the seas, enabling them to maintain an Empire of a geographical extent until then unseen. India became an integral part of the British project, especially after the brutal suppression of the so called Sepoy-mutiny (1857-58)². The need for the raw-materials of the tropics, was becoming insistent enough not to be ignored. The technological gap between Europe and the rest of the world appeared unbridgable, widening by the year, and instilling in the Europeans a sense of innate superiority which in combination with moral righteousness would have such regrettable consequences in the decades to come. There was one exception, that of Japan, which through its Meiji restoration of 1868, at the end of the period under consideration, quickly abandoned its feudal past, determined to catch up with the west, an ambition actually to be realised. There has been much speculations why the Japanese proved to be the proverbial exception proving the rule. One points to its history, similar in many ways to that of its insular counterpart - Britain, as well as its tradition of emulation, as exemplified by its heavy borrowing from China.

To a Marxist the stratification of the population into classes is one of the paramount features of society. Roughly one may speak of the four 'castes' corresponding to the martial, the spiritual, the commercial and the sustaining, referring to the aristocracy, the church, the merchants or burghers and the peasants respectively, as illustrated by the traditional Swedish division into the four estates of its representative body, and strikingly analogues to the Indian caste system. In Europe the system was not as rigid, aristocracy was not only perpetuated by birth but admitted a swelling ostensibly due to displayed merit (usually of the martial kind) and thus by the end of the ancient regime France sustained a huge number of aristocrates most of them only marginally distinguishable from the general independant peasantry. In fact in many countries the peasants ceased to be an independant class so in addition to those four there was, as in India, a fifth caste of

¹ This forced the heavy use of rubber (guttaperka) only available in tropical lands

² Actually applauded by most European powers as a victory of civilization over barbarity.

those excluded. In eastern Europe those consisted of the serfs, forming the basis for the emerging proletariat. From a Marxist point of view, the traditional delimitations were bound to be replaced by economically motivated and sustained ones. Thus aristocracy became marginalized and instead the great divide sprung up between the workers, - the have-nots, and the bourgeois, - those of possession, making up two classes locked into inevitable conflict. Neither class was particularly homogenous. The bourgeois contained most of the four traditional classes united both by being the beneficiaries of the economic system as well as being distinct from the lower classes. The latter contained within their ranks the skilled artisans as well as the overwhelming riff-raff of those destitute of mind as well as of body. The artist, the proud denizen of the bohemian underworld, tried, with various amounts of success, to be part of both. As Hobsbawm notes, the political consciousness of the proletariat, (whatever is meant by the consciousness of impersonal entities), was interpreted, formulated and propagated by the skilled elite. In fact the literacy rates of the populace was not impressive, especially not in England and France which incidentally were surpassed by the Prussians³ not to mention the Swedes, whose high rates (quotes of 99%) makes one doubt the accuracy of the statistics⁴. Hobsbawm argues that higher rates of literacy was instrumental in the rapid industrialization of the Northern European countries.

But the age was foremost the age of the Bourgeois, and no matter how much Hobsbawm may be out of sympathy with its members, he cannot but feel a reluctant admiration for the accomplishments they were instrumental in bringing about, both in terms of their scope and depth. That age saw the first stirrings of the mass consumer society. With the advent of railway and cheap steamers⁵ the well-heeled were able to travel in comfort and often; and in particular, especially after the opening of the Suez canal, the cadre of colonial administrators, rather than being committed to their distant duties, could regularly visit their home-bases and bring their families, which conceivably had rather profound effects on their attitudes to their missions. Consumer goods multiplied and thus being available to those with the means. It was about this time the first department stores opened, providing both easy access as well as making the act of shopping almost a religious ritual. The homes of the bourgeois became sumptuously furnished providing tangible evidence of solidity, one of the key moral virtues of the age. The sexual hypocrisy of the so called Victorian age is doubted by the author, who points out that there really existed (maybe still to this age) a distinct division in the attitude between the Catholic South and the Protestant North, the former being able to engage in extra-marital adventures with the tacit approval of society, while for the latter any discrepancy between individual passion and external approval often led to intense personal torment⁶.

³ Hobsbawm claims that the military superiority of the Prussians in the Franco-Prussian war was due to the higher literacy rate among its troops, something I find a bit fanciful.

⁴ It has been argued that its long tradition of comprehensive religious examination, assured at least a proficiency of reading if not writing, generations ahead of the introduction of the law of compulsory elementary education of 1842

⁵ Emigrants often found the cost towards their port of embarkation more expensive than the final leg to their overseas destination

⁶ Among Southern slave-owners, contrary to popular myth, the sexual transgression resulting in mixed

The bourgeois, among its various short-comings, have often been accused of bad taste. To some extent, Hobsbawm confirms the prejudice, pointing out that the architecture of that period was uncharacteristically eclectic, drawing on a wide spectrum of past styles. Maybe the most original and striking of its architectural accomplishments, but usually not regarded as such, were the engineering feats of bridges and similar mundane constructions. The bourgeois penchant for high-culture has often been pointed out, as well as its tangible manifestations (the ostentatious Opera house naturally comes to mind). One may be forgiven if one suspects that much of this fascination was due less to artistic appreciation than as markers of social distinction. In his attempt to give a survey of the arts of the period, the author comes up against it brevity and accidental placing in time, observing that as a whole those decades provided nothing really first rate, except that what had its origins in an earlier period. He points out that the dominant form of art was the imaginative novel reaching out not only to the bourgeois but to the reading public in general. Dickens stands out of course, although the author makes no mention of the obvious, that Dickens popular works constituted the precursor of the modern soap-opera⁷. As to science, its practical applications were coming to its fore, especially in chemistry. Physics was at the time reaching what was supposed to be the end of its development, famously announced by Lord Kelvin, after spectacular discoveries of the early part of the century. The science of geology, wedded to biology via Natural history, was coming into its own, and the most momentous development of the time was the formulation of Darwins theory of evolution⁸ with ramifications way beyond the context in which it had been conceived, thus often compared to the Copernican revolution. In the social sciences nothing remarkably happened, with one stunning exception, not surprising given the outlook of the author, namely Karl Marx; a combined philosopher and social scientist, whom the author holds in the highest possible esteem, reminiscent of the deferential ways modern biologists refers to Darwin.

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racial progeny was rather rare

⁷ The book being written in the late seventies, this observation may have not been to topical at the time

⁸ the phenomenon of evolution was generally known since a century in scientific circles