

Globalization, Democracy and Terrorism

E.Hobsbawm

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The book is a slight one, consisting of a series of lectures recently delivered. The result is one of repeated repetitions, which, however, is not such a bad thing after all, especially not from a pedagogical point of view. Hobsbawm has a few points he wants to get across, and as he says them over and over again, the message becomes clear.

Hobsbawm is an old Marxist, with little love lost as to the disappearance of the Sovietunion (although he does of course commend the inhibiting influence its existence had on the hegemony and action of the U.S.), and one who does not view the present century with any enthusiasm. (He is also an old man, now over ninety, and thus not liable to travel with it for much longer.) Globalization and its concurrent uniformization of culture and economics and its far from uniform blessings it bestows, has its limits though, as he is quick to point out. Globalization does not seem to carry to the political arena, and as the organization of the world is still along national lines, this constitutes a bulwark against its total triumph. One particular aspect of globalization is empire. Hobsbawm compares the former British with the ascending American to the detriment of the latter. The British knew their limits, while the Americans, at least not under the crazy administration of the younger Bush, seem not to. Empire is always based on self-interest, and thus one should be wary of imperial designs ostensibly motivated for the benefit of the vanquished. In former times it was the blessings of Christian religion and civilization (the two not necessarily distinguishable), nowadays the mantra is democracy, human-rights and the free market system. The world is far too complicated to expect that our western conception of liberal democracy (which has vanquished all alternatives in our political discourse) is exportable without crucial modifications.

This leads to the sacred cow of liberal democracy of which Hobsbawm has some reasonable doubts. Democracy is government of and for the people, but hardly by the people. As Plato well understood, democracy carried to its logical conclusion leads to populism, and of course a democracy can vote to abolish itself by electing a tyrant (which did happen, albeit somewhat indirectly in Germany in the 30's). Now Popper in his famous critique of Plato maintained that Platos question of how to best governed is an ill-posed one. The point of democracy is not to try to maximize the efficiency and quality of government but to try to minimize its bad effects. Electoral democracy is basically just a means of disposing of a bad government without bloodshed. Hobsbawm is, like many of us, skeptical of electoral democracy, this actually being one of the minor aspects of democracy. If there is no unity among the electorate, with no tacit consensus as to the legitimacy of a governing body, counting votes in a divided society will mean little and effect few benefits. To think of liberal democracy as a universal solution to all problems is of course naive. Colombia, the author reminds us of, is one of the most democratic republics in Latin America. For a long time, two parties have taken turns to govern through fair and contested elections, and yet Colombia is one of the worst countries to live in in all of South America, with an

extremely high incidence of endemic violence. Mankind does face formidable challenges, the impact of human society have in recent decades approached geological proportions, as the author calls it. Those challenges can hardly be met by populist approaches. The governing bodies do understand such limits to the value of popular instruction, and most of their activities are geared towards minimizing the constraints imposed by elections and their supposed interpretations of the will of the people. Yet, will they have enough latitude to do what needs to be done? To come to terms with the problems, truly draconic measures will be called for, measures which are bound not to meet with the desperate disapproval of the mass of man. What should a government do? Comply with the wishes of the people, as manifested by election or consumer priorities; or to do the right thing (whatever that is)? This is a classical dilemma which has been stated throughout history, but which now acquires a particular urgency. Hobsbawm has of course not much concrete to add to this, suffices that he raises the question, and challenge the unthinking consensus. Poppers ideas of democracy constitute a well-needed anti-dote to vulgar conception, although his are not fully thought out either. (The question of whether democracy is allowed to abolish itself he sweeps under the rug by the proclamation that there should be no tolerance for intolerance.) To Popper Science is the ultimate manifestation of democracy. matters of truth are not settled by votes, but by the free interchange of ideas, and in particular the fact that anybody who has something to contribute is welcome to do so, and can be ensured of a listening. It is not your status that counts, but the strength of your arguments. Democracy is not so much about people as about ideas.

Finally when it comes to terrorism Hobsbawm points out a growing brutalization of society, noticeably also in the use of language. Obscene language was not 'comme il faut' in polite exchanges until the 60's. Words like 'fuck' did not appear in print, let alone in dictionaries. This has of course changed, but whether this is really relevant is up to the personal opinion of the author. More to the point is that modern technology makes the monopoly of violence hitherto enjoyed by the State moot. The practice of suicide bombing has likewise increased the potency of individuals. A State is able to contain violence, as the British and the Spanish demonstrated, but unable to eradicate it. The means of surveillance have been improved considerably, but their effects have been less to maintain control than to restrict individual freedom and dignity. Terrorism is more brutal than before, when it tended to be specifically targeted. Now it is a matter of indifference whether the innocent are affected, in fact the very randomness of the victimization is crucial to the ultimate purpose of acts of terrorism - the causing of terror. The media and the political establishment have been colluding in the perpetration of terror, and in the case of governments, (although Hobsbawm does not press that point), this very collusion in creating an atmosphere of panic, can (or even ought to?) inspire suspicions of complicity¹. The Spanish and the British governments did handle the ETA and IRA threats commendably, always playing down the publicity, without which acts of terrorism become pointless. Terrorism is of course a problem, but not a political one. Spectacular as the 9/11 was, it did in no way compromise the power of the United States. Terrorism is a matter for the police not the military, and the notion of a war against terrorism is at best

¹ The apartment bombings in Moscow a few years ago and blamed on the Chechenians is a case in point.

just a vivid metaphor, and which like all metaphors should never be interpreted literally.

Pessimism is of course an easy way out. An absolving of responsibility and an indulgence in 'I told-you-so' mentality. On the other hand optimism is too often a putting your head in the sand, appealing to unfounded metaphysical principles such as the power of the market. The 20th century was a mixed bag. On one hand the scene of the worst atrocities ever perpetrated by mankind, on the other the general rise in affluence it saw through was unprecedented. Most people in the world, or at least most people who count (as consumers) have benefitted from the latter, and those who were victimized by the first, usually are no longer with us. And maybe the most momentous change brought about by it, is still unsung, namely the migration from country to city. Until fairly recently the lot of most people were that of producing food, this natural connection to the most basic of all activities, is being atrophied, with unforeseeable consequences. There is little of the 20th century to give cause for optimism as to the 21st.

April 3, 2009 **Ulf Persson:** *Prof.em, Chalmers U.of Tech., Göteborg Sweden* ulfp@chalmers.se