The Age of Revolution

Hobsbawm

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During most of its tenure on earth the human race has existed as small bands of hunters and gatherers[1]. This way of life, with its minimal impact on the environment[2] can in principle be maintained indefinitely, as is testified by the discovery, still into the 20th century, of pockets of such archaic modes of life. This kind of life most closely adhers to the life of humans as a biological species and can be seen as a natural extension of that which was practised by our proto-human ancestors. Thus most if not all of our adaptive traits can be seen as related to this kind of life, as biological evolution is a slow process and only affects marginal changes in time periods as short as a thousand years. Life as a hunter and gatherer was quite intellectually demanding, requiring a wide spectrum of skills. Modern Australian aboriginies are considered to be the most skilled of all animal trackers, a skill requiring a long education, constant practice and great ingenuity. In addition all humans possess remarkable language skills, part of our identity as a species as much as our ability of walking on our hindlegs; and it is also noted that all human languages are equally expressive, an idea too beautiful to be discarded. In short humans living in primitive circumstances were as intelligent as present day humans, and their lives were, as far as we disregard the discomforts of disease and rampant brutality[3], probably as satisfying if not more than moderns, in terms of variety, self-reliance and challenges, both physical and intellectual. For various reasons, to which we will return, modern man has conceived of it as both savage and noble, something both to outgrow and to return to. Such a life, apart from isolated innovations, knows of no development, no culture, apart from decoration and narrations performed by bards, or communally sung or danced. In particular such a life admits no history.

A few thousand years ago, the exact time interval is of no concern to us, a gradual revolution was affected, namely the agrarian. It is safe to say that it took thousands of years to develope and spread, and that it probably emerged independantly at different times and location. The transition was not clearcut, both modes of life co-existed, and the nomadic kind of life, involving domesticed beasts, can be seen as a kind of intermediary.

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[1] But this does not hold for the majority of men who have ever lived as a rather crude estimate yields setting such populations to about one million world-wide (roughly comparable to present populations of wolves suitably geographically extrapolated) with a tenure of 50 millenia.

[2] Which should be taken with more than a grain of salt. The Clovis people invading the, still by humans untouched, New World managed in a few thousand years to exterminate almost all the great game on those continents, thereby drastically changing their ways of life. Dramatic as the change may be seen in retrospect, at the time it was probably hardly noticable generation from generation except during the final phases

[3] Modern anthropological research indicates a high incidence of homocide only paralleled by gang violence in modern inner city ghettos.

While the primitive hunting economy generated no surplus only sustainment subject to slow cycles of expansion and contraction; the Agrarian Revolution effected a dramatic increase in the production of food, making possible a sharp increase in population. This lead to a concentration of the same, its extreme form being the rise of cities, and a sharp division of labour, reducing a large fraction of the population to the bondage of monotonous occupation. The concentration of people led to disease, shorter lifespans, higher turnovers and more frequent childbearing, and paradoxically undernourishment as population increases did not necessarily go in step with increases in production. Studies indicate that the hunting forfathers were physically taller, healthier and lived longer than their agrarian descendants. And until fairly recent times Nomadic people enjoyed a superiority of strength visavi the settled populations not broken until the rise of sophisticated military technology. The division of labour also made possible a thin class of people blessed with leisure out of which culture developed. Human history is basically the documentation of this narrow segment of population, how it developed scripts, brought about sophisticated technological innovations, kept track of celestial phenomena creating proto-sciences; in addition to designing art and architecture and involving in trade necessitating adminstrative structures. In short one may argue that the Agrarian Revolution was the most fundamental of all the transitions mankind has ever gone through, that it divorced man from his biological niche and created civilization and thus a history. The transition came with a heavy price, however, but as it was never consciously willed nor consciously planned and controlled, there never were any possibility of a return to a former Eden out of which man had expelled himself.

So this is the general setting in which the study the Age of Revolutions should be placed. Its author claims that at the end of the 18th-century two revolutions occured whose significance are second to none but the Agrarian. Hobsbawm refers to them as the dual revolutions, meaning on one hand the Industrial Revolution in England and the French Revolution. Of the two the former is clearly the most important, and although the thesis of Hobsbawm is that both are inseparably intertwined, one must give pride of place to the former. The Industrial Revolution shares many of the crucial features of the Agrarian. It was something that happened gradually (albeit at a much greater speed than the Agrarian), and only became apparent in retrospect. Neither was it planned but evolved independant of human planning and wishes as well as out of its control. It is much easier to explain what it really meant, than to explain how it came about. What it really meant was a dramatic increase in production, an exponential process involving the feedback mechanism of freeing people from work on the land as well as a harnassing of external sources of energy. Up to the Industrial Revolution most humans were engaged in agriculture most of whose fruits were fed back simply to sustain those so engaged. Thus in particular the main human activity, measured in any relevant unit, man-hours or expenditure of energy, was agricultural. And the energy involved was predominantly muscular i.e. produced by food grown and consumed. The Industrial Revolution simply meant that non-agrarian activities became dominant involving not only the majority of men but becoming so extensive as to transcend the manual capacity of man as well as his ability to generate power and energy by his own muscle and produce, that far-ranging mechanization had to be developed as well as the full scale harnassing of external sources of energy. Simple statistics beautifully

illustrates the dramatic increases thereby documenting the progress and scope of the wave that was the Industrial Revolution.

But what were the sources and explanations and why did it start in England of all places? Those are the major questions that Hobsbawm tries to address but not too successfully. Clearly the Industrial Revolution did not come out of the blue, although its impact may be seen as a bolt from heaven. Manufacture of tools has a very long history, and throughout civilization there has been skilled craftsmen as well as handy peasants. Tools were made to serve specific needs and most of them actually manufactured by those that actually needed them, continuing a tradition stemming back to the arcadic past of mankind. Gradually there were, especially in cities, a growing specialization and an accumulation of skilled tradition. But througout the pre-industrial stage man was basically a producer not a consumer. One of the startling effects of the Industrial Revolution, as pointed out by Hobsbawm is that the potential for production is so excessive that the main problem is not to satisfy needs and tend to markets, but to create needs and markets, thus changing man from producer to consumer. In addition to the agrarian sector there was the sector of metallurgy, obviously an auxiliary activity to farming, but so intricate that it created its own chains of activities from mining to transportation and refinement. Activities that lend themselves to mechanization and external energy as in the furnace. Then trade, ostensibly the mutually beneficial interchange of commodities, has been taking place since time immemorial, forcing improvements in transportation[4], creating a sophisticated economy with tools like money and concepts like recursive credits, ultimately based on intrapersonal faith and interconnected webs of contacts. It is easy to point to different strands that need to come together, but how they actually come together and in what sense they can say to create the elusive concept of wealth is quite another thing. And why England? True England was unique along with the Scandinavian peninsula of never being predominantly feudal but possessing an independant peasantry, although the influence of it must have been negliable compared to the aristocratic landowners and their employment of tenants. Hobsbawm is very hazy on the agricultural position of England making some vague references to its free peasantry, but allowing the notion of free both to refer to political freedom (which must have had marginal consequences) and free in the sense of being not necessarily tied to the land but available for alternate activities. England was also one of the politically most liberal countries which already in the end of the 17th century had done away with notion of an absolute monarch and developed a parliamentary system, noted by the visiting Voltaire with such approval. But the same kind of liberalism that characterized England I believe also was a characteristic of the Dutch States and possibly some, admittedly minor, German States, not to mention Sweden during most of the 18th century. True England was a major trading nation, which had ousted its main rival - Holland, during the 17th century and was busy ousting its most formidable rival - France during the 18th. It also maintained both a high population density as well as a high total population as opposed to say peripheral Sweden[5] Hobsbawm explanation is simply that

[4] although until the advent of the Industrial Revolution most transports were carried on water (and in terms of long-distance tonnage this may still be true today) creating a strange metric on the world, in which water contracted and connected, while land-masses expanded and isolated.

[5] During the 17th century the population difference between greater Sweden and Great Britain was

the English monopolized the cotton trade, a triangle involving exported slaves from West Africa, production of the raw material in the Carribean and its Southern Colony in North America, while producing the finished textiles at home, using not only a large labour-force but also abetting it by mechanical means[6]. It created a large market by destroying the traditional cotton-industry of India, effectively dismantling the incipient industrialization of the sub-continent pushing it back to a feudal agrarian past. As a historical explanation of the descriptive type it certainly is sufficient as by hindsight subsequent industrializations are marked by the growth of a key-industry generating both the capital and the momentum to set an inevitable process going. But as a deeper explanation it clearly cries out for a more fundamental economical understanding. In what ways did the fact that more non-English people used clothing manufactured by the English make for a transferable wealth that benefited the producers not the consumers? The question may appear naive, but basic questions usually are. Clearly we have to delve deeper, and as it may be there may be no satisfactory explanation. Anyway Hobsbawm lacks the tools and instead being a historian of Marxist persuasions the historical scenario he paints fits beautifully with traditional Marxist concepts like accumulation of capital, and exploitation, especially of colonies, as to make further inquiries moot.

The French Revolution is very different. It was an act of human volition, dramatic, well-defined and revolving in real time, day by day, providing printable head-lines. Its sources are easy to list as are its various impacts. Did the French Revolution make the Industrial revolution possible, or did it merely surf the wave? I am inclined to believe the latter. The French Revolution was an intellectual endeavour, eminently selfconcious, and its roots were of the mind, namely the Enlightment. It is tempting to ascribe the faith in the human mind and the power of rational thought to the Scientific Revolution of the 17th century. It certainly inspired a class of thinkers to visions of extending the inquiries into matters celestial and mechanical to the far messier sphere of human affairs. The elegance of Newtonian theories became the model to which to strive. An exaltation of the power of human reasoning inevitably lead to a radical questioning of the society in which it was embedded. The priviligues of feudal inheritance and clerical power came in for savage attack, as did the notion of God and divine authority, on which it ultimately rested, as so much superstition. The Enlightment was an Intellectual Revolution and as such it involved but a minute section of the human population confined to the Western world to boot. Yet history tends to concentrate on what is visible and makes sense, to such an extent that our image of past centuries tend to be dominated by the faces of a few outstanding individuals (whom we certainly would meet and have pleasant conversations with, would time-travel be an option in addition to charter flights to sunny exotic countries). The very word 'enlightment' makes the 18th century appear basking in a light deprived its predecessors, which in contrast look dark and gloomy, although most people at the time would never have noticed the difference. The Enlightment is usually associated

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quite small both sporting about three million people, dwarfed by populous France of some twenty million. But while the population of Sweden and especially France stagnated that of England exploded in the early 18th century, a demographic fact not discussed in the study.

[6] although as Hobsbawm points out initially at least the work was farmed out to independant craftsmen with looms and their underlings.

with the French, philosophers of wit, like Voltaire, or the more plodding do-gooders - the encyclopedists, engaged in the project of accumulation and systematization of knowledge, in short the writing of a new Bible. But it certainly was not confined to Gallic lands, Kant in Köningsberg and Adam Smith in Edinburgh certainly should be included, disparate actors in the periphery of Europe. In recent years the contributions of Scottish thinkers and the intellectual centre of Edinburgh, in glaring contrast to the degeneracy of the contemporary British universities, have even been awarded a retrospective label - the Scottish Enlightment. The 18th century was also a century of science. Mathematics exploded in sophistication, intimately but not exclusively in tandem with further exploration in mechanical physics. Astronomy literally extended the view of the world. Natural history (Linneaus, Buffon) was coming into its own, and even economics, which nowadays is considered as a minor, if fashionable, science without depth compared to the spectacular achievements of the hard, was then a very respectable intellectual endeavour on the cutting edge. Adam Smith with his elegant theories (many would now say of a spurious and specious elegance) is a case in point, and Darwins theory of evolution owes a very heavy intellectual depth to the ideas of the pioneering economists (not only to Malthus celebrated dicthomy between the arithmetic and the geometric[7]). It was a heady time with many crosscurrents and a lack of specializations, when also philosophers tended to be mathematically and scientifically literate[8] It should also be noted that research at this time was not predominantely channeled via universities, but through societies, and the largess of aristocratic and royal patronage[9]. It was the time of epistolary correspondence, and its natural developement the periodical learned journal started to appear. Knowledge was not socially dispersed via conferences but more likely at a literary salon presided more often than not by a lady whose taste of fashion run to the intellectual rather than to the frivolous. To observers of the present scientific age, which has undergone its own industrial revolution with a concomitant 'proletarization' of the run of the mill scientist[10](to which we will return below), the age appears idyllic.

All of this clearly yearned for a political expression. One such expression resulted in the notion of the 'enlightened monarch' or more crudely and oxymoronically expressed as 'enlightened despotism', a natural expression in view of the fact of the eagerness scientists sought royal patronage. How could heads of state resist having their divine authority supplemented with the benefits of rational inquiry? I suspect that in many cases 'enlightment' was confined to the financial amd moral encouragement of the scientists themselves. Clearly the ultimate political expression of the Enlightment was the French Revolution. This is not the place to present a blow by blow account of the revolution itself, nor does Hobsbawm bother to do so, the dramatic story has been told over and over again. What

[7] Nowadays we speak of course about the linear and the exponential

[8] Kant started out his career by proposing a mechanism for the creation of the solar system. An explanation which in sophistication compared well to an alternate later proposed by Laplace.

[9] The upstart Russian Empire had a lot of cash to spend, and many of the continental notables did stints in St Petersburg (The list is long and would run as a 'Who is Who' of the age, suffices it to remind the reader of names like Voltaire, Diderot and the Swiss mathematician Euler).

[10] Mathematics is still an exception, more like the humanities in the individual responsibility of inquiry and the permanence of its records

concerns us is the impact. The French Revolution made a very clear distinction between the New and the Old, it launched the modern vocabulary of politics, giving a sense to left and right, making precise the notion of conservative and reactionary, as well as giving a new twist to the terminology of liberal and progressive. And unlike subsequent revolutions it was universally hailed by intellectuals all over the (western) world[11]. Although The French Revolution, especially in Marxist circles, has been seen as the revolution of the burgeois, thus merely bringing about a temporary dominance by a class doomed to extinction (and despised as few have been); yet it contained within its rapid radicalization (as seen by the rise of the Jacobites) the seeds of modern socialism and communism, although precursors can be traced deep into the past especially in the visions of various religious sects. The French Revolution was until the advent of the Russian Revolution the supreme revolution serving as a model for all subsequent ones, of which the first half of the 19th century had more than its fair share. Its dramatic course imbued it with a lot of romantic appeal, and the terror it unleashed, did rather add to than detract from that appeal. (Hobsbawm notes, with the detachment that comes naturally to a latter-day observer, that the actual number of casualties were quite modest, especially when compared to the violent suppression of the Paris commune in 1871, to say nothing about the violent events of the 20th century). But what were its direct consequences?

As an intellectual event it was undeniable, showing that the intellectual mattered. It certainly colored our view of society and its ethics, influenced philosophy (Marx, as a philosopher as we know him, would probably have been unthinkable without it) and in general giving us an appropriate vocabulary. But the basic question is whether it was a driving force or whether it was merely reacting. My hunch, as expressed above, is to lean towards the latter interpretation. The French Revolution certainly made the ground tremble under the traditional and established ruling elites all over the continent, as being that deluge of which Louis XV had prophesized on his death-bed. The decapitation of Louis XVI certainly brought the point home[12]. Thus there formed a coalition of outside forces to try and restore the old regime. On the face of it one would have thought that France, ravaged by internal strife, would have fallen an easy prey to a collection of determined foes, but France rallied, and ironically the Revolution having abolished the traditional symbols of authority had in the process exalted the nation of France itself as the supreme symbol of authority. What France did was to introduce the notion of a total war, to be deployed with terrible consequences in the 20th. Rather than to rely on a small but professional army, which had been the rule among continental kings during the 'toy-wars' of the 18th century, it resorted to mass conscription and what its armies lacked in terms of skills and

[11] Hobsbawm repeats the anecdote about Kant foregoing his usual routines at the excitement of the news of July 14

[12] It is argued that had not the King been as foolhardy as to attempt an escape, thereby abandoning his people and breaking an unwritten contract and losing his claims to their loyalty in the process, his actual execution would not necessarily have occured. As it was, I recall from elementary school, it was decided by the majority of one vote. On the other hand the event may have been inevitable, unless of course the very decapitation, as a brazen defying of a tabu, opened the floodgates to a subsequent radicalization that may not have occured otherwise. Still one should not forget that the deposition of absolute rulers is rather a rule than an exception in the annals of mankind

experience it made up for by sheer number and enthusiasm. It certainly did not impede success that careers, including the military ones, were now open to enterprising young men of the people, i.e. without aristocratic pedigree. The supreme example being of course Napoleon.

With Napoleon the French Revolution continued, but with other means. As Hobsbawm notes, it would be monotonous to list all the succesful military campaigns that Napoleon launched, suffices it to remind the reader of the salient features behind his spectacular successes. First of all the forces against Napoleon and the Revolution he after all represented were not as united as might have been assumed, even if a regime was hostile against the revolution so called real-political considerations dominated. A country has no permanent friends, as Palmerstone is reported to have said, only permanent interests. Furthermore the main problem of an army is logistics, how to keep it fed and in fighting condition. Those problems were basically solved by themselves, as Napoleon simply followed the age-old tradition of letting the army live off the land. This worked beautifully on the densely populated continent, but became a disaster in sparsely populated Russia especially when the latter resorted to the desperate strategy of the scorched earth. Actual battles, where Napoleon proved his mettle, were rather symbolic affairs, involving a limited amount of fire power and hence caused marginal casualties[13] Thus, Hobsbawm notes that the Napoleonic wars were rather gentle affairs affecting the civilian population marginally[14]. Thus they presented a marked contrast to the ravages suffered by the Thirty Years War and the even more horrible and total ones to follow in the 20th century. France was like a flood going beyond its proper containment, inundating all its neighbours, and then eventually retreating. The land that was reclaimed was permanently changed, some would say fertilized by the fruits of the French revolution. For one thing the feudal system was abolished and the Napoleonic Code introduced as the basis for the legal systems. Thus Napoleon joins Alexander the Great in not just being a conquerer like Djingis Khan but one with a vision and a mission. With Napoleon the French Revolution was forcibly exported, and with his demise, the French Revolution came to an end, and so did France as a great power. France had been the great power of the 17th century with its rival - the Habsburg dynasty in retreat. Its continental predominance, politically and culturally, had been consolidated during the 18th although it was losing against Britain as a colonial power. The French Revolution and the Napoleonic continuation proved to be its final glory, the remembrance of which still haunts the French nation, shrill in its references to past glory and patriotism, pathetic in its attempts in the 20th century to play the role of a powerful nation, bit not realizing that its power has long since been irretrievably lost.

The dual revolution illustrates two strands of Marxist thought that appear, at least to the outsider, to be at odds with each other. On one hand we have the inexorable movement of history, as exemplified by the Industrial Revolution, a great wave which cannot be resisted. On the other hand we have the Revolution as an act of delibration

[13] Hobsbawm cites figures of 1-2% for battle casualties. The actual killer claiming the majority of soldiers were epidemics caused by the great concentration of people and defective hygiene. And during extreme campaigns, starvation and cold.

[14] One would think that the practise of living off the land by looting would contradict this, but the literature at the time seems to bear it out

as well as an admonishment. But if history evolves along its inescapable laws, why this rush to help it along by revolution when it is bound to happen anyway? Why this proud proclamation that up to now the task of philosophers was mainly to understand the world, but now the time has come to change it?

Marxism is closely tied to communism, not just in the tautological sense of communism being its ultimate goal, but more relevantly to the political manifestations of the 20th century, refered to as communist by friends and foes alike, which turned marxism into an ideology and a secular religion making it into a caricature in the process. With communism as a political manifestation collapsed and consequently become discredited, marxism as an ideology suffered the same fate[15]. What remains of it as an ideology is a vague commitment to justice out of which is supposedly rose. As a theory of economics Marxism was deficient in the Popperian injunction to try and falsify itself[16] and consequently it degenerated into the orthodoxy of a sacred text[17] . What remains is marxism as a tool to understand and approach history, and clearly it is in this sense Hobsbawm is a marxist, and it is the only sense of the notion that can be part of a serious academic context. So what constitute marxist historical scholarship and in what ways is that exemplified by Hobsbawms work?

Hobsbawm does in other contexts write about Marxs insights with the same kind of veneration that biologists write about Darwin. The theory of evolution and the mechanism that drives it changed biology from being a mere hodgepodge of isolated curiosities, however fascinating, to a structured unified subject with an overall meaning and consequently a steady supply of natural questions to ask. The main idea of Darwins theory of evolution is very simple and elegant, in fact so simple and elegant that it would degenerate into a mere tautology if it was not amply illustrated. The ample illustration is what his book - the Origin of Species, is all about, based on decades of painstaking detailed work, of which his principles are but a conclusion. In what way would Marxism be analogous to Darwinism? The philosophical content of Darwinism, as distinct from its biological, is to do away with the notion of conscious design. The intricacies of the natural world, were traditionally likened to the intricacies of a mechanical gadget exemplified say by a watch, and just as the latter pointed to a mind behind, a watchmaker, the natural world implied its maker, i.e. a divine mind, a God. Darwin posited a mechanism that side-stepped this assumption of ascension (the watchmaker is clearly superior to his watch, and by analogy God would be superior to the world) and instead made an explanation based on reduction possible. And from an intellectual point of view, to explain something complicated by something simpler, is far more satisfying than explain it by something even more complicated. The Darwinian principle transcends biology, and has in fact influenced many other fields of

[15] Western intellectuals consistently underestimate the bitterness intellectuals of the Second World suffered under its ideological reign of terror

[16] Popper developed his notion of falsifiabilty, which in practice reduces to attempts at verification, in order to draw the lines of demarcation of what he thought to be true science from impostors like psychoanalysis and marxism

[17] This can cut both ways as Hobsbawm acidly points out in a so called Marshall lecture aimed for professional economists, when he suggests that certain economists have simply moved into the premises vacated by theologians, when they praise the blessings of neo-classical market economic theory. The question of whether economics is a science or not is however clearly not a subject for this essay

inquiry, but its most important manifestation remains the biological world and divorced from a context, it always risks being diluted into a tautology. So what is the corresponding principle in Marx?

A direct answer to a direct question is a simple NO. There is no corresponding principle easy to enunciate. What Marxism has in common with Darwinism is the desire to unify a complicated picture by a reduction to a few unsentimental principles[18] In the case of Marx history reduces to an economic struggle in which certain classes of peoples (actors) are visible. History is not just one damned thing after another, but has a direction, a flow and an inevitable evolution, and even a conclusion. And the crucial methodological question to ask is always who is to gain economically, or more generally, whose interest is being served. (Which is analogous to the Darwinian question of in what way does this constitute an adaptation.) The main difference between Marx and Darwin is that the latter was not a philosopher but a naturalist, his main interest was to marvel at the intricacies of the Natural world, hence his philosophical conclusions were simple and never philosophically elabourated. Marx was very different. I doubt whether he had any interest in antiquarian history, of pursuing questions of what happened exactly then and there. He was a system builder and the subject of his system was not only history but also the system itself. (Thus he became aware of self-reference, always an exciting idea to an intellectual, more precisely that even the study of history itself is subject to the forces of history and inevitably is bound to serve the interests of some class.) This led to a philosophical elabouration including many predictions and proclamations, from which Darwin, wisely or maybe merely unwittingly, abstained. Had Darwin elaborated his theory by burying it into a morass of predictions and say specific laws of evolutionary types as well as inherent meanings, not to mention elucidating its goal, his theory would have fallen in disrepute and his main insights might have been lost[19]So the real question is what are the basic insights of Marx that can be developed when a lot of the rubbish, whatever that may be, has been cleared out? More particularly will Hobsbawms treatment of the first half of the 19th century reveal the nature of constructive historical marxist thought?

History is in its widest sense literally anything that ever happened in the past. Rankes exhortion that the proper task of the historian is to find out exactly what happened is of course a sound one, barring the inherent difficulties as to what constitute a proper answer, and without it, history would lose its empirical anchoring and degenerate into mindless speculation, but it cannot be done exhaustively, and thus selection, as in any systematic inquiry, scientific or not, is inevitable. So what kind of selection would a Marxist historian make to distinguish himself from any other historian not equipped with

[18] This is clearly very satisfying to an intellectual and explains the irresistable appeal Matrxism has exercised in such circles. (Incidentally two of the most visible (and hence notable?) Darwinists at Harvard were Gould and Lewontine, who also were Marxists and as such typical of their profession. The father of Sociobiology - Wilson, at the same insitution is a notable (or maybe rather notorius?) exception). With the political decline of Marxism, that appeal has of course not disappeared, far from it, but it has now to be enjoyed in more circumspect ways.

[19] To some extent Darwin may have succumbed to unwarranted speculation in his later work - The Ascent of Man. But mainly what has to some extent given Darwism a bad name was the late 19th century vulgarization of it coomonly refered to as Social Darwinism

the same tool nor sharing the same perspective not to say ideology? To be honest, apart from the greater emphasis on the labour movement, the unproblematic use of terminology like class and capital, and the gratuitous use of abuse like the terminology petty-burgeois, I see little indication of a characteristic Marxist insight. True, Hobsbawm may treat the sorry lot of the proletariat with a suppressed indigination, thinking of the forces of history as not only impersonal but, somewhat contradictorily, as moral. But this might be more temperamental than arising from a strict methodology. Any Marxist historian must prescribe to the view that history entails progress, and thus an historical narrative must be a narrative of progress. It is not clear what the author singles out as progress during the period which suffered so many setbacks to the lot of the common man, except possibly a greater awareness on the part of the working population. So, following the outlines of Hobsbawm treatment what characterized the first half of the 19th century?

The end of the Napoleonic wars left a transformed Europe. The notion of a nation had become modern, in terms of nations encompassing well defined non-overlapping regions, preferably connected[20]. This meant that the map of Europe was tidied up, with small princely states, whether of German or Italian extraction, coalescing. On the other hand it also meant the notion of a nation being somewhat intrinsic based on a shared culture, history, religion and language. The question of race of course being a much trickier one. This national awareness tended to split up empires, of which the Austrian and the Ottoman, were the prime targets. This new awaken national awareness found its earliest manifestation on the Balkan in particular the liberation of Greece from the 'Ottomane yoke' in the early 1820's. A kind of combined revolution and national liberation that greatly excited the European intelligentsia, seeing in the Greeks, not just another Balkan tribe, but the descendants of the founders of western civilization. The rise of nationalist feelings, so vital to the French Revolution, would hence be seen, from the point of view of the established powers, as subversive; while it in the 20th century has often been seen as reactionary. Obviously it had nothing to do with socialism, and it is not clear whether it had anything to do with capitalism. Nowadays we think of it as rather irrational, but at the time it was a logical extension of the Enlightment and its rejection of extrinsic authority. Its sources have to be looked for elsewhere.

In terms of the lot of the common man, the abolishment of feudalism did not in practice imply a liberation. Hobsbawm points out that the feudal system did after all involve a contract between the lord and his subjects. The latter had to work for him, on the other hand his was the responsibility for their ultimate well-fare. He was their shephard. In bad times he should be in position to take form his surplus and even out the throughs of fortune. Clearly not all masters were paragon of virtues and responsibility, but breaking the law does not annihilate it, rather confirm its existence. When the tenant was now set on his own, he was seldom given the resources to look out for his own well-fare, instead he became the victim of capitalists, whose interest in the land was pure exploitation, in the words of Hobsbawm. So in a capitalist economy activity has no intrinsic worth only so far as it is generating a profit. From a neo-classical point of view this makes sense, it is irrational bordering to the criminal, to waste resources, whether material or human, on meaningless activities (like mining empty mines). In Marxist theory Capital and Labour are the key

[20] in the topological sense

concepts, and during the early 19th century in particular, capital had the upper hand, and thus there was an asymmetry of power, in which broken contracts between a capitalist and his hired labour, had only marginal consequences for the capitalist but disastrous for the labourer. (And here the indignation of Hobsbawm shows through, but of course the indignation would be universal among Marxists and non-marxists alike, violating a basic sense of justice.) The interesting question is why there is such an asymmetry in the first place, something we might take for granted. One explanation would be that the capitalist society (which to a non-marxism requires some explanation as to its precise meaning) simply took over the feudal structure. Another explanation, more based on general principles than historical antecedents, would be in the Malthusian mood. There are so many people and such limited resources that the average men, on the basis of aritmethical tautology, must be left barely scraping by. Thus the poverty of the masses is less a question of injustice and exploitation (would there be a universal redistribution the average condition might only rise only marginally) than a question of numbers. So poverty rather then being a consequence of exploitation, exploitation is a consequence of poverty.

And there was obvious poverty. The abysmal conditions of the working masses were a source of horror as well as compassion. Some industrialists, Owen being an obvious example and often refered to by Hobsbawm, took a proprietory interest in and concern for his work-forces. Dickens, to take an another obvious example, is well-known for, not to say identified with, the passionate way he depicted the down-trodden, inspiring indignation and tears (and of course making a nice fortune out of it)[21]. The interesting question is whether the great mass of people were worse off as exploited labourers during the industrial revolution than before as agricultural workers. The industrialization brought with it, in addition to the great engineering feats of startling beauty, like rail-way bridges and such things, a concentration of unmitigated ugliness and squalor, making poverty exceedingly manifest. Modern tourists still, when confronted with urban misery, tend to paint a comparatively idyllic picture of life in the countryside. Also, we seldom think of animals in the wild as poor, although they lack all material possessions[22]. This leads us to another topic, the intellectual reaction to industrialism.

The industrial revolution was gradual, as pointed out above, on the other hand it took place rather quickly, easily fitting within the lifespan of a man of normal longevity. Thus there were a very acute awareness of what had been and with what it had been replaced. This reaction may be identified with the rise of the Romantic movement in arts and literature as well as in philosophy and which dominated those fields of human endeavour during the period we are considering. Hobsbawm in his survey spends some time discussing, what he describes as the remarkable cultural achievments of the age,

[21] The middle-class indignation of the 19th century compares not too badly with the general lack of the same among priviligued westerners visavi the Third World. There is a lot of lip-service to the horrors of child-labour and exploitive wages, but most consumers are quite happy with the availability of cheap products depending on the very abuses they may get a kick out of decrying. The more cynical of them argueing, not without some justification, that the alternative to exploitation is too often starvation. It is also noteworthy that Dickens in 'Bleak House' refers to, what he disparingly calls 'telescopic philantropy', a phenomenon maybe even more appropriate in our age than his.

[22] What in fact would be a poor animal as opposed to a starving and sick one?

without really trying to fit those phenomenon into a unified picture (let alone marxist perspective, but maybe they do not after all fit into a general materialistic picture, unless of course they are seen as the trivial embellishment of a leisured class). The same goes for the scientific advance of the time period. The great intellectual awakening of the natural sciences during the 17th and 18th century did not really start to have an impact on society until the 19th century. One explanation is obvious, its wedding to the industrial revolution, enlarged its scope; but the real interesting question is to what extent it furthered the industrialization and to what extent it was influenced by it. The case of applied science versus pure is a contentious subject, and none into which Hobsbawm enters into in any depth. He does, however, point out some crucial observations. Namely science was not particularly well-developed in England at the time, and its industrialization was in no way a phenomenon of sophisticated technology. What won out was not the daring invention based on scientific principles, but the pragmatic solutions of tinkering-minded men. France was scientifically far more sophisticated, not only as regards to its previous tradition but also in the establishment of its scientific institutions of learning and research in the aftermath of the French Revolution[23] Germany too was coming into its own in a big way, creating the modern research oriented university having later become a model for the rest of the world. The developement of science, as noted above, is partly fuelled externally, but also internally by a logic of its own that seems to transcend economic considerations, however subtly interpreted. This holds in particular for mathematics, a subject that Hobsbawm treats gingerly and with due respect[24] Finally as to the subject of religion, the early 19th century showing a marked bifurcation. As to the intellectual side, outspoken atheism was probably impossible during the 17th century, an act of daring and defiance in the 18th century, but fully acceptable in the 19th. The worldview initiated by the Scientific revolution and propagated by the Enlightment was in the 19th century finding a form in which, to use the words of Laplace, the hypothesis of a prime mover was no longer necessary. On the other hand among the great mass of people this was a time of religious revival, most notably in the Protestant sphere, with a variety of sects developing and splitting off the main chuches, some of them of a rather extreme kind. [25] It is this revival, as well as the sustained grips of the Orthodox and Catholic churches that account for Marxs quip that Religion is the opium for the people.

If we now step back and view the rapid transition into industrialization and the effect it must have had on people psychologically as well as philosophical, we must at first confront the fact of horror and deep uneasiness. William Blake was one of the first to spot the

[23] One of its enduring legacies was the metric standardization we enjoy to this day. Its attempts to reform the calender was, however, shortlived. The notion of 'metric time' moribound for obvious reasons.

[24] He displays commendable erudition seeping into areas rather peripheral to his concerns, yet inevitably he gets details wrong, as on his reporting on non-Euclidean geometry, but there is little reason to quibble about that.

[25] The phenomenon existed in the Russian Orthodox to a limited extent, as the example of 'the Old believers' illustrates. What its analogue in the Catholic realm I do not know, but I suspect there is none. Among the Protestant churches the desertion was so massive that it did redefine what religious really meant, taking with it, so to speak, essentially all the fervour associated with religious belief, leaving the established churches rather barren.

ugliness of industrialization, his cry later subsumed in the Romantic reaction refered to as above [26]. Marxs speaks about the alienation of workers, and Freud in the next century about the unease civilization brings forth in men. So in spite of the optimism of progress there is a concomitant sense of deep loss. To put it bluntly, the loyalty to the past cannot ever be fully reconciled with the commitment to the future. And what did the Marxist vision of the classless society really amount to? A return to the Eden of man, as a self-sustained hunter, but without the discomforts inherent? But without the struggle for life, what would be the meaning of such a life? Would it be one of contemplation of beauty, exalted scientific inquiry, maybe of a most refined mathematical kind? The problem of all utopias and millenial visions, from secular Marxism to those of religious Paradise essentially converge.

If humans as a race are biologically adapted to a certain kind of life, how do they cope in an entirely different environment? But rats and insects were never intended for an urban environment still they have adjusted successfully, without renouncing their biological integrity. Maybe in the same way happy human beings manage to carry over the sophisticated self-sufficiency of a primitive lifestyle, pursuing careers as say criminals, entrepreneurs and scientists. The latter may be most apt, or at least the most interesting, as it also shows a tendency for the individual scientist to become proletarized (as suggested above), the independent intellectual spirit pursuing its own conceived projects, being reduced to a cog, specialized into narrow groves, thereby losing the initial initiative, intellectual stimulation and independance, like organs with no furher use. This development is most clearly seen among natural scientists, in which the accumulation of knowledge has become so vast and the projects to further them so ambitious, that a single man cannot have but the vaguest idea of the details of it all, thus suffering inevitable alienation. The notion of Big Science has not yet engulfed mathematics, with the result that mathematicians in many ways enjoy the overview and the individual initiative of their fellow humanists. But will they also become engulfed? Those are questions which clearly go beyond the concerns of Hobsbawm, but nevertheless are provoked by his book.

Finally any work of history on history must be empirically anchored unless it disolves into vapid generality. History is not science in the sense of being able to argue inevitably from first principles; so its empiricism does not necessarily reduce to the need to buttress abstract arguments, but should be gratuitous in its richness of details, many of them pointless, or seemingly so. Thus a historian need to be erudite, to be able to serve the reader many curious facts, some of which potentially may be undercutting his arguments, as well as to draw many an interesting observation, maybe not always of a crucial nature. It is this encounter with a structured yet overwhelming reality that makes the pleasure of reading a work of history. We are not always interested in having the world explained to us, we never quite tire of having it simply described. Among the various tidbits of amusing observations I will restrict myself to noting one. Hobsbawm observes that the moneyed classes in France after the Napoleonic defeat took to ape the antics of the vanished aristocracy, and thereby conserving them in a away which would have been impossible, had the ancient aristocracy been allowed to continue. In the same way, Hobsbawm notes drily, classical ballet was conserved by the Soviet society. One could go further than Hobsbawm

[26] Rosseaus sentimental dreams of the noble savage also fits the picture to be elabourated below

choses to do, and observe that loanwords into very different languages are usually preserved intact, like as in a freezer, while their originals in their mother tongues may evolve quite drastically[27].

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[27] I am indebted to this observation by a popular work on the lingustic of Swedish refering to the freezer of Finnish as a repositary of many of its archaic forms