

Interesting Times

E.Hobsbawm

July 20 - July 23, 2004

In 1991 the Soviet Union collapsed and with it the prestige and mystique of Communism, at least in the west, where the various Communist parties were very quick to disassociate themselves from it, thereby incidentally proving that what ought to have been its greatest liability was in fact also its only justification¹. By that time Hobsbawm had resigned from the party for five years after having been a member for fifty. A large part of his auto-biography is devoted to an explanation and an apology for why he was so committed for such a long time.

Hobsbawm has coined the concept of the long 19th century starting by the French Revolution in 1789 and lasting until the First World War 125 years later. By the time of the fall of the Soviet empire he also coined the notion of the short twentieth century, incidentally coinciding with the span of his own life except its geriatric tail. Hobsbawm was born in Egypt to a British father and an Austrian mother, so while he grew up in Vienna after the demise of the Habsburg Monarchy, he was known as the 'Engländer' and was a British citizen, which later would turn out to be quite handy. He was orphaned in his early teens and transferred to Berlin, which would prove to be both an intellectual and political awakening. Intellectually he benefited from a solid Prussian secondary school² and politically he was a witness to the last days of the Weimar republic and the rise of Hitler. He points out that during his childhood in Vienna he had the feeling that society was disintegrating, falling freely so to speak, an awareness naturally enhanced by his German years. This he points out is the strong emotional basis for his identification as a leftist in general and his commitment to Communism in particular. He argues that his particular background sets him apart from his western counterparts and thus explains why he so tenaciously held on to his Communist membership in contrast to his more 'pampered' western colleagues. He also, somewhat frivolously, attributes his loyalty to a personal defiance of making a successful career in the West in spite of being brandished as a Marxist.

Shortly after the rise of Hitler he settled with British relatives in London, his British passport coming in handy as noted above and in fact saving him as it would transpire from all direct personal connection with the war. He is rather reticent about the nature of his intellectual awakening, apart from referring to a prodigious appetite for reading. He professes to an interest in birdwatching and regrets an ineptitude for mathematics. He is

¹ In principle the various totalitarian excesses of manifested Communist regimes would be no proof against the fact that Communism could not be made to work. (Communism with a human face). But few Communist parties openly defied the authority of the Soviet Union, and those who did, like China and Albania, presented their own indigenous forms of totalitarianism

² M.Reich-Ranicki in his autobiography 'Mein Leben' refers to the intellectual integrity even of his openly Nazi sympathetic school-teachers

good enough to enjoy a pampered Cambridge education. The thirties was a heady time and leftist sympathies were of course in the vogue, with the Spanish Civil War as the defining moment³. To join the Communist Party combined both the ethics of loyalty to the masses and the intellectual desire to belong to an elite, as well as, one is tempted to add, the security of a well organised and disciplined body. Hobsbawm notes, that with the exception of Germany, there existed no intellectual tradition on the right⁴, all serious thinkers were automatically on the left. But Hobsbawm was never let into the inner circles, as the disclosure of the Kilby affair revealed to him. He was never in contact with the Cambridge spies, testifying to the secrecy and departmentalization of the Communist party. That the Communist party was not a democratic institution, on this Hobsbawm is quite candid, the decisions of the party had to be adhered to unconditionally. He points out that there were an opportunity for debate prior to forming a decision, because a decision was always to be made on the basis of scientific Marxism. He makes a point of contrasting this process to that of fascism, where loyalty was always blind. Yet nowhere does Hobsbawm explicitly question the notion of a science of Marxism, as opposed to a philosophical point of view, and in this lies his main intellectual and moral failure. Because after all he could not have been blind to the absurdity of some of the attitudes of the Communist party. One that initially rankled him a lot was that during the Weimar Republic the Communists thought of the Social Democrats as the main enemy (at least in the short run one would surmise), not the Nazis. Clearly a suicidal strategy. The Stalinists purges seem to have passed him by, although in intellectual circles the recent disillusionment of Gide had been clearly publicised. But this can be explained as a refusal to pay heed to mere propaganda. One should realise that during the 30's a large part of the British working class did consider the Soviet Union as an exemplar of a workers state and thus a source of hope. (Just like it was generally believed in the 50's and early 60's that the planned economy of the Soviet Union may soon catch up with the American, if for no other reason by its materialistic ruthlessness.) The Molotov-Ribbentrop pact on the other hand was an eye-opener for many, but Hobsbawm was only marginally affected. Somewhat obscurely he refers to Finland as being a life-line, a kind of justification for the pact. The real challenge to his loyalty came in 1956 in connection with the Hungarian crises and more significantly the disclosures during the 10th party congress of the Stalinistic excesses. But on the other hand this very disclosure signified a fundamental reform of the Soviet system, and in view of the growing hysteria of the Cold war, one may sympathise with Hobsbawm's persistence in providing a dissenting voice. He points out, among other things, that repressive as DDR may have been, except for the stray wall-climber, dissidents were not killed but expelled or 're-educated'. What eventually marked the Soviet empire was not terror of the Stalinistic kind but economic ineffectiveness, causing not the eventual bang of an explosion but the whimper of an implosion, to the relief of everybody concerned. On the whole one is quite prepared to respect Hobsbawm political commitment⁵ but one wonders whether he is just

³ It is quite interesting to compare the leftists of the thirties with those thirty and forty years later. The former were literally prepared to risk their lives for their ideals, while the latter, except for the few who went in for quixotic terrorism, were fully satisfied with rhetorical excesses.

⁴ Unfortunately Hobsbawm does not give any explicit examples

⁵ especially by the benefit of the hindsight of a happy-ending, and also bearing in mind that in the

as willing to concede anti-Communism as not necessarily being an ideology of privilege but a liberal concern about a danger as manifest as that of what fascism once were. And what were the actual paradise of Communism going to be? Hobsbawm notes that Marx and Engels were wisely rather reticent on the subject, and he wonders, somewhat anticlimactically, whether the present day consumer society may not have been as good as a reward that any that Marx and his cohorts may have come up with.

But Hobsbawm is foremost a historian, and as a historian he is privileged to have lived through very interesting times indeed, and by now having reached quite an age, he is in a tiny minority of people who are able to have the benefit of an extended survey. After all history is more than facts, it is also about the qualia of having actually been presented and lived through what is now history. The great difference of reading and contemplating history and living through it, is that in the latter case you do not know how it will end. You live with the terror of uncertainty, a terror that cannot, like pain, be vicariously appreciated. This fact protects a living eye-witness from the trap of anachronism, and it is the task of the historian to protect against this falling into anachronism, even for periods where there are no surviving witnesses, and thus no lingering qualia of experience.

And Hobsbawm allows himself the pleasures of looking back. On his ongoing love-affair with France, on the charms of Italy available to him through his second marriage, on the backwardness of Franco's Spain. Well travelled, he can also include vignettes on Latin America, a continent that fascinates him, due to the very many different manifestations government has taken, far more than back in Europe. He also observes that life has transformed more in the 20th century than in any other comparable time interval in history⁶. In particular he notes that England has changed a lot, while America has not, especially not New York, which almost appears impervious to change. The reason being, he argues, that the consumer culture is much older in the States than in the rest of the West. Among his quainter interests is a passion for jazz, an interest that has opened many a door for him, that would otherwise have been closed. The 68-generation puzzled him, until he realised that the revolution they proclaimed was not political, as he would have expected, but cultural. A mini-revolution involving the advent of Rock and the jeans⁷, fuelled by the spectacle of mass-education.

With the States he predictably has a love-hate relationship. On one hand the bastion of anti-Communism, meaning that he as an academic jet-setter had, until fairly recently, secure special wavers to visit the country. But in later years he has a dual appointment,

western society the position of a Communist was a marginal one, and unlike in established Communist states, not a means of a personal career nor an act of subservience. Being a Communist involved some personal drawbacks to the author, but rather mild ones, compared to the sacrifices suffered by others for their political commitments. And an actual act of defiance against party authority, made in the aftermath of the Hungarian crises, and claimed in an argument of self-justification against accusations made by Koestler appears rather trivial in the general context.

⁶ One wonders whether this actually holds more for the first half of the century than its second, politically speaking at least. When it comes to conditions of life, changes in the last half may indeed have been momentous.

⁷ the prevalence of the latter may have been one of the most momentous changes of the 60's, he notes, only half facetiously, confessing that he himself has deliberately resisted the fashion.

priding himself of being quite a New Yorker, and being mildly annoyed, as most European intellectuals, by the prevalent American attitude of being perplexed by the refusal to settle down in the best of all worlds when having the opportunity. In an aside he marvels at the fact that three quite able and competent presidents - FDR, Kennedy and Nixon [sic] were on moments notice replaced by mediocre men being unprepared for the taking of the office, and yet the country seems to have run on rails anyway.

Finally, perhaps not surprisingly, Hobsbawm is Jewish. But apart from the special position visavi the events of the 20th century bestows on such an identity, he makes very little of it. He is critical to the founding of the Israeli State that has caused nothing but misery. Clearly a Marxist commitment has overridden such minor parochial concerns as ethnic provenence.

August 2, 2004 **Ulf Persson:** *Prof.em, Chalmers U.of Tech., Göteborg Sweden ulfp@chalmers.se*