

Undeatable Text: Eric Hobsbawm

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The world may yet regret that, faced with Rosa Luxemburg's alternative of socialism or barbarism, it decided against socialism.

—Eric Hobsbawm, *Interesting Times*

The world, or its relevant aspects, became post-industrial, post-imperial, post-modern, post-structuralist, post-Marxist, post-Gutenberg, or whatever. Like funerals, these prefixes took official recognition of death without implying any consensus or indeed certainty about the nature of life after death.

—Eric Hobsbawm, *The Age of Extremes*

If you wanted a test case for why someone's life and work are best understood together, as one movement, Eric Hobsbawm could well be that case. Certainly, the body of work he wrote or edited is extensive and distinguished. It includes *Primitive Rebels* (1959), *The Age of Revolution* (1962), *Bandits* (1969), *The Age of Capital* (1974), a history of Marxism published in Italian (1978–82), *The Invention of Tradition* (1983), *The Age of Empire* (1987), and his most widely read book, *The Age of Extremes* (1994). Friends

and enemies alike make ritual acknowledgment of his qualities as a writer and historian.

What has become more difficult to understand is his lifelong refusal to abjure the communism to which he adhered in his youth. What calls for a historical mode of thinking is this act of unrepentant solidarity, the very notion of which both the Cold War and the commodity form conspire to erase. Perhaps the best way to understand Hobsbawm is to think the history that he wrote, particularly *The Age of Extremes*, against the history through which he lived, as he presents it himself in his autobiography, *Interesting Times* (2002).

Hobsbawm is at once a very English figure and a cosmopolitan one. He was born in Egypt in 1917 to Jewish parents, his father a British subject, his mother from Vienna. His father was spectacularly bad at business, and so Eric grew up in a petit bourgeois family fallen on hard times in “Red Vienna.” It was once the great capital of an empire and still the center of a polyglot world, including Jews and Gypsies. Hobsbawm’s family knew they were Jews—anti-Semites insisted on reminding them of it—but their culture was German. The Vienna of Hobsbawm’s childhood was one of an undeclared civil war between clerical reactionaries and the Left. He was too young to know much about this, but it is crucial to his retrospective reconstruction. “Moving from primary to secondary school, and from infancy toward puberty in the Vienna of the late 1920s,” he writes, “one acquired political consciousness as naturally as sexual awareness.”¹

Hobsbawm is one of those whose early formation is much, much richer in “cultural” capital than the other kind. “I did not experience these years as specially distressing. Perhaps the realities of the situation passed me by because I lived most of the time at some remove from the real world—not so much in a world of dreams, but of curiosity, enquiry, solitary reading, observation, comparison and experimentation” (*IT*, 41). His father died in 1929 and his mother in 1931. When his uncle Sidney got a job with Universal Studios in Berlin, the teenage Hobsbawm moved there, too.

In Berlin, he would become interested in rather more than books and the Boy Scouts.

The months in Berlin made me a lifelong Communist, or at least a man whose life would lose its nature and its significance without the political project to which he committed himself as a school-

1. Eric Hobsbawm, *Interesting Times: A Twentieth-Century Life* (London: Abacus, 2003), 13. Hereafter cited parenthetically as *IT*.

boy, even though that project has demonstrably failed and, as I now know, was bound to fail. The dream of the October Revolution is still there somewhere inside me, as deleted texts are still waiting to be recovered by experts, somewhere on the hard disks of computers. I may have abandoned, nay, rejected it, but it has not been obliterated. (*IT*, 55)

I want to pause over this image. Hobsbawm is probably thinking of SQUIDs, or superconducting quantum interference devices. They measure magnetic fields. They can sometimes be deployed—think Reagan-era Cold War spy-craft—to extract information from a hard drive even after its user has erased it, by detecting small imperfections in the way the drive-head resets the magnetic trace of the ones and zeroes in the process of “deleting” its “text.” Faith in the grand metanarrative of the march toward communism may have been deleted, but the text itself remains imprinted, in the life, the work, or rather in the lifework.

Hobsbawm’s life and writing is a kind of remote, inactive, pensive, extended moment of solidarity with those who struggled and died in the wars against the fascists. It is even, as we shall see, a kind of allegorical project. The block of time that was to have been the transition toward communism remains as a kind of impossible narrative against which the struggle to narrate what “actually” happened can come to pass. Communism is not the goal of history but rather a ghostly double to the dark times of our barbarism.

Here’s the thing with actual Communists (and on this I speak from experience). It is important to know which party they joined, as there are national variations among the parties. But it is often more useful to know *when* they joined, as there are changes in mood and policy that are a temporal affect common to all of the constituent parties of the International. And then there’s the question of the moment of leaving the Party . . .

Hobsbawm joined during the period of the united front against fascism, and his actual politics reflect that; but emotionally, he was a member of the “1917” generation. He thinks of himself as at the tail end of those motivated by the October Revolution itself. “I was to be seized so young and so long by that typical twentieth-century passion, political commitment” (*IT*, 11). In this case, it was the first—and for some only—victory of the party of the working class.

For the young Hobsbawm, Berlin was a scene of a civil war, a struggle for raw power between Nazis and Communists, at a moment when a fragile bourgeois state was collapsing. This Communist Party was a street-

fighting party, a workers' party. Few intellectuals played central roles. Those Communists who were intellectuals shared the cultural terrain of German-language modernism with socialists and liberals. Young and old shared cultural referents. In this respect, thirties radical intellectuals were not like their sixties counterparts. They were products of the years of prewar Depression, not the postwar boom.

The teenage Hobsbawm belonged to a student front controlled by the Party. He joined in street demonstrations and was permanently shaped by them. "When, in British isolation two years later, I reflected on the basis of my communism, this sense of 'mass ecstasy' . . . was one of the five components of it—together with pity for the exploited, the aesthetic appeal of a perfect and comprehensive intellectual system, 'dialectical materialism,' a little bit of the Blakean vision of the new Jerusalem and a good deal of intellectual anti-philistinism. But in January 1933 I did not analyze my convictions" (*IT*, 74).

With Hitler in power, those in his family with British papers left for good. Hobsbawm did not come as a refugee but as a British subject, and with at least some grasp of the English language, garnered from popular magazines for boys. London was a letdown, but via a cousin he discovered jazz and even heard Duke Ellington play. Jazz would give Hobsbawm access to a whole other milieu besides those of the Party and academia, in an era when neither leftists nor professors usually went in for such popular entertainments.

Midthirties Britain did have a thriving left-of-center intellectual culture. There was the Left Book Club and even Allen Lane's Penguin Books. Hobsbawm acquired his first knowledge of Marxism from popular editions put out by the Communist Party of Great Britain (CPGB). This was not the "peculiar seminar-oriented Marxism" of the 1960s New Left.² Nor was the romantic or Blakean note in his personal philosophy a strong one. He acquired the instincts of a "Tory communist." He imagined the future state not as total freedom but as rule perfected: logos as goal, constructed in history, to end it.

His interest in Marx was more historical than philosophical.³ In England, literature filled the space in education usually reserved for philosophy on the Continent. The problem in Marxist thought that engaged

2. Eric Hobsbawm, *The Age of Extremes: A History of the World, 1914–1991* (New York: Vintage, 1994), 445. Hereafter cited parenthetically as *AE*.

3. See Eric Hobsbawm, *How to Change the World: Reflections on Marx and Marxism* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2011). Hereafter cited parenthetically as *HTCW*.

him, however, was one that also occupied his more philosophically inclined European counterparts: the problem of base and superstructure. Thinking about the social origins of art was what drew him into a serious reading of Marx.

Like a lot of young people who spend even some of their leisure hours in serious reading, Hobsbawm was good at school. "I took to examinations as to ice cream" (*IT*, 93). In 1936, he went to Cambridge on scholarship. "In a society like that of England in the first half of the last century, moving from the milieu of one class to that of another was a form of emigration" (*IT*, 100). He was leaving behind the suburban petit bourgeois life, which he had always detested.

It was a brilliant time for Cambridge in the sciences, philosophy, and economics, even if the university was rather uneven in other fields. There were only a few hundred research students. Hobsbawm saw the place as a sort of finishing school for the ruling class. It was hard *not* to get a degree. In the arts and humanities, Cambridge recapitulated the ancient customs of the old public schools, which Hobsbawm did not share. And yet he found an intellectual home at King's College. "King's was liberal and tolerant, even of enthusiasts for team games, religious believers, conservatives, revolutionaries and heterosexuals, even of the less than good-looking young from grammar schools" (*IT*, 106). Such as himself. He counts the only genius among his undergrad peers to have been Alan Turing.

The curriculum in history reflected the mission of class formation. It was mostly about teaching the next crop of managers of empire what their predecessors had done with it. The centerpiece of that understanding is constitutional history, or the chronicle of the crises via which the state reforms itself as the ruling class in committee. Hobsbawm found only M. M. Postan to be an inspiring lecturer. Postan's topic was economic history, and he had at least read his Marx, Simmel, and Weber, in a Cambridge otherwise quite allergic to the social sciences outside of economics.

It was at Postan's invitation that Marc Bloch came to Cambridge, ostensibly to lecture on the Middle Ages. Here Hobsbawm locates the beginnings of his own attempt to think the practice of historical inquiry as less a chronicle of past politics and more as an analysis of how social structures change. Drawing on the *Annales* school, of which Bloch was a founder, Hobsbawm was an early adopter of what could be called social history, "a history fertilized by the social sciences" (*IT*, 288).⁴

4. See also Eric Hobsbawm, *On History* (New York: New Press, 1998), 178. Hereafter cited parenthetically as *OH*.

Cambridge in the thirties was famous—even notorious—as a site for the formation of young leftist and communist intellectuals. The emergence there of a distinctive school of history is part of this larger picture. “Among young communists there we used to joke: the communist philosophers were Wittgensteinians, the communist economists were Keynesians, the communist students of literature were disciples of F. R. Leavis. And the historians? They were Marxists, because there was no historian that we knew of at Cambridge or elsewhere . . . who could compete with Marx” (*OH*, 157). The historians pursued a more novel course.

For many, the lines of loyalty in the 1930s ran not between but across countries. Hobsbawm joined the student branch of the Cambridge Communist Party and was soon on its secretariat, his highest rank in the Party ever. “The question why communism attracted so many of the best men and women of my generation, and what being communists meant to us,” he writes, “has to be a central theme in the history of the twentieth century” (*IT*, 127). The magnetic pull, the undeletable text, might have something to do with reanimating the narrative of enlightenment and progress, installing in it a communist horizon, in those bleak years after total war and Great Depression, when anti-enlightenment reaction was on the rise at home and abroad.

The civil war in Spain loomed large in the minds of the Left in Europe and elsewhere. Hobsbawm will later think of it more as a sideshow, although it appeared as anything but at the time. “The 1930s were for us very far from the ‘low and dishonest decade’ of the disenchartered poet Auden. For us it was a time when the good cause confronted its enemies” (*IT*, 119). And Spain was a central site of that confrontation, although the communist role in that war never gets much of a nuanced treatment in Hobsbawm.

There was nothing particularly romantic about this version of a political life. “The secret of the Leninist Party lay neither in dreaming about standing on barricades or even Marxist theory. It can be summed up in two phrases: ‘decisions must be verified’ and ‘Party discipline’” (*IT*, 133). Hobsbawm later came to see it as something of a sect, but with some original features, such as its theory and its internationalism.

Party members expected persecution. “What awaited them on the road to the millennium was tragedy” (*IT*, 138). That tragedy would be on a rather bigger scale than anyone could have imagined. The Party form was well suited to the war, and Hobsbawm clearly admires the courage and fatalism of those comrades—some of them Jews—who joined the resistance, one or two of whom he knew personally. It is something of a constant

in the structure of belief that those of us who fail to believe absolutely take refuge in believing at least in some others who we believed so believed. In Hobsbawm's case, and even though he is fully aware that the history of the resistance is mostly myth, there is still a kernel of both truth and belief in the myth.

"I had neither a 'good war' nor a 'bad war' but an empty war" (*IT*, 154). His language skills (French as well as German) were not put to use. He did some teaching in the Army Education Corps, one of the institutions that prepared the ground for the Labour Party's stunning election win in 1945, on the slogan: "Now Win the Peace!" Hobsbawm got his first full-time teaching job at Birkbeck College in 1947, before the Cold War was fully in effect, with its silent campaign to exclude Party members from public life.

The historians' group of the Communist Party of Great Britain was in many ways that party's leading contribution to intellectual life. Besides Hobsbawm, the group included Christopher Hill, Rafael Samuel, E. P. Thompson, the Marx translator Dona Torr, and A. L. Morton, author of *A People's History of England*. The group took an interest in two kinds of historical work, both of which Hobsbawm was to pursue. One was to investigate the history of radical social movements; the other was to apply the methods of Marxist social science to the analysis of history as a whole.

While the historians' group dates from the forties, its signal achievement was the journal *Past and Present*, first published in 1952. It was partly inspired by the *Annales* journal in its early incarnations and was a sort of popular front of Anglophone progressive and social history. What the journal intended to do was an analysis of history by and for the class whose mission it was to make history. What the journal actually did was break out of the constitutional history aimed at a small group of Oxbridge students who would inherit the state and replace it with a broader notion of historical actors for an expanding world of postwar higher education. The grand narrative had its uses.

Hobsbawm's own work took a while to get off the ground. He discovered that working on recent labor movement history was a bit difficult given that the Party had its own "line" on the subject. This had the effect of pushing him further back in time, toward topics on which the Party could not so easily pronounce, and into an allegorical mode. One positive effect on Hobsbawm's work of both the Party and Marxism was surely his internationalism. He rarely wrote within the confines of national historical traditions, as even his comrades in the Party historians' group were inclined to do.

Nikita Khrushchev's "Secret Speech" on Joseph Stalin's personality cult in 1956 was a difficult moment for all Communists. It affected historians in a singular way. First, Khrushchev departed from Marxist historiography in pinning mistakes on Stalin rather than accounting for the Party's actions as bearer of social forces. Second, Khrushchev enunciated a theory of what had happened, but historians go by the evidence. "The issue of what had been done under Stalin, and why it had been concealed, was literally a question about history" (*IT*, 207).

The Soviet invasion of Hungary that same year started "the political equivalent of a collective nervous breakdown" (*IT*, 206). Among other things, it broke up the historians' group, as several key members left the Party. The CPGB lost a quarter of its members, including many, such as E. P. Thompson, who would go on to be leading intellectual figures. Hobsbawm stayed in the Party. Now that the Cold War is long over, perhaps it's time to see both decisions as having their own kind of integrity. One can have empathy for Thompson and those who thought that the Soviet Union had betrayed the workers it claimed to represent. And one can have empathy for Hobsbawm, whose loyalties were not so much to Party leaderships as to all those comrades who had believed and struggled and died for the cause. In any case, while it may have lost certain intellectual ornaments, the CPGB rebuilt its industrial base pretty quickly after 1956.

Here Hobsbawm speaks for those who remained in solidarity with the Party:

We did not lose our faith and our confidence in the eventual superiority of socialism to capitalism, nor our belief in the world-changing potential of the Communist Party discipline, but our, or at least my, hopes were now edged with that sense of inevitable tragedy of Walter Benjamin's "angel of history." Paradoxically, what made it easier or, for many, possible to maintain the old faith was, more than anything else, the crusading global anti-communism of the West in the cold war. (*IT*, 180)

It's a curious variant on belief sustained by believing that another believes. In this case, at least some of the anticommunist crusaders seemed utterly sincere in their belief that communism was a real and vital "menace." The grand narrative arc can be sustained negatively.

The Cold War was politically bleak but professionally fruitful. *The Jazz Scene* (1959) was based on columns Hobsbawm wrote for the *New Statesman* and probably appeared as something of a side project at the

time. In it Hobsbawm brought a historical consciousness to a music that hovered somewhere between art and entertainment. “Real” jazz was not quite popular enough to be popular culture, nor was it recognized as an “art” music by most intellectuals at the time.

His first “real” book, *Primitive Rebels*, did well. It was a history of peasant banditry and utopian religious sects. It also reads as an allegory for reformist and revolutionary organizational forms of the modern period. It is a book that will have a strange afterlife. Meanwhile, the trade publisher George Weidenfeld commissioned Hobsbawm to write something for a multivolume history of civilization, which eventually became his second monograph, *The Age of Revolution*. David Higham became his literary agent, confirming Hobsbawm on his course as a writer for a wide readership.

His first two books are fine examples of two different versions of progressive historiography. The former is a work of history from below, in the sense that it constructs a narrative and analytic account of agents excluded from established power and who in various ways contested it. The latter is what might be called history of the totality in that it is about both the dominant and resistant forces that contend, and in that it sees history as unfolding as a result of their conflicts. Typically, rather than write lengthy theoretical texts about which of these phenomena Marxists ought to be writing, Hobsbawm just wrote about both.

It was also an extraordinary time for some of those who left the Party. E. P. Thompson became the silver eminence of the New Left and got to work on *The Making of the English Working Class* (1963), one of the most important achievements of the English intellectual Left. With John Saville, Thompson launched *The Reasoner* shortly before their exit from the Party. After several permutations and mergers, it would become a tributary to the rise of the *New Left Review*. Meanwhile the CPGB funded *Marxism Today* for the intellectuals who stayed inside the Party. Both would prove to be influential journals. From Hobsbawm’s point of view, the *New Left Review* crowd no longer had much connection to or feeling for organized labor, something that intellectuals who had been through the Party, whatever their backgrounds, acquired through Party work.

Hobsbawm drifted from actual membership in the CPGB to spiritual membership in the PCI—the Italian Communist Party. He understood quite early what a significant figure Antonio Gramsci was, and he saw the Italian party as the most successful exemplar of the popular front approach to party work in the postwar period (*HTCW*, 314). A study of Gramsci set the stage for Hobsbawm’s later interventions in British labor movement politics.

The escalator of postwar boom years lifted everyone up unawares, including Hobsbawm. The welfare state might have benefited the middle class even more than it did the workers. And yet it appeared at the end of the sixties that the revolution might happen anyway, especially in France.

The student rebels reminded theorists of a long forgotten Bakuninist anarchism, but if anything they were closest to the “situationists,” who had anticipated a “revolution of everyday life” through the transformation of personal relations. That (and their very Gallic brilliance in devising memorable slogans) is why they became the mouthpieces of an otherwise inchoate movement, although it is almost certain that hardly anyone until then had heard of them, outside of a small circle of left-wing painters. (I certainly had not.) (*IT*, 248)

Hobsbawm was, like many of the Old Left, a bit confused by the New Left, or rather the new New Left, the one that was the product of the sixties rather than the fifties. “We seemed to be using the same vocabulary, but we did not appear to speak the same language” (*IT*, 248). His history-from-below books, *Primitive Rebels* (1959) and *Bandits* (1969), were popular with those hankering for romantic heroes. Hobsbawm had come to see himself as “on the side of the eternal losers,” but he did not subscribe to a romantic anticapitalism (*IT*, 250). For him, the French and Russian revolutions were moments in the unfolding of a universal rationality with roots more in enlightenment than in romanticism.⁵

What if the sixties was not a failed attempt at a revolution of the old type, but the intimation of something to come?

What if we were just wrong in seeing the rebels of the 1960s as another phase or variant of the Left? In that case it was not a botched attempt at one kind of revolution, but the effective ratification of another: the one that abolished traditional politics, and in the end the politics of the traditional Left, by the slogan “the personal is political.” Looking back after thirty-odd years it is easy to see that I misunderstood the historic significance of the 1960s. (*IT*, 251)

It comes to form a boundary in his thought.

Immersion in the jazz world did not prepare Hobsbawm for sixties culture. While rock music, like jazz, had roots in the blues, its affect was completely different. The Dionysian, romantic, and utopian notes of the new

5. Eric Hobsbawm, *The Age of Revolution: 1789–1848* (New York: Vintage, 1996), 277.

New Left were not to his tastes or inclinations, and certainly not in synch with his historical experience. He identified with the heroic struggle of the Vietnamese people, and with the Black Panthers, but otherwise Hobsbawm was an accidental hero to the new New Left, if he was one at all.

Hobsbawm used his growing scholarly stature to extend his field-work to Latin America: learning Spanish, traveling, and doing research in several countries there. The continent appeared to him as a series of rapid experiments in the historical unfolding of economic and political action, resulting in a variety of state-forms that to a European mixed elements of Left and Right in curious formations. It was a view of the South that was far less romantic than the "Third Worldist" one, but in the long run it was perhaps more hopeful. Hobsbawm was particularly skeptical about the Cuban Revolution, which he saw as the product of very local conditions. Castro and his comrades had been pushed into the Communist camp by the binary logic of the Cold War. Che Guevara's attempt to spread an armed insurrectionary politics, "a spectacularly misconceived strategy," was doomed to failure from the start (*AE*, 440).

From the 1970s on, structural history was now on the way out, and cultural history was on the way in. Raphael Samuel started *History Workshop Journal* (1976) as an expression of a post-1968 "historical Left." It was a historical practice that seemed no longer about an analysis of social structures and their development as a whole. "These were people for whom history was not so much a way of interpreting the world, but a means of collective self-discovery, or at best, of winning collective recognition" (*JT*, 296; see also *OH*, 266). It was a history from below without a history of the totality.

The virtues of history as totality become clear in Hobsbawm's major intervention in British public life with the incendiary 1978 *Marxism Today* texts, later republished in the book *The Forward March of Labour Halted?* (1981).⁶ There he argued that the labor movement in Britain, despite the apparent militancy of parts of its trade-union wing, was in serious trouble. Industrial labor had entirely lost its ability to work collectively. Particular unions that still had leverage within the production and reproduction process were going it alone. The production process had become so complex and integrated that strikes now worked not by incapacitating an employer but by inconveniencing the public. They were aimed at getting the govern-

6. Martin Jacques and Francis Mulhern, eds., *The Forward March of Labour Halted?* (London: Verso, 1981).

ment to make concessions, not capital. Capture of parts of the parliamentary Labour Party by militants was harming its electoral prospects. Parts of the skilled working class were abandoning the Party permanently. This turned out to be prophetic, with the rout of Labour in the 1979 election. The breakaway Social Democratic Party further hampered Labour's chances of ever returning to office.

Hobsbawm supported Neil Kinnock's attempt to steer a middle course. It was not to be. "We wanted a reformed Labour, not Thatcher in trousers. The narrow failure of Labour to win the 1992 election eliminated this prospect. I am not alone in recalling that election night as the saddest and most desperate of my political experience" (*IT*, 276). Given the personal history narrated above, this is saying something. In retrospect, Hobsbawm was part of a Gramscian struggle for cultural leadership that tried to revive the fortunes of Labour so that it could defeat Thatcherism electorally and forestall the rise of New Labour as a pure electoral machine no longer really connected to the class after which it was still notionally named.

One of the key places for the discussion of a broad, popular front Left was—strangely enough—*Marxism Today*. Of the pre-1968 public intellectual Left, only Hobsbawm and Stuart Hall supported and contributed to the journal, but it was a lively place for the articulation of traditional labor politics to the new social movements such as feminism and to the reality of a multiracial Britain. It was Hobsbawm, the remnant of the oldest of Old Lefts, who was most insistent that Europe had changed, and that a progressive politics could no longer expect to be centered on the labor movement as traditionally conceived.

As a public intellectual, Hobsbawm argued persuasively for a popular front labor movement politics. As this was Britain and not Italy, it had to be centered on not the Communist but the Labour Party, which still had the allegiance of a chunk of the working class and cultural resonance elsewhere. But Labour needed to put together a new counterhegemonic bloc, drawing other classes, and nonclass social movements, together. Rhetorically, Hobsbawm presented this as the result of a "realist" kind of Marxist analysis, one that abandoned its faith that the Communist Party would lead the working class to victory over capital and to the end of history.

Here one might pause to consider the difference between Hobsbawm as historian of the nineteenth century and as historian of the twentieth, particularly in the famous *Age of . . .* books. These are some of the great works of Marxist social history as a history of the totality. But they have to negotiate a certain problem. "Marx wanted to prove *a priori* that a

certain historical result, communism, was the inevitable result of historical development. But it is by no means clear that this can be shown by scientific historical analysis" (*OH*, 161). In writing about the nineteenth century, it is a problem than can be deferred, but in writing about the twentieth century, it cannot. By the end of the twentieth century, the timelines of Hobsbawm's personal history, the history of the century itself, and his professional work writing modern history converged.

The Age of Extremes is packaged as a continuation of the *Age of . . .* books into the twentieth century, but it changes the story. The arc of Hobsbawm's grand narrative is organized around revolution, progress, and enlightenment. It starts in *The Age of Revolution* with the French and Industrial Revolutions. Then comes *The Age of Capital*, which combines bourgeois economic and political innovations. Then *The Age of Empire*, where capital conquers the world and destroys itself in the trenches of the Great War. So far this is not too remote from a consensus picture, more or less shared by the progressive sections of the expanded educated classes of postwar Europe.

Then things take an interesting turn. In *The Age of Extremes*, Hobsbawm narrates the twentieth century through the rise of the workers' movement, its success in Russia, and the Soviet Union's socialist challenge to capital. The mid-twentieth century is an "Age of Catastrophe," where the threat of Nazi and fascist expansionism unites the forces of enlightenment and progress, old and new, bourgeois and socialist, against the forces of reaction.

Victory over fascism begins the "Golden Years," where the socialist challenge forces a certain discipline on the rulers of the capitalist world. The social democratic variant of the labor movement is included in the fold. Many of the old demands of *The Communist Manifesto* are actually met—in the West. A certain trajectory of progress is restored. In this context, Hobsbawm sets the struggle against colonialism and the formation of postcolonial statehood.

What is curious about this is that communism as the Bolsheviks understood it is for Hobsbawm a dead letter. It was not to be the next and higher stage of economic and social organization. The story of the century is organized not around the struggle of the new being born out of the old but out of a parodic double of that narrative. The Soviet Union's real achievements are noted—rapid industrialization and the defeat of Hitler—while the "unprecedented inhumanity" of Stalinism hardly goes unmentioned (*AE*, 391). Here Hobsbawm is not really at odds with his Cold War counterparts

on the Right. But in his version, the Soviet Union was never a real rival or threat; it was merely the simulacrum or spectacular double of one. Communism was a mirage that nevertheless had real historical effects, both in the West and the South, for both social democracy and postcolonialism.

“The paradox of the Cold War was that what wrecked the USSR was not confrontation but *détente*” (*AE*, 251). Where Hobsbawm couldn’t be further from Cold War narratives is in seeing Ronald Reagan’s revival of Cold War-style confrontation as a useless waste of resources. For him, the hero of that story is Mikhail Gorbachev, who managed to convince the West that his desire to get out of nuclear confrontation was sincere. For Hobsbawm, what really did in the Soviet Union was not Reagan but the rise of a new kind of global, information-based economy, although the latter is not actually something on which he has much to say.

Hobsbawm thinks some sort of boundary separates the late twentieth century from our time, although he is not clear about what emerges on the other side. The lodestar of the political, which kept him oriented in the torrents of modern history, appears less helpful at the twentieth century’s end. Since Hobsbawm is fond of lists, let’s say that three things missing in his grand narrative of the twentieth century, rich as it is, are deficiencies in understanding the twenty-first.

First, he gestures repeatedly to a “revolution in transport and communication,” but the close attention to infrastructure that characterized his writing on the nineteenth century deserts him when it comes to the twentieth (*AE*, 12, 206, 264, 280). He is aware of a whole new spatial distribution of economic processes that this made possible, but he has little to say about it. The technical transformations stemming from wartime research don’t quite register. Science and technology get a whole chapter in *The Age of Extremes*, but it’s the last one, before the conclusion. It isn’t integral to the narrative.

Second, Hobsbawm’s orthodox communism does not compromise his objectivity on the subject of the Soviet Union. He is well aware of its monstrous yet complex history. But it does lead to a geopolitical blind spot regarding the People’s Republic of China. It is remarkable how little space China’s reentry into world history gets in *The Age of Extremes*. Deng Xiaoping was still alive when Hobsbawm was writing this book, and his “open door policy” might not have appeared as irreversible as it does now, but this is still a curious omission. Here one might add another irony of history: if Soviet socialism was a mere simulacrum, it really is the case that the fate

of global capitalism might now be in the hands of the biggest Communist Party the world has ever known, with something like 70 million members.

Third, what Marx called “metabolic rift” simply appears as a side effect. Climate change, which is but one of the major instances of metabolic rift, is acknowledged, but now that we know that the time in which we live is the Anthropocene, surely this calls for a recasting of past narrative as well. Hobsbawm’s historical narratives are full of precursors and prefigurations: the Paris Commune as prefiguring the October Revolution, for example. But climate change just appears, in the moment of its scientific discovery, out of nowhere.

Hobsbawm is not strong on these three things because while he was no philosopher, his Marxism was nevertheless “Western.” It began as an attempt to understand art in a nondeterministic way. His acerbic remarks about his person aside, Hobsbawm shares in his own way something like Louis Althusser’s thesis of the “relative autonomy of the superstructures.” He resisted “vulgar Marxism” (*OH*, 141). But perhaps his Marxism was in some respects not vulgar enough. He resisted economism and determinism. The *relations* of production do not mechanically determine the superstructures. But he does not have a consistent grasp on the expansion and transformation of the *forces* of production (and reproduction) in the late twentieth century.

Understanding the twenty-first century might call for a much more detailed sense of the communication and transport revolution, and the rise of digital technologies that enable it. It might call for an understanding of the really quite unique path pursued by the Chinese Communists, who took advantage of that infrastructure to advance a novel political-economic project on an unprecedented scale. And it might call for an understanding of enlightenment and progress as a different kind of grand narrative, one whose trajectory is not toward the end of history but deeper into the unknown of the Anthropocene.

In short: barbarism it is. The various “posts” were indeed attempts at a funeral. And now we do have an inkling of what remains after their passing. Hobsbawm’s lifework is now a monument to a certain faith not just in communism, which has mostly passed away, but also in the political, to which intellectuals as a class remain stubbornly devoted. But is not the failure of a communist politics merely a subset of the failure of politics in general? In the end, Hobsbawm pursued both the reformist and revolutionary forms, and both Gods failed.

It is time to abandon not so much Marxism as its Western form, which insisted not just on the dominance of relations of production over forces of production but also on the relative autonomy of superstructures, and which vested all its hopes in the political or, failing that, in the cultural. Understanding Hobsbawm's three omissions—the digital vector, the rise of China, the actuality of the Anthropocene—calls for different resources from that same Marxist tradition. The twenty-first century calls, among other things, for a Marxism of an extremely vulgar kind, one that grasps the technical changes in the forces of production, and how they bring an image of “nature” as resource into being at the same time as they destroy that from which those forces are produced.

The odd paradox of such a “turn” is that it would require more, not less, attention to the problem of language. Hobsbawm's intellectual formation predates the success of science and technology studies as a form of critique and analysis. In the twenty-first century, a more vulgar Marxist historiography is no longer by default a more epistemologically naive-realist one. The strata of what calls for historical critique and analysis has changed, or at least expanded. But the need for critical as well as analytic tools has not.