

MARX AND MARXISM

‘ ‘How to Change the World’ ’

Stefen Collini

*"Hitherto, philosophers have sought to understand the world; the point, however, is to change it." Marx's celebrated overstatement attempted to build what might now be called an "impact requirement" into the valuation of abstract thought: the test of the validity of ideas was to be found in their capacity to transform the world. This hubristic declaration may in retrospect be seen as expressing a tension which ran through all of Marx's own work and was at the root of the recurring identity crisis which plagued that diverse body of thinking and doing subsequently referred to as "Marxism".*

A quite extraordinarily rich and sophisticated body of ideas developed, and continues to develop, under this label, yet both adepts and critics have been prone to insist that the standing and importance of these ideas is to be assessed in terms of their record in transforming the world. The adepts often like to suggest that the jury is still out, but they have, sorrowfully, to acknowledge that the case is not looking good; the critics gleefully point to the millions of Stalin's victims and to the unparalleled prosperity brought (to some) by capitalism, and then consider the case closed.

This dual character of Marxism imposes special burdens on anyone attempting to chart its history. The ideas themselves are complex and demanding: the historian should, ideally, be able to move confidently through the thickets of Hegelian metaphysics as well as the intricacies of the labour theory of value. But, in addition, an adequate history has to embrace the achievements of labour movements and the posturing of party factions, the building of planned economies and the repression of dissident opinion, and much else besides. The ideal historian of Marxism has to be part theoretician, part polymath; part believer, part sceptic; polylingual but not Pollyanna.

Eric Hobsbawm is often referred to as a "Marxist historian", even though he might more accurately be seen as a historian of remarkable range and analytical power who has drawn more intellectual inspiration from Marx than from any other single source. But he is less often seen as a historian of Marxism. His major works have, after all, been focused on the analysis of the development of European society since the twin upheavals of the French and industrial revolutions at the end of the 18th century. If his contributions to the history of Marxism have been accorded less recognition, that may partly be because they have taken the form of scattered essays and chapters, and partly because, true to his cosmopolitan leanings, they have often been published in languages other than English.

The publication of *\*How To Change the World* may help to set the record straight—and not before time: it is his 16th book and appears, impressively, in his 94th year. Although the book is largely made up of previously published material, much of it has never appeared in English and some of it has been revised and updated. The "tales" of the subtitle may be a nervous publisher's attempt to make the contents sound more beguiling to readers who might be thought

to be deterred by "essays" or "studies", but fortunately the term does not in this case signal colourful biographical chat or off-beat narratives. The essays are analytical and synoptic and none the worse for that - their sheer intellectual quality makes them more compelling than any sexed-up "tales" could be.

"Part One" contains rather diverse studies of aspects of the thought of Marx and Engels, ranging from a relatively slight introduction to the latter's *The Condition of the Working Class in England* to a dense explication of Marx's thinking about "pre-capitalist formations" in the unfinished work known simply as the *Grundrisse*.

"Part Two", which may be of more interest to the contemporary reader, comes close to providing an overview of the fortunes of Marxism in the (almost) 130 years since Marx's death in 1883. It is these chapters that most notably exhibit Hobsbawm's trademark combination of lucid analysis and breathtaking range. Nearly all historians look parochial in his company. Who else could, while doing detailed justice to the history of major Marxist political movements in countries such as Germany and France, also provide an authoritative little riff on the differences between Danish and Finnish Marxism? Who else would people trust when, having itemised the translations of *Das Kapital* from Azerbaijani to Yiddish, he confidently concludes: "The only other major linguistic extension of *Capital* occurred in independent India, with editions in Marathi, Hindi, and Bengali in the 1950s and 1960s"?

In the course of the past century or more, the status of Marx's writings may be said to have oscillated between two poles. On the one hand, there is the once-orthodox communist position that Marx was the all-but-infallible guide to political action and to the creation, via revolution of the form of society that would succeed capitalism. And on the other, there is what one might call the "western civ" view, where Marx is treated, along with figures such as Nietzsche and Freud, as the author of an endlessly fascinating body of writing, writing that may be studied or simply enjoyed but that does not issue in action any more than does Mann's *The Magic Mountain* or Eliot's *The Waste Land*.

Hobsbawm, typically, avoids both these extremes: his attitude is more distanced than the first, but considerably more engaged than the second. He commends the history of Marxism to people's attention because "for the past 130 years it has been a major theme in the intellectual music of the modern world, and, through its capacity to mobilise social forces, a crucial, at some periods a decisive, presence in the history of the twentieth century."

But what of the 21st century? From its beginnings in the 1840s, Marxism has been subject to fits of premature speculation. Marx and Engels repeatedly persuaded themselves (and some others) that the end of bourgeois society was nigh, and since Marx's death there have been regular announcements of the "crisis of capitalism". But each time the patient has somehow recovered and may even have grown stronger. Perhaps even Hobsbawm, coolest and most judicious of analysts, is not wholly immune to this fever when he speculates that the financial collapse of 2008 may signal the beginning of the end of capitalism as the world has known it. He certainly believes it marks the end of that 25-year period (since the centenary of Marx's

death) during which Marx appeared to lose his relevance and, for many of the younger generation, his interest. "Once again," he announces with uncharacteristic downrightness, "the time has come to take Marx seriously."

Even during neo-liberalism's most triumphalist years, there were those who continued to take Marx very seriously indeed as a source of concepts and frameworks with which to analyse the working of societies in which capital is owned by the few and labour power is sold by the many. But, beyond this, does Hobsbawm think that people should now be taking Marx seriously as a guide to changing the world? Here he strikes a cautious, at times even equivocal, note. He reflects, in a fine phrase, that with the fall of the Soviet Union, "capitalism had lost its *memento mori*". But at the same time, "those who still held to the original socialist hope of a society built in the name of cooperation instead of competition had to retreat again into speculation and theory".

Now, globalisation and the retreat of the state have, he observes, deprived both social-democratic parties and labour movements of their natural arena: these latter entities "have so far not been very successful at operating transnationally". In another writer one might suspect sarcasm in this deliberate understatement, but "so far" and "not very" may just signal the workings of Hobsbawm's habitual literary prudence. Still, what kind of opportunity does the current financial turbulence represent? Some have compared the situation to the 1930s, but it is hard to know whether, for those of radical inclinations, that should be viewed as an encouraging parallel. Hobsbawm confines himself to the judicious observation that, unlike in the 1930s, "the socialists" (from whom he sounds oddly distant at this point) "can point to no examples of communist or social-democratic regimes immune to the crisis, nor have they realistic proposals for socialist change".

Perhaps the truth is that Marxism has, despite its founder's famous proclamation, always contributed more to understanding the world than to changing it. Certainly, Eric Hobsbawm has done more than most to further that understanding. And if one asks what his own final view may be about the prospects for changing the world, then radicals are; happily, still in a position to adapt Zhou Enlai's answer about the French revolution—that it's too early to say. □□□