

Interview

## World Distempers

Friday 19 October 2012, by [HOBSBAWM Eric](#) (Date first published: 1 January 2012).

***Age of Extremes* ends in 1991 with a panorama of global landslide—the collapse of Golden Age hopes for world social improvement. What do you see as the major developments in world history since then?**

Eric Hobsbawm – I see five main changes. First, the shift of the economic centre of the world from the North Atlantic to South and East Asia. This was beginning in Japan in the seventies and eighties, but the rise of China from the nineties has made a real difference. Secondly, of course, the worldwide crisis of capitalism, which we had been predicting, but which nevertheless took a long time to occur. Third, the clamorous failure of the us attempt at a solo world hegemony after 2001—and it has very visibly failed. Fourth, the emergence of the new bloc of developing countries as a political entity—the brics—had not taken place when I wrote *Age of Extremes*. And fifth, the erosion and systematic weakening of the authority of states: of national states within their territories, and in large parts of the world, of any kind of effective state authority. It might have been predictable, but it has accelerated to an extent that I would not have expected.

**What else has surprised you since then?**

I never cease to be surprised at the sheer lunacy of the neocon project, which not merely pretended that America was the future, but even thought it had formulated a strategy and tactics for achieving this end. As far as I can see, in rational terms, they didn't have a coherent strategy. Second—much smaller, but significant—the revival of piracy, which we had largely forgotten about; that is new. And the third, which is even more local: the collapse of the CPI(M) in West Bengal, which I really wouldn't have expected. Prakash Karat, the CPI(M) general secretary, recently told me that in West Bengal, they felt themselves beleaguered and besieged. They look forward to doing very badly against this new Congress in the local elections. This after governing as a national party, as it were, for thirty years. The industrialization policy, taking land away from the peasants, had a very bad effect, and was clearly a mistake. I can see that, like all such surviving left-wing governments, they had to accommodate economic development, including private development, and so it seemed natural for them to develop a strong industrial base. But it does seem slightly surprising that it should have led to such a dramatic turn-around.

**Can you envisage any political recomposition of what was once the working class?**

Not in traditional form. Marx was undoubtedly right in predicting the formation of major class parties at a certain stage of industrialization. But these parties, if they were successful, were operating not purely as working-class parties: if they wanted to extend beyond a narrow class, they did so as people's parties, structured around an organization invented by and for the purposes of the working class. Even so, there were limits to class consciousness. In Britain, the Labour Party never got beyond 50 per cent of the vote. The same is true in Italy, where the PCI was much more of a people's party. In France, the left was based on a relatively weak working class, but one which happened to be politically reinforced by the great revolutionary tradition, of which it managed to make itself the essential successor—and that gave it and the left far more leverage.

The decline of the manual working class in industry does seem terminal. There are, or will be, plenty of people left doing manual work, and defence of their conditions remains a major task for all left governments. But it can no longer be the principal foundation of their hopes: they no longer have, even in theory, political potential, because they lack the potential for organization of the old working class. There have been three other major negative developments. One is, of course, xenophobia—which, for most of the working class is, as Bebel once put it, ‘the socialism of fools’: safeguard my job against people who are competing with me. The weaker the labour movement is, the more xenophobia appeals. Second, a lot of manual labour and work in what the British Civil Service used to call ‘minor and manipulative grades’ is not permanent, it’s temporary: students or migrants, working in catering, for instance. And therefore it’s not easy to see it as potentially organizable. The only readily organizable form of that kind of labour is that employed by public authorities, and this is because those authorities are politically vulnerable.

The third and most important development, in my view, is the growing divide produced by a new class criterion—namely, passing examinations in schools and universities as an entry ticket into jobs. This is, if you like, meritocracy; but it is measured, institutionalized and mediated by educational systems. What this has done is to divert class consciousness from opposition to employers to opposition to toffs of one kind or another—intellectuals, liberal elites, people who are putting it over on us. America is a standard example of this, but it’s not absent in the UK, if you look at the British press. The fact that, increasingly, getting a PhD or at least being a postgraduate also gives you a better chance of getting millions complicates the situation a bit.

Can there be new agencies? It can no longer be in terms of a single class, but then in my view it never could be. There is a progressive politics of coalitions, even such relatively permanent coalitions as that between, say, the educated, *Guardian*-reading middle class and the intellectuals—the highly educated, who on the whole tend to be more on the left than the others—and the mass of the poor and the ignorant. Both groups are essential to such a movement, but they are perhaps harder to unify than before. In a sense, it is possible for the poor to identify with multi-millionaires, as in the United States, saying, ‘If only I was lucky, I could become a pop star’. But you can’t say, ‘If only I was lucky, I’d become a Nobel Prize winner’. This is a real problem in coordinating the politics of people who objectively might be on the same side.

### **How would you compare the contemporary crisis to the Great Depression?**

Nineteen twenty-nine didn’t start with the banks—they didn’t collapse until two years later. Rather, the stock exchange set off a production slump, with far higher unemployment and a greater actual decline in production than there have ever been since. The current depression had more preparation than that of 1929, which came almost out of the blue. It should have been apparent from quite early on that neoliberal fundamentalism produced an enormous instability in the operations of capitalism. Until 2008 it seemed to affect only the marginal areas—Latin America in the nineties and earlier 2000s; Southeast Asia; Russia. In the major countries, all it meant was occasional stock-exchange collapses, which were then recuperated quite quickly. It seemed to me that the real sign of something bad happening should have been the collapse of Long-Term Capital Management in 1998, which proved how wrong the whole growth model was; but it wasn’t seen as such. Paradoxically, it did get a number of businessmen and journalists to rediscover Karl Marx, as somebody who wrote something of interest about a modern, globalized economy; it had absolutely nothing to do with the former left.

The world economy in 1929 was less global than at present. This, of course, had some effect—for instance, it would have been a great deal easier for people who lost their jobs to go back to their villages than it is today. In 1929, in much of the world outside Europe and North America, the global parts of the economy were really patches that left what surrounded them largely unchanged. The

existence of the USSR had no practical effect on the Depression, but it had an enormous ideological effect—there was an alternative. Since the 1990s, we have seen the rise of China and the emerging economies, which actually has had a practical effect in the current depression, because they have helped to keep the world economy on a far more even keel than it would have been otherwise. In fact, even in the days when neoliberalism claimed that it was flourishing, the actual growth was very largely occurring in these newly developing economies—particularly in China. I'm sure that if China had not been there, the 2008 slump would have been much more serious. So, for those reasons, I think we are likely to emerge from it more quickly; though certain countries—notably Britain—will continue to be fairly depressed for quite some time.

### **What about the political consequences?**

The 1929 Depression led overwhelmingly to a shift to the right, with the major exception of North America, including Mexico, and Scandinavia. In France, the Popular Front in 1936 had only 0.5 per cent more votes than they had had in 1932, so their victory marked a shift in the composition of political alliances rather than anything more profound. In Spain, despite the quasi- or potentially revolutionary situation, the immediate effect was also a move to the right, and indeed also the long-term effect. In most of the other states, particularly in central and eastern Europe, politics moved very sharply to the right. The effect of the current crisis is not so clear-cut. One would suspect that the major political changes or shifts in policy would come not in the United States or in the West, but almost certainly in China. But one can only speculate about what they're likely to be.

### **Do you see China continuing to resist the downturn?**

There's no particular reason to think that it will suddenly stop growing. The Chinese government has had a bad shock with the depression, because it brought an awful lot of industries to a stop, temporarily. But the country is still in the early stages of economic development, and there is enormous room for expansion. I don't want to speculate about the future, but one would imagine China in twenty or thirty years' time to be relatively more important than it is today, on the world scale—at least economically and politically; not necessarily in military terms. Of course, it has enormous problems—there are always people who ask if the country can hold together. But I think both the real and the ideological reasons for people wishing for China to be united continue to be very strong.

### **How would you assess the Obama administration, one year on?**

People were so pleased at a man like that being elected, and in a situation of crisis, that they thought he was bound to be a great reformer, to do what Roosevelt did. But he didn't. He started badly. If you compare the first hundred days of Roosevelt with the first hundred days of Obama, what leaps out is Roosevelt's readiness to take on unofficial advisers, to try something new, compared to Obama's insistence on staying right in the centre. I think he's blown his chance. His real opportunity was in the first three months, when the other side was totally demoralized, and before it was able to remobilize in Congress—and he didn't do it. One might wish him well, but I think the prospects don't look terribly encouraging.

### **Looking at the hottest theatre of international conflict in the world at present, do you think a two-state solution, as currently envisaged, is a credible prospect in Palestine?**

Personally, I doubt whether it's on at the moment. Whatever the solution is, nothing is going to happen until the Americans decide to change their mind totally, and put pressure on the Israelis. And it doesn't look as though this is happening.

**Are there any parts of the world in which you think positive, progressive projects are still alive, or likely to revive?**

Certainly in Latin America, politics and general public discourse are still conducted in the old Enlightenment—liberal, socialist, communist—terms. Those are the places where you find militarists who talk like socialists—who are socialists. You find a phenomenon like Lula, based on a working-class movement, and Morales. Where it's going to lead is another matter, but the old language can still be spoken, and the old modes of politics are still available. I'm not absolutely sure about Central America, although there are indications of a slight revival of the tradition of the Revolution in Mexico itself; not that this will go very far, since Mexico has been virtually integrated into the American economy. I think Latin America benefited from the absence of ethnic-linguistic nationalism, and of religious divisions; that made it a lot easier to maintain the old discourse. It always struck me that, until quite recently, there were no signs of ethnic politics. It has appeared among indigenous movements in Mexico and Peru, but not on the scale of anything that there was in Europe, Asia or Africa.

It's possible that in India, because of the institutional strength of the Nehru secular tradition, progressive projects could revive. But this doesn't seem to reach very far into the masses, except for some areas where the Communists have, or had, mass support, such as Bengal and Kerala, and possibly some groups like the Naxalites or the Maoists in Nepal. Beyond that, the heritage of the old labour, socialist and communist movements in Europe remains quite strong. The parties founded under Engels are still, almost everywhere in Europe, potential parties of government or the chief parties of opposition. I suspect that at some stage the heritage of communism, for example in the Balkans and even in parts of Russia, may come out in ways we can't predict. What will happen in China, I don't know. But there can be no question that they are thinking in different terms, and not in modified Maoist or Marxist terms.

**You've always been critical of nationalism as a political force, warning the left against painting it red. But you've also come out strongly against violations of national sovereignty in the name of humanitarian interventions. What kinds of internationalism, after the demise of those born of the labour movement, are desirable and feasible today?**

First of all, humanitarianism, the imperialism of human rights, doesn't have anything much to do with internationalism. It's an indication either of a revived imperialism, which finds a suitable excuse for violations of state sovereignty—they may be perfectly sincere excuses—or else it is, more dangerously, a reassertion of belief in the permanent superiority of the area which dominated the globe from the sixteenth until the late twentieth century. After all, the values which the West seeks to impose are specifically regional values, not necessarily universal ones. If they were universal values they would have to be reformulated in different terms. I don't think we're dealing here with something that is in itself national or international. Nationalism does enter into it, however, because the international order based on nation-states—the Westphalian system—has in the past been, for good or ill, one of the best safeguards against outsiders coming into countries. There's no question that once that is abolished, the road is open for aggressive and expansionist warfare—indeed, that's why the United States has denounced the Westphalian order.

Internationalism, which is the alternative to nationalism, is a tricky business. It's either a politically empty slogan, as it was, for practical purposes, in the international labour movement—it didn't mean anything specific—or it's a way of ensuring uniformity for powerful, centralized organizations like the Roman Catholic Church, or the Comintern. Internationalism meant that, as a Catholic, you believed in the same dogmas and took part in the same practices, no matter who you were and where you were; the same thing was theoretically the case with Communist parties. To what extent this really happened, and at what stage it ceased to happen—even in the Catholic Church—is

another matter. This is not really what we meant by 'internationalism'.

The nation-state was and remains the framework for all political decisions, domestic or foreign. Until quite recently, the activities of labour movements—in fact, all political activities—were almost entirely conducted within the framework of a state. Even within the EU, politics is still framed in national terms. In other words, there is no super-national power to act—only separate states in coalition. It is possible that missionary fundamentalist Islam is an exception here, which spreads across states, but this hasn't actually yet been demonstrated. Earlier attempts at pan-Arab super-states, as between Egypt and Syria, broke down precisely due to the persistence of the existing state—formerly colonial—frontiers.

**Do you therefore see inherent obstacles to any attempts to exceed the boundaries of the nation-state?**

Economically and in most other respects—even to some extent culturally—the revolution of communications has created a genuinely international world, in which there are powers of decision that go transnational, activities that are transnational, and of course movements of ideas, communications and people that are far more easily transnational than they ever were before. Even linguistic cultures are supplemented now by international communications idioms. But in politics there has been no sign of this happening at all; and that's the basic contradiction at the moment. One of the reasons why it hasn't occurred is that, in the twentieth century, politics was democratized to a very great extent—the mass of the ordinary people were involved in it. For them, the state is essential to normal daily operations and to their life possibilities. Attempts to break up the state internally, by decentralization, have been undertaken, mostly in the past thirty or forty years, and some of them not unsuccessfully—certainly in Germany decentralization has been successful in some respects, and in Italy, regionalization has actually been beneficial. But the attempt to set up supra-national states hasn't worked. The EU is the obvious example. It was to some extent handicapped by its founders thinking precisely in terms of a super-state analogous to a national state, only bigger—whereas that wasn't, I think, a possibility, and certainly isn't now. The EU is a specific reaction within Europe. There were signs, at one time or another, of a super-national state in the Middle East and elsewhere, but the eu is the only one that seems to have got anywhere. I don't believe, for instance, that there's much chance of a greater federation arising in South America. I would bet against it, myself.

The unsolved problem, then, remains this contradiction: on the one hand, there are transnational entities and practices, which are in the process of hollowing out the state, perhaps to the point at which it collapses. But if this happens—which isn't an immediate prospect, not in developed states—who, then, will undertake the redistributive and other functions, which so far only the state has undertaken? At the moment, you have a sort of symbiosis and conflict. This is one of the basic problems of any kind of popular politics today.

**Nationalism was clearly one of the great driving political forces in the nineteenth and throughout most of the twentieth century. What's your reading of the situation today?**

There's no question that historically, nationalism was, to a great extent, part of the process of the formation of modern states, which required a different form of legitimation from the traditional theocratic or dynastic state. The original idea of nationalism was the creation of larger states, and it seems to me that this unifying and expanding function was very important. Typical was the French Revolution, where in 1790 people appeared saying, 'We're no longer Dauphinois, or Southerners, we are all Frenchmen'. At a later stage, from the 1870s on, you get movements of groups within these states pushing for their own independent states. This, of course, produced the Wilsonian moment of self-determination—although fortunately, in 1918-19, it was still corrected to a certain extent by

something which has since completely disappeared, namely, the protection of minorities. It was recognized, if not by the nationalists themselves, that none of these new nation-states were in fact ethnically or linguistically homogeneous. But after the Second World War, the weaknesses of the existing arrangements were addressed, not just by the Reds but by everybody, with the deliberate, forcible creation of ethnic homogeneity. This brought an enormous amount of suffering and cruelty, and in the long run, it didn't work either. Nevertheless, up to that period the separatist type of nationalism operated reasonably well. It was reinforced after the Second World War by decolonization, which by its nature created more states; and it was bolstered still further at the end of the century by the collapse of the Soviet empire, which also created new mini-separate states, including many, as in the colonies, which actually hadn't wanted to secede, and which had independence imposed on them by the force of history.

I can't help feeling that the function of small, separatist states, which have multiplied tremendously since 1945, has changed. For one thing, they are recognized as existing. Before the Second World War, the mini-states, like Andorra and Luxembourg and all the rest, weren't even reckoned as part of the international system, except by stamp collectors. The idea that everything down to the Vatican City is now a state, and potentially a member of the United Nations, is new. It's also quite clear that, in terms of power, these states are not capable of playing the part of traditional states—they do not possess the capacity to make war against other states. They've become at best fiscal paradises, or useful sub-bases for transnational deciders. Iceland is a good example; Scotland is not far behind.

The historic function of creating a nation as a nation-state is no longer the basis of nationalism. It's no longer, as it were, a very convincing slogan. It may once have been effective as a means of creating communities and organizing them against other political or economic units. But today, the xenophobic element in nationalism is increasingly important. The more politics was democratized, the more potential there was for it. The causes of xenophobia are now much greater than they were before. This is cultural rather than political—look at the rise of English or Scottish nationalism in recent years—but not the less dangerous for that.

### **Did fascism not include such forms of xenophobia?**

Fascism was still, to some extent, part of the drive to create large nations. There's no question that Italian fascism was a great step forward in turning Calabrians and Umbrians into Italians; and even in Germany it wasn't until 1934 that Germans could be defined as Germans, and not German because they were Swabian, or Frank, or Saxon. Certainly, German and central and east European fascisms were passionately against outsiders—largely, but not only, Jews. And of course, fascism provided less of a guarantee against xenophobic instincts. One of the enormous advantages of the old labour movements used to be that they did provide such a guarantee. This was very clear in South Africa: but for the commitment of traditional left-wing organizations to equality and non-discrimination, the temptation to exact revenge on the Afrikaners would have been much harder to resist.

### **You've emphasized the separatist and xenophobic dynamics of nationalism. Would you see this as something that now operates at the margins of world politics, rather than in the main theatre of events?**

Yes, I think this is probably true—although there are areas in which it has done an enormous amount of harm, such as south-east Europe. Of course, it is still the case that nationalism—or patriotism, or identification with a specified people, not necessarily ethnically defined—is an enormous asset for giving legitimacy to governments. It is clearly the case in China. One of the problems in India is that they don't have anything quite like that. The United States obviously can't be based on ethnic unity, but it certainly has strong nationalist sentiments. In quite a lot of the well-functioning states, those

sentiments remain. This is why mass immigration creates more problems today than it did in the past.

**How do you foresee the social dynamics of contemporary immigration working out, now that as many newcomers arrive every year in the eu as in the us? Would you foresee the gradual emergence of another melting pot, not dissimilar to the American, in Europe?**

But in the US, the melting pot stopped melting as of the 1960s. Moreover, at the end of the twentieth century, migration had become really quite different from that in earlier periods, largely because, by emigrating, one no longer breaks links with the past to the same extent as before. You can continue living in two, possibly even three, worlds at the same time, and identify with two or three different places. You can go on being a Guatemalan while you're in the United States. There are also situations as in the EU where, de facto, immigration does not create the possibility of assimilation. A Pole who comes to the UK isn't supposed to be anything except a Pole who comes to work.

This is clearly new, and quite different from the experience of, say, people of my generation—that of political émigrés, not that I was one of them—in which one's family was British, but culturally one never stopped being Austrian or German; yet nevertheless, one really believed that one ought to be English. Even when they went back afterwards to their own countries, it wasn't quite the same—the centre of gravity had shifted. There are always exceptions: the poet Erich Fried, who lived in Willesden for fifty years, in fact went on living in Germany. I do believe it is essential to maintain the basic rules of assimilation—that citizens of a particular country should behave in a certain way and have certain rights, and that these should define them, and that this should not be weakened by multicultural arguments. France had, in spite of everything, integrated about as many of its foreign immigrants as America, relatively speaking, and still the relationship between locals and former immigrants is almost certainly better there. This is because the values of the French Republic remain essentially egalitarian, and make no real concession in public. Whatever you do privately—it was also the case in America in the nineteenth century—publicly this is a country that speaks French. The real difficulty is going to be not so much with the immigrants as with locals. It's in places like Italy and Scandinavia, which previously had no xenophobic traditions, where this new immigration has created serious problems.

**Today, the view is widespread that religion—whether in evangelical, Catholic, Sunni, Shia, neo-Hindu, Buddhist, or other forms—has returned as an immensely powerful force in one continent after another. Do you regard this as a fundamental phenomenon, or a more passing one, of surfaces rather than depths?**

It's clear that religion—as the ritualization of life, the belief in spirits or non-material entities influencing life, and not least, as a common bond of communities—is so widespread throughout history that it would be a mistake to regard it as a superficial phenomenon, or one destined to disappear, at least among the poor and the weak, who probably have more need of its consolations, as well as of its potential explanations of why things are the way they are. There are systems of rule, such as the Chinese, which for practical purposes lack anything corresponding to what we would regard as religion. They demonstrate that it is possible, but I think one of the errors of the traditional socialist and communist movement was to go for violent extirpation of religion at times when it might well have been better not to do so. One of the major interesting changes after Mussolini fell in Italy came when Togliatti no longer discriminated against practising Catholics—and quite rightly. He wouldn't otherwise have had 14 per cent of housewives voting Communist in the 1940s. This changed the character of the Italian Communist Party from being a Leninist vanguard party to a mass class party or people's party.

On the other hand, it's true that religion has ceased to be the universal language of public discourse; and to this extent, secularization has been a global phenomenon, even though it has only undercut organized religion severely in some parts of the world. In Europe, it's still doing so; why this hasn't occurred in the United States isn't so clear, but there's no question that secularization has taken hold to a large degree among intellectuals and others who don't need religion. For people who continue to be religious, the fact that there are now two languages of discourse produces a sort of schizophrenia, which you can see quite often, say, in fundamentalist Jews in the West Bank—they believe in what is patently baloney, but work as experts in it. The present Islamist movement is largely composed of young technologists and technicians of this kind. Religious practices no doubt will change very substantially. Whether that actually produces a further secularization isn't clear. For instance, I don't know how far the major change in the Catholic religion in the West—namely, the refusal of women to abide by the sexual rules—has actually made Catholic women believers to a lesser extent.

The decline of the Enlightenment ideologies, of course, has left far more political scope for religious politics and religious versions of nationalism. But I don't think there has been a major rise in all religions. Many are clearly on the way down. Roman Catholicism is fighting very hard, even in Latin America, against the rise of evangelical Protestant sects, and I'm sure it's only maintaining itself in Africa by concessions to local habits and customs which I doubt would have been made in the nineteenth century. Evangelical Protestant sects are rising, but to what extent they are more than a small minority of the upwardly mobile—as nonconformists used to be in England—is not clear. It's also not apparent that Jewish fundamentalism, which does such harm in Israel, is a mass phenomenon. The one exception to this trend is Islam, which has continued to expand without any effective missionary activity over the past few centuries. Within Islam, it's unclear whether tendencies such as the present militant movement for restoring the caliphate represent more than an activist minority. Islam, however, does seem to me to have great assets for continuing to expand—largely because it gives poor people the sense that they're as good as anybody else and that all Muslims are equal.

### **Couldn't the same be said of Christianity?**

But a Christian doesn't believe that he's as good as any other Christian. I doubt whether Christian blacks believe that they're as good as Christian colonizers, whereas Muslim blacks do. The structure of Islam is more egalitarian and the militant element is rather stronger there. I remember reading that slave-traders in Brazil stopped importing Muslim slaves because they kept rebelling. From where we stand, there are considerable dangers in this appeal—to some extent Islam makes the poor less receptive to other appeals for equality. Progressives in the Muslim world knew from the start that there was no way of shifting the masses away from Islam; even in Turkey they had to come to some kind of *modus vivendi*—probably the only place where this was successfully done. Elsewhere the rise of religion as an element in politics, in nationalist politics, has been extremely dangerous. In places like India, it has been a very strong middle-class phenomenon, and all the more alarming because linked with militant and quasi-fascist elites and organizations such as the RSS, and therefore more easily mobilized as an anti-Muslim movement. Fortunately, the upper-class secularization of Indian politics has so far blocked its advance. Not that India's elite is anti-religious; but the basic idea of Nehru was a secular state in which religion is obviously omnipresent—nobody in India could suppose otherwise, or would necessarily want it to be otherwise—but it is limited by the supremacy of the values of the secular civil society.

**Science formed a central part of the culture of the left before the Second World War, but over the next two generations it virtually disappeared as a leading element in Marxist or socialist thinking. Do you think that the growing salience of environmental issues is likely to rejoin science and radical politics?**



I'm sure radical movements will be interested in science. The environment and other concerns produce sound reasons for countering the flight from science, and from the rational approach to problems, which became fairly widespread from the 70s and 80s. But with regard to the scientists themselves, I don't believe it will happen. Unlike social scientists, there is nothing which edges natural scientists towards politics. Historically speaking, they have in most cases either been non-political or had the standard politics of their class. There are exceptions—say, among the young in early nineteenth-century France, and very notably in the 1930s and 1940s. But these are special cases, due to the recognition by scientists themselves that their work was becoming increasingly essential to society, but that society didn't realize it. The crucial work on this is Bernal's *The Social Function of Science*, which had an enormous effect on other scientists. Of course, Hitler's deliberate attack on everything that science stood for helped.

In the twentieth century, the physical sciences were the centre of development, whereas in the twenty-first century it's clearly the biological sciences which are. Because these are closer to human life, there may be a greater element of politicization. But there is certainly one counter-factor: increasingly, scientists have been integrated into the system of capitalism, both as individuals and within scientific organizations. Forty years ago it would have been unthinkable for somebody to speak of patenting a gene. Today one patents a gene in hopes of becoming a millionaire, and that has removed quite a large body of scientists from left politics. The one thing which may still politicize them is the struggle against dictatorial or authoritarian governments which interfere with their work. One of the most interesting phenomena in the Soviet Union was that Soviet scientists were forced to become politicized, because they were given the privilege of a certain degree of citizen rights and freedoms—so that people who otherwise had been nothing except loyal manufacturers of H-bombs became dissident leaders. It is not impossible for this to occur in other countries, though there aren't very many at the moment. Of course, the environment is an issue which may keep a number of scientists mobilized. If there is a massive development of campaigns around climate change, then clearly the experts will find themselves engaged, largely against know-nothings and reactionaries. So all is not lost.

**Turning to historiographical questions: what originally drew you to the subject-matter of archaic forms of social movement in *Primitive Rebels*, and how far did you plan for it in advance?**

It developed out of two things. Travelling around Italy in the 1950s, I kept discovering these aberrant phenomena—Party branches in the South electing Jehovah's Witnesses as Party secretaries, and so on; people who were thinking about modern problems, but not in the terms that we were used to. Second, particularly after 1956, it expressed a general dissatisfaction with the simplified version we had of the development of working-class popular movements. In *Primitive Rebels*, I was very far from critical of the standard reading—on the contrary, I pointed out that these other movements would not get anywhere unless they sooner or later adopted the modern vocabulary and institutions. But, nonetheless, it became clear to me that it wasn't enough simply to neglect these other phenomena, to say that we know how all these things operate. I produced a series of illustrations, case studies, of this kind, and said, 'these don't fit'. It led me to think that, even before the invention of modern political vocabulary, methods and institutions, there were ways in which people practised politics that encompassed basic ideas about social relations—not least between the powerful and the weak, rulers and ruled—which had a certain logic and fitted together. But I didn't really have a chance to follow this up any further, although later, reading Barrington Moore's *Injustice*, I found a clue as to how one might be able to get at it. It was the beginning of something that was never really carried on, and I rather regret it. I'm still hoping to try and do something about it.

**In *Interesting Times*, you expressed considerable reservations about what were then recent**

## historical fashions. Do you think the historiographic scene remains relatively unchanged?

I'm increasingly impressed by the scale of the intellectual shift in history and the social sciences from the 70s on. My generation of historians, who on the whole transformed the teaching of history as well as a good deal else, were essentially trying to establish a permanent liaison, a mutual fertilization, between history and the social sciences; an effort that dated back to the 1890s. Economics went down a different road. We took it for granted that we were talking about something real: objective realities; even though, ever since Marx and the sociology of knowledge, we knew that one didn't simply record the truth as it was. But what was really interesting were social transformations. The Depression was instrumental in this, because it reintroduced the part played by great crises in historical transformations—the fourteenth-century crisis, the transition to capitalism. It wasn't actually Marxists who introduced this—it was Wilhelm Abel, in Germany, who first reread the developments of the Middle Ages in light of the Great Depression of the 1930s. We were a problem-solving lot, concerned with the big questions. There were other things we downgraded: we were so against traditionalist, top people's history, or for that matter history of ideas, that we rejected all that. It was not a particularly Marxist position—this was a general approach adopted by Weberians in Germany; by people in France who had no Marxist background, who came from the Annales school; and, in their own way, by American social scientists.

At some stage in the 70s, there was a sharp change. Past & Present published an exchange between myself and Lawrence Stone in 1979–80 on the 'revival of narrative'—'what's happening to the great why questions?' Since then, the big, transformative questions have generally been forgotten by historians. At the same time, there was a huge expansion of the range of history—you could now write on anything you wanted: objects, sentiments, practices. Some of this was interesting, but there was also an enormous increase in what you might call fanzine history, which groups write in order to feel better about themselves. The intention was trivial; the results were not always trivial. Just the other day I noticed a new labour history journal which has an article on blacks in Wales in the eighteenth century. Whatever the importance of this to blacks in Wales, it is not in itself a particularly central subject. The most dangerous instance of this, of course, is the rise of national mythology, a by-product of the multiplication of new states, which had to create their own national histories. A large element in all this is people saying, we're not interested in what happened, but in what makes us feel good. The classical example is that of the Native Americans who refused to believe that their ancestors had migrated from Asia, and said, 'We've always been here'.

A good deal of this shift was in some sense political. The historians who came out of 68 were no longer interested in the big questions—they thought they'd all been answered. They were much more interested in the voluntary or personal aspects. History Workshop was a late development of this kind. I don't think the new types of history have produced any dramatic changes. In France, for instance, history post-Braudel is not a patch on the generation of the 1950s and 1960s. There may be the occasional very good work, but it's not the same. And I'm inclined to think the same is true of Britain. There was an element of anti-rationalism and relativism in this reaction of the 1970s, which on the whole I found was hostile to history.

On the other hand, there have been some positive developments. The most positive one was cultural history, which unquestionably we had all neglected. We didn't pay enough attention to history as it actually presents itself to the actors. We had assumed that you could generalize about actors; but if you go back to saying that men make their history, how do they make it, in their practices, in their lives? Eric Wolf's book, *Europe and the People without History*, is an example of a good change in this regard. There has also been an enormous rise in global history. Among non-historians, there has been a great deal of interest in general history—namely, how the human race started. Thanks to DNA research, we now know a good deal about the settlement of humans across the globe. In other words, we have a genuine basis for a world history. Among historians, there has been a break with

the Eurocentric or Occidentalocentric tradition. Another positive development, largely from the Americans and partly also the postcolonial historians, has been the reopening of the question of the specificity of European or Atlantic civilization, and of the rise of capitalism—Pomeranz's *The Great Divergence* and so on. That seems to me very positive, even though there is no denying that modern capitalism arose in parts of Europe, and not in India or China.

**If you were to pick still unexplored topics or fields presenting major challenges for future historians, what would they be?**

The big problem is a very general one. By palaeontological standards the human species has transformed its existence at astonishing speed, but the rate of change has varied enormously. Sometimes it has moved very slowly, sometimes very fast, sometimes controlled, sometimes not. Clearly this implies a growing control over nature, but we should not claim to know whither this is leading us. Marxists have rightly focused on changes in the mode of production and their social relations as the generators of historical change. However, if we think in terms of how 'men make their own history', the great question is this: historically, communities and social systems have aimed at stabilization and reproduction, creating mechanisms to keep at bay disturbing leaps into the unknown. Resistance to the imposition of change from outside is still a major factor in world politics today. How is it, then, that humans and societies structured to resist dynamic development come to terms with a mode of production whose essence is endless and unpredictable dynamic development? Marxist historians might profitably investigate the operations of this basic contradiction between the mechanisms bringing about change and those geared to resist it.

---

**P.S.**

\* New Left Review 61, January-February 2010

<http://newleftreview.org/II/61/eric-hobsbawm-world-distempers>