Hobsbawm’s Politics: The Forward March of the Popular Front Halted*

To be a historian of the Left is a responsibility and a burden. Few write with breadth of vision, critical engagement, passion for evidence and commitment to reason, embracing as well revolutionary social change – foundations all of a calling as difficult as any to realise. It is one thing to research deeply, theorise imaginatively, orchestrate materials from the past to construct its blazing colours in all of their glory and despair and write with creativity and flair. Quite another to tend the garden of politics, where the blooms of one month fade and the foliage of another can be overtaken by weeds, some of which are quite compelling in their attractiveness. Figures honoured for their labours in certain tasks, can be, quite uncharitably, taken to task for their toils in another. Thus Perry Anderson once wrote of E.P. Thompson as ‘our finest socialist writer today’, concluding in 1980 that Thompson’s oeuvre constituted ‘the most declared political history of any of his generation’. Yet for all such praise, Thompson still lacked, in Anderson’s view, ‘either an intermediate or a long-term programme of objectives for a socialist movement’. To be a Marxist historian, as is undeniably Eric Hobsbawm’s touchstone of identity, is to court political critique.

I enter into that project aware of the twin pitfalls that inevitably plague the revolutionary left – arrogance and sectarianism – but insistent that avoiding the hard and often harsh questions and findings posed in an examination of Hobsbawm’s life as a historian and a Marxist is no service to either historiography or politics. As much as Hobsbawm’s historical range and depth, his reach and his interpretive vision, are indeed daunting, they were always, in some senses, compromised and brought back to the densely packed, sometimes barren terrain of 20th-century politics, in which the kind of leftism he

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1 Anderson 1980, pp. 1, 204.
embraced called out for rejoinder. In Hobsbawm’s life and in the conceptualisation of the world that ordered his histories, however rich and varied, Stalinism and, in particular, the Popular Front of the 1930s loomed large and left the mark of deformation, one that became increasingly visible in the cauldron of the 1980s, when so much of the so-called communism of the 20th century crashed and burned, leaving in its wake the scorched earth of a revolutionary left seemingly vanquished from the politics of our time.

There is, I will suggest, a disjuncture in the histories and the politics of Hobsbawm. To some extent such a radical separation is evident in all of us on the left who are historians. To research and write, guided by the insights of Marxism, is, however difficult, easier than to struggle against capitalism and realise another world. But in Hobsbawm’s case, ironically, the rift is all the more evident because of the rich range of his historical practice, one that throws shortcomings of political engagement into sharp relief. One leftist actually suggested in the mid-1990s that there were two Hobsbawms, a schizophrenic congealment that was difficult to reconcile.

On the one hand, Eric the Red was ending his The Age of Extremes (1994) with an assessment of capitalism’s threatening drive to destruction:

We live in a world captured, uprooted and transformed by the titanic economic and techno-scientific process of the development of capitalism, which has dominated the past two or three centuries. We know, or at least it is reasonable to suppose, that it cannot go on ad infinitum. The future cannot be a continuation of the past, and there are signs, both externally, and, as it were, internally, that we have reached a point of historic crisis. The forces generated by the techno-scientific economy are now great enough to destroy the environment, that is to say, the material foundations of human life. The structures of human societies themselves, including even some of the social foundations of the capitalist economy, are on the point of being destroyed by the erosion of what we have inherited from the human past. Our world risks both explosion and implosion. It must change.²

On the other, Eric of Radical Reconciliation was serving as the intellectual and political brains trust of political accommodation to the processes he so decried in Age of Extremes. Hobsbawm’s mid-1980s assault on ‘retreating into extremism’ and his insistence that the Labour Party needed to reconstitute