In a recent defence of the relevance of Marxism to the study of history, Eric Hobsbawm has reminded us that Marx aimed to provide a basis for understanding history as a totality.¹

[T]he new perspectives on history should also return us to that essential, if never quite realisable, objective of those who study the past: ‘total history’. Not a ‘history of everything’, but history as an indivisible web in which all human activities are interconnected.²

Similarly, Brian Kelly, in his Isaac and Tamara Deutscher Memorial Prize-winning study Race, Class and Power in the Alabama Coalfields, 1908–21 (2001), followed John Saville, Alex Callinicos, Elisabeth Fox-Genovese and Eugene Genovese in extolling the totalising ambitions of history from below, and criticising those of its practitioners who have embraced historical relativism.³ On a related note, Perry Anderson suggested that because Trotsky was the first to succeed in writing total history, he could lay claim to being the first ‘great Marxist historian’.

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¹ Thanks to Kristyn Gorton for her help with this essay.
² Hobsbawm 2004.
No other classical Marxist had so profound a sense of the changing tempers and creative capacities of the masses of working men and women, pushing at the foundations of an archaic social order ‘from below’ – while at the same time pre-eminently able to chart the complex shifts and organised political forces ‘from above’.

Alex Callinicos has argued that the necessity of totalisation in the study of history and society does not arise, as postmodernists would have it, ‘from some totalitarian urge to dominate and control’. Rather, it emerges from the fact that...the capitalist mode of production...operates according to a logic that is in the most literal sense global, incorporating and subordinating every aspect of social life everywhere to the drive to accumulate.

Nonetheless, Marx and Engels were adamant that, while the capital accumulation process provided the basis from which the totality could be understood, it would be a grave mistake, as Engels famously insisted in a letter to Joseph Bloch – 21 September 1890, to mechanically reduce processes in the legal and political superstructure to epiphenomena of developments in the base.

Fortunately, the Stalinist attempt to reduce historical materialism to just such a form of crude economic reductionism did not become absolutely hegemonic within the Communist movement. Historians of France and England especially were blessed with Marx’s historical analyses of these countries which provided a rich legacy informing the research of a string of later historians. This was nowhere truer than in Britain, were in the 1950s the Communist Party Historians’ Group (CPHG) brought together a number of Marxists who later made their names as amongst the most important historians of the twentieth century. Interestingly, while this group originally convened to inform the publication of a second edition of a Communist-Party book on English history, from the earliest moment their work transcended this narrow basis, and informed all subsequent Marxist historiography. Indeed, in 1986 Edward Thompson suggested that historians are still ‘exploiting the terrain’ opened by the ‘breakthrough in British radical history’ associated with the early work of the historians who came to found this group. Two decades later, Thompson’s

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5 Callinicos 1998 p. 36.