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Where have the rebels gone?

An interview with Eric Hobsbawm

Nicolas DELALANDE & François JARRIGE

Fifty years after his pioneering books on rebellion and social banditry, Eric Hobsbawm explains why he always paid close attention to “uncommon people” and popular forms of revolt, and analyses how globalization has triggered off new political mobilizations.

Experiencing the revolt

La Vie des Idées: As an intellectual involved in politics and history, you have experienced a lot of situations of crisis and popular rebellions during your life. You were in Spain during the Civil War, you observed social movements in Spain and Italy in the 1950s, and in the 1960s you were in Cuba during the revolutionary guerrilla. To what extent did these events have an impact on your first studies on rebels and rebellion?

Eric Hobsbawm: Evidently, I have been influenced in my choice of subjects by experience with the times in which I lived. It is clear that somebody who was politicized in the years of the Great Depression in Germany and then who came to England and lived through the experience of the hunger marches, the mobilization of the unemployed, developed an interest in it.

I should also add that when I joined the army, I was in a working-class unit. To some extent, the experience of life of my comrades is something that I learnt a good deal from. But effectively, I chose my subject in the 1950s largely because of my experience in traveling as well as trying to rethinking my political orientation. As I tried to explain in my autobiography,

it came largely out of my discovery of the nature of a good deal of popular politics in Italy in the early 1950s. That got me interested in the politics of people who had not yet acquired the modern vocabulary, syntax, grammar, institutions and means of action of politics, but who had their own way of expressing their aspirations, their own way of fighting, protesting, and attempting to achieve them. I began to consult friends in Italy to read material, for instance Benedetto Croce's study of the Neapolitan politics. Other matters of this kind got me interested in this whole business. That's how I came to write these studies on "prepolitical" politics.

At the same time, I discovered in some ways that this opened a new perspective on my rather conventional view of what popular politics were, namely the politics of parties and organizations. I believe that this was the only good modern way of doing politics and yet one could see that in the minds of a lot of people who lived in the world, they interpreted it in a different way from the one in which I did. And this was this tension, this confluence of two different traditions, which got me interested. Someone said that in some parts of Italy people lived at the same time in the age of Luther and in the age of Lenin. That fascinated me. That's how I got into this and I remained quite interested ever since, particularly in connection with primitive forms of this kind of things which I identified with social banditry. But this, as you know, has been very much debated, and not necessarily accepted.

La Vie des Idées: Would you say that you were, at the time of your first political commitments in 1930s and 1940s England, a kind of "maverick" or even a "rebel"? Can we see a link between your own life and the attention you have always paid to "uncommon people"?

Eric Hobsbawm: I don't think it has any personal relationship of this kind. I did begin to discover marginal characters in society, very much so for instance in the occupation of Germany after the war, when discovering all manner of people in Germany who in a sense had not been involved and who were at the bottom of the heap, women for instance, that is what interested me. My problem is not the underworld, or the semi-world of the people who were only partly integrated in the traditional society, who operated on the margins, but the actual major components of the population: peasants, city populations and so on. And I may try to make a sharp distinction between the people who knew that they were marginals, including marginal groups like the Roma or to some extent the Jews, who operated as "out"

societies. They had their own rules. They lived in a sort of symbiosis with society because they had their function in it but nevertheless they were different and not recognized. And I deliberately did not concentrate on that, except on popular music like jazz, which grew up and operated on those margins. So, to that extent, I have had an interest in the margins too, but this was a different aspect of historical analysis to the analysis of primitive revolts.

Writing the history of revolt

La Vie des Idées: At the beginning of your career, you were famous above all as an historian of the British working-class. However, your approach differed from the mainstream working-class history that was dominating at the time. You did not choose to study trade unions or political parties, but you paid careful attention to the structure of the working-class and to minor groups such as the Captain Swing rebels or machine-breakers. Wasn't it a way of studying the "margins" of working-class history?

Eric Hobsbawm: Yes and no. You're right in saying that I had no great sympathy for the traditional form of working-class history, which was a history of organizations, particularly a sort of evolutionary history, which said organizations got better all the time. It was a history of leaders, organizations, programs, and so on. I was much more interested in the way workers themselves organized within trade unions, if necessary within organizations, in the structure of these bodies and in their activities. For instance, one of my earliest studies was one of how these workers organized their labor migration: the traveling artisans, unemployed people who went from one place to another, looking for work. How were they organized? Not centrally, they developed as a form of network and convention within their organization. I think, in a sense, it includes not only the workers, who as it were, were politically conscious and therefore the subject of these movements, but also the workers who remained outside. They were also part of the working-class. I believe my own contribution to the history of labour was, along these studies, how it actually worked at the bottom and not so much on the history of dates, leaders, battles and so on.

La Vie des Idées: How can we analyze the "rationality" of the rebels you focused on in your earliest studies?

Eric Hobsbawm: I still believe that one has to take a “rational choice” approach to these things. People undertake actions with their own logical coherence, given their primary assumptions. What is important is to find out why it makes sense to them to do it that way. For instance, why do peasants who occupy the land immediately begin to labour the land, and not simply occupy it? They do it that way because it is believed impossible to own the land without working. Therefore, unless you maintain the right to work the land, you cannot possibly own it. That of course links it up with a long academic tradition of political thought, going back to John Locke and to other people, but it is pursuing those and looking at the bottom.

La Vie des Idées: What were your relations with other British historians in the 1950s and 1960s?

Eric Hobsbawm: What I tried to do is to take part of a generation of historians who between them transformed the teaching and research in history between the War and the 1970s. The bulk of these people worked by trying to marry historical scholarship with the discoveries and illuminations of the social sciences. The bulk also operated on the dynamic transformations of society, which is why a debate like the transition from feudalism to capitalism was central to them. I shared these interests very much, but at the same time I also shared the other interest, which quite often went together with the interest in the history of the people from below. I found myself inspired not so much by Marx but more by people like Georges Lefebvre, and in a distinct way Gramsci (and by his interest in the subaltern classes). That was an enormous illumination to see them as a group of people who were looking for a way of establishing a reality in society, which society did not recognize and that themselves did not yet recognize. And that is why I concentrated also on the logic, the coherence of both the ideas and the actions, even by mistake, of these people from below.

From working-class history to Subaltern Studies

La Vie des Idées: From the 1980s onwards, your work has been more and more devoted to great historical syntheses on revolutions, nationalism or empires. At the same time, what we call the Subaltern Studies have been proposing a renewal in the writing of ordinary people’s life. Some of the promoters of this current have criticized the fact that you characterized

peasants' revolts as "pre-political" and have assimilated this position to a "Western" point of view. What do you think of these criticisms and of the way your work has been discussed since the 1960s?

Eric Hobsbawm: The Subaltern Studies' scholars were originally part of the same tendency: they came out of Indian marxism. They became critical, and in my view unduly critical, because they over-privileged the traditional cultural assumptions and modes of action. They played down the role of economic transformations and consequent class transformations in the country. They tried to transform them into a different version of primitive rebellion. My critic of this is that while in practice they were quite correct to establish that these people, even supporting the Indian communist party, were not doing it in an orthodox way, from the beginning I saw the limitations of this form of protest and revolt, which was very effective but which had at its best an enormous negative power of transformation, not a positive one. The clearest example I know is what happened in Peru in the 1960s or 1970s, where in effect a series of grassroots rebellions, land occupations, by peasant communities, virtually destroyed the system of the Latifundia. At a certain stage, it simply ceased to exist but they were incapable of doing anything else because they were incapable of coordinating. If there was any coordination it had to come from somewhere else. In Peru, at that time, it came from a group of politically progressive generals. That is my critic of the subaltern people. One of the reasons why I was communist was the enormous force of communist parties as an organization which was capable of pulling together these forces and turning them into historically active forces, at least before taking over from them and suppressing them, but that's another story... That is my basic critic of the subaltern, not of their discoveries but of the political implications of what they are doing.

La Vie des Idées: Some people regret that rebels seem to have disappeared from your recent works. It looks as if analyzing the great economic and political forces that have shaped history is hard to combine with close attention paid to dissidents and protesters. Would you say that this impression is false or that it is indeed hard to write a general history including the ideas and practices of dominated people?

Eric Hobsbawm: First of all, we need to be aware that what we mean by revolt and rebellion is a category invented by those in power. For those who are not in power it is not necessarily rebellion, it is maybe the assertion of rights and demands. Consequently, to define what

constitutes a rebellion or a revolt is very much something which is done from above. I should add that somebody once said that the bulk of Russian peasants' revolts in the 19th century consisted of crowds of solemn peasants in the village square being addressed by policemen. That was all!

The concept of the rebellion or revolt, as such, is something which is often taken over by a group of revolutionaries, or rebels or progressives, from the original category, from people who disturb public order. Francisco Ferrer once said "I am not a revolutionary, I am a *révolté*". So, I think I would prefer to abandon the term of rebellion or revolt and talk about movement of assertion or protest of assertion of rights.

How does this operate? Traditionally speaking, in the period in which I was first interested, they were rarely spontaneous, they operated within a matrix of conventions, of assumptions of how people ought to behave to each other, and they always relied, to some extent, on some kind of structure of decision and advice. In peasants and village movements, even in the most primitive form, they occasions where people got together and then they discussed, there are assumptions on how decisions are taken. For instance, in the early 20th century in the Balkans, people would be meeting around the post office to discuss some new things. If there wasn't the village headman or important figure, they would consult the teacher. He would be the potential center for formation of opinion and, if necessary, action. At the lower level, the local shoemaker would. So, you have to understand that even these officially spontaneous movements have structures. In 18th century France for instance, *taxation populaire* wasn't something that suddenly happened. There were ways of doing it, you knew how it should be done if it was to occur. Women would be taking an important part in it; this was part of their function.

So the analysis has to be at the macro-level: how effective are these things on a larger scale? You may have to consider negative factors; there you may have spontaneous things. For instance, the degree of desertion from armies, which is a form of negative action, but which may turn out to be a very important form of action. At what stage does an army disintegrate? We don't really know. We can still only speculate. We do know when there is resistance to conscription in countries in which universal military service is introduced, to what extent people try to avoid it, but we don't necessarily know in cases of war how far the negative action of people simply not wanting to go and doing this. I think it is through these negative

forms that what we think of as popular revolts exercise their major historical significance. If it is to be a positive action, it has to be to some extent, framed and led, either officially or unofficially, by groups used to operate within the scale of the state or nation.

Who are the rebels nowadays?

La Vie des Idées: The forms of rebellion you worked on in the 1960s do not seem to have disappeared. Globalization, as industrialization in the 19th century, gives birth to many forms of protest activities, such as land occupation, firms managers taken hostage by workers, protest demonstrations, etc. These practices are sometimes described as “primitive”, but do they not embody the modern way of contesting the social inequalities produced by globalization?

Eric Hobsbawm: First of all, the tradition of political action is the result of the development of modern popular politics, for instance the gradual transformation of the form of conventional manifestations into systematic institutionalized demonstrations, meetings and other forms of structured action. I think, for instance, that one of the great advantages of a country like France is that this form of structured actions included *descendre dans la rue*. Since the French Revolution, it became part of the political education of people who had been educated in a country which had developed a Jacobin, republican and later on socialist mode of national politics.

At the other side, the working-class movement had developed its own specific, and often not well recognized, techniques in the course of struggle. Luddism, for instance, is often a technique for making strike and industrial conflicts effective, in circumstances where you could not do it otherwise. We may also refer to the great general strike of 1842 in England, that were called “plug riots” because they withdrew plugs from steam engines.

From time to time there are new developments of this kind. For instance, during the Great Depression of the 1930s, in France, England and also in America, there was the occupation of places of work, factories, which were very characteristic. Today, the kidnapping of the boss is yet another action. I don't think it makes any sense in classifying this as “primitive” or “non primitive”. It is a form of exploration of newly effective actions. I should add that new

effective actions are determined largely by circumstances. We have new circumstances today, which did not exist in the past, namely we live in a *société médiatique*. Therefore, to achieve at short notice maximum publicity and to find a new way of doing so is a perfectly rational way of establishing your point. In this case, for instance, kidnapping the boss may not have any real effect on the distribution of power, but it has an enormous effect on publicity, gaining the people's concern, being good or bad publicity.

La Vie des Idées: At the end of *The Age of Extremes*, you express your worry about the “forces entailed by the technological and scientific economy that are now strong enough to destroy the environment”. At the beginning of your latest book on *Empire, Democracy and Terror* you seem to be preoccupied by the environmental question and by the priority given by governments to economic growth. Do you think that environmental issues and the opposition to the technological and scientific development constitute legitimate matters of revolt?

Eric Hobsbawm: These are central problems. One of the reasons I am not really optimistic is that they go beyond the scope of existing politics. These are things which have to be solved on a transnational, global basis, and yet politics as a whole is the only area in which globalization has made no significant progress. The nation-state remains the only field within which political action is possible. Transnational organizations attempt to extend this. For instance, the rise of NGOs is important because these are structured so as to operate globally speaking. New movements, mostly led by important minorities, have recognized the potential of transnational operations, largely through the revolution in communications. There are plenty of examples; 1968 was perhaps the first in which new ideas spread, as people are afraid of pandemics like today. 1968 was an early example, it went from Mexico in the West to Prague and further beyond in the East. They were almost all spontaneous movements. In the recent decades it has been exploited to organize global campaigns, particularly “anti-globalization campaigns”, which actually rely on globalization. How effective these are going to be, we don't know.

On the other hand, real effective action, which prevents things happening, is only possible by genuine transnational actors. But at the moment it still does not exist. The best hope is agreements between the major players, of whom there aren't that many: the G20, the major

unions and so on. If they could agree to act on the same time, some action could be taken. Whether they can is uncertain, but that they must or should is not uncertain.

La Vie des Idées: Some of the contemporary revolt movements, such as the anti-GMO or the anti-nuclear movements, have been compared to the British Luddites, and their social practices have been scorned as “primitive” forms of revolt, just as the Luddites’ revolt against machines was in the 19th century. Conversely, some environmentalists seem to refer themselves to the idealized figures of the Luddites fighting against industrialization to give legitimacy to their protest. Isn’t it a way of “reinventing” the tradition of the revolt? What do you think of the use of history, and of some of your famous works, as a source of symbolic power and authority for protest movements?

Eric Hobsbawm: I am a bit skeptical on that. I think it is clearly desirable that we break with the tradition of aiming at an unlimited growth, unlimited technological change. I don’t believe there is any effective way of doing this by actions such as the ones as you describe. I think, in so far as there has been an effective resistance, for instance for the introduction of biologically technologized food, it hasn’t been by people destroying bits and pieces of maize, but it has been by the mobilization of a consensus in Europe. It has been done by propaganda, by some ways adequately organized, to accept that most people in Europe believed that these things were basically undesirable and therefore put pressure on their governments, and even on their scientists, to say “we can’t have this over here”. For this reason, in effect, whereas in the USA these new transformed plants have been used with any kind of limitation, in Europe they have been limited. There are ways therefore which demonstrate that is possible to limit it. But I don’t believe that one can do so by small groups of activists going into fields and burning maize plants. I don’t think they will get very good publicity or achieve any significant goals. But how their objectives are to be achieved is another matter.

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