Discussion:

The Forward March of Labour Halted?

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Thank you for inviting me to comment on the Marx Memorial Lecture delivered by my old friend and teacher, Eric Hobsbawm. On this occasion the Master Craftsman seems to have got it seriously "out of true". He concludes that during the last 25 or 30 years the Long March of Labour has been Halted. Tragically this has happened just as British capitalist society has entered upon a crisis which is "almost" a "breakdown".

My conclusion is very different: since the end of the Second World War the British Working Class—without itself exhibiting the will to power—has established that it cannot be governed in the old way. It is not a footsore spectator at a crisis: it is that crisis! The distinctive feature of the period is not the decline of the Labour Vote, but the advent of majority Labour Governments or the unprecedented striking down of those Tory ones which refuse to accept the terms of the new Social Settlement which was negotiated at the end of the war: an end to the reserve army of labour: comprehensive social services: the mixed economy.

With sincere respect; Eric Hobsbawm delivered a Marx Memorial service rather than a Marx Memorial Lecture. Once you start writing about "Marches" rather than "Struggles" you put yourself in the tradition of Francis Williams rather than of Karl Marx. And you end up writing the sequel to Magnificent Journey—Inconsequential Jog!

In favour of Eric The Red

The best cure for the depression induced by the new Hobsbawm (Eric or Little by Less) is to consult the spirit and immaculate standards of the Old Eric (Eric the Red). He has not left us. He has merely had an off day.

Among Hobsbawm’s most enviable strengths as an historian is his sure eye for turning points and his confident marking of our chronology. Yet in this Lecture he takes for his starting post some uncertain and seemingly arbitrary date between 1949 and 1954. If he had chosen 1945 he would have preferred the more obvious and the better vantage point. After all, when one reads contemporary history by a great historian one expects to recover one’s own experience at a deeper level. And just as Eric fails to remind me of where I was when we “sprang” the Pentonville Five or marched on a place called Saltley, so his chronology prevents me from reliving the moment when the polls were declared in the Summer after the end of the War in Europe when we ushered in not only the heroic years of British Social Democracy, but the habit of Labour Government. Between 1886 and 1945 the Conservatives were in office for 75 per cent of the time and—with only a very slight extravagance—it has been said that when they were not in office they were still in power.

From 1945 they have been in office for barely 50 per cent of the time and then they were not in power: not in the old way. They either respected the new Social Settlement or else the workers rose against them and chucked them out! It was the great limitation of "Super Mac” that he presided over "Butskelliam": he restored the semblance of political tradition at the expense of a marked relative decline in the strength of the British capitalist economy. The most accomplished British Prime Minister since the war was brought low; not by a prostate or by a Profumo; but by his final inability to reconcile the requirements of his Party with the necessities of his Class. The unsettled character of the New Social Settlement was finally exposed when, by the failing light of the new technology, the British Workman could still be discerned answering the foreman back. His answer may well be pedestrian—I have no doubt that it is vulgar—but it poses the question: which is it to be Socialism or the ruin of the two contending classes? (There is a third possibility. But that requires us to think of Sir Keith Joseph in the role of the "Chicago Boys" and Mrs Thatcher in the part of General Pinochet. At the time of writing we have not come to that nor is it a denounced which I find easily imaginable even though some of my best friends are looking forward to that catastrophe: on the understanding, of course, that it will assume an agreeably English form.)

Quantity before Quality: Obscuring Events Behind Trends

Of late, Eric has become a great man for statistics. His lecture is largely given over to counting the
declining Labour vote and the stationary population of trade unionists and the declining proportion of the occupied to be found in the manual working class and the growing number of women in paid employment. God forbid that I should be thought to be an opponent of quantitative methods—I will never receive another grant from the Social Science Research Council if that misapprehension becomes current! Social History is nothing if it is not about numbers: only, please to remember it is not about History if it is not about unique events. I like my conclusions to be accurate: and the last word in accuracy is not a word but a number. But the trouble is that one has never in history or politics had the "last word" when one tries to put it into that conclusive shape.

My purpose is not to call into question the interest or the reliability of Eric’s statistics. Indeed, I am happy to re-enforce them for him. If he had looked at individual Labour Party membership, as well as support, he would have found that it declined by a quarter of a million between 1951 and 1970. Yet the statistics to which he attends are less important than the ones to which I attend. Nor is this a purely subjective judgement. The incidence of majority Labour Governments may help to explain declining Labour support and membership whereas the argument can certainly not be made to work the other way round! It is only when we take the two statistical series together that they point to the heart of our experience: the profoundly equivocal nature of Labour Government.

About the equivocal nature of these Governments Eric has nothing whatsoever to say. One way of reading the statistics which he sets before us would be to maintain that the working class, if it has not seen through the sham; has been so dispirited by it that it has concluded that the distribution of wealth and power in favour of the capitalists and their hangers-on is irreversible. This position is available, but it cannot be securely occupied unless one can maintain that it is more significant than the progress which has been made within the Party by the Labour Left.

Now Eric has always had a rather poor opinion of the Labour Left. He has always been inclined to treat it as if it was negligible. There was considerable justification for that attitude up until about 1959. But in that year the defeat of Gaitskell at the Blackpool Conference and the formation of the Campaign for Democratic Socialism signalled the beginning of the descent of the Right Wing into a faction. One really invites the charge of displaying a kind of petulant sectarianism if one totally ignores the way in which at Party Conference; on the NEC and in an increasing number of Constituency Parties the Labour Right has come to feel that it is on the defensive and at risk. Those who in earlier periods thought of themselves as the natural and inevitable leaders of the Party huddle together in their precarious majority within the PLP and discuss their chances in relation to the slow—but highly civilised—purge of opportunists and careerists which has been, and which is, proceeding. Nor will it do to pretend that the passing of the Leadership of this Left from Michael Foot to Tony Benn is but the last episode in the squalid annals of Labour’s Lost Leaders: men who have assumed the mantle of the Left while they were waiting in the wings, only to discard it the moment they were on the centre of the stage. It is not merely that Benn has courageously acknowledged the place of the Marxists within the Party; it is that he has conducted himself differently from his predecessors and identified himself with politics which are not merely electoral. This stance has an historical importance which exists whether Benn himself maintains it or abandons it.

The Unions and the Transformation of the Wages Question

Just as Eric finds the Big Fact about the Labour Party to be the decline in its electoral support, so he finds the Big Facts about Trade Unionism to be the relative stagnation in Trade Union membership and the Growth of Sectionalism. The astonishing growth of White Collar Unionism is allowed as some small and seemingly dubious consolation. The prodigious growth of unionism among women workers (from 31 per cent in 1974 to 36.6 per cent in 1978) is not mentioned. The Labour Unrest of 1970-74 is passed over in a few lines despite the fact that it quite dwarfed its predecessor of 1910-14 in terms of its daring; its comprehensiveness and its success. Where was Eric during those mass strikes some of which turned not on the conditions of production (wages and hours) but on the conditions of distribution (pay beds and gun boats for Chile)? What was he doing during the hundreds of factory occupations when the assertion of the right to work reduced the rights of property to silence? What was he up to during the civil disobedience which followed the passing of the Industrial Relations Act and the Housing Finance Act. What stage had he reached on his Long March when the miners revenged 1926 and went on to lead the entire movement into the struggle which ended in the fall of the Tory Government?

Was he contemplating "The Growth of Sectionalism"?

Now this is the part of his lecture which I find most difficult to comprehend. I entirely agree with him when he insists that increasing industrial militancy does not lead on in some simple or necessary way to socialist consciousness. I understand
him when he points out that under the conditions of State and Monopoly capitalism the consequences of sectionalism are likely to become more disagreeable and perhaps more divisive. But if the consequences are greater that does not mean that the thing itself has become more pronounced.

Eric hardly needs me to remind him that sectionalism is one of the oldest traditions of the British Trade Union Movement. Even in the heady days of Owenite General Unionism there were still the "Pukes" and the "Exclusives". I rather fancy that he and I might agree that some of our fellow Labour historians have been a little too quick to identify the non-wage issues that lurk behind "higher" forms of action and sometimes a bit slow on the uptake when it comes to detecting the sectional interests that can be concealed within Solidarity or other "approved" issues. But a growth in sectionalism is difficult to accept in a period in which the number of trade unionists has been rising and the number of unions falling. In particular it is a bit difficult to reconcile with a period which has for one of its distinctive characteristics, the habitual recourse to—and acceptance of—Incomes Policies.

I quite accept that capitalism has always had an Incomes Policy in the sense that the aim of its controllers has always been to keep wages as low as possible. But it seems to be a distinctive feature of our period—except for time of war—that it is driven to pursue this end through formal agreements which it seeks to impose upon the entire movement whether by negotiation or directly by statute. On balance, these policies have been rather successful from the capitalist point of view since they have been associated with a slackening in the growth of real wages or else, as in the case of the "Social Contract"; with quite pronounced reductions in them. Trade Unionists—the led as well as the leaders—have repeatedly accepted this burden as a duty which they owe the Commonwealth. One may hold—with Arthur Scargill—that they have been deluded in behaving in this manner; that they have fallen victims to the "Social Con-trick"; but to reproach them with exhibiting a "growth of sectionalism" is merely to add insult to injury.

For my part, while I take as glum a view as the next man about most of the practical consequences of these exercises in incomes policy; I not only find in them a distinctive feature of our period, but in their principle a possible future. More than a hundred years ago Marx complained that in the traditional and habitual modes of their action, the trade unions dealt with effects rather than with the causes from which those effects proceeded. He made no clear suggestions as to how this limitation was to be surmounted and so far as Eric Hobsbawm merely protests against the traditional pre-occupa-

tion with the Wages Question to the exclusion of more important matters he does not either. But in our time the Wages Question is being transformed under our eyes from a Sectional into a Class question; from an Industrial one into a Political one. This has become Agenda. The capitalist must go—top hat in hand—to negotiate with the TUC about the appropriate rate of extraction of surplus value. Slowly—very slowly—the trade unions have been coming to insist that everything should be made negotiable. The more far-sighted members of the bourgeoisie have been coming to see that that would definitely not be "Constitutional"!

Where have all the Marxists gone?

Thus, the working people, poor bone-headed slouches that they are; have ignored the directions which we gave them and the routes which we prescribed for them. They may have fallen out of the Long March, but have they stumbled on to the field of battle. And in the confusion of the battle, and despite many self-inflicted wounds; one thing is becoming increasingly clear: they are not to be easily defeated. For victory they only require a belief in themselves and a Clausewitz to supply, not a preconceived strategy, but the one appropriate to the surrounding terrain and the prevailing disposition of forces.

Why have the "cadres" gone absent without leave?

Perhaps the strangest feature of Eric's Lecture is that it almost completely neglects the discussion of "the Vanguard" and it wholly neglects the task of locating the whereabouts of the British Labour Movement in terms of international developments. Of these two omissions; the second is the more extraordinary. One of the most conspicuous features of his career as Marxist historian has been the way in which Hobsbawm has supplied an uncompromising challenge to the insularity which still distinguishes the work of most of the rest of us. Yet we would surely need to believe—as I do not believe—that the history and the role of the British Communist Party is entirely unimportant before an assessment of this period could avoid any reference to events in Moscow or in Budapest or in Prague or to their repercussions upon it. It amounts to a radical form of "inauthenticity". It is as if the traison des clercs was to be seen upside down as in a camera obscura.

The tragedy of our time is not, as Eric seems to suppose, that the British Working Class has been playing the spectator at its own funeral. The tragedy is rather that Marxism has become an ideology in the strict Marxist sense of the term. It has become the necessarily false consciousness of the Industrial Revolution of the C20th: a Revolution which has to be brought about upon the basis of an international
transfer of an achieved technology and under the conditions of Imperialism. Marxism is at once the subject of that irony and the only intellectual resource capable of disclosing it.

The English Working Class is in need of its Marxists. May Eric Hobsbawm, with his great learning and his wonderful analytical intelligence, help to restore them to us.