

Reviews

THE FORWARD MARCH OF LABOUR HALTED?

Eric Hobsbawm and others

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The items in this book which have already appeared in *Marxism Today* include the Marx Memorial Lecture which Eric Hobsbawm delivered at Marx House in March 1978, and which gives the title to the book; nine comments on the lecture and a 'Response' to them by him; and an interview with Tony Benn in July 1980, also conducted by Hobsbawm. In addition, the book includes eight not previously published further comments on the lecture, and Hobsbawm's final 'Observations on the Debate'. It is very useful to have all this brought together here, for the discussion raises many issues of the greatest importance for all socialists.

In his lecture, Hobsbawm advanced the view that 'the forward march of labour and the labour movement, which Marx predicted, appears to have come to a halt in this century about twenty-five or thirty years ago' (p1). This view was based on two separate propositions. The first was that there has occurred a growth in the 'sectionalism' of the working class: 'We now see a growing division of workers into sections and groups each pursuing its own economic interest irrespective of the rest' (p14). The second proposition, derived from the decline of the Labour Party's vote since 1951, is that there has occurred a decline in the class consciousness of labour, and in 'the highest degree of class consciousness, namely socialist consciousness' (p16).

Many of the contributors to the discussion take issue, to my mind very effectively, with the view that there has been a growth of 'sectionalism' and 'economism' in the labour movement, and a decline in its sense of solidarity and class consciousness. They

point to a measure of rank and file militancy far greater than existed in the thirties and forties, and to the much more directly political character of that militancy; to the power of shop stewards and to the greater solidarity to be found in many trade union struggles; to the growth of trade unionism among women workers and white collar workers; and to many other features in the history of the last twenty-five or thirty years which belie the notion of 'decline' or 'halt'.

None of the contributors who write in this vein engage in the facile 'triumphalism' which used to be common on some parts of the Left. On the contrary, they too point to the many limitations and divisions which affect the labour movement; and what they say would need to be even more strongly emphasised today, given the reflux produced by continued mass unemployment. Nevertheless, Hobsbawm's critics do rightly see advance, in comparison with an earlier epoch, where he sees stagnation and retreat; and he himself handsomely concedes in his 'Response' to the first nine contributions that 'whether sectionalism is stronger in the trade union movement today than in the past, as I suggested, is an historical question on which I may well be wrong' (p69). However, he also insists that 'sectionalism — of a different kind from the past perhaps — exists *today*' (p69, emphasis in text); and this is something which no one would wish to contest. But it is a very different point; and the historical perspective in which today's 'sectionalism' is discussed is of great consequence. For the perspective of decline obscures not only the many positive developments which have occurred in the trade union movement: it also produces a debilitating under-estimation of important developments which have occurred in other areas. One of them, to which Hobsbawm refers in passing, is the greater currency of socialist ideas. Socialism is of course still far too marginal a part of the political culture; but it is a

great deal less marginal than it was twenty-five or thirty years ago, not to speak of earlier epochs. Another such development is the liberation of many dedicated socialists from the Stalinist straightjacket in which they were imprisoned in earlier years.

What then of Hobsbawm's second proposition, that relating to the decline in the Labour vote? Here, the record appears much more straight forward. In 1951, the Labour vote was close to 14,000,000, and Labour's share of the poll was 48.8%; in 1979, the corresponding figures were 11,510,000 and 36.9%. As Hobsbawm notes, the biggest drop (one and a half million votes) occurred between 1951 and 1955; and it could therefore be argued that the decline between 1955 and 1979 (less than a million votes) has not, properly speaking, been catastrophic. But it has nevertheless been very marked, not only in votes cast for Labour, but also in the membership of the Labour Party. In short, the Labour Party has failed, over a period of nearly thirty years, to regain the electoral support it had in 1951, and to gain support in that vast part of the working class electorate which votes for anti-socialist and anti-Labour candidates. Here is failure indeed.

Even so, there is no good evidence to suggest that this dissociation from Labour has been accompanied by a greater working class commitment than hitherto to the cause of conservatism. The significance of the gains made by the Conservative Party in 1979 can from this point of view be greatly exaggerated. It is much more likely that working class alienation from Labour also means



alienation from any alternative to it, and is allied to a profoundly sceptical view of the social order and of all 'polities'. The socialist Left has not been able to fill this vacuum: this is its own failure and challenge.

Hobsbawm rightly suggests that the reasons for Labour's failure have much to do with the character of Labour's leadership. 'If we are to explain the stagnation or crisis', he said in his lecture, with reference to the sixties and later, 'we have to look at the Labour Party and the labour movement itself. The workers, and growing strata outside the manual workers, were looking to it for a lead and a policy. They did not get it. They got the Wilson years — and many of them lost faith and hope in the mass party of the working people' (p18).

This is an absolutely fundamental point, and it clearly does not only refer to this or that individual. The failure is that of a whole collective Right and Centre leadership, which was throughout in effective control of the Labour Party's politics in practice. As Steve Jefferys says, in one of the most incisive contributions to the volume, 'the last thirty years have proved, surely beyond doubt, the bankruptcy of labourism' (p112). Unless this 'bankruptcy' of a particular kind of orientation and leadership is placed in the foreground of analysis, socialists cannot properly assess what they are up against, or begin to address themselves seriously to what ought to be done about it. For the people who controlled the Labour Party during the Wilson years (and the Callaghan years) are the same sort of people who still control it — in fact, they are mostly the same people. Presumably, there is no need to argue here that the fact of Michael Foot being Leader of the Party does very little to reduce this hold of the Right and the Centre: he has long been part of that spectrum. Nor do the constitutional gains made by the Labour Left since the electoral defeat of Labour in May 1979 significantly affect, *in practice*, this Right and Centre predominance.

Many people hoped, in the two years following that electoral defeat, that the Labour Left would achieve a decisive breakthrough and dispossess the Right and Centre from its control of the Party; and Tony Benn's bid for the deputy leadership of the Party, unimportant though the office is in itself, was rightly taken to be the symbol of the Labour Left's challenge. His victory in that contest might have been a catalyst of change in the Labour Party's structure of power. But he lost; and his defeat provides a clear indication that the architects of Labour's decline will remain in control in the relevant future, however many verbal concessions they may

have to make to the Left.

It is disconcerting to find Hobsbawm, in July 1981, dismissing these struggles as 'internal squabbles' (p168), and to hear him say, in the interview with Tony Benn in July 1980, that 'all people on the Left, whatever their views, had better concentrate their fire on their adversaries rather than on each other as they are in the habit of doing' (p99). This may sound good, but it ignores the uncomfortable fact that many Labour leaders are themselves the most determined 'adversaries' of the Left in the Labour Party.

The fact is that the basic demands of the Left deeply offend the fundamental convictions of most of the people who are likely to control the Labour Party's actual policies, should Labour find itself in government again. They hold their convictions with the same determination as the Left, often with much greater determination. They passionately believe that a radical extension of public ownership is an absurd and disastrous notion, electorally and in wider, policy terms as well; that unilateral disarmament, not to speak of 'neutralism', is dangerous nonsense; and that many other measures which are at the core of the Left's demands and aspirations are unrealistic and stupid. The people who make up the Right and the Centre in the higher reaches of the Labour Party are not Social Democrats, but they *are* social democrats. What they stand for is not a 'moderate' version of socialism: they stand for a capitalist alternative to it.

Hobsbawm insists that such people have a place in the Labour Party: 'both Right and Left, however embattled, belong to a broad movement and have a right to be there . . .' (p179). But this misses the real question, which is not the right of people to belong to the Labour Party, but what *position* they occupy in it. The 'broad church' argument, which Hobsbawm so readily endorses, fails to confront the fact of Right and Centre predominance, and the question of what can be done about it. Here, surely, is one crucial condition for the resumption of the 'forward march' which Hobsbawm wants. 'The case for socialism', he says, 'is as strong as ever, but it has to be argued in a new way, with much clearer proposals concerning the sort of society we want and what socialism can achieve, rather than a repetition of old slogans which, however valid, no longer carry the same conviction' (p177). So be it: but it cannot be expected that 'the case for socialism' will be argued with conviction by people who do not believe in it, or that they will want to implement policies designed to carry it forward in practice. Adequate political agencies are not everything; but they are nevertheless indispensable. There is no

party which can at present effectively fulfil the many functions required of a socialist party, and there seems to me to be no reason to think that there is any party or grouping now in existence which can realistically be expected to fulfil them effectively in the future. This is a deplorable and dangerous situation; and how to change it ought, it seems to me, to be a central concern of people who want to advance the cause of socialism in Britain.

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